

The demolition of press freedom in Hungary

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Last Tuesday night, the Hungarian parliament passed a comprehensive media law, largely eliminating freedom of the press.

Due to come into force on January 1, the law subordinates all public and private media—radio, television, newspapers, magazines and the Internet—to the control of a state “media council”, composed of partisans and confidants of the prime minister, Viktor Orban.

The new supervisory body has a wide range of authoritarian powers, ranging from censorship to specification of content, to imposition of ruinous fines. It was correctly described as a “ministry of mind control and power worship” by the German newspaper *Die Welt*.

To silence media that are guilty of “politically unbalanced” reporting, or failure to fulfil their “duty to inform”, the media council can impose fines amounting to €730,000, which would mean financial ruin for many. What exactly is meant by “politically unbalanced” and “duty to inform” is left to the arbitrary discretion of the media council. At any time, the council can also issue additional regulations without further parliamentary review.

The new law contains numerous provisions designed to ensure uniform reporting in line with government policy. Thus, “political propaganda”—whatever that means—is prohibited, except during election campaigns. Reporters dealing with issues of “national security” will be compelled to disclose their sources. Moreover, public media news programmes will no longer be produced by the various existing outlets, but by the pro-government MIT news agency.

The power of the media council to place strict bans on pornographic and violent images, together with its right to prescribe for newspaper editors rules about reporting standards and the avoidance of “illegal” statements, provide the government with numerous

ways of taking direct control over what the media publishes. A so-called “media charter” also obliges journalists to promote Christian, patriotic and national values—the “values” of the ruling Fidesz party.

Some Hungarian newspapers and periodicals have protested violently against the new media law. Several papers appeared on news stands with blank front pages earlier this month. Hungarian commentators write about “arbitrary rule” and a return to the fascist Horthy dictatorship of the 1930s. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Parliament have raised objections, as have the European Newspaper Publishers Association (ENPA) and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

Nevertheless, the new law was approved by a vast majority of the Hungarian parliament: 256 votes in favour and 87 against. Since elections in April 2010, Prime Minister Orban’s Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) has ruled with a two-thirds majority. Within this time, Orban has radically reconstructed the organs of state administration. He filled many key positions in the state apparatus with his own followers, including top positions in public radio and television broadcasting. His rule is becoming more and more authoritarian. He is determined not to lose his grip on the power he has won.

Orban’s authoritarian course is not merely the political odyssey of a “European oddity”, as portrayed in some of the media. His government is labouring under heavy pressure from the international financial markets. By muzzling the media and bolstering the powers of the state apparatus, it is preparing for a new round of brutal social attacks.

Following the outbreak of the financial crisis, Hungary was the first European Union member to be dependent on international support. In the autumn of 2008, national bankruptcy could only be averted by

securing billions of dollars in aid from the International Monetary Fund and the EU, which in turn committed Hungary's social-democratic government of the time to tough austerity measures.

Having been voted out as prime minister in 2002, Orban owed his subsequent political resurrection primarily to outrage over these measures, which he exploited with a mixture of nationalism and right-wing populism.

In the meantime, however, Orban himself is confronted with massive international pressure. Two weeks ago, the Moody's agency downgraded Hungary's credit rating to just above junk status. Dietmar Hornung, the agency's Eastern European expert, sharply criticised Orban's economic and budgetary policy. "The government is only relying on short-term measures; fundamental fiscal consolidation has not been undertaken", he commented, justifying Moody's decision. The Cheuvreux investment firm advised international investors to distance themselves from the Eastern European country and thus devalue Hungarian shares on the stock market.

Until now, the Orban government has concentrated on serving its own clientele, especially small businesses and wealthy layers of the middle class. It introduced a flat tax, limiting taxes on all incomes to 16 percent. Previously, the tax rate was from 17 to 32 percent. Corporate profits will also be subject to a future flat rate tax of 16 percent.

On the other hand, the government introduced an additional tax on the banks, which was little more than a symbolic gesture but was nevertheless perceived as an illegitimate curtailment of profits. The same can be said for the special tax on energy, telecommunication and retail companies.

To reduce the budgetary deficit, Orban's government raided private pension funds, unceremoniously incorporating them into the state budget. Approximately 3 million Hungarians with reserves totalling some €3.3 billion were affected. Critics have spoken of "cold-blooded expropriation".

However, this was not enough for the international financial markets. They are demanding aggressive measures to permanently and definitively reduce workers' income and state social spending. An analyst at the Vienna Raiffeisen International Bank was convinced that the Orban government would do

everything to prevent a further downgrading of his bank's creditworthiness. He was expecting a comprehensive reform package of drastic austerity measures in the spring of 2011.

This will lead to social conflicts that Orban will not be able to combat with his usual methods: fomenting of nationalism and persecuting minorities such as the Roma. This is why he is concentrating on a systematic upgrading of state power.

Orban's attack on press freedom has met with little criticism in the rest of Europe. While the media have issued prominent reports on the elections in Belarus and attacks on opposition forces there, events in Hungary are mentioned only in passing, although Orban's methods of rule increasingly resemble those of the Belarussian dictator, Alexander Lukashenko.

Although it otherwise interferes in all sorts of issues, the EU Commission has explicitly refused to take a position on the events in Hungary. Viviane Reding, the relevant commissioner for justice and fundamental rights, justified this by saying that "the Commission has nothing to do with media law".

The EU wants to avoid conflict with the Hungarian government, which takes over the EU presidency for half a year on January 1. Furthermore, Orban's Fidesz party is a member of the European People's Party, to which numerous other European ruling parties belong—including German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union. Ultimately, all these parties consider it inevitable that authoritarian measures be implemented to enforce the austerity diktats of the banks against the working population.



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