

The attack on press freedom in Hungary

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Twenty years after the fall of the Stalinist regime in Hungary, the government has abolished freedom of the press. The new media law passed last week by the Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz), which enjoys a two-thirds majority in parliament, gives the government sweeping powers to monitor the press.

A five-member Media Council, headed by a long-time confidant of Prime Minister Viktor Orban, can impose tough sanctions against any media outlet whose reporting is not “balanced.” What constitutes “balanced” reporting is determined by the Media Council.

Journalists who write about “national security” issues must disclose their sources.

The news output for all public broadcasters will be produced by a central government agency.

Former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt compared the Hungarian press under the new law with *Pravda*, the central organ of the Soviet Communist Party under Stalinist rule. Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg expressed fears over the “complete muzzling of the media.” Bernard Odehnal, a journalist, author and expert on Eastern Europe, warned against the abolition of democracy.

The muzzling of the Hungarian media casts a revealing light on the events that shook Hungary and Eastern Europe twenty years ago. The fall of the Stalinist regimes was celebrated as a “democratic revolution” and a step towards “freedom.” But twenty years later, similar authoritarian structures have been reestablished, while wide sections of the population live in abject poverty and what were once highly developed systems of education, health care and welfare have disintegrated.

Two decades ago, Fidesz was among the forces shouting loudest about freedom and the abolition of “communism.” In the summer of 1989, the 26-year-old Viktor Orban came to sudden prominence when he

made a public speech calling for an end to the Iron Curtain, free elections and the withdrawal of the Soviet army, vowing, “We will crush the communists to dust.”

That earned him international support and funding. In particular, Germany’s Free Democratic Party (FDP) and its then-chair Otto Graf Lambsdorff promoted the young anti-communist.

In the ensuing months, Orban joined the ruling Stalinists at the “Round Table” and negotiated the transition to capitalism. It was already clear at this stage that his understanding of “freedom” was entirely different from that of the mass of the people.

The latter wanted to shake off the *political* repression by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which exploited the nationalised property and used it as the source for its privileges. Orban’s Fidesz, on the other hand, wanted to abolish state property and the social achievements bound up with it because they stood in the way of the enrichment of his petty-bourgeois supporters.

The Stalinists and Fidesz quickly agreed on the dismantling of state industry. In 1988, the Stalinists had removed their aged leader Janos Kadar, who had headed the ruling party since the crushing of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, in order to embark on a pro-capitalist course in the manner of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In the summer of 1989, the Hungarian government removed its fortifications on the border with Austria, accelerating the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Since then, leaders of the Stalinist state party and its successor, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP), have acquired a significant proportion of the former state assets. The bitter hostility that has characterized the relationship between Fidesz and the MSzP stems mainly from the ongoing struggle over these assets, rather than any fundamental programmatic differences.

Following the collapse of the Stalinist regime in 1989, Fidesz was denied access to the fleshpots of

power, even though in the 1990 and 1994 elections its vote was far beyond ten percent. The government swung between the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and the MSzP.

At that time, Fidesz sailed under the banner of liberalism and joined the Liberal International. Its hour came in 1998, when both the MDF and the MSzP had discredited themselves. Viktor Orban became prime minister for the next four years.

At this time, Fidesz was clearly moving to the right. The defence of capitalist property relations and the social misery they produced could not be reconciled with lip service to liberal principles of law. Fidesz left the Liberal International and joined the European People's Party, an alliance of conservative parties. Ideologically, it glorified authority, the nation, the church and the family. It resorted to the traditions of the authoritarian regime of Admiral Horthy, the regent who had ruled Hungary between the two world wars and was allied with Hitler.

When the MSzP returned to the government in 2002 and Fidesz was sent into opposition, the party turned even more sharply to the right. It spawned the fascist Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) and its paramilitary wing, the Hungarian Guard. But greater Hungarian chauvinism, anti-Semitism and anti-Roma witch-hunts were part of Fidesz propaganda as well.

Corruption scandals and a drastic International Monetary Fund austerity programme agreed to by the MSzP paved the way for the return to power of Orban and Fidesz. In the parliamentary elections of April 2010, Fidesz won a two-thirds majority, providing it the basis for changing the constitution and developing the authoritarian structures necessary for Orban to consolidate his power.

Having just entered office, his government passed a law conferring Hungarian citizenship on people of Hungarian ancestry living in the surrounding countries. This was calculated to permanently stoke up national tensions with neighbouring countries, against which Hungary has raised territorial claims ever since the conclusion of the 1920 Trianon Treaty (the Hungarian version of the Versailles Treaty). Orban filled important posts in the court system with his confidantes. The new media law was passed in this context. It is a further attempt to provide Fidesz permanently with semi-dictatorial powers.

Hungary is an extreme example, but it is not unique. All of the European governments are in the process of pushing the burden of the international economic crisis onto the backs of ordinary working people through drastic austerity measures. This cannot be carried out by democratic means. Freedom of the press and free speech are under attack everywhere.

In Italy, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has personally controlled almost the entire private and public media for years. At an international level, the campaign against WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange marks a new stage in the attack on press freedom. If the US government succeeds against WikiLeaks, the entire Internet will before long be subject to censorship.

Despite the far-reaching implications of the new Hungarian media law, there has been only muted criticism within the European Union. Beginning January 1, Hungary takes over the EU presidency, something no one in official circles has to date seriously placed in question.

This must be seen as a warning to working people. The incitement of nationalism and racism, the destruction of democratic rights such as freedom of the press and of expression, and the attacks on wages, jobs and social conditions are inextricably linked. Only an international offensive by the working class on the basis of a socialist programme can put a stop to such attacks.

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