

Hungary: National award for notorious Anti-Semite

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On Hungary's National Day, March 15, the right-wing TV host Ferenc Szaniszlo received the Táncsics Award, the highest state award for journalists in Hungary. On the state-run Echo TV station Szaniszlo has disseminated anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and described the Roma minority as "apes".

In response to criticism of the decision, the minister responsible for the award, Minister of Human Resources Zoltán Balog, replied that he was unaware of the anti-Semitic and abusive racist remarks made by Szaniszlo. Szaniszlo has been employed by the right-wing Echo TV station since 2008, where he is primarily concerned with foreign policy. In 2011, the state media regulator had already fined the station following racist remarks by Szaniszlo.

In protest against the awarding the honor to Szaniszlo, over 10 former Táncsics award-winners immediately returned their awards.

The honoring of Szaniszlo is just the latest in a string of provocations involving right-wing personalities. Recently the government awarded archaeologist Kornel Bakay a medal of merit. Bakay had caused a stir with anti-Semitic statements, e.g., with his claim that Jews had organized the slave trade in the Middle Ages.

The Golden Cross of Merit was awarded to the singer of the rock band Kárpátia, Petrás János. The group is close to the neo-fascist party Jobbik and composed the anthem for Jobbik's paramilitary wing, the Hungarian Guard. In its songs the band glorifies the "immaculate nation" and calls for expanding the borders of Hungary.

The government of Prime Minister Victor Orban (Fidesz/Civic Union) used the award ceremony to close ranks with Jobbik as part of a broader strategy of relying on far-right layers to suppress increasing popular resistance against attacks on social and democratic rights.

The already strained social situation in Hungary is deteriorating rapidly. Poverty and unemployment are at their highest level for over 20 years and the economic outlook is grim. Investment in the Hungarian economy in 2012 fell by about 5 percent compared to the previous year. The decline in the fourth quarter of 2012 was close to 8 percent.

Despite this situation, Orban is holding fast to his policy of radical austerity measures. In early March, together with the mayor of Budapest, Orban signed a contract that establishes, among other things, the acquisition of 60 percent of the liabilities of the capital by the state budget. In return the government receives the power to cut the funds of, or close down, municipal facilities. The government has already announced its intention to make huge savings through budget cuts to hospitals and public transport in the capital city.

Fidesz Secretary Gábor Kubatov has urged his party to establish its own version of the paramilitary Hungarian Guard. Fidesz must set up its own "party guard", Kubatov wrote in a circular to party members. Such a force should be entrusted with the security of party offices and the protection of party events, he said.

The initiative to form their own band of right-wing thugs is Fidesz' response to the latest protests. A week ago, mainly young protesters conducted a sit-in in front of the Fidesz party headquarters in Budapest to protest against Orban's increasing attacks on democratic rights and the constitution.

Using its two-thirds majority in parliament, Fidesz has recently curtailed the powers of the Constitutional Court. In future judges may only check laws for formal errors and have no influence over their content. In addition, the Constitutional Court can only judge cases on the basis of the 2011 Constitution adopted by Fidesz, thereby excluding any reference to former

Constitutional Court judgments.

Following a number of judgements by the Constitutional Court declaring government laws unconstitutional, Orban has now elevated some of these laws to the rank of constitutional articles. Homelessness, for example, is now a punishable offense in Hungary. The homeless are forbidden from staying on “public property” for any length of time. Freedom of expression can be annulled by the government when judged that the “dignity of the Hungarian nation” has been violated.

The EU Parliament and its commissioner for basic rights and justice, Viviane Reding, condemned the constitutional amendments and threatened to impose sanctions. But experience demonstrates that such exhortations from Brussels remain without consequence. In 2011 Reding had rejected criticism of a new Hungarian media law that annuls the freedom of the press by arguing that her commission “has no role to play with regard to media law”.

Orban’s Fidesz is a member of the European People’s Party, which includes the conservative CDU led by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel and other European leaders are well aware that the enforcement of the current austerity measures cannot be carried out by democratic means. Nevertheless, Merkel has maintained that she had “no doubts” that Hungary is following the path to democracy.



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