

Hungarian government adopts law against homeless

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Last week, the right-wing government of Victor Orban adopted a law that forbids homeless people from sleeping in public streets or squares. Those who breach the law face the threat of fines or imprisonment. The right-wing Fidesz party is attacking the most vulnerable in society to divert attention away from the catastrophic social conditions that have emerged as a result of its austerity policies.

According to the new law, homeless people are not permitted to stay at any Hungarian cultural heritage sites. In addition, local authorities are able to stipulate particular zones in which homeless people are not permitted to stay.

Last year, the law was declared to be in breach of the constitution by Hungary's constitutional court and thrown out. In order to skirt the constitutional court's ruling, as part of constitutional changes made earlier this year, the government inserted a clause into the constitution that removes significant powers from the court and gives the government a free hand to implement the law on homeless people.

United Nations sources suggest that between 30,000 and 35,000 people live on the streets in Hungary. In the capital Budapest alone, support organisations estimate that there are 10,000 homeless people and fewer than 6,000 places for them in shelters.

According to estimates, 80 percent of homeless people in Budapest come from other parts of the country, above all from the impoverished east. Until the early 1990s, tens of thousands worked there in heavy industry. The collapse of industry as a consequence of the restoration of capitalism led to severely high unemployment. Numerous homeless people travel to the capital in the hope of finding odd jobs to secure their survival.

In recent years, homeless people have become the

target of attacks and provocations by the authorities. A new law on waste has been in force since January. An unauthorised person who takes rubbish with them commits an offence against property and can expect to face a fine or prison term. This law was above all aimed at homeless people, who are often forced to collect rubbish to survive.

The police have been clearing shelters and temporary dwellings from many abandoned public areas for some time, even on the distant outskirts of Budapest. "Before the constitutional court declared the law against the homeless to be in breach of the constitution last year, it was in force for eight months," said Tessza Udvarhelyi from an initiative from homeless people called "The city belongs to everyone!" "And within those eight months," she added, "fines worth an estimated €130,000 [US\$175,000] were imposed against 2,000 homeless people in Budapest. That was certainly a new stage in policy towards the homeless."

The adoption of the legislation provoked anger and indignation. Hundreds of people protested against the law in front of the parliament, following a call by the homeless group. Udvarhelyi explained: "Homelessness is practically being made a criminal offence with this new law. At the same time, many people don't know where this is leading. The government has promised that all homeless people will receive accommodation in homes, but there are no places."

She told *Spiegel Online* that the Orban government's policy towards homeless people was part of its general hostility towards the poor. "They need scapegoats to distract from the terrible social situation in the country" she said, "and they are using the poorest of the poor for this: the homeless, Roma and immigrants." Although previous governments had persecuted homeless people, such as the government led by the Socialist Party, this

had not been so systematic, she added.

The Orban government, like its predecessor led by the Socialist Party (MSZP), has implemented drastic austerity measures that have thrown growing numbers of people into unemployment, poverty and homelessness. In spite of this, state debt has continued to rise. It rose by 3.2 percent to more than 82 percent of GDP in the second quarter of the year alone.

Representatives of the government subsequently declared that they would continue the “war on debt.” This means further spending cuts. The government recently cut wages and pensions in order to meet its obligations under the bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The austerity measures have had a dramatic social impact. Since 2008, 40,000 households have been forcibly evicted, and a further 170,000 face this threat. Many families are on the verge of financial ruin, because they took out credit in foreign currencies that they can no longer pay back due to the devaluation of the forint. Due to the cuts to social welfare, many have fallen through the social safety net.

The budget cuts are closely connected with the expansion of an authoritarian state apparatus. Along with the disabling of the constitutional court and the media law, which in practice removed press freedom, the government has taken a number of other measures designed to target all opposition to its austerity policies.

The opposition parties expressed a few timid and superficial criticisms of the new law. The MSZP criticised the law as “inhumane” and called upon President Janos Ader to veto it. Ader is well known for acting as a puppet of Orban and shares his right-wing outlook.

The “left” opposition parties are hopelessly divided and politically bankrupt. The social and economic policies of the platform Together 2014 are not substantially different from those of the government. Together 2014 is led by Gordon Bajnai. Having served as finance minister and later prime minister in the discredited social democratic government, which placed the country under the dictates of the European Union and IMF, he is heavily responsible for the electoral victory of Orban.

The trade unions have also led no protest against the right-wing policies. While the large trade union associations have more or less supported Orban, the

Szólidaritás is part of Bajnai’s electoral alliance.

Szólidaritás consists of aged trade union bureaucrats who oppose collaboration with Fidesz because the party has massively restricted trade union rights, threatening the positions of officials in the major unions. One day after Fidesz’s party congress, at the end of September, Szólidaritás organised a demonstration against the Orban government. Only around 1,000 mobilised in Budapest, and the vast majority of these were union officials and members of Bajnai’s party or the MSZP. This shows very clearly that the opposition to Orban’s right-wing policies finds no expression in Hungary’s official political organisations.



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