

Protests against Hungarian government continue

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Around 20,000 people demonstrated in front of the parliament against the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Budapest on Monday last week. The protest was a continuation of the demonstrations that took place three weeks ago, when about 100,000 took to the streets against the planned introduction of a tax on the Internet.

The demonstrations reflect widespread dissatisfaction with the Orbán regime. But politically they are confused and contradictory. They lack a political perspective, and so can be easily manipulated for reactionary political interests.

The rally took place under the slogan “day of general indignation,” mobilized by an eponymous Facebook page that said there should be no political flags or banners at the demonstration because it was “independent” of the government. However, behind the seemingly independent façade, a number of the programmatic demands leave no doubt as to the political and social orientation. The official slogans read, “No to Internet control, to state corruption, to high taxes and the current foreign policy”. And, “Yes to Europe, freedom, transparency and good governance”.

These demands reflect the interests of privileged layers who criticize Orbán’s proximity to Russian President Vladimir Putin while trying to present the European Union (EU) as a bastion of freedom. “We do not want Orbán to lead us in the direction of Putin and Russia. We are an EU member and we want to stay in Europe, where we belong,” Balint Farkas, a 26-year-old IT student, told news agency AFP. The platform at the central Kossuth Square in front of the parliament was bedecked with EU flags alongside those of Hungary. One group carried orange posters bearing the likenesses of Orbán and Putin.

The aim is to divert anger away from the mounting social crisis. In spite of this, workers and young people could be found among the demonstrators, protesting against the growing social attacks and increasing poverty in Hungary. One told Euro news: “I have worked for 42 years, I didn’t know what unemployment was. But now I see it everywhere and my grandsons are telling me they do not have a job. So, we need to protest somewhere, poor guys have to make a living out of something.”

A teacher criticized the massive cuts in education, which mean that young people who do not come from a rich family cannot get an adequate education. She spoke out against the “destruction of the future of the young generation”. Participants of the demonstration applauded, and chanted “Orbán go away.” On Saturday, 2,000 teachers marched in Budapest and demanded the withdrawal of the planned cuts in education.

The opposition parties have played hardly any role in the protests— at least not openly. Although its members were present at the demonstrations, they had obviously listened to the organizers’ call to refrain from displays of party signs. The speakers were largely unknown.

After the rally, organizers declared the event closed. However, several thousand protesters remained in the square and began to advance towards the entrance of parliament, which immediately led to hundreds of riot police appearing. However, this did not lead to an escalation or arrests.

Thousands demonstrated in more than a dozen other cities. The largest rallies outside the capital took place in Miskolc in the east of the country and in the southern Hungarian cities of Szeged and Pécs. Several hundred Hungarians gathered at demonstrations on London’s Trafalgar Square, and also in Germany, Belgium,

Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The event organizers and the unions that participated placed corruption allegations against members of the government at the center of the protests.

In mid-October, the government-affiliated business daily *Napi Gazdas á g* reported that the US had imposed a travel ban on six government officials because the Hungarian tax authority was conducting an investigation of large US companies. According to the American embassy in Budapest, the individuals affected have been prohibited from entering the US on suspicion of corruption. However, it refused to disclose their names, citing the privacy of the persons concerned. In early November, the head of the Hungarian Tax Office NAV, Ildikó Vida, admitted to being one of the people. She rejected all accusations.

Orban himself described the rationale for the travel ban as “paper thin” and implied the opposition was behind the US move. He said he was also unsure whether he could accept a possible resignation by Vida, because such a decision would affect the sovereignty of Hungary.

In Budapest, the former conservative finance official András Horváth appeared as a speaker at the protests. As a tax auditor, he was responsible for uncovering irregularities among those the United States had placed on its “watch list”. Horváth’s investigations were stopped on orders “from above” and he was dismissed.

There has also been sharp criticism of the tax policies of the Orban government. Big business and the European Union have attacked the special taxes on banks, energy and telecommunications companies—that is, areas where foreign companies dominate. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Hungarian state has imposed such charges to a significant and increasing degree.

However, it is mostly those on small and medium incomes who are affected by government tax policies. The government introduced a flat tax on incomes of 19 percent, while at the same time, tax allowances were abolished for blue and white collar workers. As a result, the tax burden has increased for two-thirds of the population.

The unions are trying to cover up their own complicity in the social crisis. They centered their involvement in the protests on criticism of the taxes; their motto was “We can’t pay as much tax as

you steal.” In fact they have worked closely with the Fidesz government since its first term in office, not only supporting the business-friendly tax policy but all the cuts in social spending.

The Orban government has limited unemployment benefits to a period of three months, and the unemployed must undertake *de facto* forced labor in public employment programmes to receive any assistance. The decline in the official unemployment rate is due in large part to these measures.

Many Hungarians find little hope in staying in their own country and emigrate. According to estimates, around 250,000 people have left the country since 2010. Above all, these include better-educated young people.

The European Union and the official opposition in Hungary are trying to divert the protests in their own favour. Orban’s closeness to Russia in foreign policy has angered the EU and the United States. The Budapest analyst Andrei Nosko, giving expression to the pro-European circles of the Hungarian elite, told the *Financial Times* Hungary’s turn to Russia was “worrying”.

In recent months, Orban has repeatedly criticized the EU sanctions against Russia as being harmful for the European economy. Hungary should ally itself with those EU countries that are interested in halting the “process of separation” from Russia, he demanded. The EU has “shot itself in the leg” with the sanctions against Russia.

Hungary is dependent on Russian gas to a large extent. Earlier this year, Orban also signed an agreement with Putin on the modernization and expansion of the single Hungarian nuclear power plant in Paks. By 2023, two new nuclear reactors costing €10 billion to €12 billion will be built, partly financed by Russian loans.



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