

After the Charlie Hebdo attack

Governments in Eastern Europe intensify attacks on democratic rights and immigrants

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Like the ruling elites in the West, the governments of Eastern European states are deliberately using the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* to restrict democratic rights and persecute refugees. Muslims in particular have been declared the enemy, strengthening extreme right-wing forces.

The Bulgarian government is planning new measures against refugees. The barriers on the existing 33-kilometre border with Turkey, which was constructed some time ago to prevent immigration from the neighbouring country, are being expanded by 82 kilometres at a cost of €46 million for this year alone.

To secure the Turkish-Bulgarian border, the right-wing government has increased its border police to more than 1,400. The regime in EU's poorest country is also using the costs involved in its deployment at the border as a pretext for involving the army, thereby creating a precedent for military intervention in domestic affairs. Interior Minister Veselin Vutchkov demanded this explicitly. Defence minister Nikolai Nenchev made vehicles and weaponry available to the police units.

The government intends to shut down the border with Turkey for refugees under all conditions, since in neighbouring Turkey there are currently 2 million refugees, mostly from Syria. According to official statistics, around 38,500 refugees attempted last year to illegally cross the Turkish-Bulgarian border. Figures from Bulgaria's state migration agency (DAB) suggest that 10,000 of these have applied for asylum.

Most of these people come from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, countries where the Western powers are responsible for wars, civil wars and catastrophic living conditions. Compared to 2013, the number of refugees

has risen by 200 percent. Many refugees have been forced to spend the freezing winter in the border region in tents under horrendous hygienic conditions.

The Bulgarian government has justified its draconian new measures against refugees by claiming they are necessary in the "struggle against terror". Former interior minister Svetan Svetanov, who is a member of the governing GERB party and acts as a domestic adviser to Prime Minister Boiko Borisov, bluntly declared that an increase in the flow of refugees inevitably increases the risk of a terrorist attack.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and some NGOs have criticised the border barrier, because it forces refugees to pursue more dangerous routes, such as crossing the Mediterranean Sea, to reach the EU.

Hungary's right-wing Fidesz government is already well known for its inhumane treatment of refugees and minorities. Hungary has no need for any economic migrants, Fidesz parliamentary fraction head Antal Rogan told the state radio broadcaster. It had been "proven that the presence of Islamic communities in Christian countries in Western Europe disturbs domestic order, for example in the United Kingdom, France and Germany."

Interior Minister Laszlo Trocsanyi explained the necessity of a European-wide terrorist database that should also include Hungary. At the same time, he announced further measures at the national level. According to previous reports, an action plan already announced by Prime Minister Viktor Orban will be adopted, and includes a range of measures to grant the police, army and intelligence agencies comprehensive powers.

Terrorism as a daily reality, according to the Hungarian regime, was forcing Hungary and Europe to reconsider its anti-terrorist strategy and immigration, and more. “I think the United States could serve as an example here, including its anti-terror laws,” said Rogan. Rogan’s suggestion was met with enthusiasm from the right-wing party Jobbik, the third-largest party in parliament. The neo-fascists have been conducting a campaign of hate propaganda against foreigners for years.

In the Czech Republic, the utterly discredited and unscrupulous political elite is using the attacks in Paris to conduct a disgusting campaign against Muslims. State President Milos Zeman declared publicly that immigrants have a “genetic dependency” that they could not deny. Muslims had only themselves to blame for having to live in ghettos in Europe’s major cities, Zeman claimed.

Zeman is already well known for his anti-Islamic comments. In 2011, he told a conference that Islam was “the anti-civilisation that stretches from North Africa to Indonesia, the enemy of NATO,” and that these countries, populated by around 2 billion people, were “financed partly by drugs, partly by oil.” He told a news magazine in the same year that the idea that there was a moderate Islam was just as wrong as the claim that there were moderate Nazis.

Zeman and other leading politicians have incited the dregs of society with their tirades. A crowd numbering about 600 participated in an anti-Islam demonstration two weeks ago. In front of Prague Castle, the main residence of the Czech president in the capital, they chanted racist slogans and held up placards stating, “Wake up, Europe” and “Stop Islam.” The group “No Islam in the Czech Republic” intends to collaborate with the German Pegida movement in Dresden, 150 kilometres away.

The attacks on immigrants, which go hand in hand with restrictions on democratic rights and the adoption of police state measures, are directed against the entire population. The unstable governments in Eastern Europe fear that repeated protests could turn into a mass movement in the face of worsening economic conditions.

The recently announced removal of the link between the Swiss franc and the euro threw thousands of families into poverty in Southern and Eastern Europe.

The free floating of the franc will result in a sharp rise in mortgage costs. The exchange rate of the franc rose massively overnight, thereby increasing repayment rates by 20 percent. In Hungary, Poland, France, Greece, Croatia and Serbia, the majority of mortgages are denominated in foreign currencies, particularly Swiss francs.

In Poland, central bank governor Marek Belka has already announced extraordinary measures. According to the Polish financial supervisory authority, outstanding loans in Poland amounted to €31 billion.

In Croatia, the government announced it would peg the exchange rate of its currency, the Kuna, with the franc for a year. Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic announced his plan earlier this week to fix the Swiss franc exchange rate at 6.39 kuna. The official exchange rate is more than 7.60. Since the free floating of the franc, the kuna has been devalued by 18 percent. While there are strong doubts among analysts that this measure will be effective, it is definitely politically motivated. After the governing Social Democrats suffered a painful loss in the presidential elections, “Milanovic is considering the forcible transformation of the franc loans into kuna so as to win back the allegiance of supporters,” opined the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Hungary was thrown into a similar crisis in 2008-2009. There, around 90 percent of loans were denominated in francs. “The credit rating for Hungary exploded, many of those affected could no longer service their debts, losing their houses and apartments,” *Die Welt* reported.



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