

Hungary strengthens state security powers after Brussels attacks

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The Hungarian government has responded to the terrorist attacks in the Belgian capital March 22 by further strengthening its state apparatus. Last week, it tabled a draft law loosening restrictions on telephone and Internet surveillance, and providing the authorities with continual access to bank accounts.

Despite the best efforts of the Fidesz Party government, the authorities can currently only carry out telephone surveillance with a court order. Telecommunications providers also have the opportunity to oppose surveillance. According to the new law, in “dangerous situations” Internet and telephone communication will be completely cut off and only SMS communication and emergency calls will be possible.

The strengthening of the security agencies with more personnel and technology is also planned. According to interior minister Sandor Pinter, a counter-terrorism centre is to be developed which will evaluate, analyse and pass on information, and, when necessary, issue warnings. In this context, the constant domestic deployment of the military is being pursued.

“The events in Paris and Brussels have settled the debate, the terrorism threat has grown,” the interior minister declared at a press conference. Prime Minister Victor Orban described the attacks in Brussels as “an attack on Hungary,” which had to be responded to with “all necessary steps.”

The government is shifting blame for the terrorist attacks onto refugees seeking protection in Europe. Foreign minister Peter Szijjarto said there was hardly a reasonable person left in Europe who would not deny that the terrorist threat has increased because of uncontrolled illegal immigration.

Interior minister Pinter stated that the details of the new measures would be outlined at a later date.

However, he was forced to admit that they were so significant that some would require a two-thirds majority in parliament to pass.

The human rights organisation Amnesty International has already expressed concern that the expansion of anti-terror laws will undermine basic individual rights.

In January, Orban initiated a constitutional reform, which empowers the government in case of a vaguely defined terrorist emergency to significantly restrict democratic rights. At the time, it was clear that the limitation of democratic rights was directed above all against popular opposition to the government. Hungary has been repeatedly rocked by protests during recent months.

Earlier this month, tens of thousands demonstrated in Budapest against the government’s education policy and solidarised themselves with striking teachers. It was the largest anti-government protest in two years. The demonstrators demanded better pay and working conditions for teachers and more state funding for the education system. Recent polls showed high levels of support for the teachers’ demands.

The government can rely on the support of the opposition parties in the implementation of the new measures. The Fidesz government has relied on support from the fascist Jobbik Party since it lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority.

Jobbik declared it would support the anti-terror measures on the condition that “they are actually aimed at prevention.” Jobbik spokesman Adam Mirkóczki made clear that the far right party would attach further conditions to their support for the measures, and demanded the strengthening of several laws related to the threat of terrorism.

The Socialist Party (MSZP) is also in fundamental agreement with the measures. The chairman of the

national security committee, Zsolt Molnar, said that the MSZP was prepared to support all measures which increased the security of the Hungarian population.

Along with Hungary, several other European governments have responded to the Brussels attacks with drastic measures. The Polish government announced a major expansion of the intelligence agencies' powers to "combat terrorism." Interior Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said, "We will present the bill to parliament at the beginning of April so that it can be adopted by May."

The new measures make surveillance of telephone conversations and Internet data easier. The use of anonymous pre-paid mobile telephones is to be restricted and bank account data from "suspect persons" will be monitored. "Terrorist suspects" can be detained for longer periods of time and foreigners can be deported more easily.

The Polish government has also blamed refugees as a whole for the attacks in Brussels. "After what happened in Brussels yesterday, we cannot say that we are in the meantime willing to take in any migrants," Prime Minister Beata Szydlo told the television station Superstacja. The Prime Minister thus contradicted a promise by the previous government last September that Poland would accept 7,000 refugees.

Over recent months, the Polish government has rapidly strengthened the state apparatus. Since the Law and Justice Party (PiS) assumed power last autumn, it has undermined the power of the courts, expanded its control over the surveillance agencies, co-opted the state radio and television broadcasters and begun a massive rearmament programme both externally and domestically.

In February, a law came into force massively expanding police powers. At the same time, PiS has increased military spending and armed and integrated paramilitary units into the state apparatus. In total, these units amount to 80,000 men, which corresponds to two-thirds of the regular Polish armed forces of 120,000.

The Brussels attacks have also been exploited in the Czech Republic to accelerate the domestic deployment of the army. In an emergency cabinet meeting in Prague last Tuesday, the government adopted a measure allowing the deployment of 550 active army personnel for a period of two months. According to Prime

Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, this would strengthen the police forces.



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