

European Union launches disciplinary procedure against Hungary

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The EU has launched disciplinary proceedings against Hungary. Last Wednesday, a two-thirds majority in the European Parliament voted in favour of a procedure that could, ultimately, lead to the withdrawal of the country's voting rights in the Council of Ministers. Following Poland, Hungary, too, now faces sanctions for serious violations of EU core values.

A so-called Article 7 procedure under the EU Treaty is the EU's "strongest weapon" against a member state. Some 448 members of the European parliament (MEPs) voted in favour of the procedure, 197 against, with 48 abstaining. EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker supported the procedure, saying it must "apply where the rule of law is in danger." Similar comments were made by many other EU representatives.

The vote was preceded by a report that Green MEP Judith Sargentini had prepared this spring on behalf of the parliament. The report charges Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing government in Budapest of representing a "systemic threat to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary." The text refers to the undoubted restrictions on freedom of expression, research and assembly and to a weakening of the constitutional and judicial system in Hungary. Details about violations of the rights of minorities and refugees as well as the action taken against NGOs are also included in the report.

The decision of the European Parliament now goes to the European and foreign ministers of the member states. If at least four-fifths agree with the European Parliament, the EU Council must give the Hungarian government the opportunity to comment. The member states must vote unanimously for a possible withdrawal of voting rights, although Hungary itself would not

participate in the vote. However, such unanimity is unlikely.

It is beyond question that the right-wing government of Orbán has been building up an authoritarian regime for the last three legislative periods, which systematically abrogates democratic rights and acts brutally against refugees and their supporters. The European Union's criticism, however, is pure hypocrisy.

As far as the refugee question goes, the EU states and Hungary are on the same page. At the urging of the EU, Orbán systematically sealed off the so-called Balkan route, along which refugees try to reach Europe via the Balkan states. European politicians, such as German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer or Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, praised him expressly for it.

Orbán never made a secret of using barbed-wire fences and paramilitary units from right-wing groups against refugees. The European People's Party (EPP) faction in the European Parliament also supported Orbán.

Most recently, it became public knowledge that conditions prevail in the camps on the Hungarian-Serbian border that are comparable only with the concentration camps of the Nazis. Refugees are systematically denied food if they do not voluntarily agree to leave for Serbia. The criminalization of refugee aid workers in the context of the "Stop Soros" package was also tolerated by the EU. Governments in which right-wing extremist parties participate, such as in Austria and Italy, are not criticized in Brussels.

The attack on democratic rights and the rule of law in Hungary is also part of a rightward development across Europe, for which the adoption of drastic police laws and the censorship of the internet in Germany provide clear examples.

Even though the government in Budapest is the strongest expression of a pan-European rightward development, the Article 7 procedure against the country reveals the fierce conflicts within the EU. The attempt to subordinate the EU to the dictates and interests of the most powerful European states has strengthened nationalist tendencies in many countries.

“The vote of the EU parliamentarians in Strasbourg welds the front in Eastern Europe even closer together. An Eastern bloc is emerging,” remarked finance daily *Handelsblatt*. Poland has already announced its veto if it comes to a vote in the Council. “Every country has the sovereign right to implement the reforms in the country that it considers appropriate,” the Foreign Ministry announced in Warsaw immediately after the vote in Strasbourg. An Article 7 case has also been running against Poland since December. For his part, Orbán had already announced that he wants to block the procedure against Poland with a veto.

The Czech Republic also declared its support for Orbán. “We are allies,” said right-wing Prime Minister Andrej Babis in Prague. After the formation of a government this year, the coalition of the right-wing liberal ANO, the Social Democrats and the Communist Party is taking a much more EU-critical course. Similar voices prevail in Slovakia as well.

The impact of the Article 7 vote on the balance of power in the EU parliament could be serious; Orbán and others could leave the EPP and join the nationalists. Even the ultra-conservative leader of the EPP, Manfred Weber (Christian Social Union, CSU), said last Tuesday that he voted in favour of Article 7. “We’ve had enough dialogue,” he explained. For a long time, Weber was considered a close ally of Orban. Other CSU MEPs, however, voted against launching the procedure.

The breakup of the EU is progressing rapidly even before the European elections and the official withdrawal of Britain from the EU in the coming year. “The division between East and West, between South and North is already clearly visible,” the political analyst Radu G. Magdin in Bucharest told the *Handelsblatt*.

The deep conflicts in the EU take place against the background of ever more open geopolitical tensions. While there have been widespread fears in the EU that Orbán might have enjoyed too close ties with Russia,

this is now increasingly true in relation to the US.

Under the Obama administration, the relationship between Hungary and the United States had always been tense. However, Trump recently signalled greater commitment and closer ties with Hungary, similar to the case with Poland.

For example, the US announced in July that it would cancel a \$700,000 grant from the State Department to independent media outlets in Hungary. The State Department wants to use the money instead in other parts of Europe, it said. The message arrived. “A huge victory,” the *New York Times* quoted Andras Simonyi, Orbán’s former ambassador to NATO and later Hungarian ambassador to Washington. “This sends a message that Hungary is OK, that Hungary is a democracy.”

With Washington increasingly seeing the EU as an opponent and less as a partner, and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas recently saying he wanted to “recalibrate” the transatlantic alliance and build up the EU as a “counterweight” to the United States, the US is seeking to take greater advantage of conflicts within the EU.



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