

Hungary's government continues its assault on democratic rights

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Last week, the Hungarian parliament, dominated by the right-wing Fidesz party, passed a number of controversial bills that represent a further step towards dictatorial forms of rule. Among the bills passed is a Culture Law, which recalls the darkest chapters in European history. The law effectively gives the government the ability to censor any form of culture it deems unfavourable.

The 200-page bill, also known as the “Muzzle Law,” permits the chairman of parliament to impose heavy fines on deputies or exclude them from sittings if they protest in parliament. The powers are very broad and allow Fidesz to impose financial sanctions making any effective opposition virtually impossible. The law also includes a de facto ban on the right to form political factions.

Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán has pursued these goals since assuming power in 2010, despite its already firm grip on power, with a completely fragmented social democratic opposition and the fascist Jobbik party, which often lines up with Fidesz. Following a series of changes to procedural rules, the power of the ruling party has been further strengthened. At the same time, the official opposition has been stripped of any ability to block legislative proposals.

A driving force in these attacks on parliamentary and democratic rights is the president of the parliament, László Kövér. Kövér is a founding member of Fidesz, an avowed anti-Semite and an admirer of Adolf Hitler's closest Hungarian ally during World War II, Miklos Horthy. In 2012, Kövér took part in events honouring the writer József Nyíró. Nyíró was the central cultural ideologue of the National Socialist Arrow Cross, under whose rule tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews were murdered between October 1944 and March 1945.

With its new Culture Law, the government is making clear it will not tolerate any opposition, even on a cultural level. According to the government, the bill will guarantee “the strategic control of cultural sectors by the government.” A draft published at the beginning of December included the abolition of the national cultural fund and the slashing of government grants for independent cultural institutions. In future subsidies are to be directly linked to the government's ability to determine the appointment of theatre directors.

The new law triggered large-scale protests by artists and those working in the field of culture, forcing the government to moderate its draft somewhat. Just a few days after the draft was published, 50,000 people signed a petition opposing the law. In the country's capital, Budapest, several thousand people recently demonstrated with posters reading: “Pigs, hands off the theatres!” The Reuters news agency quoted a retired bus driver taking part in the protests as saying, “I am a democrat and this is yet another step to steal another sphere of public life: this time theatres.”

The cultural fund is to be retained in the meantime, but when theatres request grants, the government can not only decide on the payment of any subsidies, but also have a say in the choice of director. At the same time, the National Cultural Council—a body set up by the government—will issue guidelines on culture. One can imagine the character of such guidelines, bearing in mind that fascist artists and intellectuals like Nyíró have been rehabilitated under Orbán in recent years and their works made compulsory reading in Hungarian schools.

Orbán is clearly planning further authoritarian measures. “We cannot be sure with this government whether a stricter law will not come in a few weeks or months,” commented Martin Boross, artistic director of

the independent Stereoakt theatre, to the German media outlet *Deutsche Welle*. “It is a proven strategy of the government to wait until the situation has calmed down before adopting even more serious legislative changes.”

Orbán justified the latest restrictions by saying that they reflected the will of the electorate. In fact, the opposite is true. The law is partly a reaction to the local elections in October when Fidesz suffered significant defeats. The opposition made gains in several areas and in particular won the capital of Budapest, which is significant in terms of federal policy. In a number of cities and municipalities, opposition parties had formed alliances and were able to top the polls. According to the new legislation this will no longer be possible.

First and foremost, however the law is not directed against the toothless opposition, which is quite prepared to enter into a pact with the fascist Jobbik party, but rather against the population. Strikes and protests against the government are increasing significantly. At the end of November, thousands of teachers demonstrated for higher wages and better working conditions. The head of the PSZ teachers’ union, Zsuzsa Szabó, was even forced to declare that the union would call for a nationwide strike in January if the government did not make concessions. There have already been massive strikes by teachers in Poland and Croatia this year.

The Orbán government has responded to the growing opposition among teachers in its typically provocative and repugnant manner. It released a statement alleging that teachers were directed by George Soros and that the goal was to overthrow Hungary’s “anti-immigration government.” The anti-Semitic campaign against billionaire Soros is not new. The fact that the government now brings it into play against striking workers must be understood as a warning. Orbán will not hesitate to dispatch fascist thugs against strikers.

At the same time, the government is pushing ahead with the country’s militarisation. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said after the last NATO meeting in Brussels that Hungary would increase its participation in NATO missions by a third. An additional 70 soldiers would be deployed in Afghanistan and 100 in Kosovo. Szijjártó also confirmed that Hungary will increase its military budget to 2 percent of gross domestic product by 2024. This militarist policy is most actively supported by the German government and its military

industries. Recently, the Düsseldorf-based armaments group Rheinmetall received an order worth €300 million from Budapest for weapons technology.

The further the Orbán regime moves to the right, the more the European Union closes its ranks against any criticism. For example, the German EU president, Ursula von der Leyen, appointed Olivér Várhelyi, a close confidante of Orbán, as EU commissioner for enlargement. This enables Orbán to increase his influence on the corrupt, right-wing governments in the western Balkans. At the same time, his brutal anti-refugee policy retains the legitimacy of the EU and is increasingly becoming the policy of all European governments.



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