

Hungarian government uses coronavirus epidemic to promote racism

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In common with the rest of Europe, the coronavirus is spreading rapidly in Hungary. The response of the ultra-right-wing government of Victor Orban is to promote racism in order to cover up its own inactivity and its responsibility for the spread of the infection.

The Fidesz government only took action against the spread of Covid-19 last week after Orban previously downplayed the crisis with a combination of stupidity, ignorance and audacity.

The country's borders with Austria and Slovenia are now closed, and all other borders are due to be closed. Air traffic will also cease at the country's international airports. Hungarians are still allowed to enter the country but are quarantined for 14 days. Travellers from Italy, China, South Korea and Iran are now prohibited from entering the country. According to Orban in a radio interview: "Foreigners have brought the plague to Hungary."

Universities, theatres and cinemas have been closed, and there is a ban on any large gatherings. When asked why universities, but not schools, were being closed, Orban replied that there were "a lot of strangers" in universities and, in the event of school closures, teachers would have to be sent on unpaid leave and the school year would end.

Zoltán Lomnici, spokesman for the far-right Civilian Forum (CÖF), an organisation that is generously funded by the government, posted the following message on the CÖF's Facebook page: "The virus is spreading faster in countries that allow immigration. This proves that Hungary's immigration policy is right and that George Soros' theory of an Open Society has failed totally." The reference to the Jewish billionaire Soros, whom Orban has often personally insulted, is aimed at encouraging anti-Semitic, fascistic elements in the country.

The first person infected with Covid-19 in Hungary was an Iranian student who was also among the first group to be tested. Hungarians returning from northern Italy and South Tyrol as tourists or workers who wanted to be tested for the coronavirus have been turned away by the authorities. There are now 58 officially confirmed cases in Hungary (all figures from March 18), but given the lack of testing, it must be assumed that the actual number is far higher.

The case of two Iranian students shows the indifference and brutality with which the Hungarian government deals with the pathogen. According to the Interior Ministry last Friday, the pair were deported from Hungary for allegedly leaving a hospital where they had been quarantined for infection. Neglecting all infection control measures, the two were immediately transported by the national immigration authority to the Hungarian border, where no medical care is available. They were then deported and banned from returning to Hungary for three years.

The Orban government has barely undertaken any protective measures, but at the same time used the coronavirus to abolish the right of asylum at the beginning of this month. The country's so-called transit zones on its border with Serbia are closed until further notice. More than 300 interned refugees remain there under intolerable conditions with their applications for asylum now rendered invalid. Orban and other government officials declared that it was "likely" the refugees would bring the coronavirus to Hungary.

"We have discovered a link between the coronavirus and illegal migrants," stated Gyorgy Bakondi, national security official to the government. Orban made similar comments on Friday, declaring: "We are waging a war on two fronts. One front is migration and the other is the coronavirus, there is a logical connection between

the two, as both are spread through movement.”

Fidesz spokesman Istvan Hollik said that immigrants not only pose a “risk of terrorism” but also come from coronavirus “hotspots.” One could not jeopardise the security of the Hungarian population and would therefore continue to say “No” to immigration, Hollik wrote on Facebook.

This statement is as repugnant as it is false. Of the 58 cases confirmed so far, only a small minority affect foreigners. At the border with Serbia, just a few metres from the Roszke transit zone, no tests have yet been carried out, although infections have been reported in Serbia. One of them involved a man who had recently traveled to Budapest several times.

“Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Urban is using the outbreak of the coronavirus to abolish the right to asylum in Hungary,” commented Gerald Knaus from the European Stability Initiative think tank. Human rights organisations regard the new ordinance as a continuation of the “hate campaign” against refugees that Orban has conducted for years.

Right-wing and widely despised governments in several other eastern and south eastern European countries are also trying to distract attention from their own responsibility for the developing crisis by scapegoating refugees.

In Croatia, Health Minister Vili Beros said that immigrants are a “potential” risk and the EU must find a solution. There are 65 confirmed coronavirus cases in the country.

In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vucic said the country would not be a “parking lot” for immigrants. The government instructed the Ministry of Health to quarantine all immigrants. Seventy-two people in Serbia had been infected with the coronavirus. The parliamentary elections scheduled for April 26 are likely to be postponed.

The widespread distribution of the Covid-19 pathogen will result in a social catastrophe for the states of former Yugoslavia. The country’s former well-developed health system has been systematically destroyed during the last 25 years. “Everything is missing in clinics, not just medication and cleaning agents but of course, staff. In the past few years, at least 50 percent of doctors and nurses have left the state system in almost all successor states,” reported the *taz* newspaper.

Clinics in the entire region lack any facilities to carry out adequate tests, and laboratory capacities are completely inadequate. There are only a few isolation rooms in some large clinics, and everywhere there is “a lack of protective clothing for staff. After Germany refused to export protective clothing and face masks to countries outside the EU, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania have been rendered virtually defenceless to the corona epidemic heading their way,” *taz* wrote.



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