

Citing influx of refugees, Hungary prepares authoritarian legislation

By Markus Salzmann
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Hungary's right-wing government plans to introduce far-reaching emergency powers. Under the pretext of combating terrorism and deterring refugees, which in official propaganda are one and the same thing, the government plans to grant itself dictatorial powers enabling it to suppress all social and political opposition.

Citing the threat of terrorism, the Fidesz government of Victor Orban wants to sharply curtail the right of assembly and press freedom, close down borders, restrict the freedom of travel of Hungarian citizens and their contacts abroad and compel telephone companies and Internet service providers to shut down connections. The anti-terrorism package includes 30 individual measures.

Freedom of the press has been restricted in Hungary for years. Now the media are to be forced to publish government bulletins and censor and ban "dangerous" material. Laws can be set aside by decree. The secret service and police, who already go largely unchecked, will get wider powers. Restrictions will be eased on the use of the military domestically.

In addition, strike bans and curfews may be imposed at any time. The government may declare a state of emergency without parliament's approval. This would only be subject to debate after 60 days in order to possibly extend the action.

The term "terrorist threat", which allows the government to declare a state of emergency, is kept deliberately vague. The bill only talks about the "protection of the Hungarian people" and of external and internal threats. Government representatives have already made it clear that the emergency laws can be directed against anyone.

Government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs vigorously defended the planned laws, citing the European refugee

crisis. He described the assaults on women on New Year's Eve in Cologne, which have been blown out of all proportion by the media, as a new form of terrorism. "We should in any case listen to the experts who claim this," Kovacs said. He openly declared that terrorism and the streams of refugees in Europe went "hand in hand".

Following the terrorist attacks in Paris, Orban's adviser Gabor Fodor had declared, "Tonight, liberalism has failed. What has failed are Merkel and Hollande. What has failed are the immigration and ultimately terrorism friendly Brussels bureaucrats."

Hungary already halted last year refugees traveling from Serbia who wanted to continue to Austria and Germany. The government built a 170-kilometre-long fence on the Serbian border and is acting ruthlessly against refugees there. Refugees who nevertheless enter Hungary illegally are threatened with draconian punishments. The construction of another 600-kilometre-long fence on the border with Romania is in preparation, should many refugees change to that route.

The right-wing government in Budapest feels vindicated by the stricter refugee policies of other European governments. Kovacs referred to the harsher legal situation in countries like Germany, Austria and Sweden. "It turns out we were right," the government spokesman said.

The recent announcement of the government in Vienna that it is imposing a ceiling for refugees is grist to the mill of the Hungarian right-wing. "This is an admission that the welcoming culture and open borders policy was a mistake," said Kovacs. "Common sense" was slowly prevailing in Vienna.

Kovacs called for a "line of defence" against refugees in Macedonia. Hungary has already sent

several dozen police officers to the Macedonian border with Greece to help secure the border. The construction of a border fence is also being prepared there.

During a recent meeting with the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov in Sofia, Orban declared that the wave of refugees was the most important security issue in Europe. This raised the terrorist threat, he said. "All those who cannot defend themselves" live "in danger" from the refugees. Orban announced that the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) would discuss further measures against refugees at their meeting in mid-February in Prague, in cooperation with the Bulgarian government.

Although the Orban government justified the emergency law by citing the recent influx of refugees, its anti-democratic measures are in continuity with its previous policy. Orban has laid the foundation for an authoritarian state in the last five years. He has cleansed institutions such as the Constitutional Court and the publicly-owned media of those the government finds disagreeable. This was done in parallel with attacks on the living standards of the population. Today, Hungary is one of the poorest countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

There is no resistance to the emergency law from the Hungarian parties. Both the fascist Jobbik and the Hungarian Greens have worked for some time with Fidesz in parliament and support the laws.

While there is widespread public concern, the opposition seeks to suppress this. At the end of January, a group of despised and discredited politicians organized a protest in Budapest. They were led by Lajos Bokros, the notorious Socialist Party finance minister who had enforced draconian austerity measures in the 1990s.

There is also no criticism of the emergency laws from the European Union, because almost all member states are moving in the same direction. In France, a state of emergency was declared after the terrorist attacks in Paris, which remains in force. In many other European countries, democratic rights are also under attack. The anti-terror laws in Hungary are therefore a template for the introduction of authoritarian forms of government in other countries.

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