Merkel and Orbán: A sordid deal at the expense of refugees and democracy

By Peter Schwarz
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Sometimes reality surpasses the worst fantasy. This was the case on Monday in Sopron in western Hungary, where German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán celebrated the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Hungarian-Austrian border. They sang the praises of “freedom” and heaped compliments upon each other—at the expense of refugees and democratic rights, and in the interests of closer military cooperation.

On August 19, 1989, the then Stalinist regime in Hungary had allowed more than 600 citizens from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to pass through the previously hermetically sealed border between Eastern and Western Europe. This began a mass exodus from the GDR, which led two-and-a-half months later to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the introduction of capitalism throughout Eastern Europe.

Orbán, who has since hermetically sealed off Hungary’s southern border with a 175-kilometre-long, four-metre-high barbed-wire fence against refugees, and Merkel, who contributes with her rigorous anti-refugee policy to the mass deaths in the Mediterranean, praised the demolition of the border fence 30 years ago as a major contribution to “freedom.”

When a journalist pointed to this apparent contradiction, Orbán replied that the removal of the border fence 30 years ago had served the “freedom” of the citizens of the then Eastern Bloc. Now, the construction of a fence on the borders with Serbia and Croatia served to protect their “freedom and security.” Orbán claimed, “We have now built walls on the southern borders, so that those Germans for whom walls were brought down 30 years ago can now live in safety. These two things are related. We are the castle keepers of the Germans.”

Merkel did not contradict him. “We are agreed that border management is important,” she said, highlighting the points of agreement with Orbán: the fight against the causes of migration in Africa, the refugee agreement with Turkey and better protection of the EU’s external borders. She praised the good German-Hungarian relations and promised more trade, more joint research and above all, more military cooperation.

Until recently, the relationship between Berlin and Budapest had been extremely frosty. Berlin had issued pro-forma criticisms of Orbán’s refusal to accept refugees, even though it pursued a similar policy of sealing off Europe’s external borders.

Last autumn, the European Parliament initiated a rule of law case against Hungary by a large majority. A report commissioned by the parliament concluded that there was a “systemic threat to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights” in Hungary. Based on official findings of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, the report criticized restrictions on freedom of expression, research and assembly, a weakening of the constitutional and judicial system, government action against non-governmental organizations, violations of the rights of minorities and refugees as well as corruption and conflicts of interest.

In March of this year, the European People’s Party (EPP), which includes Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), suspended Orbán’s party Fidesz because it had agitated against European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker in the European election campaign. Orbán then threatened to make common cause with right-wing nationalists such as the Italian Lega and the French Rassemblement National.

But now it was if these differences had dissolved in thin air. Orbán showered Merkel with praise, assured her of the “appreciation of the Hungarian nation” and praised her “untiring commitment to European unity.” Merkel refrained from any criticism of Orbán’s dictatorial methods of rule.

The reason for the reconciliation of Merkel and Orbán is a dirty deal. Orbán’s Fidesz—and the equally nationalist Polish PiS of Jaroslaw Kaczynski—had ensured that Merkel’s candidate Ursula von der Leyen received the required majority in her election as president of the EU Commission. This was apparently in return for promised concessions.
According to a report in the newspaper Die Welt, the Hungarian side had formulated the following “clear requests” before the election: consideration of the Visegrád countries Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic in filling important EU posts; the replacement of former EU Commissioner for Rule of Law Frans Timmermans, who had repeatedly criticized Hungary, from this area of responsibility; support for the candidacy of former Hungarian Justice Minister László Trócsányi for a post as EU Commissioner; the lifting of the suspension of Fidesz from EPP membership.

Above all, however, what links Berlin and Budapest are massive economic and military interests. Germany is the largest investor in Hungary. In particular, the automotive industry, such as companies Audi and Bosch, uses the nearby country, where labour costs amount to only a quarter of those in Germany, as a low-wage platform. There are currently 300,000 employees working for 6,000 German companies in Hungary. The trade volume last year amounted to €55 billion.

Meanwhile, Hungary is also the largest customer for Germany’s defence industry. In the first half of 2019 alone, German companies supplied weapons valued at €1.76 billion to the state on the Danube, more than twice as much as Egypt, number two on the German arms export list.

The Orbán government is in the process of doubling military spending and upgrading the Hungarian armed forces far beyond NATO’s 2 percent target. “The defence of Hungary is not the job of NATO and not of the EU, but ours,” Orbán said in May. “There cannot be a strong Hungary without a strong army. A nation that cannot defend its country does not deserve its country.”

Germany, which was allied with Hungary under the Nazis, supports this project. The reason is not just the profits of the arms industry. Germany itself is massively upgrading its military and is again striving for the role of a world power. This requires allies. That is why Merkel has reconciled with Orbán.

The 30th anniversary of the opening up of the former Eastern European border was not chosen by chance. The opening of the Hungarian border at that time was not a step in the direction of “freedom,” but in the direction of capitalism and a new form of oppression.

The Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, which forcibly prevented people from leaving, were undoubtedly reactionary. They served to secure Stalinist rule, the power of a privileged bureaucratic caste that acted as a parasite on state property and oppressed every form of workers’ democracy.

But there were two forms of opposition to Stalinism. One attacked it from the right, the other from the left. The first sought the removal of socialised property and the introduction of capitalist exploitation, the second the overthrow of the bureaucracy and the establishment of a real, socialist workers’ democracy.

The opening of the border on August 19, 1989 clearly belongs to the first category. This is made clear by the form in which it was celebrated: a “pan-European picnic” organized by the arch reactionary Paneuropa Union, headed by the Austrian heir apparent, Otto von Habsburg.

The opposition to Stalinism exploded throughout Eastern Europe at that time. It expressed itself in demands for democracy and was directed against the Stalinist rulers and their privileges, not against socialised property. The opening of the border served to relieve pressure and direct the movement in a pro-capitalist direction.

Gyula Horn, the Hungarian foreign minister responsible for the opening of the border, embodied the wing of the Stalinist bureaucracy that sought to secure its endangered privileges through the introduction of capitalist property. He oriented himself to Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1985 had taken over the leadership of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and initiated its dissolution. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Horn was Hungarian Prime Minister from 1994 to 1998 and organized capitalist restoration.

For the working class, the result has not been “freedom” but a social catastrophe. The once good education and health systems have deteriorated. Thirty years after the collapse of Stalinism in the Eastern European states, low pay, unemployment and decay dominate. And instead of democracy, authoritarian rule, fascism and war are returning.

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