
ORBAN PROTESTS TARGET STATE MEDIA IN NEW FRONT

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19.12.2018

EU Observer (18 December 2018)

Protests continued in Hungary on Monday (17 December) for the fifth consecutive day, sparked by a controversial labour law that grew into demonstrations against right-wing prime minister Viktor Orban and his increasingly autocratic "illiberal democracy".

Around 2,000 people showed up at the headquarters of the public broadcaster, a central element in Hungary's pro-government media, on Monday evening to demand a more independent public media and courts.

Earlier, two opposition MPs who spent the night at the state media HQ were thrown out of the building by security guards after they tried to get into a studio to read out the protestors' demands for independent courts, free media and joining the EU's prosecutors office, set up to monitor the use of EU funding.

Around a dozen MPs spent the day at the offices, which refused to give airtime to the opposition politicians, after Sunday's protests saw around 15,000 people take to the streets despite the subzero temperatures.

Another MP was injured during scuffles with security guards and was hospitalised on Monday with minor injuries.

Protestors on Monday evening also demonstrated in front of offices of other pro-government media, demanding independent press.

The protests do not yet pose a threat to Orban's rule, and he has not commented on events.

Meanwhile, pro-government and state media have either not been reporting on the demonstrations, or portrayed the protestors as paid activists by US billionaire George Soros lacking popular support, and opposition MPs as troublemakers.

A spokesperson for George Soros' Open Society Foundations said in a statement that Soros had not stoked the protests.

The absurdity of Orban's self-styled "illiberal state" was highlighted as thousands watched the live Facebook streams of opposition MPs from inside the state media HQ - while the events were largely ignored by the Orban-allied media.

The protests were sparked by a new labour law that increases overtime by 60 percent yet delays payment for it for three years, uniting opposition parties from far-right Jobbik, through liberals, to

the socialists for the first time.

Violence against protestors and MPs also mark a new low, as Orbán's government has so far attempted to avoid displays of violence against political opponents, using it as a proof that his illiberal state is not autocratic.

The protests are the first wave of demonstrations since 2014, when people took to the streets against Orbán's proposed internet tax, which he quickly scrapped.

The rare and sustained strain of protests are unlikely to grow much larger as Christmas holidays are approaching, although opposition parties that were fragmented and ineffective in the past are keen to keep up the momentum.

The protests nevertheless mark a growing desperation with Orbán chipping away checks and balances, curbing independent institutions and building his illiberal state in the past eight years.

Last April Orbán's party received another two-thirds majority in parliament, tightening his grip on power, and the government enjoys broad support according to opinion polls.

'Slave' law

Last week, as his MPs voted for the new labour law, his party also voted to set up an administrative court system under the oversight of the justice minister to deal with politically and economically sensitive cases that critics say ends rule of law in Hungary.

Orbán and his allies also cemented their control over media in the country recently by creating a centralised media holding as his political and business allies "donated" their outlets, news channels, radio stations, and newspapers, under his political control.

Since Orbán came to power in 2010, public broadcasters have been turned into mouthpieces for the government.

Hungary's media is only "partly free" according to Freedom House, and has fallen nearly 50 places on the watchdog's scale since Orbán's 2010 election.

After Orbán was re-elected for the third time in April, international election observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said in their report that Orbán's party enjoyed an "undue advantage" because of biased media coverage.

An EU probe underway is due to scrutinise Hungary's backsliding on democracy and rule of law, but is not expected to lead to any pressure or sanctions from fellow EU countries.

Kaynak/Source: