

**Christopher Adam**

## **Hungary erases the past and whitewashes the future**

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The European Union had scant reason to celebrate the first days of the New Year, as tight-lipped bureaucrats in Brussels tried to muster a smile for the cameras when faced with the impending Hungarian presidency of the 27-member union. The EU's image as a stable, reliable and orderly economic community even amidst an international financial storm was already shattered when the sovereign debt crisis erupted in Greece, Ireland and Portugal.

But now the European Union's reputation as a credible international voice on issues of democracy, freedom and civil liberties may suffer a devastating blow, as Hungary's new government takes over the reins of power for the next six months.

Fidesz, Hungary's increasingly authoritarian ruling party, enjoys a two-thirds majority in Parliament. It used its political might to rush through a troubling bill restricting freedom of the press and raised the sceptre of a second bill threatening to erase the country's communist past, all before riding into Brussels on the coattails of stinging international condemnation.

The proposed bill on how to deal with the country's past is a stunning example of bureaucratic idiocy mixed with a wish to sanitize the historical record for political purposes. Bence Retvari, the parliamentary secretary of state at Hungary's Ministry of Justice, announced that it is unethical for a democratic state to preserve in its public archives the "immoral documents of an immoral regime." As such, the government will soon make it possible for affected citizens to remove and destroy original, irreplaceable documents on the country's communist past. The documents in question include thousands of secret police files currently available to professional researchers at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security, as well as a separate collection of unreleased data on over 50,000 communist state security officers, encrypted on magnetic tape.

Both collections are sensitive, but documents declassified over the past 10 years have been essential to understanding the nature and scope of four decades' worth of communist rule in Hungary. The prospect of government bureaucrats removing irreplaceable documents from public archives because they are deemed "immoral" harkens back to Europe's darkest twentieth century dictatorships. Using the government's warped logic, they might as well go all the way and destroy the records of interwar Hungary and light a fire under the boxes of documents detailing the history of the Habsburgs.

Not quite satisfied with unilaterally "renegotiating" the past, Fidesz passed a highly repressive bill three days before Christmas aimed at curbing the influence of newspapers, radio stations and television channels critical of the current government's measures. Fidesz established a new radio and television commission, with the ruling party appointing all five members to its board. Annamaria Szalai, the commission's president, has been a loyal party member for nearly two decades and can now enjoy unparalleled job security during her nine year term as the country's powerful media tsar. Hungarian newspapers and magazines published blank cover pages after the bill was passed, protesting a law that moves Hungary inexorably back in time to the days of the People's Republic.

The bill gives the government new powers in determining the content of privately owned broadcasters and introduces financial penalties that could immediately bankrupt newspapers and

websites. The bill also forces all journalists to reveal their confidential or anonymous sources, if the government determines that their article touches on issues of national security. Fidesz claims that the bill intends to protect minors, rather than ban political dissent. In fact, the media tsar launched the new year by investigating a radio station for their decision to play “negative” music by rapper Ice-T. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has already warned that the law, which came into effect the same day that Hungary assumed the EU’s rotating presidency, endangers “media pluralism.”

Ironically, by shutting down critical newspapers and television stations, Fidesz may dig its own political grave. Provided that Hungary holds free and fair elections as scheduled in 2014, the current government and its institutional supporters would find themselves at the receiving end of the very authoritarian measures they implemented. If Socialist Party spokesperson Zsolt Torok’s characterization of Fidesz as a “criminal alliance” reflects the views of the largest opposition party, then many at the helm of the government may find themselves on the threshold of a brave new world indeed.

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