

Beat: News

Hungary's leader using Ukraine war as an excuse to seize more power

Orbán declares state of emergency

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USPA NEWS - Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Tuesday declared a state of emergency over the Ukraine war that was set to take effect on Wednesday, the Associated Press reported, granting him the ability to bypass the country's legislature and rule by decree. Orbán, who was recently re-elected to a fourth consecutive four-year term, made the announcement shortly after his far right, ruling Fidesz party passed a constitutional amendment paving the way for such a declaration.

The Hungarian leader in a video on social media said that the Ukraine war was "putting our physical security at risk and threatening the energy and financial security of our economy and families," the Associated Press reported. He said the state of emergency would enable the government "to respond immediately and protect Hungary and Hungarian families by any means possible."

Orbán, who is widely regarded as an authoritarian and ethno-nationalist, was also granted sweeping emergency powers, including the ability to rule by decree, by the country's parliament in 2020 in response to the COVID-19, but that state of emergency was set to expire next week on June 1.

"Having 2/3 majority in parliament is not enough for him. Ruling in permanent state of emergency with ability to suspend basic rights seems Orbán's new normal," Thorsten Benner, director of the Global Public Policy Institute, a Berlin-based think tank, said in a tweet responding to the move.

Emese Pasztor of the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union in a statement said that Orbán's government was "once again adapting the rules of the game to its own needs," per the Associated Press. "By always allowing the possibility of introducing a special legal order in the future, it will lose its special character. It will become the new normal, which will threaten the fundamental rights of all of us, and rule by decree will further diminish the importance of Parliament," Pasztor added.

Hungary is a member of the EU and NATO, but Orbán has often been the target of fierce criticism by other European leaders, democracy watchdogs, and human rights groups.

Orbán's close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin have been at the heart of Hungary's tensions with the EU. He's called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy an "opponent," and is standing in the way of an EU embargo on Russian oil. Europe has faced mounting international pressure to cease its reliance on Russian energy, in order to cut off an important source of income from Moscow as the Ukraine war rages on.

Since coming to power in 2010, Orbán has taken a lot of anti-democratic, controversial steps that have helped ensure his ruling party stays in power. He's remade Hungary's electoral system, including by gerrymandering parliamentary districts and almost halving the number of seats in parliament, to give Fidesz major advantages that experts have characterized as electoral autocracy; gerrymandering, for example, allowed him to carry roughly 83% of the districts while only securing 53% of the April election. Orbán has also attacked the independence of the judiciary, used public funds to enrich loyalists, and muzzled independent media in Hungary.

In spite of these anti-democratic trends under Orbán, the Hungarian leader has been lauded as a model by prominent right-wing figures in the US, including Fox News host Tucker Carlson and Republicans in Congress. In one of the clearest signs of the growing affinity for Orbán among US conservatives, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) was held in Budapest last week and the Hungarian leader was the keynote speaker.

"We need to take back the institutions in Washington and Brussels," Orbán said in his speech, per CBS News, adding, "We need to find friends, and we need to find allies. We need to coordinate the movement of our troops, because we have a big challenge ahead of us."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Tuesday ripped into Republicans for embracing Orbán and welcoming him at CPAC. "A notorious authoritarian and proponent of replacement theory! It's sickening. There must be accountability," Schumer said in a tweet,

referencing a white supremacist conspiracy theory that's been promoted by conservative figures like Orbán and Carlson.

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