

Hungary seeks indefinite extension to state of emergency

March 23 2020, by Pablo Gorondi



Military staff patrol in the downtown of Gyor, Hungary, Monday, March 23, 2020. The patrol is deployed to keep up public safety and order during the time of the epidemic of novel coronavirus. (Csaba Krizsan/MTI via AP)

The Hungarian government is seeking to extend indefinitely the state of

emergency introduced on March 11 because of the coronavirus epidemic, leading some to fear an unjustified power grab and an erosion of press freedoms.

The bill to be debated Monday in Parliament would grant the government special powers, including the ability to rule by decree, for as long as the government considers it necessary because of the epidemic.

It would also set prison terms of up to five years for those convicted of spreading [false information](#) about the epidemic, and of up to eight years for those who interfered with efforts to contain the spread of the [coronavirus](#).

Opposition parties and [rights groups](#) are criticizing the proposed indefinite extension of the [state of emergency](#) and fear the government may curtail press freedoms in the name of fighting the new virus.

The Council of Europe's human rights expert expressed concerns about the lack of a "clear cut-off date" and other safeguards in the proposed legislation.

"Even in an emergency, it is necessary to observe the Constitution, ensure parliamentary & judicial scrutiny & right to information," Dunja Mijatovic said in a tweet.

The Vienna-based International Press Institute said the threat against journalists and others who could be accused of spreading "[fake news](#)" was "a step toward total information control and the further suppression of press freedoms in the country."



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"While restrictions on individual freedoms may be necessary in the pandemic, any such measures must be necessary, proportionate, temporary and limited to solving the immediate health crisis—criteria that the Hungarian proposals do not appear to meet," the IPI said in a statement, noting government efforts to dismantle press freedoms since Orbán's return to power in 2010.

In Hungary, rights groups including the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, also criticized the proposed legislation

"We need strong rule of law safeguards and proportional and necessary emergency measures, not unlimited government rule by decree that can last beyond the actual epidemic crisis," the groups said. "In the past decade, we've seen that the Hungarian [government](#) does not tolerate constitutional limitations on the exercise of its powers."



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Workers unload boxes containing medical aid and protective materials to combat the COVID-19 coronavirus from a plane of the Hungarian low-cost airline WizzAir at Liszt Ferenc International Airport in Budapest, Hungary, Monday, March 23, 2020, after its arrival from Shanghai, China. (Zsolt Szigetvary/MTI via AP)

Speaking Monday on state television, Orban said the number of those infected with the coronavirus in Hungary was "clearly much higher than the 167 confirmed infection cases." Hungary has also reported seven deaths linked to COVID-19, while 16 people have recovered from the disease.

Hungary has closed off its borders to passenger traffic except mostly for its own citizens. Universities and schools are closed and have switched to

distance learning, public events have been canceled and people are being urged to stay home as much as possible.

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