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Hungary

Hungary's war on women

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The Hungarian ruling party's anti-woman campaign is part and parcel of their larger agenda.

A public service announcement (PSA) produced by the Hungarian government has provoked worldwide outrage by placing the blame for sexual assault on survivors. The video depicts young women dressing provocatively, drinking and dancing, with the consequence of an attack by a stranger, before ending with the words, "You are responsible. You can do something about it."

The media initiative coincided with a statement issued by police in Vas County on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, warning women that flirting might be expected to "elicit violence."

Justifiably outraged, Hungarian feminists were quick to respond. Keret, a consortium of Hungarian women's rights organizations, issued a letter of protest titled "Clothes Do Not Make the Victims!" In this statement, Keret says that the broadcasts are produced by "misogyny and contempt for women," that the video propagates misconceptions, and that the government's claims are incompatible with international human rights standards and Hungary's commitments to these.

SlutWalk Budapest organized a November 30 demonstration that began at 3:30 in the afternoon at Déak Ferenc Square with scores of protestors demanding that the Hungarian government abandon its deplorable campaign and replace it with one that raises awareness about the facts regarding rape and the rights of survivors.

SlutWalk is a movement of protest marches that first occurred three years ago in Toronto, Ontario, in response to comments by a police officer who suggested a woman's choice of dress was a primary cause of sexual violence. Demonstrations inspired by the Toronto protests have subsequently taken place in cities all over the world.

These protests explicitly counter the message conveyed by the Hungarian PSAs that victims of assault are themselves responsible for the acts of violence committed against them, simply as an effect of their dress or behavior. As Jen Roesch wrote during the initial outpouring of SlutWalk events:

We should reject outright the victim blaming that says a woman "asked for it" if she dresses a certain way or has had previous sexual partners. But we must go further and build an anti-sexist movement that can empower women to confidently accept or refuse sex according to their own desires—and create the kind of culture in which men understand and respect the difference.

The content of the videos is so blatant in its illustration of what feminists have named "rape culture" that many viewers initially react with disbelief. It is actually somewhat rare to find such an explicit attempt to force women to police themselves—all under the guise of protecting them. For this reason, it is worth considering the ideology that the Hungarian state wishes to disseminate, and how this is related to its larger political agenda.

FIRST, THE video presents the perpetrator of violence as an "outsider." This provides a valuable function for the right-wing populist worldview developed by the ruling party of Hungary, Fidesz. The state has an interest in

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encouraging fear of those who are different or unfamiliar. As Roesch explained in this speech:

When rape and sexual assault become defined primarily as issues of criminality, it becomes exceedingly difficult to define that outside the boundaries of how society defines it. The typical criminal once again becomes the stranger on the street, usually black, brown or poor.

However, the main purpose of the video seems to be regulating and disciplining the behavior of women. But why has this become a state priority at this particular time? The video must be placed in the context of the conditions facing women in Hungarian society as a whole. For example, between 2006 and 2014, Hungary's place in the World Economic Forum's gender-equality ranking fell from 55 to 93.

Responsibility for this decline lies squarely with the policies of the ruling party, which has maintained a two-thirds supermajority since 2010. Fidesz's rule has resulted in savage cuts to the system of social provisioning, amounting to what economist Zsuzsa Ferge has justly described as a "war on the poor."

In the words of Tithi Bhattacharya, "the changes that take place in the dynamics of social provisioning and the extent to which it can or cannot take place within the enclosure of 'safe' spaces also determine the contours of gender relationships." The state's refusal to provide basic needs for food and shelter effectively outsources these requirements to women, who are expected to "naturally" provide care labor without cost to capital.

In order to achieve this, the state must advocate an ideology of traditional femininity, according to which women are "responsible" and "self-sacrificing." For this reason, it won't come as a surprise that the elimination of social provisioning by Hungary's right-wing populists also coincides with a fervent new push for "Christian values," interpreted by the party in highly traditional, chauvinist and patriarchal terms. The PSAs, then, are a propaganda effort by the state-owned media to enforce this role by means of terror.

In recent months, a series of popular protests have countered the initiatives of the Hungarian state. Protesters first got a taste of their power when they forced the government to abandon its plans for an Internet tax. Subsequently, large demonstrations have taken place against corruption and against cuts to retirement funds.

For this reason, the gap between state policies and the actual needs of the Hungarian people is especially evident. The popular resistance to the government's backwards campaign against sexual violence is a further example of a growing anger at Hungary's authoritarian capitalist state. The victim-blaming television spots are of a piece with other governmental abuses of power, because they are part of a unified strategy of centralized authority and indifference to the social costs of capital accumulation.

In response, it is necessary to build solidarity among all of the popular movements that reject the authoritarian populism that presently monopolizes state power in Hungary. These struggles can only achieve their goals by recognizing a common affinity. Five years ago, G.M. Tamás, a Hungarian Marxist intellectual, put it this way:

Reaction is teaching East Europeans how these struggles hang together. We are learning our lessons the hard way. We don't need to be told that socialists and feminists, gay and lesbian activists, minority-rights campaigners and trade unionists belong together because we all are being clobbered by the same enemy.

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