

MEPs gear up to vote on EU sanctions against Hungary

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News

MEPs will vote next week on whether to initiate the procedure to determine if Hungary is breaching the EU's founding values.



Viktor Orbán | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

A report authored by Greens MEP Judith Sargentini set to go before the European Parliament accuses Hungary of serious violations of EU values and recommends triggering sanction proceedings.

Ahead of the vote in Strasbourg, an alliance of NGOs have written to MEPs urging them to approve introduction of the so-called Article 7 procedure against Hungary.

Article 7 is a mechanism of the Lisbon treaty that opens a path for sanctions against a member state and a temporary loss of EU Council voting rights. It is triggered when a member state violates European values and the rule of law. It was invoked for the first time last year against Poland.

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In the letter, NGOs call on MEPs to vote for sanctions, because “European leaders have accommodated, coaxed and warned the government of Hungary. Those efforts have proven futile.”

The NGOs include Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Reporters without Borders.

The letter, seen by this website, says, “Europe enjoys a wide political spectrum but it cannot be stretched to allow the denial of rights. If unchecked, the deterioration of respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law in Hungary will continue and spread further across Europe.

“The lack of clear action at EU level has emboldened Hungary’s increasingly autocratic leadership.”

The NGOs conclude, “The vote on 12 September will give MEPs a decision: uphold EU values or abandon them.”

The vote in plenary is expected to be tight, according to MEPs. It is unclear how many MEPs back the measure, however. The EPP - of which Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party is a member - strongly opposes disciplinary moves against Hungary. The EPP group is the largest in Parliament.

Hungary has found itself at odds with the EU over a range of issues in the last two years, notably changes to the country’s constitution. It is claimed these amount to a direct attack on human rights and civil liberties in Hungary.

In July, the Commission upped the ante when it referred Hungary to the European Court of Justice, claiming that its treatment of asylum seekers was in breach of EU rules. The Commission accused Hungary of expelling refugees without respecting appropriate safeguards, also adding that Hungary’s practice of “the indefinite detention of asylum seekers in transit zones without respecting the applicable procedural guarantees” was against EU law.

While this referral is the final step of a procedure started in 2015, the Commission also launched another infringement procedure against Hungary yesterday over its new ‘Stop Soros’ law.

The institution argued that the new law “curtails the right to asylum in a way which is incompatible with the Asylum Qualifications Directive and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights,” adding that it “also unduly restricts the exercise of free movement rights of EU citizens without due regard for procedural guarantees or for the rights of the people affected.”

A parliamentary committee recently backed a report from Greens/EFA MEP Judith Sargentini for member states to trigger Article 7 sanctions procedures against Hungary. Since Orbán’s re-election in April, the Hungarian government is accused by some MEPs, including the Greens, of continuing its

“authoritarian” crack down on civil society, academia and freedom of speech.

In June the Hungarian government passed the ‘Stop Soros’ package of laws which, it is claimed, aim to single out NGOs working on migration in the country and will make it almost impossible for organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to continue their operations in Hungary.

“How long will the EU stand by and watch Hungary’s ‘illiberal’ descent away from democracy? The rights of the Hungarian people to free speech and equality under the law must be protected from Orbán’s desire to drive the country into authoritarianism. It’s time for the EU to stand-up to Orbán for the Hungarian people and defend our shared values of freedom of speech and the rule of law,” said Sargentini.

Her report, which will be voted on 12 September, looks into the infringement of fundamental principles and values by the Hungarian government, recommends that the European Council initiate proceedings against Hungary in accordance with Article 7 which would see the country lose voting rights in the Council.

The findings which were drawn up by the civil liberties, justice and home affairs committee and supported by the budgetary control, constitutional affairs, culture and education, women’s rights and gender equality committees.

Sargentini, who visited Hungary in January as part of her investigation, said the text takes into account input from a wide range of experts and representatives, including those of the Commission, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, the United Nations, OSCE as well as national and international courts.

About the author

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