

H.E. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir
Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
Ul. Miodowa 10
00-251 Warsaw, Poland

Budapest, 26 January 2018

Dear Director Gísladóttir,

We, the undersigned non-governmental organizations, are writing to you to express our deep concern about the recent political developments in Hungary, and as a consequence would like to urge the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR) to extend its engagement regarding the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Hungary due April 8, 2018. We are strongly convinced that the situation justifies the representation of the OSCE-ODIHR in a significantly enhanced capacity compared to the Limited Election Observation Mission during the last such elections four years ago.

We gathered first hand experiences in 2017 with a repressive legislation aimed at intimidating critical NGOs, undermining their independence and operability. Further measures of this kind have been announced by the government in January 2018. These attacks have most probably been motivated by the fact that after the government had seized control over key institutions of checks and balances as well as a dominant part of the media, civil society remained one of the few actors in Hungary committed to control the state. In spite of intimidation and blackmailing, a wide range of Hungarian NGOs – united in the campaign *Civilizáció* – rejected the law and declared their belief in the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.¹

Already in its final report on the 2014 parliamentary elections the OSCE-ODIHR clearly stated that *„the main governing party enjoyed an undue advantage because of restrictive campaign regulations, biased media coverage and campaign activities that blurred the separation between political party and the State”*. Since then the situation has greatly deteriorated. Nearly all of the regional print newspapers have been seized by government-friendly oligarchs. The politically seriously biased „billboard” law of 2017 has further constrained opposition parties to reach the electorate. Last December the State Audit Office has fined the main opposition parties, rendering them financially incapable of conducting proper election campaigns.

During the past years the National Election Commission, the crucial appeal board for election irregularities has become a politically seriously biased institution, showing a systemic discrimination of referendum initiatives launched by opposition parties. In spite of the judiciary control guaranteed by the Hungarian supreme court (Kuria) over the decision of the National Election Commission, the politically biased character of the key electoral body raises serious concerns whether election irregularities would be investigated

¹ <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/ngos-were-here-to-stay-and-to-continue-ourwork/>

in an impartial, honest and professional manner. This is all the more important, since, as proven by a study conducted by leading Hungarian political think tanks², the large number of citizens participating in public works at municipal level shows explicit correlation with the outstanding electoral performance of incumbent parties. The strong personal dependence of socially vulnerable people on local mayors with the decision-making power over public work schemes can be considered a hotbed of potential election fraud. Therefore a significant number of OSCE short-term election observers could play a major role in deterring irregularities on election day.

The Resolution of the European Parliament on 17 May 2017, instructing the Committee of Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs to draw up a report about a reasoned proposal launching the so called Article 7 procedure, has highlighted that the serious breach of democratic values presents a rather clear risk in Hungary. Under such circumstances and the conditions outlined above we are deeply concerned that the Hungarian parliamentary elections on April 8, 2018 are not going to fulfil the relevant international democratic standards. It is our deep conviction that in a country where several dimensions of liberal democracy are compromised the quality of the electoral dimension of democracy must enjoy a very special attention. In this particularly worrisome context, a robust engagement of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights could, in itself, equally enhance the fairness of the elections and public confidence in the electoral process.

Signatories

Amnesty International Hungary (Amnesty International Magyarország)

Clean Air Action Group (Levegő Munkacsoport)

Country for All Movement (Közös Ország Mozgalom)

Eötvös Károly Public Policy Institute (Eötvös Károly Intézet)

Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (Társaság a Szabadságjogokért)

Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation (Ökotárs Alapítvány)

Hungarian Europe Society (Magyarországi Európa Társaság)

Hungarian European Women's Forum (MENŐK)

Hungarian Helsinki Committee (Magyar Helsinki Bizottság)

Hungarian Women's Lobby (Magyar Női Érdekérvényesítő Szövetség)

School of Public Life (Közélet Iskolája)

² http://www.valasztasirendszer.hu/wp-content/uploads/Votes_of_the_poor-public_works_and_the_perils_of_clean_elections.pdf