

Mr Frans Timmermans
First Vice-President
Better Regulation, Inter-Institutional Relations,
the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights
European Commission

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS OFFICE

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Dear First Vice-President,

THEIR BACKS TO THE WALL: CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER PRESSURE IN HUNGARY

Amnesty International would like to draw your attention to our enclosed report [*Their backs to the wall: civil society under pressure in Hungary*](#), published today. The report details the orchestrated attacks on rights groups by the Hungarian authorities over the past year. These have included public smearing, criminal investigations, office raids and the seizure of equipment, and a politically motivated audit which could eventually lead to the closure of organisations.

In May 2014, government officials started accusing a number of NGOs of being “paid political activists” who were “attempting to enforce foreign interests” in Hungary. These allegations were regularly repeated, and been echoed in hostile media campaigns, seeking to discredit the NGOs and delegitimise their work in the eyes of the public. The pressure escalated, and the government ordered an audit of 59 NGOs distributing and receiving grants from the EEA/Norway grant. Four NGOs are now facing separate legal proceedings that could lead to them losing their tax registration numbers and effectively being shut down.

These actions against Hungarian NGOs have drawn strong criticism, including from the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. In December 2014, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Mr. Nils Muižnieks expressed concerns about the stigmatisation of NGOs, and declared himself particularly worried about further developments, including the audit and subsequent criminal proceedings.

It is important to emphasise that the human right to freedom of association is not violated only when activists are jailed and NGOs closed down; the impact of the attacks on civil society are already being felt in Hungary, and have had a chilling effect on those speaking out against human rights abuses.

Ultimately, the price of harassment and intimidation of NGOs working in the field of human rights and other areas of public interest is paid by the people these NGOs work to protect. Victims of domestic violence, members of marginalised minority groups, and those defending the rights of others, to name a few, will have less support. Society in Hungary and other European Union (EU) member states will be worse off if critical voices are silenced.

Whilst Amnesty International acknowledges the previous Commission’s monitoring of the situation in Hungary during the last four years, and its action against the Hungarian authorities, including dialogue with the Hungarian authorities, cooperation with the Council of Europe, and targeted measures to address specific violations of EU law, we remain concerned that such action has been and remains too fragmented and limited. Despite the admission at EU level that the situation in Hungary is challenging the founding values of the EU, the Commission has so far failed to take full measure of the erosion of human rights and the rule of law at play in one of the EU member states.

We call on the new Commission, and you in particular in your role as the First Vice-President in charge of Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights, to:

- continue monitoring and to publicly denounce the human rights situation in Hungary, including now the attacks on civil society as documented in Amnesty International’s research
- take further action to remedy violations and prevent further abuse, in line with article 7 TEU. A first obvious step should be to trigger the Framework to Strengthen the Rule of Law that the Commission adopted in March last year.

It is crucial that the Hungarian authorities end their campaign against independent voices in civil society, and that the EU, and the international community more broadly, insist that they do so.

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We thank you for your attention and remain at your disposal for a meeting on this, or any further information you may need.

Yours sincerely,



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Acting Director
Amnesty International European Institutions Office

Cc: Commissioner Věra Jourová, in charge of Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality