



Open letter to

Věra Jurová, Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency

and

Katarina Barley, Vice-President of the European Parliament

6 October 2020

Dear Madam Vice-Presidents,

As you may be aware, the Hungarian government is engaged in an all-out propaganda operation claiming that the EU's criticism toward Hungary is an insult against the Hungarian people. This is not the first time that the government of Hungary identifies as the country itself. This time around, your recent statements have become the target of Viktor Orbán's propaganda machine. This is something you now share with many Hungarian democrats. No doubt, we will be treated the same way after publishing this letter.

That said, the European Union must back its words with deeds when stating that Viktor Orbán's government is not equal to Hungary, and - by implication - criticizing that government is not a value statement about all Hungarians. We find it crucial that high ranking EU-officials make that distinction between country and government. Hungarian democracy as such is not „ill” by itself. Rather, it has been made ill by the actions of our government. If a breach of EU law is established, sanctions must target the government without depriving the Hungarian people of EU-support.

When EU norms are not respected, it is the Hungarian government not respecting them. When the rule of law is dismantled, it is the government's doing, not the Hungarian people's. Similarly, it is Viktor Orbán's government at the top of OLAF's annual blacklist, not Hungary. We may share in the government's disgrace, but certainly not in its responsibility. Let us not forget: the whole debate about European norms and the rule of law is a direct result of the Hungarian government putting its own personal interests, and those of its oligarchs before the interest of the country.

Therefore, we find it extremely important, in fact absolutely necessary, that a distinction is made between Hungary and its current government not only with regards to the European

institutions' communications, but also its decisions. Hungary must not fall victim to the policies of its government.

We understand and fully support that each and every member state should be held accountable according to the very same principles when it comes to dismantling the rule of law and breaching basic EU-norms. At the same time, we believe that sanctions linked to those breaches should target the government only, and not handicap Hungary's population. This has never been more crucial than now, in the midst of an economic crisis.

There is certainly a way how the EU could simultaneously sanction Hungary's government for breaking EU norms whilst still supporting the Hungarian people. That is, if those funds are channelled directly to the population through local governments.

Unlike the Orbán-government, Hungarian municipalities will not find it difficult to respect the rule of law criteria. Not least because those criteria include anti-corruption and transparency rules that may run counter to Viktor Orbán's intentions, yet they are fully consistent with the basic principles and values of municipal governance.

The issue of directly accessible urban EU-funds was originally raised by the mayors of the Pact of Free Cities (Budapest, Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw), but has now become an all-European cities' movement. Our objective is to highlight the expediency of prospective direct urban funds in the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework and in the allocation mechanisms related to the European Green Deal, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the React-EU programs.

What we propose is certainly not a large-scale remaking of established allocation mechanisms. Rather, the introduction of some easy-to-realize ways that create opportunities for local governments to directly apply for sustainable urban development and green economic recovery funds. Not only would these new procedures greatly benefit the residents of these localities, but they would also help achieve Europe's strategic objectives.

Altogether, Hungary may receive more than €6 billion – more than €2000 billion HUF – from the EU's recovery package, most of it (€4.64 billion) coming from the Recovery and Resilience Facility. On behalf of several Hungarian municipalities, we propose that at least half of those funds be allocated through municipalities and we are asking the European Commission and the European Parliament to back our initiative. We strongly believe that this would simultaneously protect European norms and benefit the Hungarian population, thus ensuring a positive outcome in the clash between European institutions and the government of Hungary.

To further back our proposal, let us also remind you that the Hungarian government had practically abandoned local governments in their pandemic protection efforts. Unlike most other European governments, ours is not only not supporting, but in fact plundering the local level amidst the current economic crisis. In addition, the Hungarian government does not in the least consult municipalities or society when planning for the upcoming long-term EU budget. Leaving local governments out of this process both creates a severe democratic deficit and serious concerns about the feasibility of the government's plans. Finally, it defies the EU's

partnership principle mandating governments to consult municipalities in the process of planning.

Hungarian municipalities stand ready to assist their citizens while fully respecting the rule of law and our common European norms.

Gergely Karácsony, Mayor of Budapest

Klára Nyirati, Mayor of Baja

András Nemény, Mayor of Szombathely

László Csőzik, Mayor of Érd

Péter Márki-Zay, Mayor of Hódmezővásárhely

Attila Péterffy, Mayor of Pécs

Péter Hegedűs, Mayor of Balmazújváros

Róbert Lengyel, Mayor of Siófok

Zsolt Fülöp, Mayor of Szentendre

Tamás Wittinghof, Mayor of Budaörs