

June 11, 2014

A letter of support for Ökotárs Foundation

We, the operators of the EEA/Norway NGO Programmes in 15 EU countries, are writing to express solidarity and support for Ökotárs Foundation and its three consortium partners which handle the Norwegian Civic Fund in Hungary, as well as for all the Hungarian NGOs affected by the dispute between the Fund and the Hungarian government.

We are deeply disturbed by the reports that our colleagues in Hungary who are recognized and respected in the European NGO community for their professionalism and exemplary operational standards have become the target of unfounded accusations from the Hungarian government.

In all our countries there are constructive and respectful relationships between the EEA/Norway NGO Programme operators and the national governments. The NGO Programme is welcomed by the governments, as well as by the NGO community, as making a positive contribution to strengthening civil society and citizen engagement in line with core democratic practices and values. In addition, the NGO Programmes have proven to be especially important during the recent period of economic hardship, where public finances have been under severe pressure and national budgets have been cut.

The mechanism of working with national NGOs as programme operators is accepted and supported in every recipient country, by both the national governments and the civil society, and furthermore it is considered as good practice internationally. The experience from the previous programming period demonstrated that the programmes for NGOs operated by NGO sector representatives were most effective of all EEA/Norway Grants programmes. The governments in our countries appreciate our transparent and friendly procedures and cost effective methods and are impressed by the results NGO Programme grantees achieve thanks to the EEA/Norway Grants.

There has never been the case before that a democratically elected government questioned the value the NGOs bring to the development of the society through the NGO Programmes.

We are therefore astonished that the Hungarian government accuses the Norwegian Civic Fund operator of disbursing grants not on the merit basis but by political sympathy and sends in the 'Government Control Office' (KEHI) for programme's audit. To our knowledge such a situation is simply impossible. All NGO Programmes follow strict grant-making procedures and observe the regulations of the disbursement of public funds. Moreover, there is a rigorous, on-going control of the way the NGO Programmes operate. The mechanisms of monitoring, evaluating and audit are inherent in the programmes set-up and the governments have an access to their results. We all work in an open and transparent way accounting for all expenditure incurred clearly and unambiguously and make all our grant-decisions available to the public. The NGO Programmes are equally rigorous in selecting grant recipients and in

monitoring, evaluating and providing feedback to ensure best use of the funding available.

Reports of the dispute initiated by the Hungarian government are in both national media and international media. We are sure that the growing attention and concern over the dispute can only serve to highlight the high standards and integrity with which the EEA/ Norway Grants NGO Programmes operate.

We express our solidarity with Ökotárs Foundation and its consortium partners, extend our full support and call upon the Hungarian government to refrain from any actions which undermine the important mission that Norwegian Civic Fund carries out for the benefit of Hungarian society.

Operators of EEA/Norway Grants NGO Programmes:

Stefan Batory Foundation, Poland

Human Rights Monitoring Institute, Lithuania

Open Society Foundation, Estonia

Bodossaki Foundation, Greece

Civil Society Development Foundation, Resource Center for Roma Communities,
Regional Environmental Partnership Foundation, Romania

Solidarity Overseas Service - SOS Malta

Open Society Foundation Bratislava, Ekopolis Foundation, Slovakia

Civil Society Development Foundation and Czech Environmental Partnership
Foundation, Czech Republic

Open Society Institute-Sofia, Bulgaria

Society Integration Foundation, Latvia

Regional Environmental Center - REC and Centre for Information Service, Co-
operation and Development of NGOs - CNVOS, Slovenia