

**Open letter on the oppression of freedom of religion in Hungary  
from former Hungarian political dissidents  
to the Human Rights Commissioners of the European Commission and the Council of Europe**

**Viviane Reding**, Vice-President of the European Commission, Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship

**Thomas Hammarberg**, Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights

Budapest, 8 August 2011

**Dear Vice-President Reding,  
Dear Commissioner Hammarberg:**

The undersigned, participants of the erstwhile human rights and democracy movement that opposed the one-party communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s, request you to take resolute action in defence of freedom of religion and other fundamental liberties that are presently in great danger in Hungary.

On 12 July 2011, based on a draft presented just two hours before the vote, Hungary's Parliament passed a law on churches that deprived more than 100 religious denominations of their church status.

In blatant disregard of Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, only fourteen denominations were allowed to retain their recognition as churches and the rights that come with it.

In breach of democratic standards separating church from state, the law declared that, in the future, the authority to recognize churches will be a vote by the political parties sitting in Parliament.

The fourteen denominations that were allowed to retain their registration are the Roman and Greek Catholic Churches, the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Lutherans, the Calvinists, select Jewish denominations, the Hungarian Unitarians, the Baptists, and the Faith Church.

Among the churches that were discriminated against are, to mention only a few, Hungary's Methodist, Pentecostal, Adventist and reform Jewish churches; the Salvation Army and Jehovah's Witnesses; and all the Islamic, Buddhist, and Hinduist congregations.

Not only were these communities pushed into a pariah status overnight, but all of their social, healthcare and educational services were stripped of their lawful subsidies.

Many of the now de-registered churches have been leaders in social services for the homeless, the elderly and the poor. They have provided assistance for tens of thousands of persons in need, including Roma, inmates, children and young people. Withdrawing their subsidies leads the way to a social disaster.

Several of the cast-out churches have been running successful middle and higher education schools which now will be denied accreditation.

This unabashed violation of freedom and equality of religions is paired with an open about-face from the separation of religious and political institutions that was achieved in our democratic transition twenty years ago.

In the future, all the now-ostracized churches as well as all new ones will have to request recognition from a government minister, who will "evaluate" their religious creeds. Such requests will also have to obtain authorization from the secret services. If the minister chooses to consider the request, it will be sent to Parliament, where the sitting political parties will decide whether church status should be recognised. A positive result will necessitate a two-thirds vote.

The right to judicial overview is denied in this process. Any religious group that has been in existence for less than twenty years is automatically excluded from recognition. In violation of privacy rights, at least one thousand citizens have to personally sign each submitted request.

Dear Commissioners Reding, Hammarberg:

Never before has a Member State of the EU so blatantly dared to go against the principles of freedom of beliefs, equality before the law, and separation of church from state. These are all established fundamental rights in our common Europe.

In the 1970s, under the Soviet domination over Eastern Europe, all we could do in similar situations was to hold vigils at worship sites that had been shut or demolished.

We fought for a Europe that is united under human rights. Have our hopes been in vain?

The passage of this law is only the latest disturbing example of the many serious setbacks in human rights and the rule of law that have occurred recently in Hungary.

We sincerely hope that, after studying Hungary's new Church Law, you will start an official inquiry into this violation of the rights that are possessed by all Europeans.

Yours sincerely,

Attila Ara-Kovács, journalist

György Dalos, writer

Gábor Demszky, former Mayor of Budapest

Miklós Haraszti, former OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Róza Hodosán, former MP

Gábor Iványi, pastor

János Kenedi, historian

György Konrád, writer

Ferenc Kőszeg, Founding President of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee

Bálint Magyar, former Minister of Education

Imre Mécs, former MP

Sándor Radnóti, philosopher

László Rajk, architect

Sándor Szilágyi, writer on photography

Gáspár Miklós Tamás, philosopher

Forwarded by László Rajk,  
H-1061 Budapest, Paulay Ede u. 19.,  
Phone, facsimile: +36 1 351 9543  
[www.iprotest.hu](http://www.iprotest.hu). [www.rajk.hu](http://www.rajk.hu)