



To
Ambassadør Anna Mária Sikó
Embassy of Hungary
Sophus Lies gt. 3
0244 Oslo

Oslo, 4 May 2020

Your excellency,

Thank you for taking time to meet with us, and to discuss our profound concerns regarding the state of freedom of expression and press freedom in your country.

We are Kjersti Løken Stavrum, President of Norwegian PEN, Annette Groth, member of PEN's media group and Thomas Spence, Chair of PEN's media group. We are experienced journalists and editors from Aftenposten and NRK.

Being aware of your country's long historic struggle for freedom and independence, we acknowledge the Hungarian-Norwegian cooperation through NATO and the EU internal market.

Yesterday, 3 May, was World Press Freedom Day. The day was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1993. It is a day we celebrate media freedom and access to information, and the necessity for both to empower people.

This year, UNESCO reminds us that:

“We are currently facing an unprecedented health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic spreading across the world also represents a new challenge for the press, which was already battling smear campaigns and defamation. Today, citizens are on lockdown, eager for news like never before. And more than ever, the news must be fact checked and verified. Because disinformation spreads as fast as the virus itself, and journalists are on the frontline in the fight against the distortion of truth. More than ever we need facts. Facts to avoid spreading fear, fake news and panic. More than ever we need a free press.”

With the words from UNESCO in mind, we thank Ms Ambassador for agreeing to meet us this special day. Celebrating the Press Freedom Day together with Norwegian PEN, and give us this valuable opportunity to share views and concerns for the development of press freedom, freedom of expression and media pluralism in Hungary.

According to PEN's charter;

- PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations. Members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression.
- PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. We believe that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations



and institutions imperative.

Thus, it is with regret and concern we notify the new law which grants officials authority to sanction publishing of so called “fake news”. The executive itself (prime minister and government) decides in the first instance whether a report is true or false. Consequently, the government decide what the media can publish and not, making the press unable to keep the public as informed as they need to be. The new “coronavirus law” gives the executive a total and indefinite control regarding vital information about the virus.

Yet alone the very harsh potential punishment of five years imprisonment can and will have a chilling and negative effect on the true freedom of the press as well it’s task as a critical force in the democratic system.

Hungary is [number 89](#) of 180 on the Reporter Without Border’s World Press Freedom Index for 2020, the country has dropped two places since 2019, and 16 places since 2018:

Ranking since 2013

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Year	Ranking		Year	Ranking	
2019	87 / 180	↓	2015	65 / 180	↓
2018	73 / 180	↓	2014	64 / 180	↓
2017	71 / 180	↓	2013	56 / 180	=
2016	67 / 180	↓			

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Reporters Without Borders states for Hungary:

“Access to information is more and more difficult for independent journalists. They are banned from freely ask politicians in the Parliament or from attending different events. Government politicians do not give interviews to government-critical media outlets. Press departments of public institutions typically do not reply to questions of independent media. Media Council was reelected in December 2019. Only the nominees of ruling party Fidesz were elected as new members of Hungary's most powerful media regulatory body. Fidesz's MPs in the Parliament's ad-hoc nomination committee rejected all candidates of the opposition parties.”

We all need to fight against dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. But we raise the warning flag against letting the government define what are false and what are real news.

We also take the opportunity to encourage the development of a diverse media ownership in Hungary. In our opinion, a concentration of media ownership to persons and organizations close to prime minister Viktor Orbán undermine the legitimacy of a free press and the



democracy itself.

In February Victor Orbán's government published its National Basic Curriculum for literature. Jewish writers were removed from the list. Amongst them the world acclaimed writer Imre Kertész, who in 2002 became the first Hungarian awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Kertész' books were censored by the communist regime and experience the same by the nationalist government.

Human Resources Minister Miklós Kásler told the press that the national Curriculum was "reworked to include new content and structure as well as modern tools to shape national identity". To be "more patriotic".

Our concern for the development of freedom of expression and the freedom of the press in Hungary is shared by journalists and writers all over the world. Recently, 13 of EU's member states have declared they are seriously concerned for the possible breach of fundamental principles for rule of law and democratic rights, though not outing Hungary by name.

We urge you to convey our concerns to the Hungarian government.

Finally, we hope for Hungary to contribute to the work of strengthening the core democratic forces that freedom of expression and media freedom are, and to keep in mind that they are rights granted to each and everyone through the UN charter of human rights and the European declaration of human rights.

Oslo, 3 May 2020

Sincerely,

Kjersti Løken Stavrum
President
Norwegian PEN

Annette Groth
Norwegian PEN's
Media Group

Thomas Spence
Chair
Norwegian PEN's Media Group