

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1604

December 16, 2011

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán
Office of the Prime Minister
1055 Budapest, Kossuth Lajos tér 1-3
Budapest, Hungary

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

We write as Members of the Congress of the United States to express our deep concern about Hungary's new "Law on the Right to Freedom of Conscience and Religion, and on the Status of Churches, Religions and Religious Communities," which was adopted on July 12, 2011. We applaud the Hungarian Constitution's commitment to religious freedom and hope that Hungary will remain committed to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of conscience and religion.

We understand that the "Religion Law" of 1990 gave religious groups "registered" status in order to perform their important social and charitable work. However, several religious and human rights organizations in Hungary, Europe and here in the United States have informed us that the new religion law will "de-register" all but 14 of the more than 350 religious groups currently registered. With the bill's passage, thousands of congregations—from Methodists to Evangelicals to Muslims—will automatically lose their "registered" legal status on January 1, 2012. Further, we are concerned that in order to "re-register" and gain legal recognition, these de-registered groups will have to meet seven different criteria and win a two-thirds majority vote of the Hungarian Parliament.

The new religion law thus establishes the Parliament as the competent authority on religious communities, putting it in the business of evaluating and judging beliefs, doctrines and values, and of determining which groups are acceptable and which are not. This action will politicize the process and violate the duty of the state to be neutral when it comes to religion. Moreover, it will inevitably result in discrimination against minority religious groups.

As we understand it, the new religion law contravenes the human rights norms, standards and instruments of the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations, and it ignores the relevant decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. For instance, we have seen that the European

Parliament has called on the Hungarian government to “guarantee equal protection of the rights of every citizen, no matter which religious...group they belong to, in accordance with Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.” In addition twenty-four members of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States signed a motion for a resolution that expressed “serious concern with respect to recent developments related to the rule of law, human rights and the functioning of democratic institutions in Hungary.” It also requested a human rights monitoring procedure to ensure Hungarian compliance with the European Convention for Human Rights and other Council instruments Hungary has signed and ratified.

Furthermore, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Melia’s testimony before Congress on July 26, 2011, U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton stated during her June 30th visit to Hungary:

The United States will ask the government to carefully reconsider the new law on “the Right to Freedom of Conscience and Religion and on the Status of Churches, Religions and Religious Communities,” which requires re-registration of all but 14 religious groups, negatively impacting the religious freedom atmosphere in Hungary.

We write to echo the European Parliament’s call on the Hungarian government to “guarantee equal protection of the rights of every citizen” and to reiterate the U.S. Secretary of State’s call for the Hungarian government to reconsider the new religion law. We urge your government to make substantive revisions to bring the new law into conformity with the Hungarian constitution and the international human rights instruments Hungary has signed and ratified.

Sincerely,



Mike Pompeo
Member of Congress



Trent Franks
Member of Congress



Heath Shuler
Member of Congress



Howard Coble
Member of Congress



John Carter
Member of Congress



Dan Burton
Member of Congress



Randall Hultgren
Member of Congress



Vicky Hartzler
Member of Congress



Howard Berman
Member of Congress



Mike Kelly
Member of Congress



Joe Pitts
Member of Congress



Tim Walberg
Member of Congress



Eni Faleomavaega
Member of Congress