



The American Hungarian Federation

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August 20, 2012

Honorable Christopher H. Smith
Chairman, U.S. Helsinki Commission
Washington, D.C. 20510

Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin
Co-Chairman, U.S. Helsinki Commission
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman and Co-Chairman:

The American Hungarian Federation (the "Federation") is deeply concerned that the prosecution of former state secretary Attila Marko, Silviu Vlim and Tamas Marosan in connection with the restitution to the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania of the Szekely Miko Evangelical Reformed College ("MEC") in Sfantu-Gheorghe, Romania was not justified. It only serves to further stall, and in this instance reverse, the lawful restitution of church properties and discriminate against Romania's Hungarian minority. The Federation hopes that this matter will be fairly and thoroughly reviewed, the sentences and punishments reversed and the property restored to MEC, thereby ensuring that Romania complies with applicable restitution laws, due process requirements and Western standards and norms. The Federation respectfully urges that you publicly express the Helsinki Commission's deep concern about the threat to democracy and human rights arising from such blatantly discriminatory actions.

Twenty-two years after the collapse of Communism, restitution of Hungarian communal properties, including churches, has been proceeding at an extraordinarily slow pace so that a significant number of the affected properties have yet to be returned to their rightful owners. We understand that the Jewish community is facing similar difficulties. The slow restitution process prompted Tom Lantos, the late Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, to sponsor H. Res. 191 (2005), which was adopted by the Congress and urged Romania to "provide equitable, prompt, fair restitution to all religious communities for property confiscated by the former Communist government."

Despite this unequivocal expression of congressional opinion and Romania's pledges to its Hungarian minority to respect minority rights and abide by the rule of law when it was accepted into the European Union and NATO, Romania's restitution process has not improved. Romania should be expected to re-dedicate itself to these promises and solemn undertakings.

The MEC case would be a good place to start. The college was built by contributions and owned and operated since 1859 by the Reformed Church until it was illegally nationalized in 1948. In May 2002, the property was duly restituted to the Reformed Church. Thereafter and inexplicably the authorities sued for the nullification of the restitution (thereby seeking to re-nationalize the church property).

Despite the unassailable evidence that MEC belonged to the Reformed Church, on June 29, 2012, the three individual defendants received three year prison sentences (Vlim's sentence was suspended), the Reformed Church was ordered to pay 1M lei, and the property was re-nationalized. The Hungarian community justifiably views this case not only as a property restitution case but also as a proceeding directed against the community and a manifestation of intolerance and discrimination. Bigotry and intolerance is an affront to all democratic-minded individuals and violate Western values and norms. We trust the Helsinki Commission will forcefully express its views regarding such intolerance and discrimination with the aim of promoting democracy in Romania.

In conclusion, we urge fair and expeditious restitution in this and other cases as well as justice for the defendants. We appreciate your and the Helsinki Commission's attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Frank Koszorus, Jr., National President
Public Member of the U.S. Delegation of the 1989 Conference
on Security and Cooperation in Europe on the Human Dimension

