

Budapest, 16 May 2018

To:

Mr. Karmenu Vella,
European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

Dear Commissioner Karmenu Vella,

On 30 January 2018 representatives of nine Member States which are not complying with the air quality standards fixed by the Ambient Air Quality Directive met you to discuss options for improving air quality. Following the meeting, the European Commission asked¹ the governments concerned to inform the Commission about steps they would take to reduce air pollution until 9 February 2018. Subsequently, the European Commission has confirmed² that all nine governments shared such information before the deadline.

After this, European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and one of its Hungarian member organisations, Clean Air Action Group (CAAG) wrote a letter to the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture (ministry responsible also for the environment) asking for information about the plans submitted to the Commission. The Ministry's response³ shocked the NGOs: instead of any plan, the Hungarian government just sent to the Commission the speech of Zsolt V. Németh, Secretary of State for Environment, Agrarian Development and Hungaricums, which he made during the 9 February meeting. In spite of the fact, that the speech contains nothing concrete about the plans of the government, here we comment some of the statements of the Secretary of State.

According to the Secretary of State, *“we must not ignore the fact that, in the case of Hungary, the air quality is influenced by not only the air pollution, but geographical location and meteorological conditions too, which often influence the release of air pollutants unfavourably. I would point out that because of the geographic location of Hungary, the country is a net importer, 30% more air pollutants arrive in our country than it goes away.*

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that due to the Carpathian basin, the temperature inversion situations, typical of the winter period, are more frequent. In this case, air mixing is hindered and air pollutants are enriched in the near-ground air layer. This greatly hampers the achievement of our air quality goals, increasing our efforts and time. Some of these episodes can cause annual limit overruns.”

It is true that Hungary is a net importer of PM10, and it is also true that geographical and meteorological circumstances influence the level of PM10 pollution. Nevertheless, it is not true that these are the main causes of regular exceedances of the permitted PM10 concentrations. CAAG has made many measurements in various locations all over Hungary, and these measurements have shown that the concentration of particles is often 10 to 30 (in some cases, even more than 100) times greater in inhabited areas than the background pollution.⁴ This

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/focus/index.cfm?sitelang=en&focusid=2881>

² <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-eu-environment-pollution/eu-studying-if-members-doing-enough-to-avoid-penalties-over-air-pollution-idUKKCN1FX2C2>

³ <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/pop4lspkxyqr06q/AAClmc917Sl3Rps05y8AVMY2a/HU?dl=0>

⁴ See, for example: <https://www.levego.hu/en/news/2015/12/fresh-air-or-smog-in-the-mountains/>

means that imported pollutants are responsible for only a very small percentage of PM10 pollution in places where most people live and work.

The list of measures implemented so far and listed by the Secretary of State might seem quite impressive, but it is certainly not very reassuring that (with two exceptions) no concrete numbers are mentioned. However, let's look at first at these two exceptions.

According to the Secretary of State, *“Since the start of the [PM10 reduction] program in 2011, a number of measures have been taken in the transport, industry, agriculture and public sectors, amounting to about HUF 160 billion.”* Counting with six years, this means about HUF 27 billion annually. This is an extremely small sum in comparison with the health-related costs of air pollution in Hungary which are more than EUR 5 billion (HUF 1600 billion) yearly⁵. It is an even smaller sum in comparison with the enormous direct and (especially) indirect subsidies to environmentally harmful activities.⁶

According to the Secretary of State, *“As a result of our ongoing support system more than 412 000 households have been benefited from the emission reduction investments since 2010.”* There are about 3.8 million households in Hungary, the overwhelming majority of which is still living in buildings with very low energy efficiency characteristics. Moreover, no figures are provided, how much energy was saved due to the mentioned investments.

The Secretary of State declared: *“With regard to the transport sector, I would like to highlight the bus exchange programs, the designation of traffic zones without trucks, the introduction of the new toll system and the greening of the car tax system. The vehicle fleet is upgraded, the proportion of vehicles equipped with a catalytic converter is growing and due to a government program, the use of hybrid or electric cars is constantly growing in Hungary. The number of available electric filling stations increases, and a community electric car rental system will be introduced in the capital soon. In the framework of the development of non-motorized transport, the infrastructure of cycling is constantly improving and community bicycle rental networks operate in more and more large cities.”* Although all these measures are commendable, most of them have very limited extent, and there are serious problems with some of them:

- *“Bus exchange [i.e. replacement] programs”*: There are still a lot of obsolete buses running. Moreover, the maintenance of buses is often inadequate, especially as far as emission is concerned. For example, responding to the call of Clean Air Action Group (first published in 2015) people have informed CAAG in nearly 250 cases so far that BKV (Budapest public transport company) buses emit large quantity of black fumes or passengers smell exhaust gas inside the bus. CAAG forwarded all the complaints to BKV, where the buses in question were fixed.
- *“Designation of traffic zones without trucks”*: A new system of entrance fees was introduced in Budapest in 2008. The measure was certainly a serious step forward, but at the same time with a number of deficiencies. The fee is lower than it was in 1991 (in real terms). The differentiation of the fee according to the environmental characteristics of the vehicle is too small. As a result of the fee, the number of vans with a permitted total weight of less than 3.5 tons increased substantially (there is no fee or other restrictions or them). There is still no Budapest freight transport strategy (although it has been in preparation for years). This situation is all the more deplorable, because according to transport experts, motorized freight transport in Budapest could be reduced by more than 50 percent (measured in vehicle-kilometers), if a proper urban freight transport system would be implemented.

⁵ Shared conclusions from the Clean Air Dialogue with Hungary that took place on 3-4 October 2017, <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/pdf/Conclusions%20CAD%20HU%202017%20final.docx>

⁶ See, for example: The social balance of road and rail transport in Hungary, https://www.levego.hu/site/assets/files/5819/social_balance_transport_hungary_20110131.pdf

- *“Introduction of the new [truck] toll system”*: The system is implemented on nearly 7000 km of motorways and main roads. This has been a huge step in the right direction. However, there is still a lot more to do. We have no figures on how much this measure reduced pollution. This is all the more problematic, because many trucks use secondary roads (without tolls) passing through inhabited areas which thus are subjected to greater pollution. Moreover, the differentiation according to the emission characteristics of the vehicle is very weak (all trucks better than Euro II pay the same toll).
- *“Greening of the car tax system”*: This occurred only to a very limited extent, and it is largely offset by the fact that the older (i.e. generally more pollution) the car, the lower is the tax. Moreover, the fact that accounting private use of cars as company car use deprives each year the state budget from a revenue equalling to 3 to 4 percent of the GDP.
- *“The number of available electric filling stations increases”*: There are 42 public electric filling stations in Hungary.
- *“The use of hybrid or electric cars is constantly growing”*: At the end of 2017, about 2000 purely electric and 2200 hybrid cars were registered in Hungary. The total number of cars registered in Hungary is nearly 3.5 million.
- *“The infrastructure of cycling is constantly improving and community bicycle rental networks operate in more and more large cities”*: The increase of cycling and bicycle sharing has been truly spectacular during the last decade. However, this was due more to the activities of civil society organisations and local governments than to those of the national government. Moreover, civil society organisations (especially Hungarian Cyclists’ Club and CAAG) have made a lot of proposals to the government which have not been implemented in spite of the fact that most of them would not cost much money.

According to the Secretary of State, *“Unfortunately, further reductions in emissions may be hampered by the significant over-supply of diesel vehicles likely to emerge in the market for second-hand vehicles. This, in my view, requires vigilance at EU level, in order to comply with the environmental objectives.”* We consider this a very cheap excuse. Even the Ministry of National Development (the ministry responsible for transport) declared – in a letter to CAAG – that there is way to stop the import of very polluting second-hand vehicles: the implementation of low emission zones. This would be an inexpensive and efficient measure; the only thing which is lacking is political will.

Furthermore, the implementation of congestion charging in Budapest is not an option but a duty of the Hungarian government. Namely, there is a contract between the Hungarian government and the European Commission (DG Regio) that congestion charging will be implemented as a condition of EU financing of the construction of the 4th metro line in Budapest. The charging should have been implemented in 2014 (at the same time when the metro was put into operation), but so far this did not happen. CAAG made a concrete proposal⁷ for urban road pricing in Budapest, and has discussed it with many experts. Practically all of them agreed with the proposal, including the chief advisor of the Budapest Mayor and the CEO of Budapest Transport Centre (the Municipality company responsible for transport in Budapest). At least, the planning of such a system should start immediately.

Another measure that could be implemented quickly and relatively inexpensively is the regular remote sensing on-road control of motor vehicles. The Ministry for National Development already confirmed (in reply to letters initiated by CAAG) that it intends to implement on-road remote control of vehicle emissions. However, so far this has not been implemented. Starting on-road remote control of vehicle emissions is all the more necessary because the regular and

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https://www.levego.hu/site/assets/files/5752/time_to_implement_congestion_charging_in_budapest_2015sept-2016dec12.pdf



compulsory technical tests of the cars are not reliable and not frequent enough, and because cheating is quite widespread, including the removal or neutralisation of particle filters.

According to the Secretary of State, *“In Hungary, the PM10 in the air comes mostly from public heating and burning of garden waste and any other illegal waste incineration. One of the best ways to reduce the population's PM10 emissions is to improve the energy efficiency of buildings by thermal insulation, the replacement and upgrading of heating systems. As a result of our ongoing support system more than 412 000 households have been benefited from the emission reduction investments since 2010.”* Undoubtedly, residential burning is by far the biggest source of PM10 pollution in Hungary. Although improving the energy efficiency of buildings is absolutely necessary, it is not an option for reducing PM10 pollution in the coming years due to its enormous cost and slow implementation. However, there are a number of efficient measures that could be implemented which could substantially reduce PM10 pollution from residential heating within a year or two:

- Total prohibition of garden and on-site agricultural waste burning: The Budapest Municipality and several other local governments already completely prohibited such burnings without any problems. There is no reason why the government should not introduce a nation-wide ban.
- Empowering the authorities: It is necessary to increase the capacity of the public authorities (district offices, police, environmental protection departments of government offices) to make them capable of taking decisive action against every case of illegal residential burning.
- Effective sanctions: In all authority procedures started because of illegal waste burning – in case the perpetrator does not confess it –, investigations lead by judicial experts should take place. Applying this can clearly demonstrate whether any offense has occurred, the procedural fee could be charged to the perpetrator and could be collected the way taxes are collected. In CAAG’s experience, currently this kind of procedure is not initiated by the authorities, and the fee of the judicial expert is to be paid by the complainant in advance, which he/she is not willing to do. Thus, in almost all cases, in the absence of proof, the perpetrators are exempted from the crime. This means of procedure is mandatory for the authorities based on the government regulation 306/2010, so initially the cost should be paid by the authorities. In our experience, 95% of the complaints are based on real facts, but the processes do not reach the point to prove the illegal burning.
- Banning the sale of lignite for households: Selling lignite for residential burning should be banned immediately, because burning lignite in households is extremely polluting and has spread significantly over the last few years. The Ministry of Agriculture has prepared the draft of the regulation, but it has been lying in the drawer already for almost two years.
- Banning the sale of wet wood: Selling or free allocation of wet wood (more than 20 % moisture content) to residents should be banned immediately. Burning wet wood causes much more pollution than burning dry wood.
- Ensuring proper heating fuel for people in need: The conditions to heat within a legal framework should be ensured for people in need. It cannot be emphasized enough that this would cost much less than the damage caused by illegal burnings. At present, based on the government decree 1503/2015, the government provides 4 billion HUF for social fuel assistance. This amount should be at least five times more.
- Regulating construction waste: According to the Secretary of State, *“In order to eliminate the incineration of construction and demolition wastes from their generation until their disposal, the rules to be observed will be laid down in a government decree. In compliance with the regulations, the use of resulting construction-demolition materials will be realized under controlled conditions, thus eliminating their illegal combustion.”* Such a regulation is long overdue, so it would be a welcome move. On the other hand, we have serious concerns about its implementation, considering the weakness of the authorities and the fact that the



previously well-functioning waste management system has been dismantled by the present government.

- Raising public awareness: According to the Secretary of State, *“In addition to regulations and support programs, we also believe that the public must be aware of the risk of air pollution and it should know what to do to reduce this risk. That's why we put great emphasis on education and information. We launched the ‘Heat wisely!’ campaign in 2011, which besides presenting the environmental and health impacts of air pollution, aims to stimulate the public's role and the importance of their responsibility. People must understand that different social actors and sectors have to work together to protect their environment and health. In the residential sector, unfortunately, it takes longer to reach the results but we are convinced that with our support programs and information we will be closer to the goal.”* Many years of experience by CAAG as well as the recent nation-wide representative opinion poll⁸ carried out on request by CAAG and the Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network prove that the most important and urgent task is public awareness raising. However, the government spends each year about 30 million HUF on awareness raising concerning residential burning while it is well known to the government that an effective awareness raising campaign costs at least 100 times more. We should emphasise again that even such a sum would be almost infinitesimal in comparison with the damages caused by air pollution from residential burning and in comparison with the total expenditures of the state budget.

According to the Secretary of State, *“We upgrade our agricultural databases in order to provide an adequate basis for introducing additional, effective measures.”* This measure is laudable as appropriate databases are very important for reducing emissions from agriculture. However, the Secretary of State does not give any information on the measures the government foresees for actually reducing agricultural emissions.

According to the Secretary of State, *“The further measures requested in the letter of the Commissioner are currently under preparation in the context of the preparation of the new program. The program will also include estimates of the impacts of the measures by the deadline, next April [2019].”* The Air Quality Directive entered into force in 2008, thus the Hungarian government had ample time to prepare and implement serious measures to reduce air pollution. As the above examples prove, there are no financial or technical obstacles to implementing without delay many of the measures that would substantially reduce air pollution. What has been lacking is political will. Naturally, it is necessary to update air pollution reduction programs and create new ones with estimates of the impacts. However, this should not serve as an excuse to delay the implementation of those effective measures which can be implemented already today.

Finally, we would like to call to your attention that all of the above measures proposed by CAAG are well known to the Hungarian government for years.

Sincerely yours,



András Lukács
President

⁸ <https://www.levego.hu/hirek/2017/12/ellenezzuk-megis-egetunk/>