

Dear Professor Palinkas,

Thank you for your reply to the Open Letter.

Let me begin by stating that even though it was not a response to our Open Letter of January 28, your [public statement](#) of January 31 has more or less expressed what the Open Letter was urging, and for that, many thanks!

*"To decide on matters of scientific truth, and to establish the scientific value of any particular research are in the sole authority of scholars'... It is the realm of the authorities to uncover breaches of law and prosecute transgressors within the framework of the law. The press should report on such cases to the public in a reliable and well-balanced manner, without unfounded accusations or foregone conclusions."*

There are six important points in your construal of the Open Letter that require some clarification, however. As the author of the Open Letter, I take full responsibility for its text, and hence for these clarifications:

**1. Crimes and Politics.** Let it be made clear from the outset that neither I, nor the text -- nor, I am sure, any of the signatories -- said, implied or believe that crimes should not be investigated and punished, in Hungary or anywhere else.

The real questions are two: (1) *Have researchers really committed crimes (as widely accused, in some sectors of the press, of doing)?* (2) *And is the singling out of the accused researchers for selective criminal investigation politically motivated?*

**2. Laws, Rules and Enforcement.** Apparently the crime (as confirmed in your letter) that the researchers in question are alleged to have committed is "self-contracting" (receiving grant funds through a private company instead of through one's institution, presumably in order to pay lower taxes on the sum received).

This practice would certainly be frowned upon in other countries, and would probably be illegal (or contrary to funding rules) in most. But the fundamental question is whether it is currently illegal or unruleful in Hungary, and if illegal or unruleful, are the laws or rules currently being systematically enforced?

I am sure that none of the signatories would disagree that if researchers are proved to have engaged in illegal or unruleful practices, the laws and rules should be enforced, and the penalties applied, according to the rules and the law.

But that does not quite answer the concerns about selective political motivation:

**3. Selective Investigation.** I hope you will agree that if it were the case that the practice of self-contracting was in fact widespread in Hungary (among the

citizenry, including among funded researchers), and if the current laws and rules were unclear as to its legality, and not being systematically enforced, then selectively targeting specific researchers for investigation would be, as they say, "as easy as shooting fish in a barrel."

Under this hypothesis, the rightful target would be the current research funding system's rules and enforcement (which, in your own [statement](#), Professor Palinkas, you have described as being badly in need of reform), and possibly also the laws of the land: not researchers singled out for selective retroactive scrutiny (for whatever ulterior reason, whether complaints about the size or merit of the grants, or opposition to the recipients' political or intellectual views).

**4. Press Freedom.** The Open Letter's reference to "dismay about curbs on press freedom" in Hungary today is based on reports that most of the world has seen, transmitted via the international press, about Hungary's new press curb law, which differs from, and is under criticism by, the European Union. What one also hears -- again via the international press -- is that this new press law will not be implemented until after Hungary's presidency of the EU expires in July.

This was the Open Letter's only mention or implication about freedom of the press in Hungary today. There was certainly nothing said or implied about the need to *further curb* the press! Rather, it was very explicitly stated in the letter that press exaggeration or misinformation should be ignored or corrected; in particular, in the present instance, where it spills over into the Academy, it needs to be publicly corrected by the Academy (which your January 31 statement has now gone a long way toward doing).

**5. Academic Responsibility.** It is a fact, though, that although Hungary's press is still free (at least for the duration of the current EU presidency), it is, and has long been highly partisan and polarized. It is also a fact that the attacks on the accused researchers issue from one pole of this highly polarized partisan press.

It is not a fact -- but a hypothesis with enough circumstantial evidence to be taken seriously -- that the partisan pole in question is highly influenced by the current government, and looks in some respects as if it has become the government's house organ.

The Open Letter was a request that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences take a principled public stand in support of the accused researchers against prejudgments and vilification from the partisan press (not a request to curb the freedom of the press, nor to obstruct justice).

You have now done that, Professor Palinkas -- though only coincidentally, a few days after the Open Letter was sent; not as a response to our Open Letter, which, as you note, you received only afterward. Your statement is of course just as welcome, regardless of what induced you to make it at that time.

**6. Defending Hungary.** Our Open Letter was certainly not an attack on Hungary -- a country of which the letter's author as well as all of its signatories are proud and fond, just as we are proud of the honour of being members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Quite the contrary, the concerns and the criticism (about the new press law and what looks very much like the selective targeting of critics) were of course about the current government of Hungary, which, even when elected by a 2/3 majority, is not synonymous with Hungary itself. The Open Letter, in both letter and spirit, was intended as much to defend Hungary as to defend its targeted critics -- as, no doubt, was your own January 31 statement -- from the excesses resulting from its current extreme partisan polarization.

(As you note in your letter, Professor Dennett, one of the original signatories of the Open Letter, subsequently wrote that as a result of the "torrent of messages both condemning and supporting" his having signed, "I must withdraw my signature in order not to be drawn into this polarized atmosphere.")

I would like to close by seconding your own open statement of January 31:

*"The social science research programme launched by the Government on my initiative in the framework of the Széchenyi Plan in 2001 was substantially retailored by the next government in 2002. It became professionally unfounded, financially illogical and legally vulnerable... It is our common interest that such a deformed, incomprehensible and counterproductive system of research funding should be transformed to normalcy. What is needed is an up-to-date, thoroughly transparent research funding system that provides a balanced support of basic research, technical development and innovation....The success of the work we have begun could be seriously jeopardised by artificially induced, amateurish, inconsiderate, politically motivated mud-slinging whether it comes from the areas of science, public administration, or from the media."*

I would add only the suggestion that what the Hungarian government needs to do now is to focus on trying to reform its deformed funding system, rather than on trying to take revenge on its critics for the deformities of the old system.

Sincerely yours,

Stevan Harnad