

Hungarian garners enough public support to join EPPO



Independent Hungarian MP Akos Hadhazy speaks during a press conference in Budapest, 5 June 2019. The Hungarian opposition collected a total 680,000 signatures in support of getting the country to join the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). In the background the signature sheets are displayed.
EPA-EFE/NOEMI BRUZAK

by Phoenix Berman

An initiative to rally public support for Hungary to join the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), which is set to launch in 2020 and led by an independent member of parliament, Akos Hadhazy, has collected 680,000 signatures in cooperation with the Socialist Party and Momentum Movement.

Hungary is one of six EU members that has consistently refused to join the EPPO. What is noteworthy is that among the other Member States that opted out of the EPPO, Hungary benefits greatly from EU grants. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has said that his refusal to allow Hungary's participation in the EPPO stems from concerns about national sovereignty and the issue of EU prosecutors overstepping the jurisdiction of their Hungarian counterparts.

There has been a concern that the Fidesz government - led by

Orbán - has refused to take part in the EPPO as part of his effort to avert prosecutorial repercussions from its own misuse of EU funds. Hadhazy has publicly stated that Fidesz' mission since 2010 was to "steal EU funds" and that the public deserves to know how their tax money is being spent.

In a recent study by Publicus research, eight out of ten respondents believed that Hungary should join the EPPO. In the same study, 80% of the respondents supported the EU to link the arrival of EU funds to Hungary to comply with certain standards of the rule of law. Voters from the Socialist and Jobbik parties overwhelmingly support (96 percent) the initiative, while two-thirds (68%) of Fidesz party voters also support the idea.

Along the same vein of other opposition parties, the conservative Jobbik, known for its promotion of nationalism and Euroscepticism, has come out publicly against Fidesz and Orbán

in an effort to promote Hungary's future involvement in the EPPO.

In a November 2018 statement, Jobbik affirmed that it believed the movement towards joining the EPPO was not an issue of compromising national sovereignty, but a necessary measure to protect EU funds as a significant share has been stolen while the Hungarian prosecutor's office has been aiding the government in this activity.

A Jobbik MP, Tibor Bana, went so far as to state that other MPs who refused to add the issue of the EPPO to the National Assembly's agenda were working to "further reinforce the criminal network to Viktor Orbán" over the welfare of the Hungarian people. According to Jobbik, joining the EPPO remains a non-issue in terms of sovereignty because the scope of the competency of the EPPO would only cover investigating EU funds.

Financial corruption by Fidesz and the Orbán administration has

proven to be politically relevant and quite complex. OLAF, the EU's anti-fraud office, has consistently stated that Hungary needs to repay misspent EU funds.

Consequently, Hungary joining the EPPO would reopen the issue of Hungarian debts to the EU. In the most recent version of its 2017 report, OLAF stated that it sent its final conclusion with judicial recommendations to the General Prosecutor of Hungary as well as its financial proposals to the European Commission Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy to redeem €43.7 million from the Hungarian government.

OLAF stated that the fraudulent activities have ranged from the scope of research and development projects to public works projects. In its 2016 report, the issue of conflicts of interests initially arose when EU-funded municipal contracts were awarded to István Tiborcz's company - who also happens to be Orbán's son-in-law.

According to news site 24.hu, OLAF's investigation into Tiborcz's company, Elios, led to their recommendation that Hungary had to repay all €45.1 million EU development funds that had been given to the Hungarian government.

Similarly, OLAF's 2017 report noted that there were continued conflicts of interest and deception in a different public works projects as well as artificial supporting documents used to justify a cost benefit analysis in a lighting project.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the future of Hungary's participation in the EPPO currently looks to be quite slim. Considering the threat that comes with joining the office by reopening the issue of mounting debts to the EU from financial misconduct, Orbán's government may continue to neglect its involvement in the future of prosecutorial practices at the European level.