

Laudation

on the occasion of bestowing the JUSTITIA REGNORUM FUNDAMENTUM AWARD

on András Lukács, President of Clean Air Action Group

This year's Justitia Regnorum Fundamentum Award for environmental protection is bestowed on András Lukács, President of Clean Air Action Group, for his prominent work in the field of improving air quality, spanning almost three decades, and his activities related to greening the state budget. His work is inseparable from the institution that he co-founded and has been leading for a long time, so, indirectly, the award is a recognition of the work of his colleagues as well. András is an institution in himself. He is a part and the head of a group; however, it is primarily him who acts as the face of Clean Air Action Group, one of the most recognized and long-standing environmental organizations in our country.

According to its mission statement, Clean Air Action Group works to ensure that “every man could live in a healthy environment and in dignity. It conducts its activities on a professional basis, with the involvement of all those concerned, free of any political or economic affiliation, in a consistent and transparent manner.” As their ally from the sphere of science, Károly Kiss has pointed out: Clean Air Action Group has survived and become stronger as a result of its activities of high professional standard and through fruitful cooperation with other stakeholders. Cooperation is wide-ranging and diverse: their partners include scientists and research institutions, domestic and international professional organizations, central and local governmental institutions. These partnerships are verifiably constructive and fruitful.

András Lukács points out eco-social budget reform, environmentally friendly transport and sustainable energy policy, as well as his membership in the presidium of Green Budget Europe, as core elements of his own activities. It is not a pleasant, rather a futile task to prepare year after year, with a strong professional background and through serious efforts—an alternative, green budget that would be generally and mostly ignored by those drafting the state budget. However, András and his colleagues are well aware that important issues are decided in this dimension, dominated by the forces of environmental destruction, and this is the dimension where those forces can—if may—be redirected towards positive objectives.

Clean Air Action Group, led by him, fights against environmental pollution and the destruction of nature not only with green activism: it tries to beat them in their own domain, with their own weapons – economic arguments supported by market criteria. The most part of environmental and social damages caused by polluting products and activities is not compensated – it is even economically wrong. Prices do not reflect the actual costs, which distorts the market. That is the reason why we waste energy, valuable raw materials; that is why international road transporters can pollute the air and destroy our roads with impunity. Charging to others the external costs of the transportation and energy sectors, amounting to thousands of billions, contradicts the principles of market economy and, at the same time, is immoral, since damages are covered not by those who have caused them but by those who have to suffer them.

If necessary, András Lukács is not afraid to swim against the tide. His essays promote environmental protection, not shying away from emphasizing unpopular points. Suffice to mention two titles: “Do highways facilitate economic development?” and “The real costs of energy – Why is it inevitable to raise energy prices and how to do it?” The activities of Clean Air Action Group are based on the consistent implementation of clear principles: “it is active in reducing the use of non-renewable energy sources and

other natural resources and, at the same time, it supports activities that can be improved without using non-renewable resources in great quantities or without causing enormous damage to the environment”.

The state of the environment is fundamentally determined by what activities are supported by the State and what taxes are charged by the State to certain activities. If financial conditions favor environmental pollution, the state of our environment is going to deteriorate, and vice versa. That is why Clean Air Action Group considers promoting a green budget and a green tax system as its main task. “We are trying to change attitudes”, but “it is very difficult to neutralize the unsustainable consumption and production patterns imposed on people”: “Money is the best educator, when people experience things firsthand, through their pockets.” András does not hesitate to counter market demagoguery: “The market-friendly solution is what we suggest.” Costs are assessed on the basis of scientific criteria; nowadays it can be statistically predicted how much damage air pollution causes relative to human health and lost hours at work. András and his colleagues have calculated that as a result of delaying the introduction of road tolls the domestic budget has suffered losses in the range of 10 billion Euros.

Clean Air Action Group time and again hurts the interests of those who earn their living or profits from a socially harmful activity. According to András, in order to manage a conflict, discussion should be about a given issue and not about the people behind it. Adherence to principles, readiness to concede and to compromise together may achieve any objective. The efforts of Clean Air Action Group have yielded serious results. For decades they fought for the introduction of road-tolls for heavy trucks; finally they were successful. For decades they opposed to burning heavily polluting lignite in households; today the decree banning it is ready to be adopted. For decades they promoted the environmental advantages of district heating; today there is an official, national action plan stipulating its development. For decades they fought for banning the burning of garden waste; regulation has clearly moved in this direction. The capital city has bought electric buses on their urging, and the campaign launched by them led to the modernization or withdrawal from duty of the old, smoking buses of Budapest. The capital city’s parking regulations are based on their concept. They are the initiators of Car-free Day. On behalf of Mayor István Tarlós, Deputy Mayor Balázs Szenczey expressed the municipality’s appreciation to Clean Air Action Group “for their continuous contribution to the efforts aimed at improving the environmental state of Budapest”.

In addition to their professional work, all this is also related to another pillar of their activities: to promoting publicity, information, social participation. They demonstrated through measurements the serious risks of improper household heating, waste incineration, showing that, during the heating season, the air in several small settlement, surrounded by forests, is much more polluted than the air in downtown Budapest. Clean Air Action Group operates a counseling office, a professional web page, and supports the activities of local civil organizations, including bringing test cases to the courts. In one of the cases brought by the CAAC, the Supreme Court, in a precedent-setting ruling, confirmed the civil organizations’ right to act as petitioners in environmental cases, and stated that “economic benefits shall not be taken into consideration when the environment is in danger”. They act on behalf of local communities only if requested to by those concerned. “It is not worth working against them even for a good cause; without them the prospects of success are doubtful.”

They have their fair share of failures as well; however, their troops, the 130 local organizations, are ready to fight. Dear András, do not ever give up!

Budapest, June 26, 2017