

Subject: Martin Balluch, Austria: My message to the international animal rights movement

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From prison hospital in Vienna, Austria

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My message to the international animal rights movement

On Wednesday 21st May, my life was to change drastically. We had prepared a new campaign on a constitutional change for animals, which would have gone for a vote in Parliament at the beginning of July. The campaign was to be launched the very next day. For this campaign we had managed to unify just about the whole movement in Austria to pull on the same string. As many of you, who know me, will have expected, this is one of my primary aims, to unify the movement for double strength.

But the campaign was not to be. In the early hours of Wednesday morning, police launched the most violent attack ever in Austrian history against a social justice movement and against NGOs. Hundreds of armed police officers smashed in the doors of 21 different homes, of 6 different NGO offices and of our warehouse of demo material. 25 people were arrested and questioned by police. 10 people were put on remand since, one of them me.

In order to "catch" me, police not only broke into my home, but also in the home of two of my brothers and my girlfriend's.

Black clad, masked up officers stormed through the broken down door and run, guns drawn, to our beds. They pointed their guns at my head and pulled me out of my bed naked. My brother was pushed onto the wall and had the gun put into his neck.

One of the 10 people police intended to put on remand was not at home. So they phoned him, and guess what? Trustingly, he went to the police station suspecting nothing evil. Till today, 19 days later, he is still rotting in a cell, not knowing why. Incidentally, he is campaigns director of the well known animal welfare group "Four Paws", which has offices in 6 different countries.

After police had arrested us, they searched all our homes, including those of my brothers, who are not involved in the animal rights movement. Police mainly took computers, but also brochures, books, videos and mobile phones.

You would be forgiven to think that this massive police operation was the state reaction to a high level of animal rights related criminal activity. But instead, fact is that ALF activity in Austria is on a much much smaller scale than in all other countries with a big animal rights movement.

You would also be forgiven to think that police must have had information that dangerous ALF-attacks were about to happen, or that they would discover firebombs or terrorist material. But again, you could not be more wrong. They had no such information, they did not even look for such material. They were only interested in computers, books and videos, i.e. in stuff that says something about the attitude of those people they had arrested. This is what this case is about: the attitude of people, no specific crimes.

If the police had any evidence against any of the arrestees regarding crimes they supposedly here committed, they would have said so by now. But the arrest order says something else. We all were arrested for "forming a large criminal organisation with a hierarchical structure like a company". And the crimes this organisation under the name ALF supposedly has committed, is EVERY SINGLE animal rights related crime that ever happened in Austria! This sounds like a joke, but it is not. Every single animal rights related crime ever, every lock glued, every tyre punctured, every window broken and so forth, but also - believe it or not - every run-in, every home demo and every undercover investigation without criminal aspect, to every topic imaginable, from vivisection to fur, factory farming, circus, the lot, is supposed to have been done by our criminal organisation.

You would expect that if police and the State Prosecution suspect you of such heinous crimes, they would come to you after your arrest and question you. But wrong again. Ever since I have been put on remand in a cell, I have never been asked by anyone any question related to this case. My solicitor has demanded to see the police evidence, and so far we have seen some 2500 pages. And in all those pages, some animal rights related crimes of the last 2 years are forensically analysed, even a bite lock that was put on a door was investigated for DNA traces. And no evidence against any of the 10 arrestees was found. Also, police has listened to our phones, had us under surveillance, put cameras pointing at our front doors, have put V-men into our groups and have read all our emails. For 2 years! And still, they have found no evidence. So they started the huge police operation, desperate for something to use to charge us of anything, and be it tax fraud.

My arrest and remand is "justified" as follows. There is some albeit comparatively little, animal rights related criminal activity. Hence, there must be a big, hierarchical organisation run like a company, which is

responsible for it. Further, since I have been active in the movement for decades, since I have international contacts and since I am influential in the movement and have run many campaigns, I must be the head of this organisation. Full stop. That is it. That is the evidence. Can you believe it? I can't, but for all I can see, it seems to be reality.

How is it possible that I am sitting on remand for such a ludicrous "suspicion"? Good question. For 2 weeks I was given no reason why I was arrested. Then I could see the "evidence" and was put before a judge last Friday 6th June. The prosecutor read out the list of all animal rights related crimes and non-criminal actions in the last 11 years, which took a while. Then he said I am suspected to lead a criminal organisation, which is responsible for all of them. Then my solicitor said that there is no evidence. Then I wanted to give a statement, but the judge did not allow me to do so. She just handed me a prepared verdict, which said that I have to remain on remand for another 4 weeks, then she will consider my case again. And that she did with all 10 arrestees, including the campaigns director of Four Paws International.

So, what is behind all this? I think behind all this is the most fundamental attack on animal rights movement ever in the history of our movement worldwide. Let me explain. About 11 years ago, we embarked on a new type of campaigning in Austria. We used the classic grass roots campaign tactic with media work and civil disobedience actions for legal reforms. And we were very successful indeed. First, we banned fur farms, then wild animal circuses, then battery cages and vivisection on apes, and at last rabbit cage farming. These successes caused a lot of concern for powerful groups in society. After the hen battery cage ban was achieved in 2004, we started to feel an increasing amount of police repression. The anti-terrorist police department started to watch us and slander us by releasing statements how they suspect us of criminal activity. Also, police restricted our rights to protest ever more. Then the Minister of the Interior publicly called us a violent group. We tried to sue him for it, but he turned out to be immune to law suits as a minister. But he admitted in Parliament when questioned that his accusation was based on wrong assumptions. We publicly called him a liar, but, revealingly he did not react.....

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Or so we thought. At about the same time a special police squad was formed and started a major surveillance operation on us, i.e. on a number of different animal rights groups, NGOs and individuals. The rest you know already.

Since, after years of intensive surveillance, police could find no evidence of any criminal act, they had to come up with suspicion of an offence that does not need concrete evidence. For that they used a recently introduced law against terrorist groups and the mafia. This law says it is illegal to form a big (i.e. more than 10 people) organisation, which is hierarchical and run similarly to a company, which aims to influence politics or economy, and which was for that aim at least also and at least occasionally, criminal acts. Since we do run campaigns to influence politics and economy, and since there is some sort of animal rights related criminal activity, even if not related to us, on a very low level and of no serious kind but still, the State Prosecution is using the law now - for the first time in history against an NGO. And don't forget: some of those "crimes" recounted by the State Prosecution include flyposting, run-ins, blockades and undercover investigations inside factory farms. This is a very worrying development. Police is using an anti-terrorist law against legitimate and non-criminal political campaigning. Amnesty International has voiced concern. A Green Party MP has visited me in prison and the Greens have put critical questions to the minister of the interior in Parliament. But he refused to comment. Instead, the state prosecutor released a statement to media that we are suspected of committing arson and "gas attacks", in order to slander us.

This is a political trial, a full scale attack on legal and legitimate reformist law campaigns, which were successful. Please protest against those criminals, who are behind this attack on us, and who are probably high up in government.

I support this protest as much as I can. Immediately after my arrest, I went on hunger strike. Apart from before my court hearing in order to be able to attend, I have not eaten since. I am on my 19th day today. I have been in prison hospital for the last week, have blurred vision and fell unconscious once already. I have been told that soon they will start force-feeding me.

I need your help. I count on you. Thanks for all the support you have given us already. Please trust that there really is no evidence whatever of criminal activity against me. There is none now, and there never will be any.

<http://www.evana.org/index.php?id=34567&lang=en>

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Austria: Write letters of support to ten animal welfare workers

<http://www.evana.org/index.php?id=34539&lang=en>

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