



THE WRITERS'
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August 15, 2011

The Honorable John Baird
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Baird:

Three recent news stories have suggested that, for political reasons, the Department of Foreign Affairs has not only backed away from providing support for a series of exhibits in Europe by the author and artist Franke James but discouraged a private sponsor in another country from supporting her.

The Writers' Union of Canada has an interest in ensuring the rights and freedoms of all writers, and Franke James is one of our members.

Our understanding is that Ms. James was in the process of organizing a Central and Eastern European tour of her environmentally-themed artworks, in conjunction with a Croatia-based environmental group called Nektarina Non Profit. According to a July 28 story in the Toronto Star, Nektarina's coordinator of international projects, Sandra Antonovic, has reported that a senior Canadian official asked, "Who was the idiot who approved an art show by that woman, Franke James? Don't you know this lady speaks against the Canadian government?" (See also <http://www.nektarinanonprofit.com/2011/07/bully-in-playground.html>, as well as <http://www.vancouversun.com/opinion/Government+undermining+freedom+speech/5220970/story.html>.)

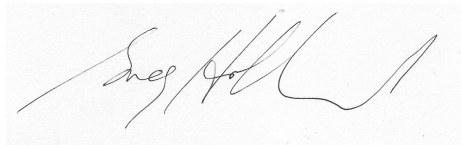
In a July 27 story, the Tyee reports that, as a result of intervention from the Department of Foreign Affairs, "the Canadian embassy in Zagreb, Croatia . . . decided suddenly to withdraw its support for [Ms James'] art show. Antonovic learned this in a conversation with an embassy official, who explained that a dispatch from Ottawa had requested the decision"

Ms Antonovic further alleges that, in addition to withdrawing its support, the Canadian Government persuaded Nektarina's private sponsor to withdraw. The Toronto Star reports that the sponsor "notified Antonovic that a Canadian official had contacted it directly, leading it to yank its sponsorship funds to avoid 'further damage for our company'." The Tyee confirms that Ms. Antonovic learned from the sponsor that "a Canadian official called and persuaded them to withdraw from sponsoring the exhibition."

Although I am aware that a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs has denied knowledge of any interference, I am writing to ask that the matter be investigated further. It is disturbing to hear reports from the Croatian sponsor that Canadian officials have discouraged support for an artist for political reasons. We believe that these charges warrant a fuller inquiry and ask to be informed of the results. We would also be grateful to receive notice of any policies in your department that might pertain to this reported behaviour by your officials.

I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Greg Hollingshead", is centered on a light gray rectangular background.

Greg Hollingshead
Chair, The Writers' Union of Canada

cc Franke James