

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

17 June 2014
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Hungary: Stop targeting NGOs

Amnesty International calls on the Hungarian government to stop targeting NGOs and civil society groups but ensure that they can exercise their right to freedom of association and freedom of expression without intimidation.

The organization is concerned at what appears to be an attempt by the newly reelected government in Hungary to silence Hungarian NGOs that are carrying out vital human rights work and threatening the rights to freedom of association and expression.

Hungarian NGO Operator Consortium (which includes four foundations) distributing Norwegian NGO Funds (Norway Grants) in Hungary has recently been subjected to scrutiny and controls that appear to be motivated by the government attempting to target civil society, by alleging that the funds may be used to support certain party political interests. Three of the four Foundations that form the Consortium were visited by state officials in early June to investigate the use of the Funds received by NGOs. In response to this, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry announced its decision to suspend further disbursements of funds to Hungary under the EEA and Norway Grants scheme, until the Hungarian government withdraws its audit.

Amnesty International believes that actions taken by the Hungarian authorities will have a chilling effect on civil society, a crucial part of civic engagement in any country. By deterring NGOs from seeking much needed funding such actions by the authorities are detrimental to the needs of the very people the NGOs are there to assist.

These attacks on NGOs' funding is the latest in line of steps by Hungarian authorities that Amnesty International has raised concerns over. In 2011, despite amendments adopted by the Hungarian Parliament, the Media Law that was introduced in 2010 by the then new Fidesz government contained measures that seriously curtailed the right to freedom of expression: introduction of compulsory registration of all media outlets, regulation of media content and a new regulatory body that is inadequate in ensuring media plurality.

Amnesty International is therefore calling on the Hungarian authorities to withdraw the threat on the Hungarian NGO Operator and instead engage in a dialogue with all parties to ensure that Hungarian NGOs can continue to carry out their work.

Background

17 August 2013

The spokesperson of Fidesz, stated during a press conference that "fake NGOs" are paid to undermine the government and the Prime Minister. One of the NGOs, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee has filed a complaint against the spokesperson. The case is still pending.

3 October 2013

A Jobbik MP, Márton Gyöngyösi announced a proposal of a new law to "record and publish" foreign funds exceeding 3,300 Euros received by any NGO. In its press release on the proposal, Jobbik was referring to a similar law adopted by Russia under which the NGOs receiving foreign funds are registered as "foreign agents".

9 May 2014

The Norwegian Foreign Ministry announced that it has decided to suspend further disbursements of funds to Hungary under the EEA and Norway Grants scheme.

2 June 2014

Following the allegations made at the beginning of June by the Chief of the Prime Minister's cabinet János Lázár, that the Norway Grants are funding groups close to one of the opposition parties, the Hungarian government launched an "independent audit" into the use of the funds, and requested funding-related documents from the NGOs.

6 June 2014

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that such an audit amounts to a violation of the agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants as any responsibility for potential audits lies with the donor states, namely Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

13 June 2014

Despite negotiations, Norway and Hungary have not reached an agreement on lifting of the suspension of the EEA and Norway Grants. The Norwegian authorities informed that Hungary must meet the requirements stipulated in the agreement, which means that the audit of the NGOs should be halted.

Ends/