



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Stop the Attacks on Civil Society in Hungary Statement by the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum expresses its profound concern over the on-going and increasing pressure on NGOs and civil society by the Hungarian government.

Since 2010, after the Fidesz party came to power, the Hungarian government has systematically attacked independent NGOs, questioning their credibility and trying to gain control over their funding distributed independently from the government.

On 7 April 2017, a new bill targeting foreign-funded NGOs was submitted in Parliament by Fidesz.¹ The bill is strikingly similar to the “foreign agents” law in Russia that obliges foreign-funded NGOs to register themselves as “foreign agents”. In accordance with the new legislation, Hungarian NGOs receiving more than HUF 7.2 million (EUR 23,000) from foreign sources must register with authorities and represent themselves to the public as foreign-funded organisations by reporting on their website (or anything they publish) that they are foreign-funded NGOs. In case of refusing to do so, applicable organisations will be fined.

Earlier this year, Szilárd Németh, Vice President of the Fidesz Party, made a statement accusing foreign-funded NGOs of attempting to ‘influence political life in an illegitimate or unlawful way.’² Furthermore, Mr Németh threatened to use ‘all the tools at disposal’ to ‘sweep out’ NGOs funded by the Hungarian-born financier and philanthropist George Soros.³ The statement specifically targeted the Hungarian national chapter of Transparency International, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee – credible partners of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

In the past years, Hungarian NGOs, especially those critical of the official ideology, have been subjected to a campaign of government harassment that includes administrative measures, unlawful investigations and labelling them as enemies of the state. These actions are aimed at limiting the voice of those, who critically comment on government activities - citizens, media, and civil society organisations. It is particularly regrettable that so far no forceful reaction from EU bodies has been initiated in response to these attacks.

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is alarmed about the new legislation hostile to NGOs - along with the pattern of government crackdowns on civil society in Hungary. We are convinced that the stigmatising actions of the Hungarian government towards civil society organisations

¹ See <http://budapestbeacon.com/news-in-brief/anticipated-ngo-crackdown-bill-officially-submitted-fidesz/45704>

² See <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-01-10/trump-s-win-prompts-hungarian-call-for-crackdown-on-soros-groups>

³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/hungary-defends-planned-crackdown-on-foreign-backed-ngos>

are completely unacceptable in member states of the European Union, as they undermine the very values, on which the EU has been built.

As a key driver for safe-guarding and promoting good governance and human rights, an independent civil society plays a crucial democratic role in a modern society. The example of Russia clearly demonstrates how the hostile rhetoric and repressive legislation can severely impede the work of NGOs undermining this very role.

The new bill has been one in several other recent government actions that may severely hamper development of institutions of civil society in Hungary. The recently adopted legislation on institutions of higher education will severely inhibit existence of the Central European University in Budapest⁴, an institution not only known worldwide for its excellence in education and research but for its continuous engagement with various Hungarian, European, and international civil society organisations that work on important issues of social inclusion, human rights, non-discrimination, and equality. Central European University is also renowned for its commitment to principles and values of open society, democracy, and citizens' participation.

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum joins its voice to those, who reject this legislation and call for the EU bodies to take action to challenge it. We express our solidarity with the Hungarian nonprofit organisations and the Central European University and appeal to the Hungarian authorities and EU bodies to take all necessary actions to protect the civil society space in Hungary. We will closely monitor the situation.

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 153 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history, and civic education.

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⁴ See <https://www.ceu.edu/category/istandwithceu>