



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

The Pressure on NGOs in Hungary Undermines the Rule of Law in the European Union

Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum expresses serious concern at the new moves by Hungarian authorities against local NGOs. It calls on the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to stop all political pressure on civil society institutions. We also call on European Union authorities, including José Manuel Barroso, incumbent President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, President-elect of the European Commission, Martine Reicherts, acting EU Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights, and Citizenship, and other international institutions to intervene against the Hungarian authorities in view of recent developments.

The crackdown on Hungarian NGOs demonstrates a systemic violation of fundamental rights and suppression of political opposition. It is unacceptable for non-governmental organisations in an EU member state – Ökotárs (<http://okotars.hu>), a partner in the Environmental Partnership Association, which is a member of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, and Demnet (www.demnet.hu) – to be accused of receiving foreign funds for so-called oppositional activities.

Earlier this year, some Hungarian NGOs were put on a blacklist of “problematic civic organisations”, including Transparency International Hungary, TASZ, Roma Press Agency. Since then, NGOs have been exposed to unannounced financial inspections. Prime Minister Victor Orbán even described some NGOs as “political activists paid from abroad” trying to “influence Hungarian politics”.

These developments and the anti-NGO rhetoric in Hungary ominously echo the situation in the Russian Federation where NGOs receiving foreign funds are labelled as “foreign agents”. At least six organisations have been forced to shut down to avoid criminal prosecution of their leaders. Several member organisations of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum have been falsely accused of acting as “foreign agents” as well. Repression and discrimination of civil society organisations have also been documented in Belarus, Azerbaijan, and other post-Soviet countries.

However, Hungary is the first example of an EU member state showing a development towards authoritarian rule. In 2011, a controversial media law adopted by the Hungarian Parliament was only amended after strong criticism by the European Union. Nevertheless, the promotion of pro-government media, the shutdown of opposition channels like Klubrádió, and the introduction of the

so-called “advertising tax” in June 2014 are clear signals that media freedom in Hungary is still under threat.

The work of the two Hungarian NGOs (Ökotárs and Demnet) is aimed at supporting the civil society projects of local NGOs. Although their financial support comes from a non-EU country (Norway), the current situation calls for urgent reaction from the European Union. The EU cannot let the crackdown on NGOs in one of its member states go unattended. Behaviour such as Hungary's endangers democracy not only in the country itself but also in Eastern Europe and Europe as a whole. The situation in Hungary puts the whole idea of a “Europe of citizens” at stake. So far, the persecution of NGOs in Hungary has only been addressed in an official letter from an international organisation, by Nils Muižnieks, Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe.

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls on European civil societies to display solidarity – regardless of whether they belong to the EU or not – with Hungarian, Russian, and other NGOs under political pressure and appeals to these civil societies to use their power for achieving a better environment for civic engagement and independent participation of citizens in the development of their countries. The Forum will continue to stand up for improved conditions of NGO work in open societies in the EU and Russia.

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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 127 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are member 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.

EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM / ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

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