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Hungarian government must end its intimidation of NGOs

On 8 September around a dozen police officers raided the offices of two NGOs, Ökotárs and Demnet, and confiscated files and computer servers. Both organizations are members of the consortium responsible for the distribution of the funds of the Norwegian NGO Fund (EEA/Norway Grants) amongst Hungarian non-governmental organizations.

The raids come after a string of recent government statements and actions which have sought to discredit the work of civil society organizations in Hungary.¹

According to the official record of the search obtained by another NGO, Átlátszó, during the raid, police officers confiscated documents relating to 13 NGOs that the government had previously labelled "supporters of the opposition", including human rights and other NGOs such as Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ), Transparency International, the Roma Press Center and K-Monitor. The search of the premises took five hours and the police remained at the NGOs' premises until 6pm. According to the media, after the search the police escorted the head of Ökotárs, Veronika Móra, to her flat where her computer was confiscated.

The police investigation against Ökotárs was initiated on the basis of the government's allegations of mismanagement and unauthorized financial management. The financial management of Ökotárs is annually reviewed through an independent audit which so far has not found any malpractice.

The police raid was carried out despite Ökotárs' ongoing cooperation with the police. According to Veronika Móra, the organization had provided the authorities with the requested documents at the beginning of August.

The authorities must not use these raids to intimidate and harass Hungarian civil society organizations, or to attempt to discredit them in the eyes of the public.

Hungarian NGOs perform essential work in the fields of human rights, education, environmental protection and social services. Amnesty International calls on the Hungarian governments to respect the right to freedom of association and freedom of expression.

¹ Amnesty International Public Statement, *Hungary: Stop targeting NGOs, 17 June 2014*
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR27/002/2014/en>.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai, has noted that the ability to access foreign or international funds is central to the realization of the right to freedom of association, and called on states “[t]o adopt measures to protect individuals and associations against defamation, disparagement, undue audits and other attacks in relation to funding they allegedly received.”²

Background

17 August 2013

The spokesperson of the governing party 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. In July 2014, the Budapest City Court ordered Fidesz and its spokesperson to apologise.

3 October 2013

A member of parliament from far-right party Jobbik, Márton Gyöngyösi, announced a proposal of a new law to “record and publish” foreign funds exceeding Euro 3,300 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 had decided to suspend further disbursements of funds to Hungary under the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants scheme except for the NGO funds.

2 June 2014

Immediately following the allegations made by the Minister of the Prime Minister’s office János Lázár that Norway Grants were 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 amounted to a violation of the agreement on EEA and Norway Grants as any responsibility for potential audits rested with the donor states, namely Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

13 June 2014

Despite negotiations, Norway and Hungary had not reached an agreement on lifting of the suspension of the EEA and Norway Grants. The Norwegian authorities informed that

² Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session23/A.HRC.23.39_EN.pdf.

Hungary had to meet the requirements stipulated in the agreement, which meant that the audit of the NGOs had to be halted.

6 August 2014

Budapest Chief Prosecutor's Office started to investigate the reported embezzlement against an unknown perpetrator.

3 September 2014

Government Control Office, Kormányzati Ellenőzési Hivatal, KEHI announced that it had reported one NGO to the police in relation to funding by Norway Grants related to the charge of suspicion of mismanagement and unauthorized financial management.