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Silencing Dissent: Hungary's Crackdown on NGOs

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Hungary is in the middle of a crackdown against NGOs and civil society leaders. On September 8th, Hungarian police raided the offices of two nonprofits, Ökotárs Foundation and DemNet Hungary, as well as the homes of their leaders, seizing documents and data. While no charges have been filed, they are accused of distributing foreign grant money to leftist political parties, which is against Hungarian law. In reality, Ökotárs Foundation and DemNet Hungary allocate funding to other NGOs that promote democracy, civil society, environmental awareness, and independent media.

The Hungarian government is trying to silence civil rights groups, think-tanks, and organizations that demand transparency in government decisions and lead the fight against corruption. The government strategy: dry up their financial resources and run a smear campaign to discredit them in the public eye. Their recent police raids achieve both objectives. Potential charges are unlikely to hold up in court, but no matter – protracted legal wrangling will still go a long way towards dismantling and discrediting these organizations and blocking their financial resources. Fidesz, the ruling party, has already successfully used the prosecutors office and the police force to accomplish similar goals against opposition parties and politicians.

The Hungarian government would like you to think that these nonprofits are partisan groups trying to influence elections with foreign money. Prime Minister Viktor Orban called them “activists financed from abroad” and a threat to the sovereignty of the Hungarian state in a speech this summer. This sounds eerily similar to Russia’s law that classifies all NGOs that receive international funding as “foreign agents,” which is clearly intended to discredit them. According to the Hungarian government and the state-controlled media, these NGOs are mouthpieces for a “liberal” agenda.

So who are these allegedly menacing foreign groups funneling money into Hungary? Once such group is the Norway Fund, which supported Ökotárs Foundation and DemNet Hungary. But the regime’s logic breaks down when you see that Norway Fund also gives ten times that amount to development programs for the Hungarian government. By this reasoning, the Hungarian government is also a “foreign agent.”

The groups targeted by the Hungarian government all have one thing in common: they are criticizing the Hungarian administration in one way or another – whether on their track record in human rights, women’s rights, LGBT rights, or transparency and anti-corruption measures. The government feels threatened by these organizations because they have the potential to damage Hungary’s reputation abroad – and rightly so, as the regime has failed

to promote democratic values, make a more transparent system, and protect minority citizens.

The regime's targeting of NGOs follows clear political lines. Gábor Mabda, the principal investigator of the case at Government Control Office (the body that started the investigation that led to the police raid on September 8th), was a parliamentary candidate for MIÉP—an anti-Semitic ultranationalist party and a former ally of Jobbik in 1998 and 2002. The police searched for and seized documents specifically related to 13 other NGOs that receive foreign funding on a “hit-list” issued by an official in the Prime Minister's office, even though their activity and funding is perfectly legal. It appears that the police were executing a political order. A politician from the Prime Minister's office issued a statement that the police's actions were excessive—a not-so-credible effort by the government to distance itself from the event, especially as Orbán himself did not condemn the police action, but welcomed it.

Meanwhile, the same office that is pursuing these “investigations” into NGOs has not touched a stack of numerous government corruption cases that have piled up in the last four years.

In all likelihood, the government will amplify their efforts to convince the public that these NGOs are criminal organizations financed by the West, serving foreign interests. They are already being presented as such in government-controlled media. And once they are discredited, the methods used against the NGOs will seem justified.

It's a bleak picture, but it's a realistic one. Orbán has proven himself to be a politician who follows through on his threats. His crackdown on NGOs shows he's serious about creating an “illiberal democracy” modeled after Russia. The police will not hesitate to carry out his political agenda.

As mentioned above, the Hungarian government is rightly afraid of how the international community views them, despite bravado nationalism. Like it or not, Hungary is a member of the European Union and receives millions of dollars in aid. If they expect to continue receiving the benefits of E.U. membership and partnership with Norway, the government needs to stop this crackdown on NGOs and demonstrate a commitment to democratic values.