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Hungary foreign agent bill: there is nothing to consult on

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Today the European Parliament will be debating the situation in Hungary. The following is a statement issued last week by Hungarian civil society organisations, including Transparency International Hungary, on the proposed NGO financing bill in Hungary. The proposed bill would require NGOs receiving over EUR 23,000 from outside of Hungary to register as “organisation receiving support from abroad”. Failure for NGOs to register could result in a fine and ultimately dissolution.

Hungarian NGOs: There is nothing to consult on

20/04/2017, Budapest. Today, the Ministry of Justice invited a number of civil society organisations for a consultation on the so called law on the ‘transparency of foreign funded organisations’. The insincerity of this gesture is shown by the fact that the parliamentary debate on this utterly unacceptable bill started a day before the ministry’s consultation. The position of the invited civil society organisations remains unchanged after the meeting: the bill does not provide any basis for a discussion and they refuse the bill. What the governing parties can do at best is to withdraw the bill and forget forever their attempt of imposing a damaging system of control on NGOs.

The aim of the planned amendments – contrary to the allegations of the governing parties – is not making the functioning of civil society organisations more transparent for society. The present Act in force, which was also adopted by the governing parties, already makes it mandatory for the public benefit purpose entities to publish their income and who their funders are. The majority of civil society organisations operate in an even more transparent manner than required by law. For the cases where any organisation would violate the law, the state already had at its disposal the necessary measures to adequately sanction the offenders.

The Bill of the MPs of the Fidesz party arbitrarily qualifies certain civil society organisations as foreign funded and obliges them and their supporters to register as such. This regulation serves no purpose that can be justified by the constitution and at the same time stigmatises and segregates numerous independent voices in public life.

The ‘foreign funded’ stigma gains its true meaning in the context of the government’s communication constructed over several years, in which everything that is ‘foreign’ is necessarily against the interests of the Hungarian nation. Beyond particular civil society organisations, the Bill also stigmatises funders who qualify as foreigners, whether they be individuals (such as Hungarians living abroad or foreigners living in Hungary), private

foundations, foreign states, international organisations, the European Union or the United Nations and its specialised bodies.

Among those civil society organisations that appeared at the meeting in the Ministry of Justice, Amnesty International Hungary, the Háttér Society, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (Társaság a Szabadságjogokért) and the Transparency International Hungary Foundation refuse the bill and consider it unsuitable for any further debate. For these reasons they request the governing parties to withdraw it.

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