



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Intimidation of Civil Society and Media in Hungary

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Gary Robbins
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 19, 2014

We take the floor today to express concern about recent developments in Hungary, one of our close friends and allies.

Shortly after its re-election victory in April, the Hungarian government accused "Norway Grants," a funding mechanism that distributes money to a consortium of Hungarian NGOs, of being politically biased. The Hungarian government publicly alleged that Norway seeks to influence Hungarian politics, and on June 2 the Government Control Office (KEHI) initiated investigative audits against the offices of three NGOs that distribute funds from Norway Grants.

Subsequently, on June 12, Transparency International, the ACLU, and other NGOs published a joint statement registering their concern that Hungarian civil society organizations have a shrinking space in which to carry out their activities.

Similarly, members of the media in Hungary report they practice self-censorship because they fear retaliation for articles critical of the government. As an example, on June 9 the chief editor of a prominent independent news website was fired soon after publishing exposés of extravagant spending by the head of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) while on official travel. The PMO official subsequently reimbursed the government. Although the website's management claimed the editor's release was part of a long-planned reorganization, numerous members of the editorial and reporting staff quit in protest, claiming that the firing was due to political pressure.

On June 11, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a new law that imposes tax of up to 40 percent on advertising revenue. Media analysts say the tax would cripple the industry and tighten government controls on the press. In protest of the pending tax, on June 6 TV channels went dark for 15 minutes, more than 100 private media companies cut their services, newspapers printed blank front pages, websites shut down, and radio stations fell silent. We share the concerns of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM), Dunja Mijatović, regarding the lack of public consultations and the expedited procedure under which the new law was adopted.

Mr. Chairman, as Representative Mijatović noted, an open and informed public debate on policies and laws affecting civil society and media is of crucial importance to democracy. We encourage the government of Hungary to engage in broad-based discussions with civil society and media outlets, and to work toward mutually acceptable solutions that uphold Hungary's OSCE commitments to freedom of association and freedom of expression, including media freedom.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.