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NGO transparency will protect democracy

By G. STEINBERG
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Government use of taxpayer funds to secretly promote particular groups and policies in other democracies is a violation of international norms.

For several months, the Knesset's proposed Foreign Government NGO Funding Transparency legislation has been a major target for anti-Israel allegations.

NGO officials who benefit from this often secret funding were widely quoted in the media, in the European Parliament, and elsewhere, alleging that the draft bill provided "proof" of the dire threat to Israel's democracy.

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On this basis, NGO officials and ideologues have placed this issue on the European Parliament's agenda for September 8.

However, their campaign on this issue received a major blow on August 16th, when the Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee debated and approved an updated version of the draft legislation.

For anyone interested in the facts, in contrast to the ideology, a brief examination of the text will end questions regarding the vibrancy of Israeli democracy.

The purpose of this very concise legislation could not be clearer – it will increase transparency for Israeli NGOs that receive foreign government funds. Public monies used for political purposes are entirely different than donations from private individuals or foundations – although these should also be transparent.

When democratic governments use taxpayer funds to secretly promote particular groups and policies in other democracies, this is a blatant violation of international norms and the principle of national sovereignty.

The degree to which European governments seek to influence the Israeli public sphere through funding for radical NGOs is without precedent or parallel in the democratic world.

Contrary to claims made by NGO officials, the bill will not restrict the foreign government funding for their groups. It will, however, make reporting far more visible – including quarterly reports – ensuring that funding sources for political campaigns are made public while the information is relevant.

UNDER THE current system, one or two years can elapse after an NGO political or media blitz has ended before reports are submitted. The Israeli public will also be able to know which foreign governments are sponsoring a specific advertising or propaganda campaign designed to influence important policy decisions.

This legislation became necessary after the European Union and member governments began channeling

tens of millions of shekels to Israeli and Palestinian NGOs to promote EU interests on the most controversial and difficult questions facing Israeli society. Many of the recipient groups are active in the demonization of Israel in the UN, European Parliament, and foreign capitals.

And in Israel, this money pays for media advertisements, propaganda materials, Knesset lobbyists, onesided academic conferences and frequent appearances before the Israeli Supreme Court.

The EU and its member states fund groups such as Yesh Din, Breaking the Silence, PCATI, Gisha, B'Tselem, and many others who were major contributors to the Goldstone "war crimes" indictment against Israel. Other NGO recipients lead the boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaigns against Israel, and spearhead 'lawfare' attempts to have Israeli officials arrested while traveling abroad.

Furthermore, while the EU claims to promote "two state" policies, money from the EU budget is allocated to groups that campaign for one state, meaning the abolition of Israel.

The secret European funding processes also protect decision makers from investigation and accountability.

Other than a few officials, no one knows whether the current funding process violates due process of law and standard administrative practice. Secrecy makes it impossible to learn who actually allocates these monies, how they are distributed, whether any groups receive special consideration, and whether anyone fully monitors or evaluates funded programs.

In a June 23rd hearing of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, officials from two Israeli NGOs – the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI) and Mossawa – portrayed criticism of the secret process by which they are funded by the EU as a McCarthyist conspiracy.

And they demonstrated their commitment to free speech by attempting to prevent NGO Monitor from speaking at the hearing, falsely claiming that the latter was a governmental organization (in fact NGO Monitor was the only organization invited to speak that does not receive funding from any government).

On September 8th the European Parliament's Plenary is scheduled to debate an oral question on the "Draft Bill on Israeli NGOs." The oral question includes the inquiry "How will this legislation affect the relationship between the EU and Israel, within the context of the Association Agreement in particular?" Perhaps, in light of the bias, the inappropriateness of the interference in Israeli affairs, and the changed text, this session will now be cancelled, while the Israeli Knesset fulfills its democratic responsibilities.

The writer is president of NGO Monitor and professor of Political Science at Bar Ilan University.



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