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TRANSPARENCY FOR NGOS IS NOT ANTI-DEMOCRATIC

Gerald M. Steinberg
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Haaretz

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The Knesset legislation that mandates reporting of foreign government funding for non-governmental organizations is not anti-democratic, as claimed by vocal critics, mainly the recipients of the foreign largesse.

Indeed, as wide support in the Knesset showed, including from Labor and Kadima MKs, this law mandating transparency is designed to fix a gaping hole in Israeli democracy. This bill is very different from the draconian and partisan effort to use the Knesset to investigate only left-wing groups.

In recent years, European governments have provided an estimated 100 million euros in taxpayer funds annually to a very narrow group of Israeli, Palestinian and European political advocacy organizations. When these groups sponsor quasi-academic conferences, newspaper advertising campaigns and public rallies heralding sweeping allegations of Israeli wrongdoing, the public has the right to know that the money was provided by a foreign government.

This transparency is an elementary requirement for the informed debate that is essential to the democratic process. While all external funding for Israeli civil society, across the political spectrum, should be public knowledge, large foreign government transfers are very different in principle from private donations.

All governments have interests and use power to pursue those goals. When officials from Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and another dozen nations use their "soft power" to fund dozens of Israeli groups, such as Breaking the Silence, Yesh Din, and the Public Committee Against Torture in

Israeli, whose officials travel the world declaring that Israel is a nation of war criminals, these groups are also promoting the interests of their sponsors.

(In contrast, the U.S. government generally does not fund Israeli political advocacy NGOs, and the few exceptions, such as the ill-advised attempt to use the "Geneva Initiative" organization, ended quickly.)

In election after election, the governments chosen by Israeli voters have differed with European positions. However, by massively funding opposition NGOs, many of which claim to promote human rights (although they do this selectively), Europe tries to interfere with and manipulate the legitimate outcome of Israeli elections.

In fact, some NGO officials are simply rejected politicians, who, after failing to get Knesset positions, have used foreign funds to exert power they could not obtain otherwise. A heavy shroud of secrecy surrounds the budgets of these Israeli political groups.

In most European nations, the details are more tightly held than military plans, and no parliamentary hearings are held to discuss the legitimacy, wisdom or implications of such funding. The decision making processes are also completely non-


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transparent, leaving open the possibility that these policies are made in violation of due process of law, as was recently uncovered in the case of Canadian NGO funding.

In theory, Israeli NGOs should be covered by the existing reporting requirements for non-profits, but in practice, many political advocacy groups have found ways to avoid such transparency by registering under different frameworks, or avoiding any Israeli oversight mechanism.

The new legislation, which is based on the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act, is designed to prevent these exceptions, and to promote the public's right to know who and what forces are behind powerful political campaigns that take place outside, and often in direct opposition to, the electoral process.

Had the NGO recipients endorsed this transparency legislation, instead of falsely denouncing it as anti-democratic, the proposed investigations aimed only at one side of the political spectrum (and misdirected at alleged Arab government funding) would not have been introduced.

With the adoption of regulation for reporting of foreign government funds, the door is open to expanding transparency for private foreign funding for Israeli groups across the political spectrum.

The writer is president of NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research institution that tracks NGOs, particularly in the Middle East.

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