The dispute between the Orbán-government and Norway Grants have entered another level when a search was conducted in the office of the Hungarian NGO – Ökotárs – that has handled the distribution of funding for the Hungarian applicants. While this is sure to escalate the level of conflict, it also leaves no doubt that this has become a matter of pure politics. The case creates bilateral, and in many ways international dispute for Hungary, over an issue, which causes more loss of face than it brings in domestic popularity, were we to suppose that this is just another example of the government stepping up as „protector of the national interest” in order to keep up internal political support before the municipal elections. Even if this was the original intention, the events have spiraled out of the government’s control and visibly hurt their interests. Since the government can no longer back down without major humiliation, therefore they surmise that the best defense is offense.

There is more to this story however than calculating political cost or debating whether this is yet another step in the direction of creating an authoritarian regime or illiberal democracy. The events shed light on just how vulnerable the non governmental organizations in Hungary are, which has a great deal to do with the state of Hungarian democracy.

In order to understand how such a conflict between state and NGO’s could arise, we have to know that in effect Hungary does not have longstanding traditions of organizations serving the public good. The current system of NGO’s is a product of the West, imported after the 1989 change of regime as an indispensable element of a liberal democracy. The problem is that the most important leg of the financial support of NGO’s – philanthropy – was missing in Hungary. What is natural in more affluent Western countries to donate time, money or in kind to an organization was uncommon in the newfound democracy intent on leaving all forms of „communism” behind. This tradition has not evolved to this day. The question is, why not?

Philanthropy is a product of capitalism. Whether we see it as charity or as an alternative means of finding solutions to problems that cannot be addressed by government, it supposes private individuals with significant enough funds to spare to be able to “invest” in society. Hungary however is still paternalistic in mentality, expecting most services to come from the state. When you are dependant on the state, you rarely call it to account. This is exactly why
a country would need NGOs in all areas of life; to facilitate problem solving without being dependent on government. This is rarely recognized in Hungary.

A country that was focused on catching up in its lifestyle to the West, aided NGO’s only to the extent that for example people disposed over which NGO should receive the 1% of their taxes that could be given to charity. Therefore NGO’s are always fighting for their life and have to make compromises. Major funding is only available from grants from abroad or from the all-time governments, which in itself can cause a contradiction for many organizations. As a result, the situation of NGO’s are always politicized. Even in the case of NGO’s that do not deal with human rights, ecology or other questions which can be controversial and often related to politics. The greatest fear of a Hungarian NGO is to be „discovered“ by a party or government as their ideological support can diminish the organization’s perceived independence. It is very easy to become labeled a left or right wing NGO. Ökotárs has fallen into this trap.

It is well known that many organizations abroad go to great lengths to ensure the spread of democratic ideals around the world. However, for a long time now Hungary has disappeared from their map. Following the change of regime, with the introduction of multi-party democratic elections and all the institutions that went along with it the democracy building funds dried up and moved to conflict ridden areas elsewhere. As members of NATO and the European Union, Hungary was expected to manage on its own and not much follow up was given after the initial starting push. One cannot expect a strong and thriving NGO community to come about and survive from out of nowhere. Money and infrastructure is not enough to sustain their existence. Without popular support it is all too easy to fade away.

While the current Prime Minister benefited from the incoming foreign attention to the country at the time change of regime – he went to Oxford to be infused with the spirit of democracy with the help of George Soros funded NGO – when his government policies cause international attention to focus once again on Hungary and question whether foreign aid is needed to protect the ideals fought for by young Orbán, it is no surprise that such a conflict arises. When the Orbán-government is concerned over international „intervention“ in its matters, it has to realize that its leader is a “product“ of exactly such an intervention and the West is not about to let him forget it.
Ironically in the long run, the current conflict will actually end up strengthening NGO’s in Hungary. By attacking the independent organizations, the government actually contributed to gathering domestic and foreign support – both moral and financial – for these groups, eventually contributing to the evolution of civil awareness that is so greatly need in Hungary.