

European politicians try (and fail) to manipulate Israeli legislation

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Gerald M. Steinberg

In the midst of Israel's intense debate on legislation in response to massive European government funding for political NGOs (non-governmental organizations), some European politicians decided to join the fray. Their letters, publicized in the media or via the Internet by the writers themselves, sought to halt the debate – a point not lost on many Israelis, who view European NGO funding as blatant meddling in domestic affairs.

These letters contained a number of inaccuracies that misrepresented the legislation and repeated the slogans of their Israeli NGO clients. These actions were another sign that for many European officials, Israeli sovereignty and democracy are limited, and subject to external pressure and manipulation.

MEP Julie Ward (S&D, UK) was the driving force behind the most publicized letter, circulating the text and asking her colleagues to join in urging Israel to reject the legislation. Out of 751 MEPs, she gathered only 50 signatures, many from politicians with a proven record of anti-Israel lobbying, including Ward herself.

In contrast to the letter's faux expressions of concern for the "Israeli interest" and fear of "damaging Israeli's standing in the world," Ward has a long record of attacking the Jewish state. She is a vocal proponent of BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions), and was an initiator of a 2014 petition calling on the EU to suspend trade agreements with Israel. That petition notes that BDS "takes its inspiration from the successful boycott campaign" against "the South African apartheid regime," promoting the vile and false comparison between Israel and apartheid. Outrageously the petition claims "Israel would not be able to carry out its brutal mass killings and maintain its repressive regime without the support by the EU and the United States." In addition, joining a 2015 open letter, Ward called on EU officials to exclude an Israeli hi-tech firm from the Horizon 2020 R&D framework.

The letter repeated claims made by the pro-BDS "Stop the Wall" group.

Many of the 50 MEPs who signed Ward's letter on NGO funding participated in the earlier petitions and campaigns to demonize and isolate Israel. For example, MEP Barbara Spinelli (GUE, Italy) has made many hostile statements on Israel and Jews, saying "Israel constitutes a scandal." And MEP Patrick Le Hyaric (GUE, France), who openly supports and promotes BDS efforts.

Le Hyaric called on Europeans to “exert real pressure on Israel by developing an economic boycott” in a piece he penned for Le Monde.

In addition to Ward’s missive, another letter – addressed to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – was leaked to Haaretz, signed by four German MEPs, including Alexander Graf Lambsdorf (ALDE) and Arne Lietz (S&D). Although seemingly reflecting good-faith concerns (in contrast to Ward) that the foreign NGO funding law would “infringe on the freedom of expression in Israel and in turn harm relations,” evidence suggests that these MEPs were not well informed, and their language was at least influenced by the Israeli NGO lobby.

For instance, the MEPs repeated the standard and baseless concern that the minor transparency additions would somehow “complicate, if not obstruct, the work of various NGOs.”

These European letters, and a third – also from German politicians, including Volker Beck (Greens) – pointedly omit any mention of the nature and scale of the NGOs targeting Israel, which has no parallel elsewhere.

Tens of millions of euros are provided annually and without independent oversight to fringe NGOs, all on one side of the political spectrum. Many of these groups work primarily to promote BDS and demonization against Israel around the world. To similarly influence American politics and society, Europe would need to channel at least one billion dollars to groups focusing on issues such as gun control, abortion or immigration. Obviously, Europe would not do this, but in the case of Israel, such blatant intervention, including the efforts to prevent legislation, is standard behavior.

Another question repeated by the European politicians is why “privately funded NGOs with substantial impact on Israeli politics... are excluded” from the proposed law. Indeed, this is a serious question, and must be addressed. At the same time, there are also important differences that justify separate consideration of the different funding sources. States are sovereign entities and each democratic society must determine its own course, and not be the subject of external manipulation.

For all of these reasons, the attempts by the European politicians to sway the Israeli debate on these important issues were not only ignored; they were rejected, even by opponents of the NGO legislation. If European officials are truly bothered by the proposed NGO funding transparency law, they should take action which would make it unnecessary. For example, negotiation of NGO funding guidelines with their Israeli counterparts could be a viable alternative.