



Appeal to the EU: Demand Concrete Action to Improve the Situation of Russian Civil Society

Brussels/Moscow, 15 April 2008. On the eve of the new round of EU-Russia consultations on human rights, which will take place in Slovenia on 17 April 2008, the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG), the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) **call on the EU** to use this event as an opportunity **to demand concrete measures by Russian authorities to improve the situation of Russian civil society.**

During the period in office of outgoing President Vladimir Putin, civil society has come under growing attack in Russia, and the work of independent groups has been curtailed in the name of protecting national security and preventing foreign “interference” in Russian politics. Such rhetoric was used to justify the adoption in 2006 of the so-called NGO law, which introduced significant changes to existing legislation on NGOs. Since its entry into force in April 2006, this law has become a major tool of repression against civil society.

The vaguely and ambiguously worded law, which grants authorities broad powers to oversee and control NGOs, has **proven to be open to arbitrary and selective implementation and has been used to impede, restrict and punish legitimate civil society activities.** Under the law, NGOs have been refused registration as legal entities because of spurious objections to the wording of their charters;¹ they have had to invest considerable time and money to comply with new, onerous reporting requirements, which has drained resources from their regular work, such as human rights or charity projects; they have been subject to intrusive and lengthy inspections of their activities and internal dealings, which have crippled their operation for up to several months; and they have been warned or deprived of their legal status because of alleged failures to submit required information to authorities (even in cases when there has been evidence to show that they have filed required documents on time). While the law may not have resulted in any mass closure of NGOs to date, it has seriously constrained the day-to-day work of NGOs and contributed to increasing harassment of groups critical of official policies.

In view of these developments, we urge the EU to use the upcoming human rights consultations as an opportunity not only to raise concern about the problems facing Russian civil society, but also **to insist that the Russian authorities take specific steps to address these problems, in particular by promptly initiating a review of the NGO law.** This review should be aimed at ensuring that the provisions of the law are consistent with international human rights standards and should, among others, serve to:

- *Limit the grounds for denying registration to NGOs so as not to leave any discretionary powers to registration authorities to interpret these grounds;*
- *Simplify reporting requirements for NGOs to ensure that necessary documentation can be compiled with reasonable efforts and costs, and that reviews of reports are carried out in a transparent and well-regulated manner;*
- *Bring to a minimum the powers of authorities to supervise the work of NGOs so as to exclude any interference in strictly internal matters of NGOs and to prevent that the work of NGOs is impeded without weighty grounds;*

- *Limit the powers of authorities to take punitive action against NGOs so as to eliminate the risk of arbitrary and subjective decisions and to ensure that any sanctions are proportionate to the violations of which NGOs are found guilty.*

For more information: please see the recent MHG-HRWF report *Control and Punishment: Human Rights Implications of Russian Legislation on NGOs*, which is available at the websites of HRWF (<http://www.hrwf.net>) and the MHG (<http://www.mhg.ru>), and/or contact:

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¹ For example, one organization in St. Petersburg was denied registration because its charter allegedly did not explain how it intended to realize its mission of “providing social support,” while a well-known foreign NGO was told that “assisting law enforcement authorities” is not an acceptable objective. A third group, which promotes the rights of homosexuals in the Tyumen region, was refused registration because its advocacy work was considered to undermine “spiritual and cultural values” and the “territorial integrity” and “national security” of Russia.