

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

Russian Federation: New legislative and administrative moves to restrict and criminalise human rights defenders

Paris-Geneva, July 17, 2015. In the past months, new laws were adopted by legislative bodies to further restrict the space of civil society, including human rights work conducted in the country. The Observatory expresses its utmost concerns over these new developments, in particular the drawing up of a “patriotic stop list” by the Parliament, the labelling of the Committee Against Torture (CAT) as “foreign agent” and the introduction of two new pieces of legislation providing police and security forces with new means to suppress and repress social dissent.

On July 8, 2015, the Upper Chamber of the Russian Parliament (Federal Council) requested the Prosecutor General and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to check the compliance of 12 foreign non-profit organisations with the new law on “undesirable foreign organisations”. The law bans the activities of foreign NGOs that “threaten the constitutional order, security of the State or its defence capacity” and criminalizes those who work for them. The Federal Council's list includes several American organisations such as the Open Society Foundation (OSF), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Freedom House, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), two NGOs uniting Ukrainian diaspora around the world, and an informal group monitoring human rights in Crimea. The inclusion of the latter unregistered group with no organisational structure or staff demonstrates the clumsiness of the Russian decision makers in their efforts to silence all critical voices.

On the same day, the Regional Court of Nijegorod (Nijegorodskaya oblast) upheld the previous city court decision to include the Committee Against Torture (CAT), OMCT member organisation, into the list of 'foreign agents'. The law aims at further stigmatizing civil society organisations, forces NGOs to register as 'foreign agents' if they receive foreign funding and engage in so called “political activity aiming to change state legislation”. The organisation defended itself in vain.

“The aim of the authorities is to form a mass of obedient citizens isolated from the rest of the world, deprived of independent sources of information and without a possibility to stand up for their rights”, declared OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock.

In addition, a legislative amendment proposed on July 3, 2015, by members of the Federal Council would render any form of civil society protest even riskier than before. If passed, the amendment to the law “on the Federal Security Bureau” (FSB - former KGB) will allow agents to use lethal weapons “to prevent mass disorder”, “to deliver to police stations persons who committed an administrative offence” and “to arrest any person” who undermines the ability of security officers to perform their duties.

“These recent events attest of a particularly gloomy picture for human rights defenders. New legislative initiatives might further restrict freedom of assembly and any form of social dissent”, said FIDH President Karim Lahidji.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by FIDH and OMCT. The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy to situations of repression against human rights defenders.

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