

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

Russian Federation: The Observatory deplores the adoption of the bill on “undesirable foreign organisations”

Paris-Geneva, May 20, 2015. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint FIDH and OMCT programme, is deeply alarmed by the adoption of the bill on “undesirable foreign and international organisations” in third reading of the Russian Parliament on May 19, 2015. The bill criminalizes work for foreign non-profit organisations that “threaten the constitutional order, security of the State or its defence capacity”.*

Although the bill was significantly amended before the second reading, the Observatory deplores that it remains a tool to harass non-profit entities with foreign origin and Russian nationals cooperating with them, hereby further isolating Russia and igniting xenophobia and nationalism. The law lacks clear definition of what “threatening the constitutional order, security and defence capacity” means. Moreover, it entitles the Prosecutor General with powers exceeding his authority, since he and his deputies are assigned to compile a list of undesirable organisations in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such a unilateral procedure is not only political in nature but it does not allow the organizations listed as undesirable the right of appeal nor establishes any independent judicial review of the decision.

Needless to say that one of the main goals of the bill is to undermine the cooperation of Russian human rights defenders and civil society activists with foreign NGOs that make their voices heard inside and outside the country. They now face a fine up to 900 euros for working for an “undesirable organisation”. The repeated violation of the law would lead to the criminal responsibility of the NGO's directors and is punished by up to six years of deprivation of liberty.

If labelled as “undesirable”, the activity of such an organisation will be banned on the territory of Russia. Banks and other financial institutions are prohibited from authorizing any financial operation originating from or destined to such an organisation.

The Observatory reminds that this bill follows and complements the restrictive legislative arsenal Russia adopted in the course of the last years to silence all forms of criticism against the regime in contradiction with international human rights standards. Many local experts and lawyers as well as the Council on Human Rights, an institution under the President of the Russian Federation have raised their criticism about the content of this new piece of legislation.

The work of human rights defenders in Russia has already been significantly restricted after the closing down of numerous foreign and local organisations that used to promote freedom of expression, assembly and association as well as civic activism. Along with the so-called “foreign agents” law obliging NGOs to register as such if they engage in “political activity” and receive foreign funding and the laws restricting the registration and funding of NGOs, the bill on “undesirable organisations” is the last in Russia's legislative arsenal used to get rid of any critical voices. The Observatory strongly opposes the adoption of this bill and calls on the international community to condemn its enactment.

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