

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

RUSSIAN FEDERATION: Human rights defender Oleg Orlov acquitted!

Paris-Geneva, June 15, 2011. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), welcomes the acquittal of Mr. Oleg Orlov, Chairman of the Board of the Human Rights Centre "Memorial".*

After a period of almost two years of judicial harassment before both civil and penal jurisdictions, the Khamovniki District Court in Moscow acquitted Mr. **Oleg Orlov** on June 14, 2011, stating that his allegations on Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's responsibility in the assassination on July 15, 2009 of Ms. **Natalia Estemirova**, Head of Memorial office in Grozny, were "hypothetical" and did not constitute slander.

On August 13, 2009, Mr. Kadyrov had initiated a criminal lawsuit against Mr. Orlov for defamation after the publication of a statement by Mr. Orlov on July 15, 2009 in which he indicated he believed the Chechen President was responsible for the murder of Ms. Natalia Estemirova.

Mr. Oleg Orlov had been condemned by the Moscow Civil Court to pay 20,000 rubles (approximately 460 Euros) in damages to Mr. Kadyrov. But at the penal level, proceedings were still ongoing against him since October 20, 2009.

Since 2009, the Observatory has been closely monitoring the hearings before both the civil and criminal jurisdictions through the dispatch of international missions of trial observation, and a report on the proceedings before civil courts was published in December 2009¹.

"I personally attended the first hearing of this judicial saga on September 25, 2009. We welcome the verdict of the court, which recognises the right of human rights defenders to freedom of expression, in a context where they continue to face threats in Chechnya and, more generally, in the Russian Federation. The decision is also in line with a statement of OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Milklos Haraszti, who had pointed out in 2009 that "statements like Orlov's are perfectly legitimate in a democracy and should be subject neither to civil-law nor to criminal-law sanctioning", FIDH President Souhayr Belhassen said today.

"While we take note with appreciation of this positive decision, one shall not forget that the situation of human rights defenders in the Russian Federation remains of high concern, and we accordingly call upon the Russian authorities to guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their activities without hindrances, in conformity with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders as well as international and regional human rights instruments ratified by the Russian Federation", concluded OMCT Secretary General Eric Sottas.

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¹ The report is available in English and French on the following web links:

<http://www.fidh.org/Publication-of-a-judicial-observation-report-on/>

http://www.omct.org/pdf/Observatory/2009/Russia_Judicial_observation_mission_dec09_ENG.pdf