

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Russian Federation: Contemporary art - an issue of freedom of expression, not extremism.**

Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to respect the right to freedom of expression and to stop the criminal prosecution of Yurii Samodurov and Andrei Yerofeev, two organizers of an exhibition of contemporary art, called "Forbidden Art 2006", which took place in the Sakharov Museum in Moscow from 7 – 31 March 2007.

On 15 May 2008, the Taganskii District Prosecutor charged Yurii Samodurov, director of the Sakharov Centre in Moscow, with Article 282. 2 of the Russian Criminal Code (Inciting hatred or enmity, denigration of human dignity with the use of one's official position). Yurii Samodurov had been previously found guilty of inciting hatred or enmity and sentenced to a conditional prison sentence in connection with another exhibition. Amnesty International considered him at that time a possible prisoner of conscience and campaigned for the protection of his right to freedom of expression.

On 22 May Andrei Yerofeev, head of the department for contemporary art at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and curator of the exhibition "Forbidden Art 2006", was charged with the same crime as Yurii Samodurov. If found guilty of such a violation of the law, both men may face imprisonment.

Both men are accused of having organized an exhibition, which – according to the findings of the Taganskii district prosecutor – "is clearly directed towards expressing in a demonstrative and visible way a degrading and insulting attitude towards the Christian religion in general and especially towards the Orthodox faith."

The exhibition showed a number of art objects (photos, paintings, collages and others) which had been previously refused inclusion in some exhibitions. (However, several of the art objects, which include work by some of Russia's most well-known contemporary artists, such as Ilya Kabakov, Aleksandr Kosolapov, the group *Blue Noses*, Aleksandr Savko, Mikhail Roginskii among others, have already been on show in other exhibitions in the Russian Federation and are shown at major exhibitions of contemporary art worldwide. The objects range from those which have been produced during Soviet times to objects from the 21st century. Several of them use religious motifs such as icons or paintings depicting religious scenes, others use non-normative language.

The Taganskii district prosecutor's office ordered several expert opinions on the art objects, including from philological and psychological experts. An expert on iconography found that "the negative impulses coming from the objects may provoke aggression, or at least lack of respect towards [the religious objects] used in the exhibition or against any other object used in religious cults". The expert, without further explaining her accusation, draws the conclusion that such art objects cynically evoke incite people to burn the houses of religious leaders, or to kill them as well as their children.

Amnesty International considers that the art objects do not incite hatred. While some viewers may be offended by the art objects this should not lead to a criminal persecution of those who

have organized the exhibition. International human rights law does not permit, still less require, freedom of expression to be restricted or prohibited simply on the grounds that some people find it offensive.

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