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Russian NGO awarded Sakharov human rights prize

Human rights organizations in Russia joined forces today to pay tribute today to Memorial, an international civil rights society that operates in a number of post-Soviet states, as they received the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of thought in the European Parliament. Amnesty International, Civil Rights Defenders, FIDH, Human Rights Watch came together to pay tribute to the important work of Memorial and to remember the valued work of Natalia Estimerova.

Memorial, represented by Oleg Orlov and Sergei Kovalev as well as Ludmila Alekseeva of the Moscow Helsinki Federation, have been presented with the Sakharov Prize in recognition of the courageous work of human rights defenders in Memorial. One of its leading members, Natalia Estimerova, was murdered in the Chechen Republic on 15 July 2009.

“Five months ago we in the human rights community in Russia and beyond lost a friend and colleague, Natalia Estemirova, Memorial's lead researcher in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation,” said Halya Gowan, Director, Europe and Central Asia Programme. “We are delighted to see Memorial recognized for their human rights work but are extremely saddened that Natalia is no longer alive to receive this honour.”

Memorial suspended its work in the Chechen Republic after the murder of Natalia Estimerova. Since that time, the authorities in Chechnya have continued to intimidate and persecute human rights defenders and those who seek justice for abuses. Several have been forced to leave the country due to threats to their lives.

The suspension of Memorial's work means that victims of human rights violations in the Republic have nowhere to turn.

“The vacuum left by the closure of Memorial is significant and painful,” said Halya Gowan.

In December, more than 80 Russian human rights organizations sent a letter to Memorial urging them to return to work in Chechnya. They pledged to support Memorial in whatever way they could. Several of these organizations have joined together to form a Monitoring Mission in Chechnya and recently began to work in the Chechen Republic.

In his Nobel lecture, Andrei Sakharov had said “we must today fight for every individual person separately against injustice and the violation of human rights. Much of our future depends on this.”

Amnesty International, Civil Rights Defenders, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Human Rights Watch consider it our common responsibility to monitor and report on the human rights situation in Chechnya. These international NGOs have offered to work jointly with Russian and other international

human rights organizations to monitor the situation in Chechnya.

“We will continue our work to end human rights violations in the republic and to hold perpetrators accountable. People in Chechnya must not be left without access to justice,” said Halya Gowan.