

AI Index: PRE 01/063/2008
26 February 2008

Russian Federation: Freedom of expression is the oxygen of civil society

The space for human rights activists, independent organizations and media to operate and to express critical views in the Russian Federation has been gradually and progressively curtailed in recent years, Amnesty International said today.

In its report, [*Freedom limited. The right to freedom of expression in the Russian Federation*](#), Amnesty International examines the combined effect of arbitrary interpretation of vague legislation and increasing harassment on the freedom of people in the Russian Federation to express their opinions and to stand up for their rights.

"The rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association are a cornerstone for a functioning civil society. The Russian authorities are curtailing these rights as part of their strategy to counter so-called western influence. In doing so, they fail their national and international obligations to guarantee these rights for all," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

In the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections, the clampdown on freedoms of assembly and expression has been particularly visible. The authorities violently dispersed some opposition demonstrations, while pro-government events went ahead without interference. Human rights activists and journalists who monitored demonstrations and public meetings were harassed by law enforcement bodies.

In a country where TV and many other media outlets are controlled by the state, there is less and less space for independent reporting. Those journalists who attempt to report independently are obstructed from conducting their professional work and they may face intimidation and possibly prosecution. For example, the radio station Ekho Moskvy was repeatedly asked to provide transcripts of their programmes to the prosecutor's office in relation to preliminary investigations into allegations that they had aired extremists' views.

Amnesty International is also deeply concerned that the investigation into the murder of human rights journalist Anna Politkovskaya appears to be making no progress in determining who ordered the killing.

"Freedom of expression is first and foremost the freedom to express alternative viewpoints. The continuing attack on this right, including by restrictions to the rights to freedom of assembly and association, has a stifling effect on the whole society," Nicola Duckworth said.

"Without the right to freedom of expression, other basic human rights may be violated more easily. Silence is the best breeding ground for impunity -- a powerful tool to undermine the rule of law."

The 2006 law on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with its burdensome reporting requirements,

is one of the legal instruments being used to target some organizations seen as a threat to state authority. Today, many NGOs find themselves entangled in bureaucratic procedures set by the authorities, which takes away valuable time from their real work without adding to the fulfilment of the NGO law's stated aims, to make them more accountable to society. Other legal instruments include the 2002 law to combat extremist activities, the tax law and the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

As a result, Golos (Voice), an NGO working to promote fair elections and conducting training for election observers, is involved in a legal battle to prevent the closure of its branch in Samara, while Rainbow House, an NGO of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights activists, was denied registration. Before that, the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, which collected and distributed information about the human rights situation in Chechnya and other parts of the Russian Federation, was closed down.

“With their expertise and outreach to different parts of society, non-governmental organizations fulfil an important role and should be given space to work and contribute to addressing issues relevant to the whole society,” Nicola Duckworth said.

Amnesty International urges the Russian authorities to uphold the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association and to:

- address the deficiencies in the NGO law and its implementing regulations;
- refrain from using laws such as the law to combat extremist activities to clamp down on civil society organizations and independent media;
- instruct law enforcement bodies on policing public meetings in line with the right to freedom of assembly;
- ensure journalists can conduct their professional work without arbitrary interference from law enforcement officials;
- investigate fully, promptly and impartially any reported human rights abuses against civil society activists, journalists and members of the political opposition and bring to justice anyone suspected of involvement in such violations in trials which meet international standards of fair trial.

Note to editors:

The scope of the report Freedom limited. The right to freedom of expression in the Russian Federation does not include the protection of the right to freedom of expression in the North Caucasus. Amnesty International's concerns in this region were addressed in a November 2007 report entitled [Russian Federation: Human rights defenders at risk in the North Caucasus.](#)