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Russian Federation: Draft law -- the latest in clampdown on civil society

Amnesty International today expressed serious concern that a draft law on civil society organizations, due to receive its first reading in the Duma (parliament) on 23 November, presented a serious attack on freedom of association in the Russian Federation.

The draft law entitled "On Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation" would require non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia to reregister under stricter rules or face closure. The proposals also would require informal groups without legal status to declare their existence to the authorities or risk being branded illegal. In addition the amendments provide for the authorities to request financial and other documents at any time from non-commercial organizations, and to send representatives to attend any event organized by the organization.

"If this bill becomes law, it is likely that it would not only seriously hamper the activities of domestic human rights organisations but also lead to the closure of foreign NGOs. As such it would have a chilling effect on the rights to freedom of association and expression in Russia ", said Nicola Duckworth, Director of the Europe and Central Asia Programme. "It is unfortunately all too easy to imagine how the increased powers of scrutiny could be abused."

Foreign citizens and non permanent residents in Russia would be severely restricted in establishing public associations and non-commercial organizations and in becoming members or participants in such bodies, and representative offices of foreign non-commercial organizations would be required to re-register with a different legal status, potentially impacting on funding arrangements.

Under the draft law, government officials in charge of registration would be authorized to effectively rule whether the actions of an organization's founders constitute "extremist activities" or "would help to legalize illegal assets".

"By allowing government officials to deny registration to NGO's according to such vague criteria, there is a grave risk that decisions on which organisations are allowed or banned will be politically motivated," said Nicola Duckworth.

Background

Under President Vladimir Putin the climate of hostility towards non-governmental organizations has been growing, spurred on by statements by President Putin questioning the organizations' real motivation. Amnesty International has reported on a worrying trend of Russian authorities targeting human rights

defenders, activists and independent journalists working on human rights issues, in particular on Chechnya, and in some cases subjecting them to extreme levels of harassment and “disappearance”. For example, Amnesty International has expressed its concern at an apparent campaign of harassment and prosecution aimed at the NGO Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, apparently aimed at closing the organization down. As well as an unfounded criminal prosecution against executive director Stanislav Dmitrievskii, the organization is simultaneously undergoing legal action by the tax authorities and the registration department of the Ministry of Justice, which can be described as “administrative harassment”.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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