

## EVALUATION REPORT

### Amnesty International Campaign

#### Freedom of Expression, Assembly and Association in Russia, 2012-2014

##### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

###### Methodology

Amnesty International (AI) requested an external and independent evaluation to assess AI's contribution to change and lessons learnt during the Freedom of Expression, Assembly and Association Campaign in Russia in 2012-14 (FoE Campaign). More broadly, the learning from the campaign is expected to inform Amnesty's future strategies related to human rights work in Russia and in the wider region.

Case study method lies at the core of this evaluation. It combined in-house and field studies and relied mainly on qualitative methods. We used several methods of data collection:

- Desk research, including media and internal documentation review;
- Semi-structured in-depth interviews with four groups of stakeholders;
- Three focus groups;
- Field observation.

Evaluators aimed not only to collect sufficient and accurate data, but also to provide a good framework for the AI staff's reflection and better building-in of evaluation into AI core activities.

This evaluation was carried out as part of the requirement of the Norwegian Telethon (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, NRK) which funded this work. The study was conducted by external expert Anna Sevortian between September 2014 and January 2015. Sociologist Kirill Burdey provided analysis of the focus groups.

###### Context

Russia's human rights record has been deteriorating for several years, reaching a new low in 2012 with a crackdown on civic activism and a stream of repressive legislation limiting fundamental freedoms. The Sochi Winter Olympic Games in February 2014 were seen as a chance to draw the world's attention to the situation and human rights obligations of Russia.

Later in 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine dramatically changed the human rights agenda in the region, and created new challenges and demands for Amnesty International's team working on Russia and the AI movement as a whole.

The activation of the state propaganda in 2014 also significantly altered the environment for AI in Russia. Reaching out to the broad Russian audience for independent NGOs became extremely challenging.

Independent opinion polls as well as the focus groups' results in this study show that the majority of Russians today are indifferent to politics and focused mostly on their personal lives. Corruption was the only issue that the participants named among Russia's key problems they care about, when asked about human rights.

It is a fairly popular opinion in Russia that "freedom of expression could be sacrificed" in a crisis situation. Relevance of such terms as freedom of expression, assembly, association is currently low. Besides, overall NGOs are poorly known to the general public, which further narrows potential audience of human rights

campaigns. Over the timespan of the FoE campaign the environment for AI operation has worsened. Under these circumstances, most of the AI Russia work is reactive and difficult to plan.

### **Campaign overview**

Amnesty International's key objective was to generate international solidarity with rights-holders and human rights activists in Russia. AI was running the FoE campaign in Russia between 2012 and 2014. When discussing highs and lows of the campaign during this evaluation, the respondents identified its four highlights. These are Amnesty's work on the Pussy Riot case, Sochi Olympics, Bolotnaya case and the 2014 Week of Action.

The Week of Action in October 2014 was a peak performance moment of Moscow-based AI activists. Many respondents praised the creativity of street actions ideas. Altogether, ["Flowers for Anna Politkovskaya"](#) street action in Moscow on 7 October 2014 resonated best both with the focus groups' participants and the interviewees.

### **Key findings**

#### ***Campaign outcomes***

- The chosen framework of freedom of expression, assembly and association for the 2012-14 Russia campaign is inclusive, flexible and allows further development in AI's work. So far its relevance increases, with a few problematic areas gaining prominence in Russia: internet and media freedom, hate speech, hate crimes, religious freedom. AI might consider engaging on these in the future.
- Largely, the major outcome of the Freedom of Expression campaign in Russia is a greater cooperation and coordination of Amnesty International with the Russian human rights community. In a time of intimidation and pressure on this community, it is a valuable contribution.
- Creative campaigning and broad international profile is what makes Amnesty International unique for its Russian audience. During the FoE campaign, AI's campaigning in Russia became more expertly organised. Building up a group of volunteers to support campaigning in Russia is one of the achievements.
- By the end of the campaign, Amnesty International enjoyed a more active and creative image within its local constituency. However, this closest circle is rather small (mostly human rights, civil society groups).
- Predictably, outside of the "solidarity agenda" the overall impact of the AI work on Russia in terms of driving change in the human rights condition is low, visible only on the margins – and best of all in AI's work on individual cases and urgent appeals.
- Focus groups showed that the wider audience barely knows of AI activities on Russia, which under the circumstances is not surprising. Though participants easily "deciphered" ideas and messages of the AI Russia street actions, their emotional reactions varied, including negativity or distrust, which is a reflection of their attitude to human rights work more generally.
- The campaign – and lately the 2014 Week of Action in Russia as its climax – reached the international community and regained its awareness of the human rights situation in Russia. It did so more for the international than for the Russian audience.

### ***Solidarity messaging***

- There is a growing willingness and recognition among the AI family to continue working on and with the civil society leaders in Russia. There is also an ambition to reach out to mainstream public opinion.
- Solidarity with the Russian civil society is an important and timely message to send. A non-patronising approach towards the Russian civil activists was appreciated by many respondents inside and outside of the Russian human rights community.
- However, for any audience outside of existing supporters and Russia expert circles, the solidarity message needs to be simplified and adapted. AI Sections particularly stressed the need for simplification and better follow-up on cases and Russia material.
- Since a lot of AI Russia activity is organically moving online, the visual side of campaigns grows more important. Visual merits should be considered when picking up stories and materials.

### ***Internal processes***

- Comments on internal processes were most numerous in terms of AI staff's feedback received during this evaluation. Internal communications came up as a field in which Amnesty can see improvement – both at the AI Moscow office, and the AI team working on Russia as a whole.
- Staffing is deeply problematic issue for those involved in the AI Russia work. The workload for the staff members both in London and Moscow has been very high during the FoE campaign, and shows no tendency to decrease. Adding extra capacity in human resources – administrative or substantive - would be beneficial.
- Bi-lateral visits between the Moscow office and individual sections are in demand – they help sections to understand the situation in Russia and better engage local constituencies, better send a solidarity message across.

### ***Contributing to Change***

- Focus groups' results provided enough substance for validating the "change on the margins" concept, which was formulated for restrictive environments and based on AI theory of change. It states that setting up the connection between the current state of freedom of expression, assembly, association and problems relevant to people will help to bring better understanding of the rights' values, to mobilise and organise for future change.
- According to the interviewees, the role of AI in Russia today is in (a) uncovering human rights violations and shouting about the "wrongs"; (b) reframing of the public discourse using the language of universal values; (c) highlighting cases that reflect systemic patterns/deficiencies and generating pressure on the authorities, (d) generating pressure on international actors to urge them to act – when relevant.

### ***Recommendations***

#### ***AI Work in Russia***

- It is crucial to continue the AI street actions in Russia, without compromising the quality of creative content; to build in a stronger membership subscription element and keep up the volunteer engagement.

- Practice of partnerships with civil society groups and relevant media outlets shall be a strong/mandatory element within the next cycle of the Russia FoE campaign.
- AI's approach to speaking about specific problems (cases) should be simple, respectful and non-didactic, relevant to everyday experiences of Russians. It should make a clear connection between problems and the lack of freedom of expression.
- AI should sufficiently balance Russian cases with international cases in its campaigning in Russia, representing Amnesty's work on the issue of freedom of expression worldwide – especially in the US and Europe.
- Prioritise "light"/easily re-publishable formats for media work, ensure the Moscow office spokespersons' outreach to the local audiences is in their mother tongue.
- AI should explore existing practices of engagement via social media and start targeting new groups of users (as medium-size city dwellers, Russian-speaking diaspora, etc.).

#### *AI work on Russia*

- Freedom of expression theme has potential for becoming a global AI campaign, given the current global challenges of the security of personal data, press and freedom limitations, etc.
- Building on the experience of the Week of Action and several AI sections' experiences, AI might consider launching an Amnesty Day of Action on Russia (October 7 was suggested).
- AI should continue raising issues of specific cases and systemic human rights violations both via international human rights instruments and big international events with significant Russia presence (as the Olympic Games, etc.), ensuring early preparations for such engagements.
- It is equally important to regularly engage with relevant Russian officials on human rights subjects.

#### *AI Management*

- Keep synchronising the events with the AI "calendar" (media, campaigning, advocacy cycles); optimise timeliness of internal follow-up information and the approval process.
- Within AI, engage potential stakeholders at campaign planning as early as possible – ideally at the brainstorming stage – and be consistent about the primary objective of a campaign, whether it is generating visibility, expressing solidarity, or building capacity.
- Skill and experience share between comparable units and positions (especially within neighbouring regions, or those with a shared past – as post-Soviet states), should be promoted.
- Intensified direct communication within the AI team working on Russia would be beneficial to address the internal communication issues.
- Any available formats of getting extra capacity for the AI Moscow office (including consultancies, internships, joint projects with the AI sections, etc.) should be utilised.