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Moscow mayor urged to protect freedom of assembly

Amnesty International is calling on the new mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, to protect the right to peaceful assembly after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the city's recent banning of Pride marches was discriminatory.

The Court found on Thursday that Russia had violated the right to peaceful assembly and the prohibition of discrimination by preventing lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender activists from holding marches in Moscow from 2006 to 2008.

“The decision by the European Court of Human Rights confirms the fact that the right to peaceful assembly has been violated in Moscow in recent years. It serves as an important reminder that this right must be enjoyed by all persons in Moscow, without discrimination on grounds such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other views,” said John Dalhuisen, Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Programme.

The Court stressed that the possibility of public disturbances and violence against marchers, as cited by the Moscow authorities, was not sufficient to justify the ban.

“It is the authorities’ duty to make sure that participants in gay pride marches, as well as those who wish to express their disagreement with such events, can demonstrate peacefully and lawfully and not be subjected to physical violence by their opponents,” John Dalhuisen said.

“The authorities must not be intimidated by blatantly unlawful calls for violence by the event’s opponents as grounds to ban them or to use such calls as an excuse for the ban.”

Amnesty International's call comes ahead of a planned demonstration in Moscow on 31 October in support of Article 31 of the Russian Constitution, which guarantees the right to peaceful assembly.

Over the last 18 months, pro-freedom of expression demonstrators have been refused permission to assemble in Triumphalnaya Square, in the centre of Moscow, on at least ten occasions. Peaceful gatherings on Triumphalnaya Square have been declared “unauthorised” by Moscow authorities and dispersed by police.

“We are calling on the Moscow authorities to ensure that their decision on the planned Article 31 demonstration is fully in line with national law and respect the freedom of assembly as guaranteed by the European Court of Human Rights,” said John Dalhuisen.