



RUSSIA

Natalia Estemirova

Unforgotten in her commitment for human rights

Natalia Estemirova, a history teacher and journalist, joined the Human Rights Centre Memorial in 2000. She researched information on some of the most serious human rights violations committed during the second Chechen conflict.

For her admirable and uncompromising defence of victims of human rights abuses she faced harsh criticism from the authorities in Chechnya.

In February 2008 she became the head of the newly founded Human Rights Council of Grozny, but only a month later, on 31 March 2008 she was excluded from the Council after she had spoken out against the government policy which obliged women to wear headscarves in public buildings, including schools and universities.

After a meeting she had with Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov about this issue, she told Amnesty International that he said he was prepared to kill those he considered to be enemies. Natalia Estemirova had reason to take this as a threat against her and left Russia for a couple of months for her own safety.

On 8 July 2009, Memorial published information about the abduction of Zelimkhan Khadzhev and Apti Zainalov, who had been stopped, reportedly by members of a law enforcement unit, when travelling together in a car in Grozny on 28 June 2009. Due to the efforts of Natalia Estemirova it was possible to establish the name of at least one of the suspected perpetrators of this enforced disappearance. Reportedly, Zelimkhan Khadzhev was released several weeks later but was not questioned about his abductors.

On 9 July 2009, Memorial published information gathered by Natalia Estemirova, according to which on 7 July, members of law enforcement bodies extrajudicially executed Rizvan Albekov in public in the village of Akhkinchu-Borsoi. That day, Rizvan Albekov and his son had been detained by law enforcement officials. A couple of hours later, unidentified law enforcement officials reportedly drove Rizvan Albekov to the village of Akhkinchu-Borsoi and shot him in front of several eye-witnesses from the village.¹ To date no information has been made available about investigations into the alleged extrajudicial execution of Rizvan Albekov.

After Memorial had published information on these cases, Chechen Ombudsman Nurdi Nukhazhev reportedly told the head of the Grozny office of Memorial that “the latest statements have led to serious dissatisfaction at the highest level of the Chechen Republic. It is time you change your style of work. May nothing bad happen, but you do understand that you are in real danger”.²

¹ <http://www.memo.ru/2009/07/16/nest.htm>

² <http://www.memo.ru/2009/07/16/1607092.htm>

On 15 July, at about 7.30am, Natalia Estemirova was abducted when she left the apartment building she lived in. Her body was later found in Ingushetia with gunshot wounds.

The same day, President Dmitrii Medvedev sent Aleskandr Bastrykin, Head of the Investigation Committee under the Prosecutor General to Chechnya, to initiate the criminal investigation into Natalia Estemirova's murder.

Since then, Memorial as well as Russian media reported that witnesses to the abduction had been put under pressure. According to information available to Amnesty International, not all suspects and witnesses have been questioned and some witnesses are in hiding.

The Human Rights Centre Memorial reports that the Investigation Committee has identified an armed fighter as the murderer. This man, Alkhazur Bashaev, was reportedly killed in a clash with security forces in November 2009.

Natalia Estemirova's murder followed the killings in Moscow of human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova in January 2009 and of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October 2006.

Since Natalia Estemirova was killed a year ago, her colleagues and other human rights defenders in Chechnya have continued to face threats and intimidation. On 11 August 2009, less than a month after the murder of Natalia Estemirova, Zarema Sadulaeva and her husband from the humanitarian organization Save the generation were abducted from their office in Grozny and killed by men identifying themselves as law enforcement officials.

At the same time, Chechen officials continue to publicly denounce the work of the Human Rights Centre Memorial and other independent human rights organizations.

In December 2009 a letter was published on the website of the Chechen Ombudsman for human rights, allegedly signed by 31 organizations, sharply criticizing Memorial and claiming that it had not helped people in Chechnya.

It was later established that many of the alleged signatories of the letter had not signed it and were not even aware of this document. Several human rights defenders from Chechnya told Amnesty International that subsequently they were put under pressure to sign a new letter, less hostile but still accusing the Human Rights Centre Memorial and its head Oleg Orlov of trying to split the human rights community and to have political rather than human rights oriented aims. This letter was signed by 10 people and published on the website of the Chechen Ombudsman for human rights.³

On 3 July 2010, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov gave an interview to the Chechen TV station in Grozny in which he claimed that Oleg Orlov and two staff members of the office of Memorial in Gudermes in the Chechen Republic "receive a lot of money from the West and in order to account for their work they write a lot of nasty things and rubbish on the internet and that is why they are not my opponents, they are enemies of the people, enemies of the law and enemies of the state." <http://www.memo.ru/hr/news/index.htm>

Take action and sign the petition to President Dmitrii Medvedev to protect human rights defenders in Russia and investigate effectively and impartially the murder of Natalia Estemirova:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR46/017/2010/en/630fe08b-40f3-4335-839d-34474d7b2267/eur460172010en.pdf>

³ http://chechenombudsman.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=747&Itemid=196