

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AI index: EUR 46/043/2013  
Embargoed until 0001, 3 October 2013

### **Russia: Human rights activists: Voices from the ground**

#### **NGO law – freedom of expression**

##### **Natalia Taubina, Director, Public Verdict Foundation**

Natalia Taubina is the Director of Public Verdict, a Russian organization which provides legal aid to victims of police abuses and rehabilitation to torture survivors.

On several occasions, Natalia and her organization have suffered harassment by the authorities. More recently, the Ministry of Justice has launched a case to try and shut them down, claiming they refuse to comply with a law that requires organizations receiving foreign funding to describe themselves as “foreign agents”.

“The human rights situation in Russia is not getting better. Despite recent law enforcement reforms and statements by the authorities, torture and ill treatment by police continues to be common practice,” Natalia says.

“The new NGO laws make the work of human rights organizations harder. The case raised by the Ministry of Justice against us takes away energy and time to help victims of human rights violations. It’s not easy to operate in this hostile environment. We want the Russian authorities to create an environment for NGOs can operate without fear; to respect our freedom of expression and follow their international obligations.”

##### **Grigory Melkonyants, Deputy Executive Director, Golos (Voice) Association**

Grigory Melkonyants is the Deputy Director of Golos, an organization that played a prominent role in organizing election monitoring and reporting allegations of electoral fraud in the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections.

In April this year they were fined 300,000 rubles (almost USD\$10,000) for allegedly violating the “foreign agents” law, introduced in 2012. It requires organizations receiving foreign funding and engaged in vaguely described “political activities” to register themselves as “foreign agents”. Golos was the first organization to be prosecuted under the law.

The Russian authorities accused Golos of receiving approximately USD\$10,000 in prize money after being presented the Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. Golos was prosecuted even though it instructed its bank to return the money.

The Ministry of Justice claimed that Golos’ advocacy for the adoption of a unified Electoral Code sought to “influence public opinion and decisions of government bodies”, which, in their opinion, constituted “political activity”.

“We are in the process of founding a new organization which should be able to function throughout the country based on funding from individuals and businesses. In the meantime, after exhausting all possibilities here, we are appealing to the European Court of Human Rights, with the hope that the European Court will help scrap this law,” Grigory says.

## **NGO law – freedom of association, assembly, harassment**

### **Lev Ponomaryov – Head of For Human Rights**

Lev Ponomaryov is the head of the “For Human Rights” movement, an independent organization that monitors prison conditions in Russia.

They have been subjected to unplanned inspections under President Putin’s new “foreign agents” law and have been brought to court by the authorities.

“There are four court cases against me. The hearings get postponed and rescheduled all the time. Once security forces came to my office and threw me out. We are now starting to work in a new office but we don’t know if we will be kicked out from here too. All this is [affecting] our work,” says Lev.

“Prison conditions in Russia are very poor. However, the authorities lack the political will to do anything. There is no understanding that detainees have rights too, that they have dignity. From time to time, as a reaction to some grave situations, officials state their intentions to improve conditions, but this requires a huge effort and resources and the authorities lack the political will to commit themselves.”

**Igor Kaliapin** chairman of leading human rights NGO Inter-Regional Committee Against Torture  
Igor Kaliapin is the chairman of one of Russia’s leading human rights NGOs Inter-Regional Committee Against Torture and one of the co-founders of the Joint Mobile Group – pulling together human rights defenders from across Russia who investigate serious human rights violations in Chechnya. The group was formed shortly after killing of Natalia Estemirova - a prominent human rights defender who worked in Chechnya.

In July 2012 he was threatened with criminal proceedings for allegedly disclosing confidential information relating to alleged human rights violations by law enforcement officials in Chechnya.

Igor claims he had revealed no secrets but exposed the lack of effective investigation into serious human rights violations and the lack of redress for the victims.

“Our first responsibility is to the people whose rights we are defending. We cannot do this being labelled ‘foreign agents’ and we cannot stop our work. The authorities must think twice before they apply legislation that is stifling civil society in Russia,” says Igor.

### **LGBTI Law**

Polina Andrianova, Activist with Vykhod (Coming Out)

Vykhod (“Coming Out”) is an independent Russian organization based in St Petersburg that works for the promotion and protection of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex people (LGBTI) in Russia.

LGBTI organizations such as Vykhod and the LGBTI film festival Bok o Bok (“Side by Side”), both based in St Petersburg, have been targeted by the authorities.

The organizations and their leaders were fined under the so-called “foreign agents law”. It requires any NGO that receives foreign support and engages in loosely defined “political activities” to register as “foreign agents” and mark all their public materials accordingly. The rulings on Vykhod and on its leader were quashed on appeal but official harassment continues.

“The human rights situation in Russia has been deteriorating quite rapidly in the last years, particularly after a series of laws were passed that threaten freedom of expression. Discrimination against LGBTI people in Russia has also grown rapidly, partly because of new homophobic laws but also because of hate campaigns promoted by politicians,” says Polina.

“As a human rights activist in Russia, you work under constant risk. As an LGBTI organization, anything we do can be considered propaganda: what we put on the web, the demonstrations we organize. We know that the authorities can come at any time and issue us with huge fines which we wouldn't be able to pay. Activists have also faced harassment and attacks, which have been on the rise. I would ask the authorities to properly investigate and punish homophobic violence and set up programmes to prevent it and to review recent laws that are discriminatory in nature.”

**Freedom of expression – artists**

**Aleksandr Donskoy, owner of recently closed down in St Petersburg “Museum of Power”**

Aleksandr Donskoy is the owner of the recently closed “Museum of Power”, in St Petersburg. The Museum was shut down after police seized a painting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in women's underwear, saying the satirical display had broken unspecified laws. Other paintings ridiculing politicians, both past and present, were seized too.

“Because of restrictions on freedom of expression we cannot show works of art that we think are worth exhibiting and the public should see. While artists are forced to flee and seek asylum abroad, I don't see any future for myself because of the pressure security services, the prosecutors office and the authorities in general are putting on us. Their actions are a clear signal to artists and curators that only art sanctioned by the authorities will be tolerated.”

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