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Russian Federation: Harassment of NGOs must stop

Amnesty International expresses its concern on the recent harassment of several Russian NGOs on the day the new law on NGOs came into force and calls on the authorities to promptly and thoroughly investigate these incidents.

Amnesty International expresses its solidarity with the Russian human rights non-governmental organisations (NGO) “Memorial”, the Public Movement “For Human Rights” and the Moscow Helsinki Group against the backdrop of vandalizing attack on their respective offices in Moscow, and reiterates its concern over the rapid worsening of environment for human rights work in Russia.

On 21 November, graffiti was drawn on the building of the NGO Memorial and the Public Movement “For Human Rights”. The inscriptions contained the following message in Russian: “Foreign agents, ♥ USA”. Stickers with inscription “Foreign agent” were also put on the building Moscow Helsinki Group.

On the same day, the pro-Kremlin youth movement “Young Russia” organized picket in front of the building of the Center Transparency International Russia. According to their statement that appeared on the website of the “Young Russia”, the activists called on the representatives of the organisation to register as “foreign agents”.

Amnesty International is concerned that these incidents took place on the same day as the Federal Law “On Introducing Changes to Certain Pieces of Legislation of the Russian Federation as Regards Regulation of Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents” came into force.

Amnesty International previously expressed its grave concern over the implications of this law for the freedom of association in the Russian Federation and in particular its effects on the work of human rights organisations in the country. As Amnesty International and many other human rights activists inside and outside the country were noting earlier, the newly introduced requirements for NGOs receiving overseas funding to register as ‘foreign agents’ not only puts additional administrative burden on them, but more importantly, may create negative perceptions of their activities due to the negative connotation ‘foreign agent’ in the Russian language and is likely to be part of a larger crackdown on civil society in the country.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned with the current deterioration of the environment in which human rights NGOs operate. In the months which followed the inauguration of Vladimir Putin as Russia’s newly elected President, a number of legislative changes have been introduced imposing new restrictions on freedom of assembly, association and expression. In addition to the above obligation on NGOs to register as ‘organizations performing the functions of foreign agents’ these changes include tighter restrictions on public demonstrations and increased fines for those who fail to observe them, the re-criminalization of libel and the introduction of broader and vaguer, definitions of high treason and espionage. Another bill criminalizing blasphemy is currently under consideration by the Russian Parliament.

The above mentioned incidents only reinforce the concerns over the negative implications of this law.

Furthermore, Amnesty International is particularly concerned with these incidents, since it follows the overall trend of continued intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists in the Russian Federation. Just over a month ago, the organisation expressed its grave concern over the threats to the prominent human rights defender and staff member of Human Rights Watch. Earlier, in its October 2011 report ([Russia: Beaten for speaking out – Attacks on human rights defenders in the Russian Federation, EUR 46/038/2011](#)), Amnesty International described the climate of

intimidation, harassment and attacks on human rights defenders in the Russian Federation. It was noted that human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists are targeted because of their work; and at the same time these attacks are not being fully and impartially investigated and perpetrators are not being brought to justice.

Amnesty International understands that the incidents regarding vandalizing of the premises of the Memorial and the Public Movement "For Human Rights" were formally reported to the competent law enforcement and that the Moscow Helsinki Group intends to do so in the nearest future. In this regard Amnesty International urges the Russian authorities to launch a prompt, effective and impartial investigation and to bring the perpetrators to justice. The organisation reiterates that harassment and attacks on civil society activists, including human rights defenders, even when carried out by private actors, but accompanied by repeated failure of authorities to investigate these incidents effectively, clearly is in breach of Russia's human rights obligations.

Amnesty International also reiterates its appeal to the Russian authorities to ensure that human rights defenders can work freely and without fear of harassment, refrain from the public denigration of human rights defenders and to demonstrate a commitment to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms by fostering a climate inviting greater participation of civil society in public affairs and legitimate criticism of government actions.