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International NGOs call for end to Russian crack-down on civil society

BERLIN, 19 December 2012 – On the eve of the European Union-Russia summit this week, eight international organisations representing a cross-section of global civil society call on European Union leaders to urge Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the crackdown on Russian civil society.

Russia has passed a series of laws that restrict the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly significantly hindering the operation of national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as international NGOs supporting them. The laws have created a difficult environment for civil society in Russia where activists now face significant risks in carrying out their work.

Amnesty International, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Freedom House, Front Line Defenders, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Transparency International urge the summit participants to seek a commitment from the Russian government to ensure the involvement of civil society in public policy debates, stop harassment of human rights organizations, and increase protection for civil society activists and journalists.

We call for the repeal of recently adopted laws that contain provisions inconsistent with Russia's international and constitutional commitments on human rights and good governance. These include:

- Non-profit and non-government organisations receiving funds from foreign organisations must now register with a special governmental agency and publicly identify themselves as “foreign agents” – a pejorative label signifying spy and traitor – if they engage in so called “political activities”, which include advocacy and influencing public opinion. Such organisations must also put “foreign agent” on all publications. Failure to respect the provisions is punishable by a prison sentence.
- A new, broad legal definition of “treason” could potentially criminalise human rights and political activism.
- Exorbitantly high penalties of up to \$32,000 have been introduced for violating restrictive rules on public protests creating a chilling effect on the right to peaceful assembly.
- The government now has the power to shut down websites without a court order if they are considered to be publishing “prohibited” information, a term that is not clearly defined. This could curb freedom of expression and increase internet censorship.
- Libel is once again a criminal offence, punishable by increased fines of up to \$61,000, which is likely to inhibit criticism by the media and NGOs of public officials and policies.

We believe the new restrictive laws, particularly the definition of treason, could threaten Russia's membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), its accession to the OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials and its relationship with the European Court of Human Rights.

We call on the European Union to join us in urging the Russian government to bring its laws into line with Russia's international obligations and rights guaranteed under the Russian Constitution, repeal restrictive new laws and guarantee a safe environment for civil society.

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