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ARTICLE 19

For immediate release – 15 April 2008

Russia: Attacks On Free Speech Continue

ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned with the continuing abuses of the right to free expression of journalists, human rights defenders and NGOs in Russia, and with the renewed scrutiny and targeting of NGOs activities and international NGOs.

Targeting of NGOs

On 20 March 2008 the office of the *Nizhny Novgorod Foundation to Support Tolerance (FST)* was searched by police in connection with an ongoing investigation against it regarding use of counterfeit software. Its computers were taken, and the office sealed.

On 8 April, Stanislav Dmitrievsky, consultant to the FST and formerly executive director of the *Russian-Chechen Friendship Society (RCFS)*, was threatened at his home by court officers. They threatened to confiscate his property to ‘cover the debts of the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society’, which was shut down in Russia in January 2007 and later registered in Finland. The FST was established in March 2007 as a successor to the RCFS, with the aim of promoting tolerance and understanding in the Russian Federation. The RCFS, which provided alternative information on conflict in the North Caucasus, including human rights violations in Chechnya, was eventually shut down in January 2007 in connection with its publication of statements from Chechen separatist leaders calling for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

On the night of 9 April two unknown men in uniform broke into the Moscow office shared by the NGOs *For Human Rights* and *International Defence Centre*, claiming that the building belonged to them, and attempted to damage the doors and stair rails. The police were called, but did not arrive. The *International Defence Centre* is a legal defence organisation which works on sensitive cases including those of FST and RCFS.

ARTICLE 19 condemns the harassment and targeting of Stanislav Dmitrievsky and the staff of FST, and calls for an immediate end to it. ARTICLE 19 also urges the authorities to return all computers to the FST, and allow it to operate fully. ARTICLE 19 also calls on the authorities to undertake full investigation into the attack against the NGOs For Human Rights and International Defence Centre and to bring to justice those responsible for the attack.

Authorities speaking out against NGOs

These attacks come at a time when NGO activities are under renewed scrutiny in Russia, with official speech equating foreign funding of NGOs and foreign NGOs with extremist activity.

The Head of Russian Security Services Nikolai Patrushev recently stated at a meeting of the National Anti-Terror Committee on April 8th that ‘NGOs are the main supporters of terrorists’ and that ‘foreign NGOs are helping international terrorists to recruit young people’.

ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned with the Russian authorities’ verbal targeting of national and international civil society, which create a chilling effect on freedom of expression and association. ARTICLE 19 calls on the authorities to put an end to these attacks or else provide ample evidence for their allegations.

Attack against Grigory Belonuchkin

On the night of 2 April 2008 journalist Grigory Belonuchkin was beaten up in the porch of his apartment building, and later taken to hospital with concussion. He had answered the door to a stranger who claimed to have material for publication with which only he could help.

Belonuchkin had previously received threatening phonecalls regarding his work investigating the results of the December 2007 parliamentary elections. He is currently challenging in court the results at a polling station in his home town of Dolgoprudny. As an election observer for the communist party, he photographed duplicate results protocols in polling stations 306 and 318, showing inflated results for the ‘United Russia’ party, which supports President Putin.

According to Belonuchkin, he went twice to the police after being threatened, but was told that nothing could be done, since no consequences of the threats had yet been seen. He was later telephoned and told that no case could be opened. Shortly after, from the same number, he received a call advising him: ‘do not touch the elections, or we will knock your head off’.

According to Belonuchkin, the leaders of the local communist party received similar calls.

ARTICLE 19 expresses deep concern at this attack which appears to be connected to Grigory Belonuchkin’s professional activity, and urges the authorities to carry out a full and thorough investigation into this and all other attacks on journalists.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information: please contact Catrina Pickering on 0207 278 9292, email: catrina@article19.org
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.