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## Russia: Launch of Report on Media Coverage of North Caucasus Conflicts

**ARTICLE 19 launches its report “Covering Conflict: Reporting on Conflicts in the North Caucasus in the Russian Media”. The report concludes that information on the North Caucasus conflicts, both in the region and in Russia as a whole, is limited, skewed and often one-sided. It highlights the tight control of information on conflicts by authorities, and the wide variety of other obstacles to media freedom that are particularly acute in the North Caucasus: political pressure, punitive legislation, the low professional level of journalists and the poor economic environment.**

The obstacles to media freedom that affect Russia as a whole are particularly acute in the North Caucasus because of conflict and instability:

### **Political pressure stifles independent and unbiased reporting.**

Repression can take the form of overzealous auditing of media outlets, defamation lawsuits, withdrawal of licences or direct threats and intimidation. Most seriously, there are grave security concerns for journalists engaged in investigations or criticism of the authorities, and for their families. This leads inevitably to endemic self-censorship.

### **Key legislation is vaguely defined and selectively implemented.**

Laws on incitement and extremism contain specific provisions on media activity, which seem to place a double burden upon it. Penalties are severe. Such legal provisions have been more commonly used against those protesting against human rights abuses, than against those at genuine risk from incitement or extremism.

### **The professional level of local media is low.**

The report demonstrates a lack of diversity in coverage of conflict-related issues in local North Caucasus and Russian national media, with extremism and crime the dominant themes. There remains a need to train local media in order to develop journalistic skills and ethics, and improve knowledge of Russian and international media law and freedom of expression standards.

### **Regional media are financially weak.**

Most regional media are subsidised by government, and independent sources of finance are rare. Development of advertising as a revenue stream is hindered by general slow economic development and heavily degraded infrastructure.

ARTICLE 19 urges Russian authorities to take the necessary steps to ensure the development of a free and independent media in the North Caucasus. The report makes detailed recommendations including:

- Legislative provisions on defamation, hate speech and extremism should be revised to bring them into line with Russia's commitments as a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights and member of the Council of Europe. Selective application of such provisions with the aim of stifling alternative viewpoints should end.
- Authorities should remove obstacles to free reporting on conflicts and avoid interference with the operation of a free media. Restrictions on journalists travel to Chechnya should be lifted and directives restricting reporting on banned or extremist organisations should be reviewed.
- The authorities should actively seek to prevent cases of harassment and violence against journalists. Journalists should be able to operate without fear of possible retaliation. Where such cases occur they should be investigated fully and impartially.

The report is available at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/russia-conflict-report.pdf>

**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

- For more information: please contact Catrina Pickering, Press officer, on 0207 278 9292
- 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.