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OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Russia: UN expert alarmed at continued targeting of human rights defenders

GENEVA (14 September 2022) – The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, today reiterated her [calls](#) on the Russian Government to stop the clampdown on human rights defenders. She said in a statement:

“In the past years, I have seen many cases when Russian human rights defenders were criminalised for their legitimate work and exercising the freedom of expression. I therefore continue to be concerned about the use of the criminal provisions introduced shortly after the invasion of Ukraine to target critical voices. Under the “[fake war news](#)” law, 114 people have already been prosecuted since its adoption on 4 March 2022. Furthermore, it is deeply alarming that the authorities have introduced even more new crimes that may be used against human rights defenders and create a suffocating effect on civil society.

On 14 July, the Russian Parliament adopted amendments to the criminal code introducing prison terms of up to eight years for those convicted of “confidentially co-operating” with a foreign state, an international or foreign organisation. The “co-operation” is supposed to be punishable only if its aim is to assist in “activities knowingly aimed against the state security”. In practice, however, there is no guarantee that human rights work will not be considered a threat to the state security. The same law criminalised broadly defined “public calls for activities aimed against the state security” with the maximum penalty of seven years in prison.

Further expansion of the laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations” is also very concerning. The Government has resorted to them for years to restrict human rights work, stigmatise human rights defenders, and discriminate against them.

Since 2015, 65 foreign and international non-governmental organisations have been recognised as “undesirable” and banned in Russia without recourse to court. A number of them had human rights and humanitarian programmes. People continuing to participate in these organisations, finance or organise their activity risk up to six years in prison. The law adopted by the Parliament on 14 July extended this liability to actions committed abroad, effectively targeting human rights defenders in exile.

A total of 276 persons, many of whom protect and promote human rights, are currently on various “foreign agents” registers, introduced a decade ago and continually expanded and added to ever since. A new law entering into force on 1 December will consolidate and further broaden the regulation. The authorities will be able to designate as “foreign agents” anyone whom they consider being under a vague “foreign influence” and engaging in a broad range of activities, including those related to human rights. In addition to burdensome labelling and reporting requirements, “foreign agents” will face 18 restrictions of their activity. Moreover, current and former participants, employees, founders, managers, and governing body members of “foreign agent” groups will be placed on a unified register of “foreign agent affiliates”.

Russian human rights defenders told me how this stigmatising label scares away some partners and even people whose rights they defend. New vague and broad provisions of the law further marginalise the human rights community, which is completely unacceptable.

Another discriminatory legislative initiative concerns the defenders of the LGBT+ persons’ rights. For over nine years, their legitimate work has been restricted, and now any public discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity issues may be completely outlawed.

The broadly defined “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors” is an administrative offence introduced in 2013. It may be punishable by fines up to one million RUB (16,476 EUR), and up to 15-day administrative detention, an expulsion from the country for non-citizens, and a temporary suspension of a legal entity.

At least three new bills, one of which is being considered by the Parliament and two more are undergoing preliminary approval procedures, propose to outlaw spreading information about “non-traditional sexual relations” to people of any age. If the Parliament adopts one of them, the fines may increase up to tenfold and the authorities may be able to block this information online without recourse to court, as well as ban its distribution in the media and films.

When adopting any new laws, the Russian Federation must be mindful of its obligation to create an enabling environment for human rights defenders and guarantee the freedom of association and expression. These laws and bills, on the contrary, appear to be discriminatory and not comply with the strict tests for allowable restrictions.

I also note with regret that the Government continues large-scale efforts to silence critical voices and dismantle civil society.

The number of detentions in connection with anti-war protests has reportedly exceeded 16,400. Many more human rights defenders have had to leave the country due to professional risks. Access to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram remains restricted, and the number of websites blocked since the invasion of Ukraine has reached a staggering 138,000, according to the Prosecutor General. The work of most independent media outlets continues to be suspended or stopped.

On 5 September, the Basmanny District Court of Moscow stripped *Novaya Gazeta*, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and one of the oldest Russian media outlets writing about human rights, of its print media license. The ground was minor reporting violations allegedly committed 16 years ago. On 15 September, the Supreme Court will consider whether the license of *Novaya Gazeta's* website should also be revoked.

On 14 September, the Moscow City Court will decide whether to dissolve the Journalists' and Media Workers' Union. The Union is a non-governmental organisation defending the rights of media workers across Russia. The Moscow City Prosecutor requested its dissolution for several “grave violations of the law”. The violations reportedly included campaigning to support persecuted journalists, fundraising for an independent media outlet and a human rights project, unspecified publications “discrediting” the Russian army, unspecified violations in the charter, a publication of alleged “fake war news” by a Union member, and an alleged non-payment of the membership fee by some journalists. The Union's work has reportedly been suspended by the court order since 4 July.

I urge the Russian authorities to immediately stop the crackdown on human rights defenders and repeal restrictive and discriminatory laws.

I call again on the international community to support human rights defenders in Russia and in exile.

In reference to visa and entry restrictions considered by some states, I would like to emphasise that any measures affecting Russian citizens abroad should be mindful of human rights defenders at risk and not put them in further danger.

The Russian Government is destroying civil society day by day and if the world does not lend a hand to Russian human rights defenders now, it will face the human rights consequences for decades to come.”

The Special Rapporteur is in touch with the relevant authorities regarding these issues.

ENDS

Ms. Mary Lawlor (Ireland) is [the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#). She is currently an Adjunct Professor of Business and Human Rights in Trinity College Dublin. She was the founder of Front Line Defenders - the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. As Executive Director from 2001-2016, she represented Front Line Defenders and had a key role in its development. Ms. Lawlor was previously Director of the Irish Office of Amnesty International from 1988 to 2000, after becoming a member of the Board of Directors 1975 and being elected its President from 1983 to 1987.

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defenders, Mary Lawlor, calls
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