



Asociace pro podporu demokracie a lidských práv
/ Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights

13 May 2009, Prague, Czech Republic

OPEN LETTER

Dear Mr. President of the European Union Council,
Dear Mr. President of the European Commission,
Dear Ms. Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy,

We are writing to you on behalf of DEMAS, a Czech association of 11 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the Czech Republic and other countries in the areas of democracy assistance and human rights.

We would like to request that you discuss with your Russian counterparts during the upcoming EU-Russia summit the dire state of civil society in the Russian Federation.

The European Union provides political, legislative and financial support to civil society in its member states as well as abroad while acknowledging that an independent and thriving civil society plays an essential part in fostering freedom of expression and public control of government power.

The Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, himself acknowledged the importance of civil society, saying in his recent interview for the *Novaya Gazeta*¹ newspaper that "civil society is a human dimension to every state".

However, Russia's 2006 law on NGOs², which are one of the main building blocks of civil society, badly affects, hinders and in some cases even thwarts the work of NGOs. The complexity of documentation required for registration means that it is virtually impossible for an NGO to register without professional legal advice. Registration may then be withheld for minor errors, such as typos. A 2007 Moscow State University study showed that registering an NGO in Moscow with professional legal assistance is 40 % more expensive and takes twice as much time as registering a firm (or even 100 % more expensive in some regions). The 2006 NGO law is thus much more restrictive than in EU countries and contradicts the principles of free association enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights signed by the Russian Federation.

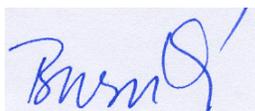
¹ <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2009/039/01.html>

² In full: "Federal Law of the Russian Federation on Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation No. 18-FZ, 2006"

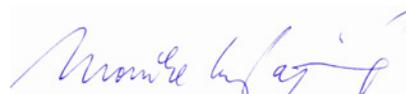
In response, in April 2009, a group Russian NGOs³ submitted to the Minister of Justice their recommendations⁴ for changes to the 2006 NGO law aimed at halting government meddling in the work of NGOs. Talking about the NGO legislation, Mr Medvedev recently admitted that "certain changes are possible and some even necessary"⁵. We welcome that Mr. Medvedev has recently established a working group to deal with proposed changes to one of the laws affecting NGOs, and we hope that the amendments proposed will be fully in line with NGOs' recommendations.

We ask you to **call on the Russian state to liberalize current NGO legislation** following the Russian NGOs' recommendations during the upcoming EU-Russia summit and to stress that a healthy and independent civil society is a key to European Union-Russia dialogue. Official support to civil society is essential when independent-minded people, such as journalists, activists and human-rights defenders, are on a regular basis threatened and attacked, and have even been murdered.

Yours faithfully,



Ivana Bursíková
Agora Central Europe



Monika MacDonagh Pajerová
Ano pro Evropu (Yes for Europe)



Igor Blažević
People in Need



David Král
Institute for European Policy - Europeum



Jakub Klepal
Forum 2000 Foundation



Jan Ruml
Civic Belarus and Respekt Institut

Also sent to: Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic Jan Kohout

³ Moscow Helsinki Group, Human Rights Watch - Russia, Agora Association, Youth Human Rights Movement, Human Rights Resource Center

⁴ <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/05/13/proposals-changes-russian-federal-laws-regulating-ngos>

⁵ http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2009/04/15/1547_type63378type63381_215116.shtml