



Russia: Freedom of Expression and Assembly Severely Repressed ahead of Parliamentary Elections

28 November 2007

ARTICLE 19 is alarmed at the recent violent suppression of freedom of expression and assembly in the Russian Federation, only a few days in advance of parliamentary elections. Especially alarming are the use of force against and detention of unarmed demonstrators.

According to our information, on 24 November 2007, the police repressed the demonstration of opposition movement 'Other Russia' in Moscow and detained its leader Garry Kasparov for five days, for leading an unauthorised demonstration. Others who gave speeches on this occasion, including human rights activists, were reportedly also detained and beaten.

On 25 November, nearly 200 people were arrested in St Petersburg for participating in demonstrations and chanting the slogan 'Russia without Putin.' Journalist Nikolay Andruschenko of *New Saint Petersburg* newspaper was reportedly detained for his article 'Why I am joining the March of Dissent?'

Similar incidents occurred on 24 November in Nizhniy Novgorod, where the police blocked most of the streets adjacent to Gorky Square, where the demonstrations took place. The police also reportedly deterred people on their way to the demonstration, including from nearby cities. A number of demonstrators were taken to the police station and beaten on the way. The detainees were accused of participation in an unauthorised rally and of 'resisting to the police.'¹

Particularly alarming is the fact that, on the same day, special security forces opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in Nazran, Ingushetia. Demonstrators were wounded and some sixty people were detained. Moreover, early on the morning of the 24th, three Moscow television journalists and Oleg Orlov, an activist from the human rights organisation 'Memorial', were abducted from a hotel in Nazran, beaten and left in a field by unidentified men wearing masks. When the four went to police to report the attack, they were allegedly held at the station until late afternoon.

The crackdown on freedom of expression and assembly is particularly concerning in the context of upcoming parliamentary (2 December 2007) and presidential elections

¹ Authorisation was denied by the city administration on the grounds that Gorky Square was 'not meant for holding public actions.'

(2 March 2008). Apart from the use of physical force to suppress dissenting opinions voiced during and through demonstrations, the clearly biased media coverage of the elections has undermined critical and independent expression. While the opposition is denied any significant airtime by most television stations, the overwhelming majority of prime time provides exclusively positive or neutral information about the current political establishment.²

Russia has ratified the *European Convention on Human Rights* and *International Covenant on Civil and Political Right*, which among others protect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The unhindered realisation of these rights is of particular significance during electoral campaigns, so as to enable the electorate to make informed choices when casting their votes. Moreover, expression of and free access to a wide range of opinions and ideas, including those critical of the authorities, are at the foundation of a democratic society.

ARTICLE 19 calls on Russian authorities to:

- Take immediate steps to ensure that nobody is detained or harassed for the peaceful expression of ideas;
- Carry out a thorough and impartial investigation into the cases of violence during demonstrations;
- Ensure that people are able to exercise their right to free expression, including through peaceful demonstrations;
- Ensure adequate access to the media for the opposition during election campaigns, and the balanced coverage of the full spectrum of political views.

² See the monitoring results of the Centre for Extremism in Extreme Situations, <http://www.memo98.cjes.ru/?p=3&sm2=on&reports=2007101>