

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

RUSSIA: First human rights organisation liquidated by court for "influencing public opinion"

Paris-Geneva, February 11, 2016 - On February 10, 2016, Russian human rights organisation "Agora", providing legal assistance to nongovernmental organisations and civic activists, was liquidated by a court decision. The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of FIDH and OMCT, strongly condemns the verdict of the Supreme Court of Tatarstan (Russian Federation) closing down one of the most visible and active organisations in Russia, and calls on the international community to publicly denounce the mounting repression of civil society in Russia.

In a lawsuit filed by the Ministry of Justice, "Agora" was charged with violating the infamous NGO law on "foreign agents". It is noteworthy that the verdict violates the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which allows for liquidation in limited cases only, namely, if an organisation carries out activities aimed at undermining the constitutional order, threatening national security or putting citizens' lives and health in danger. In its lawsuit, the Ministry has not accused "Agora" of any of the above-mentioned activities.

Marking yet another step in the ongoing repression launched by the Russian State against human rights defenders, the decision came on the day the Chairman of the Council on Human Rights under the Presidential Administration submitted a proposal to clarify the term "political activity" in the law on "foreign agents". The proposal suggests to define "political activity" exclusively as "a struggle for political power" and thus repels the existing vague wording allowing to qualify any civil society organisation activity as political.

After endless persecutions and harassment that made the functioning of civil society organisations impossible, it is the first time that the Ministry of Justice has demanded the liquidation of a human rights organisation for "influencing public opinion". The day after the decision, on February 11, 2016, the election monitoring association "**Golos**" received a letter informing them of a lawsuit filed by the Ministry of Justice demanding the closing down of the association.

Shortly before, on January 28, 2016, the department of the Ministry of Justice in the Orenburg region brought administrative charges against the **Committee for Prevention of Torture** (CPT) and its Chairman Mr. **Igor Kalyapin**, in relation to alleged violations of the "foreign agents" law. The Observatory believes that this judicial harassment only aims at preventing their peaceful human rights activities, and reiterates its call on the Russian authorities to end their systematic repression of critical voices in the country.

"Agora, a courageous and notorious watchdog of Russian citizens' rights, was already inspected by the Prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Interior, the Tax inspection, and after months of various judicial procedures, the court finally closed them down once and for all, clearly stating the main reason for this decision was their human rights activities", declared Karim Lahidji, FIDH President.

"Human rights are rightly enshrined in the Russian Constitution, yet seeking their implementation is perceived as political activity. A State that cares about its constitution would invest its energy in preventing constitutional rights violations as opposed to preventing human rights work", OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock added.

"Agora", with its head office in Tatarstan and other 40 regional offices across the country, united 35 barristers and lawyers who provided free legal aid to defendants of the most



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notorious cases, such as the "Bolotnaya" and Pussy Riot cases, defended Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and artist and activist Petr Pavlensky. They won several cases in front of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation resulting in six federal laws declared unconstitutional.

In summer 2014, "Agora" was included into the list of "foreign agents" - a decision that the organisation challenged in courts unsuccessfully. Lately, in accordance with the law, "Agora" appealed to the Ministry of Justice to exclude it from the list claiming it had not received foreign funding for more than a year. Not only was the appeal declined, but the Ministry filed a lawsuit for the court to close the organisation. It has sued "Agora" without formerly sending any warnings or requests to the organisation. The verdict was handed down during the very first hearing on the case.

According to the lawyer representing the organisation, the Ministry accused "Agora" of "influencing public opinion", of being a "foreign agent", and of undertaking efforts to be excluded from the registry of "foreign agents". It has now six months to close down. The organisation intends to appeal the decision before the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy to situations of repression against human rights defenders.

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