

Stop Violence against Russian Civil Society Activists and Punish Perpetrators Statement by the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum expresses its indignation at the recent escalation of politically motivated violence in Russia, including a series of violent attacks targeting civil society activists and nonprofit organisations over the past month in different parts of the country.

On 3 September 2016, an anniversary of the hostage crisis at School No. 1 in Beslan, members of the NGO "Voice of Beslan" and journalists Elena Kostiuchenko and Diana Khachatrian were forced to leave the school memorial's premises and then assaulted by two unidentified men: one of them snatched the journalists' phones while the other one doused Kostiuchenko with green antiseptic. None of the police present tried to stop the assailants, and the journalists were questioned about the attack as late as half an hour after it occurred.

On the night of 8 to 9 September in Krasnodar Region, unidentified men armed with clubs, knives and guns attacked members of the Environmental Watch on North Caucasus and Greenpeace (both NGOs are members of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum) and volunteers who had come to fight forest fires in the region. The attackers beat the firefighters, smashed their cars, and slashed the tires and tents. They threatened the environmentalists with more violence if they did not leave Krasnodar Region before the next morning and yelled insults, telling the firefighters to 'go back to their America, their "Pindosia".'

On 27 September in Barnaul, unidentified men attacked Grigori Pasko, journalist and director of the Community of Investigative Journalists - Foundation 19/29, another Forum's member. Grigori Pasko had travelled to Barnaul to train local journalists and bloggers in investigative journalism techniques and was assaulted outside the hotel where he was staying. One of the attackers punched him in the head and then shouted: 'Get out of our city! We are going to get you!' Then both assailants drove away.

On 28 and 29 September, the Sakharov Centre, also a member of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, was subjected to a series of attacks on its exhibition of photos — winners of the Direct View photography contest. On 28 September, painter Anton Belikov came to the Sakharov Centre and sprayed paint on photos of the Ukrainian military taken during the war in the Donbas, and then escaped. On 29 September, men in camouflage and Cossacks came to the Centre; one of them was Dmitri Zakharov, member of the Yakimanka District municipal council, who carried a can of red liquid with the words "The blood of Donbas children killed by the Ukrainians" written on the can. The attackers were yelling: 'Waste the bastards, save Russia,' threatening to destroy the Centre.

'We are holding on, we are working. Our programme will not change,' Sakharov Centre Director Sergei Lukashevsky wrote courageously on his Facebook page. 'Tolerated by the Russian authorities, these

radicals terrorise all those who do not share their values system or live in their paranoid, conspiratorial world. It is a terrible symptom of society and state's disintegration.'

These events clearly demonstrate the lack of adequate attention and response from the Russian authorities to multiple acts of intimidation and physical violence that have recently targeted civil society leaders and nonprofit organisations across Russia. As a consequence, various informal groups positioning themselves as supporters of the Russian government's policy continue to indulge in lawlessness with impunity. This is absolutely unacceptable in a country that considers itself based on the rule of law.

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum urges the Russian authorities to give an adequate response and suppress such acts, conduct a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation into all attacks, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

We consider it of utmost importance to ensure a safe environment for civil society in the Russian Federation. We urge the international community to monitor the events closely and demand that steps should be taken to end the ongoing campaign of harassment against civil society leaders.

We at the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum express our solidarity with the victims of the dastardly attacks and call upon our colleagues in and outside the country to support Russia's civil society in these challenging times.

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 160 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history, and civic education.

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