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Safeguard freedom of expression and the work of human rights defenders in Russia

On 23 January, the Russian Supreme Court will take a decision on the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society's appeal against closure.

The Russian-Chechen Friendship Society (RCFS) monitors human rights violations in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus. Staff and volunteers in Nizhnii Novgorod and the North Caucasus have produced daily press releases on "disappearances" and other serious human rights abuses by both sides to the conflict, which are disseminated by the organization's project, the Russian-Chechen Information Agency.

The RCFS also undertakes humanitarian initiatives for individuals affected by the conflict in the North Caucasus, for example, organizing medical assistance and holiday breaks for children from the conflict zone.

In 2005, the RCFS simultaneously underwent legal action by the tax authorities and the registration department of the Ministry of Justice. At the same time, both RCFS executive director Stanislav Dmitrievskii and deputy director Oksana Chelysheva, were the subject of threatening leaflets which accused them of being "traitors" and supporters of "terrorists".

In February 2006, Stanislav Dmitrievskii was convicted of "inciting racial hatred" for publishing non-violent articles written by Chechen separatist leaders. AI considers that Stanislav Dmitrievskii was convicted for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and that his conviction should be quashed.

In October 2006, the court of Nizhnii Novgorod closed the RCFS. The court decision was motivated in part by Stanislav Dmitrievskii's conviction on "race hate" charges, applying restrictive new NGO legislation. The verdict appeared to be the latest move in a carefully calculated strategy to get rid of the organization that has been so outspoken on behalf of victims of human rights violations in Chechnya.

The organization has appealed against this verdict and, on 23 January, the Russian Supreme Court will take its decision on this appeal. If the hearing upholds the previous decision to close the RCFS, it will constitute another serious blow to freedom of expression and the work of human rights defenders in Russia.

In support of the organization, human rights activists, journalists and politicians around the world have applied for membership in the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society.

Call to action

Send an urgent appeal (text provided below) to express your concern, and urge the Russian authorities to safeguard freedom of expression and respect the work of human rights defenders.

Sample letter

Dear President Putin,

I urge you and your government to respect and support the work of human rights defenders in the Russian Federation, who peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression and carry out legitimate work. In particular I am concerned about attempts to close the non-governmental organization Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, which monitors the human rights situation in the North Caucasus and undertakes humanitarian initiatives for individuals affected by the armed conflict in Chechnya.

Therefore, I respectfully call on you and the government of the Russian Federation:

to allow the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society (RCFS) to freely conduct their legitimate and valuable work

to refrain from prosecuting members of the RCFS for their peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression

to review the implementation of the restrictive new NGO legislation

to make a public statement of support for human rights defenders and independent journalists.

Target contact details

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Stanislav Dmitrievskii, head of the NGO Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, in the organization's office in Russia, December 2005.

