

Working Session 5, Rule of Law II, 26 September 2012

Crackdown on civil society by the Russian Government

Freedom House views the concerted effort by the Government of Russia to brand those who support human rights and democracy as enemies of the state as a broad effort to destroy civil society. These new repressive laws are only likely to put Russia on a course toward instability while it flagrantly violates its human rights commitments. Russian nongovernmental organizations that engage in what authorities consider "political activities" and that receive foreign funding will now be branded as "foreign agents." Last week, the U.S. Department of State announced Putin's second step: his request that the U.S. Agency for International Development, which has been in Russia for nearly two decades, supporting legitimate civil society, was told to pack up and leave.

The latest move to expand the definition of treason is of particular concern, and in grave violation of the OSCE definition of comprehensive security; participating States must protect human rights, at the same time that they seek to protect stability. The misuse of the overly broad extremism law to go after those who disagree with the government, rather than real extremists and terrorists, has been a concern for some time. Repressing peaceful freedom of assembly and adding severe penalties for citizens exercising this right will only increase the potential for instability. Russian civil society has stressed that it is critical that the OSCE States and institutions speak out and hold the Russian government accountable.

I would like to conclude with several recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The first recommendation is that the Russian government should not sign into law this expanded definition of treason.

Second, additional steps should be taken by Russia to reverse laws which fall afoul of OSCE commitments to uphold the fundamental rights of assembly and expression, including reversal of the "foreign agent" legislation and the decriminalization of libel.

Finally, OSCE States should speak up about Russia's repression of civil society and human rights. The good efforts of this organization to build up NGO participation in the OSCE are at risk. The many brave Russian human rights activists, who have participated in HDIM could be branded as foreign agents for their good faith efforts here. Let us not be silent in the face of these challenges to the core commitments of the human dimension.