

## **Working session 9, Democratic Institutions**

### **Norwegian Helsinki Committee**

**September 25, 2015**

#### **The case of Lev Shlosberg and electoral trust in Russia**

On Sunday 13 September, more than 10 000 various elections took place all over the Russian Federation. There was extensive pressure towards the domestic election observers of Golos, but none the less they managed to observe the elections and publish their results. The conclusion of Golos and the European Platform for Democratic Elections EPDE, is that the elections were predetermined by decisions and actions taken by the authorities and election commissions organizing the elections at the stage of nomination and registration of candidates and parties, as well as during the election campaigns. In such a situation—and in the absence of real political competition, the Election Day merely confers upon the elections a formal “legitimation.” The population has little if any trust in such an electoral process.

Another episode that undermines trust occurred yesterday, on 24 September, when the deputies of the Regional Assembly in Pskov, Western Russia, stripped fellow Deputy Lev Shlosberg of the Yabloko party of his mandate as a deputy in the Assembly. This despite the obvious fact that Shlosberg was not put in this position by the Russian authorities or his fellow deputies, but in fact was elected by the local population and was only half way through his period.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee considers this decision by the Pskov Regional Assembly a measure to silence Lev Shlosberg, as an outspoken person and as an independent politician who seemed to annoy the local officials by his autonomous position. By preventing Shlosberg from doing his work as a legally elected representative in the Pskov Regional Assembly, the local authorities have not only violated the rights of the Russian citizens to an elected representative. They have also exceeded their mandate, and more importantly, they have contributed to the further undermining of trust in the electoral system of the Russian Federation.

Formally, the reason for this action is that Lev Shlosberg has testified as a witness in court, in a case against an organization which was announced a “foreign agent”. The initiative to strip Shlosberg of his seat came from Pskov’s political leadership, headed by governor Andrey Turchak. Turchak’s name has recently appeared in Russian media in connection with the accusation of ordering an assault on the journalist Oleg Kashin.

Lev Shlosberg is the head of the Yabloko party in Pskov and a vocal figure in the community. He is also the editor of the Pskovskaya Guberniya, a newspaper that received the Fritt Ord/Zeit Stiftung Eastern Europe Press Prize in Oslo this summer. He is also known for spreading information about the graves of unidentified soldiers in Pskov region appearing in August 2014. After this information was known, he was severely beaten. As Deputy, Shlosberg has required the Russian authorities to investigate the death of the soldiers.

Lev Shlosberg also participated in delivering a complaint to the Russian Supreme Court in June 2015 regarding a new law amendment which prohibits announcement of the numbers of military losses in peace time. Further, Shlosberg has frequently raised attention about the cases of corruption in the

region, the need to control the use of budget resources, he has criticized law-amendments which limit and violate the freedom of assembly, freedom of association and expression.

Shlosberg has thus repeatedly raised his voice in protection of Russian civil society groups, Russian budget resources and Russian citizens. Yesterday, 41 of his fellow deputies voted to have his mandate lifted, half way into the period.

Norwegian Helsinki Committee urges:

- Russian authorities to stop all political pressure against legally elected Deputies in general and Lev Shlosberg in particular;
- Russian authorities to guarantee personal security and safe and professional working conditions for Shlosberg and other independent voices;
- Russian authorities to investigate the lawfulness of the initiative from the local authorities in Pskov and the connection of the Governor Andrey Turchak in this regard;
- all OSCE participating States to maintain the pressure with targeted sanctions against individuals and entities in the Russian Federation, and to consider the establishment of a Global Magnitsky Mechanism that also will impose visa denial, entry bans and freezing of assets against persons (including entities) who are guilty of gross human rights violations against human rights defenders or whistle-blowers who expose illegal activities carried out by government officials.

Human rights defenders, whistle blowers and independent journalists are amongst those who contribute to a society with transparent processes, accountability and equal political competition where the electorate is given a real choice. We urge the international community to take necessary steps to ensure this will be the case also in the Russian Federation.