



*NHC intervention to the 2007 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting*

WORKING SESSION 16, FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS II:

Freedom of expression, free media and information

Thursday, 4 October 2007

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Moderator, delegates, NGOs

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee addresses freedom of expression and free media in Russia.

This upcoming Sunday, it is exactly one year since the journalist and human rights defender Anna Politkovskaja was murdered outside her apartment in Moscow. In our view, this tragic incident did not stand by itself, but was part of an encompassing campaign against independent journalists and human rights defenders in Russia over the recent years. The murder of Politkovskaja, and the authorities' failure to fully investigate the incident, shows what kind of state Russia has become, and signals that the international community must strengthen its commitment to support and encourage democratic initiatives in Russia.

The three most important gains from the democratization process, which started under Gorbachev is today about to be lost. Freedom of speech is severely weakened, the new-grown civil society is under pressure, and fair and free elections in Russia seem to be out of reach. This is not co-incidental, or a temporary development; rather a direct result of Putin's regime seeking vertical control, not appreciating the shared powers that characterizes liberal states.

The murder of Anna Politkovskaja showed the vulnerability of the critical and independent voices in Russia. When not even Russia's most famous and internationally renowned journalist could be safe, the message to other journalists and editors is crystal clear. Through a combination of administrative pressure, dubious court processes and use of violence, the authorities seek to discipline civil society and the free media.

An example of this is the police-raid of Politkovskaja's newspaper Novaja Gazeta's Nizhny Novgorod office last month. The police argued that the office did not hold valid software licenses, and thereby confiscated computers, without allowing the journalists to copy their documents.

Self-censorship is now widespread in Russian media.

In July this year, the Anti-Extremist legislation was amended, widening the definition of extremism so much, and making the concept so vague, that human rights groups fear that the paragraph's main purpose is to silence opposition. Extremism now also includes assisting so-called extremists in getting their views across, thus also intimidating the media.

Another example is the author Andrei Piontkovsky that faces legal charges under the anti-extremism law over two books highly critical about Putin's years in power.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee would strongly underline the necessity of a common effort of the international community to support democratic initiatives, work for freedom of expression and efforts to secure fair and free elections in Russia.

Thank you for your attention.