



EUROPEAN UNION

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EU statement on the shrinking space for civil society in Russia

On 4 June, Russian President Putin signed a new law banning anyone with links to so-called “extremist organisations” from running in elections in Russia.

This law is yet another tool against critical and opposition voices, which will further curtail political pluralism in Russia. This decision, in conjunction with the laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations”, reinforces the systematic crackdown on democracy, human rights and freedoms. It is of additional concern that this law will have retroactive force, and can be instrumentalized.

The 9 June ruling by a Moscow Court to label Mr Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Organisation, the Foundation of Citizens’ Rights Protection and the offices of Mr Navalny’s team “extremist groups” marks the most serious effort to date by the Russian Government to suppress the independent political opposition and anti-corruption investigations, and to eliminate Mr Navalny’s political networks’ influence ahead of the State Duma elections in September, and beyond. It is an unfounded decision which will have far-reaching consequences for the Russian civil society, opposition and critical voices. We urge the Russian Government to abide fully by its international obligations and commitments it has made, including in the Council of Europe and the OSCE, to uphold these rights.

The European Union repeats its call for Mr Navalny’s immediate and unconditional release as we consider his sentencing politically motivated and running counter to Russia’s international human rights obligations. In this regard, we also expect Russia to fulfil its obligations under the European Convention on

Human Rights, including to comply with the interim measure of the European Court of Human Rights with regard to the nature and extent of risk to Mr Navalny's life. The Russian authorities are responsible for Mr Navalny's safety and health in the penal colony, to which we hold them to account.

The recent case of removal from a plane in Saint Petersburg of Mr Andrei Pivovarov, a former Executive Director of "Open Russia", and his detention for alleged violations of the law on so-called "undesirable organisations", confirms the continuous pattern of shrinking space for civil society, the opposition and critical voices as well as for independent media in Russia. We urge the Russian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Mr Pivovarov and other opposition activists who are currently in detention, as well as to stop the prosecution of the opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov. The state must allow and promote conditions for real political competition.

The EU also rejects the decision taken by the Russian Prosecutor General on 26 May to list three German NGOs as "undesirable organisations". This decision, which targets Forum Russischsprachiger Europäer e.V., Zentrum fuer die Liberale Moderne GmbH, and Deutsch-Russischer Austausch e.V., is the most recent example of the Russian authorities' disregard for and repression of a vibrant civil society. It contravenes our 1990 Copenhagen commitment to ensure that individuals are permitted to exercise the right to association, including the right to form, join and participate effectively in non-governmental organizations which seek the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and ultimately harms the interests of the Russian people and possibilities for open and free dialogue.

The EU fully supports the key role played by independent NGOs in developing mutual understanding across borders and improving relations between countries. Nothing in the activities of the NGOs we have named justifies such a step. We call on the Russian authorities to reverse this decision and to contribute to the promotion of people-to-people contacts to the benefit of both Russia and the EU.

The EU also rejects the decision of the Russian Federation authorities on 14 May to include the independent news website VTimes on the list of "foreign agents", which forced VTimes to decide to cease its activities in Russia. The existing requirement on labelling as "foreign agents" imposes additional administrative and financial burdens

as well as stigmatizes the media concerned, restricts their ability to perform their activities, and thus contributes to a systematic infringement on the exercise of fundamental freedoms in Russia.

The EU urges the Russian authorities to repeal the above-mentioned laws and bring Russian legislation in line with its OSCE commitments and obligations as well European and international human rights law, including the European Convention on Human Rights of the Council of Europe.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA, and the EFTA country ICELAND, member of the European Economic Area, as well as GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.