



# EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

## Statement

### **Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum demands immediate release of environmental activist Yevgeny Vitishko**

On 12 February 2014, the Krasnodar Appeals Court upheld the decision to enforce a three year prison sentence for Yevgeny Vitishko for “damaging the fence” of the allegedly illegally constructed country house of Alexander Tkachev, Governor of the Krasnodar Region.

In 2011, activists of the Environmental Watch on North Caucasus (EWNC) held a public inspection of the forest and public lands upon which the Governor’s countryside house was built, despite the fact that the lands were registered as public. The criminal charges brought against were based on allegations that on this occasion they had spray-painted graffiti on a construction fence to draw attention to this situation. In June 2012, the activists, Yevgeny Vitishko and Suren Gazaryan, were sentenced to three years of probation. Gazaryan had to emigrate because of reprisals, but Vitishko stayed in Russia.

The reconfirmation by the Appeals Court of the prison sentence contradicts the October 21, 2013 ruling by the Supreme Court of Russia, which stated that the sentence on Gazaryan and Vitishko should be reconsidered. "Inscriptions on fences located in a forested area can't be regarded as hooliganism and there is no the evidence of significant damage inflicted upon the owner of the fence", the Supreme Court stated.

This case of illegal construction was not the only environmental violation that EWNC was investigating. EWNC also published a report on environmental damage caused by preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi and repeatedly spoke out publicly on these issues (see [http://ewnc.org/files/sochi/Doklad-Sochi-2014\\_EWNC.pdf](http://ewnc.org/files/sochi/Doklad-Sochi-2014_EWNC.pdf)).

On the eve of the Sochi Olympics activists of EWNC were put under more and more pressure by the Russian authorities (see earlier statement by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum Steering Committee - [http://eu-russia-csf.org/fileadmin/Statements/statement on EcoWatch eng.pdf](http://eu-russia-csf.org/fileadmin/Statements/statement_on_EcoWatch_eng.pdf)).

There is no doubt that the imprisonment of Yevgeny Vitishko is connected with the environmental and human rights activities of EWNC in the Krasnodar region including cases of environmental violations and corruption during Olympic construction in Sochi. The case illustrates the undemocratic conditions under which the Olympic Games were organised and are taking place at present. Amnesty International has already recognized Vitishko as a prisoner of conscience. Yevgeny Vitishko has gone on hunger strike in protest against the unfair court decision.

In relation to the above, the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum:

- Demands that the Russian authorities release Yevgeny Vitishko immediately
- Welcome the attempt of the International Olympic Committee to investigate the case of Yevgeny Vitishko's imprisonment and calls upon the IOC to continue investigating it due to irrelevant and incomplete information given in the official answer of the Russian authorities to the IOC's request
- Calls upon the Russian and European public as well as the European Parliament and the European Commission to urge Russian authorities to release Yevgeny Vitishko
- Calls upon the Russian authorities to end the reprisals against all activists of Environmental Watch on North Caucasus and other environmental and human rights organisations
- To fulfil the national legislation and international standards in environmental protection, including in the course of national investment projects, and of fighting corruption.

Steering Committee  
of the EU-Russia-Civil Society Forum  
18 February 2014

Contact:

Ksenia Vakhrusheva,  
Environmental NGO "Bellona",  
member of the Steering Committee  
of the EU-Russia CSF  
Tel. +7-921-318-01-38

**EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM / ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ**

**Address (Secretariat):** Deutsch-Russischer Austausch e.V. (German-Russian Exchange) – 13357 Berlin, Badstr. 44, Germany, Tel. +49-30-446680-0

**Адрес (Секретариат):** Немецко-Русский Обмен – 13357 Берлин, Бадштрассе 44, Германия, +49-30-446680-0

**Website:** [www.eu-russia-csf.org](http://www.eu-russia-csf.org) **E-mail:** [info@eu-russia-csf.org](mailto:info@eu-russia-csf.org)

**Facebook:** [EU-Russia Civil Society Forum / Гражданский Форум ЕС-Россия](https://www.facebook.com/EU-Russia-Civil-Society-Forum/) **Twitter:** [@EU\\_Russia\\_CSF](https://twitter.com/EU_Russia_CSF)

*This project is supported by:*



Robert Bosch Stiftung



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