Solidarity with Magomed Mutsolgov: Stop the Pressure on the Prominent Ingush Human Rights Defender

Statement by the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is extremely concerned by reports of a raid conducted at the office of the NGO MASHR, Forum’s member, in Karabulak, Ingushetia, and in the home of its leader Magomed Mutsolgov, Head of the Ingush Public Monitoring Committee and a prominent human rights defender.

As reported by Mutsolgov, mass media, and non-governmental organisations, in the early morning of 6 November 2015, a few dozen armed men, some of them masked, came in three armored “Gazelle” vans and two passenger cars to the MASHR office and Mutsolgov’s house located nearby. Saying that they were police officers, the men sealed off the area around the house and the office and spent a few hours searching the premises and confiscating the computers and all of the organisation’s documents and archives dating back to its establishment. The conduct of this large group of armed men was clearly intimidating; Magomed’s children were terrified and his mother had a heart attack.

We are particularly concerned about the text of the order warranting the search as part of the ‘operational investigation and search activities’, signed by the Acting Chair of the Supreme Court of Ingushetia. This document says that Magomed Mutsolgov allegedly ‘serves as liaison for anti-Russian NGOs located in Georgia, United States, and Europe, and acts on behalf and orders of foreign NGOs’ and that he, ‘while pursuing subversive purposes in Russia, has taken steps aimed at inciting religious conflict’ and is involved in ‘various extremist projects’, ‘which spread anti-Russian information and propaganda to shape destructive public opinions about the Russian government’s actions in regard of Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria.’ The document further states that ‘for subversive purposes, he uses various online media and social networks. In addition, Mutsolgov had organised various seminars, workshops, and forums.’ The document also states that Mutsolgov allegedly ‘acts in a very secretive manner, trying to conceal his involvement in extremism. He only uses proven channels and proxies. He manufactures and stores various extremist materials aimed at inciting ethnic hatred in society, and also other items prohibited for free circulation in Russia.’

It is hard to believe that a judge has written these words today in 2015 and not at the time of Soviet repression. This document stylistically reminds of a different historical era and is ridiculous in its content; what is more, it directly contradicts the law. While Mutsolgov is neither a suspect nor a witness in any criminal proceedings, the wording of the said document gives us grave concerns over potentially serious consequences.

The absurdity of accusations against Mutsolgov is clear to anyone who knows Magomed and his work, including his contribution to this Forum. Magomed Mutsolgov is a well-known expert in Russia and internationally and is an authoritative and respected human rights defender. His sincerity, honesty, and patriotism cannot be questioned. For many years, Magomed and his organisation have provided legal assistance to victims of human rights violations in the North Caucasus, including IDPs, victims of arbitrary
detention, and families of victims of abductions and enforced disappearances. Magomed and his colleagues have on many occasions harshly criticised the government's actions, which cause human rights violations, but it is precisely due to MASHR's consistent effort, professionalism, and commitment that many human rights violations have been stopped, many people assisted, and numerous lives saved.

Magomed says he has been warned many times that the authorities may bring criminal charges against him to force him to stop his open criticism of the authorities, close his organisation's newspaper and website, and refuse to publish monitoring reports and engaging in human rights advocacy. But despite the threats and pressure, including the latest episode with the judge's order and the raid on 6 November, Magomed has declared that his organisation will continue working and helping victims of human rights violations.

We are convinced that advancement of rule of law and protection of human rights is the best way to prevent extremism and terrorism.

We urge the Russian authorities to stop the pressure on Magomed Mutsolgov and MASHR, and we will follow the situation closely. We also wish to remind that any illegal pressure and persecution targeting civil society activists for their human rights work, including, inter alia, their criticism of government, violate the Russian Constitution and Russia's international obligations.

We extend our support and solidarity to Magomed Mutsolgov, our friend and colleague.

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment 150 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are member of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history, and civic education.