



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

## **STATEMENT BY THE STEERING COMMITTEE OF THE EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ON ATTACKS AGAINST CIVIC ACTIVISTS IN KHMINKI FOREST**

**24 May 2011**

The Steering Committee of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum express most serious concern in relation to continued acts of violence, attacks and threats against civic activists, defending the Khimki forest in the Moscow Region from illegal logging in the course of construction of Moscow - Saint Petersburg highway. According to reliable sources, numerous attacks against activists by private security staff of the construction company and groups of unknown people covering their faces with masks and wearing Nazi symbols on their clothes have been happening for several months with direct connivance by and sometimes with support from the law enforcement bodies. Lately this alarming situation has clearly deteriorated and requires resolute actions to stop violence, investigate all incidents of attacks and bringing perpetrators to justice.

Confrontation around construction of the highway through the Khimki forest has developed for several years. According to many experts, the decision made about the route of the highway through the forest violates the Russian law on "On the transfer of land or land plots from one category to another", according to which this transfer of the land of the forestal park would be permitted only when there were no other option for the placement of the highway. In this case, alternatives exist. Many local residents and environmental activists express their disagreement with the decision about his particular routing of the road which will lead to the destruction of the valuable forestal park. By peaceful protests they are trying to draw attention to the problem and stop the logging, conducted without permissions required by the law.

Khimki forest defenders have long been a target of criminal attacks. During the last few years dozens of activists and journalists have been a subject of brutal attacks, illegal shadowing, threats and beatings. As a result, two people became handicapped, one died, and a few sustained serious injuries.

The law enforcement authorities, instead of investigating the attacks and protecting the civic activists from criminal assault in the course of their peaceful and legitimate activity to protect the right for healthy and favorable environment, regularly engage in acts of violence against the defenders of the forest, in essence acting in solidarity with the bandits. During the last year the riot police officers repeatedly brutally and cruelly applied ungrounded and disproportionate force while illegally detaining activists during peaceful protest actions, in an ecological camp and even after a press-conference. Most recently riot police again conducted several attacks against environmental activists, having violently and illegally detained and brutally beaten many Khimki forest defenders. According to testimonies from witnesses and victims, police officers were joined in their beating of environmentalists by private security guards of "Vityaz" security company as well as unidentified criminal types.

At the same time, crimes massively committed against the forest defenders remain uninvestigated for several years. The urban district of Khimki has become a territory in which civil activists every day have to fear for their lives and liberty, the safety of their children and



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loved ones. In essence, the police do not protect civic activists and their families from the criminals but prevents their legitimate civic activities.

The Steering Committee of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum strongly condemns systematic illegal violence from the criminal elements against civic activists engaged in defense of the Khimki forest as well as against journalists covering this important for the society situation. Impunity for these actions, lack of effective investigation, and complicity of the law enforcement bodies with the criminal acts of aggression as well as cruel treatment, illegal detention, and beating of activists by the police cause our sincere indignation. This intolerable situation has to be stopped.

We call on the Russian authorities to take resolute and effective action to protect civil society in Khimki, promptly and effectively investigate all crimes committed against the activists, and bring perpetrators to justice. The government has a duty to protect peaceful and legitimate activity of civic activists according to its international human rights obligations.

In addition to that, we call on the Russian authorities to pay the outmost attention to claims about violations of environmental legislation and corruption interests in the course of taking decisions about construction of the Moscow-St Petersburg highway. This allegations raise legitimate concerns among many Russian citizens and experts. Public interests require conducting as many expert assessments as necessary to provide answers to all questions the public is concerned about.

We call on the authorities in the European Union and France, where the company Vinci participating in the project of construction of the highway is registered, to give legal and moral assessment of the developments around the Khimki forest and the role of representatives of European business in them.

**Fraser Cameron** (EU-Russia Centre, Brussels)

**Oksana Chelysheva** (FINROSFORUM - Finnish-Russian Civic Forum, Helsinki)

**Yuri Dzhibladze** (Center for Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Moscow)

**Alexey Kozlov** (Groza, Voronezh)

**Stefan Melle** (German-Russian exchange, Berlin)

**Danuta Przywara** (Helsinki-Komitee, Warsaw)

**Olga Sadovskaya** (Committee Against Torture, Nizhny Novgorod)

**Sergey Simak** (Socio-Ecological Union, Samara)

**Natalia Taubina** (Public Verdict, Moscow)

**Rostislav Valvoda** (People in Need, Prague)