

This collection of reports marks the second year of the project "Monitoring of Human Rights in Russia," jointly run by the Moscow Helsinki Group and regional human rights organizations. Our previous report, for 1998, was based on the monitoring carried out by the MHG and 30 organizations from different regions of the Russian Federation. In 1999 the number of regional participants has doubled - from 30 to 60. Accordingly, our next report, the one for the year 2000, shall be prepared with participation of human rights organizations from all 89 regions of the Russian Federation.

The monitoring surveys by the regional organizations provide us with objective and complete information on the situation of human rights in Russia. We cannot help but point out that the All-Russia Report and regional reports indicate some glaring discrepancies between Russian constitutional guarantees and international obligations, on the one hand, and daily realities of life, on the other.

Several events that took place in 1999 exerted an especially strong influence over the current political situation and even more so over the human rights situation in Russia. They were, firstly, the invasion in Daghestan by units of Chechen fighters in August 1999. Secondly, a series of bomb attacks on apartment buildings in Moscow and other Russian cities, which resulted in a vast loss of life. Thirdly, the spread of hostilities, which started in Daghestan and moved on to Chechnya, referred to officially as an "anti-terrorist operation." Fourthly, the State Duma elections of the Russian Federation. And finally, President Yeltsin's notorious resignation speech of December 31, 1999 in which he named Vladimir Putin as Acting President and his most desirable successor.

The invasion of Daghestan by Chechen units inspired a train of thought rather typical of Russian mentality. An unexpected unprovoked attack took place, therefore, the attackers must be rebuffed and the war must end in complete victory attained by any possible means. Accordingly, during the Daghestan campaign, the federal troops had mass support from the population. The retreat of Chechen fighters caused quite a soar of nationalist sentiments and was generally perceived as long-awaited compensation for Russian defeats in the first Chechen war.

The Russian media and public opinion interpreted the bomb explosions in the Russian cities as the Chechens' revenge for Daghestan and the Federal troops' invasion in Chechnya. In this tense atmosphere, the operation, of which the official aim was to clear Chechen fighters from the territory of Daghestan, developed into a new full-fledged war against Chechnya. In the public opinion it was "a just war" and, with the situation being so favorable for the Russian military, the hostilities turned into mass terror against the entire population of Chechnya. The actions of the Russian civilian and military authorities in blocking access to independent information on the developments in Chechnya were, in fact, conducive to that mass terror. Military censorship prevented not only publications on the sufferings of the civilian population, but even on the real

figures concerning losses of federal troops. It also helped to support nationalist sentiments in the society.

I have to admit that the Russian media did not make any noticeable protest against military censorship and did not fight against illegitimate deprivation of access to information about the situation in Chechnya and relevant developments elsewhere. Moreover, numerous Russian mass media bodies clearly introduced self-censorship. The same thing happened with different political parties in the country. The State Duma election was coming up, and so they chose to play up to the mass public opinion. Even the Union of the Right Forces (SPS) expressed their approval of the federal troops' actions (even if with certain restrictions) and their support of Vladimir Putin, who became a symbol of the Russian revenge. Anti-democratic trends were seen not only in Chechnya but also in many Russian regions. That process became particularly obvious during the State Duma election of December 1999. Regional and local authorities openly supported certain candidates (which is forbidden under the law). Regional leaders gave administrative support to their favorites in the election race and blocked the opponents' campaigns. They persuaded election commissions to deny registration to some of the candidates and to de-register some of those registered at an earlier date. They also ignored flagrant breaches of the election law by the candidates under their patronage.

The media was subjected to even heavier pressure than before. Mass media bodies controlled by the authorities became less free in expressing their opinions. Quite a few independent mass media bodies were put under the control of or destroyed by administrative and financial means. Significant pressure was also exerted over NGOs. This was particularly evident in the process of mandatory re-registration, which Russian NGOs had to undergo in 1999. The situation of ecological, human rights and religious organizations was especially unfortunate in that respect. In light of the fact that these pressuring policies were pervasive across the entire territory of the Russian Federation, we can actually talk of a systematic governmental campaign, as a result of which a great many NGOs failed to qualify for registration or were not re-registered. Their charters were examined extremely carefully and the most petty mistakes or deviations from bureaucratic rules were used to deny registration or re-registration. It is also notable that human rights NGOs were advised to exclude the very words "human rights" from their names and the words "protection of human rights" from their charters. Evidently, the authorities' aim was to reduce the number of NGOs, free themselves from public control, and impede the formation of civil society, that crucially important process which is now taking place across the entire territory of the country.

The year 1999 also saw intensified encroachments by law-enforcement organs, especially the Procuracy and Federal Security Service, on the freedom of conscience and on the right to spread information. The cases of espionage were particularly illustrative in this respect. After such cases against Alexander Nikitin, Grigory Pasko and Vladimir Soifer had been dismissed, the Federal

Security Service tried to initiate similar accusations against persons in other spheres. In October 1999, Igor Sutyagin, a specialist in the field of armament control, was arrested for "divulgence of state secrets." He has been incarcerated to this very day, in spite of the fact that he had no access to secret information and the accusations against him were built from his own analytical publications evaluating the Russian armament, which he had compiled by studying open data on this subject.

In 1999, Russian courts were very severe to those citizens that insisted on the realization of their constitutional right to alternative civil service as a replacement for military service. Such cases were numerous, the most notorious one being that of a pacifist from the Kaluga Region, Dmitry Neverovsky, who spent almost six months in custody.

The year 1999 also brought with it complete suspension of efforts to carry out the proposed judicial reform, which is vital to the establishment of the rule of law in Russia. Moreover, several judges known for their strict adherence to the Constitution and the rule of law in general were banished from the judicial corps so as to forewarn the others from being too bold.

In 1999, manifestations of xenophobia, including nationalism, which I mentioned above in connection with the Chechen conflict, were pervasive in the country and were directed not only against the people of Chechen descent, but against all nationals of the Caucasus. Manifestations of anti-Semitism were also numerous. The authorities showed unfortunate passivity in this regard.

It should be noted, though, that despite the extremely adverse situation in the country, Russian NGOs, and particularly human rights organizations, continued to develop fast in 1999. All over the country, new human rights organizations sprang up, while the already existing ones grew in membership and achieved greater professionalism in their work. Human right NGOs have been the most independent and objective sources of information about the mass violations of human rights in Chechnya and about the situation of refugees from that region. In December of 1999, local human rights organizations from 70 regions of the Russian Federation monitored the elections to the State Duma, and their reports represent the most complete source of information on violations committed in course of the election race on the voting day.

This collection of reports based on the findings of the human rights monitoring surveys in the Russian regions, which we are happy to present today, shows that in Russia there are numerous efficient provincial NGOs capable of successfully joining their efforts to safeguard the rights and freedoms of our citizens. This apt network of NGOs is a new phenomenon for Russia. Its emergence testifies to the fact that the formation of civil society is indeed taking place in contemporary Russia.