



In partnership with Memorial Human Rights Centre (MHRC), the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) and Article 42 of the Constitution

## Racism in Russia

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"*Racism is a global phenomenon*" said Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. "*No country, no region, is free of this social ill – including the European countries*".<sup>1</sup>

These observations have been borne out in Russia over the last year. The SOVA Centre on Nationalism and Xenophobia reported that in 2008 at least 87 people were killed and 378 wounded in racist attacks. This slight change from 2007 (at least 86 killed and 599 wounded) may result more from under-reporting, rather than any reduction in the number of attacks.<sup>2</sup> The ferocity of these attacks is illustrated by a case in December 2008, when ultra-nationalists attacked two Tajik migrant workers. One escaped wounded, but the body of the other was later found beheaded. The attackers claimed responsibility by sending out pictures of his severed head.<sup>3</sup>

The State has taken some action against the perpetrators of these racist incidents: 105 people were convicted for violent hate crimes and 55 for producing hate propaganda.<sup>4</sup> The penalties imposed by the courts have occasionally been severe, as in the case of the 'Ryno gang', a neo-Nazi group charged with 20 murders and 12 attempted murders on members of ethnic

minorities in Moscow. The leaders of the group were both minors when they committed the murders and were sentenced to the maximum 10 years' imprisonment, while other members received sentences ranging from six to 20 years.<sup>5</sup> However, other cases saw a far more lenient and ineffectual approach: 29 people convicted for hate crimes only received suspended sentences.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian government has adopted some measures to fight the increase in racist attacks, particularly its new 'anti-extremism' laws. This legislation has certainly helped fight racism and hate crimes, particularly in outlawing and banning racist groups. However, its results have not been wholly positive; it does not speak of 'racism' or 'xenophobia', but of 'extremism' in general and it has been arbitrarily enforced, with some extremist groups being proscribed while others maintain contacts with the Government itself. Russian NGOs have noted that the Government has not only used the laws in order to combat racist groups, but also to suppress political opponents and silence critics. This has only served to politicise the fight against racism and undermine it in the eyes of the public.<sup>7</sup>

Russian NGOs have concluded that racism by State authorities remains widespread, particular in respect of racially

selective arrests and identity checks by the police as well as criminal charges fabricated by prosecutors against members of ethnic minorities.<sup>8</sup> The Government has itself launched campaigns against ethnic groups, particularly against Georgians in 2006, during which many had their visa or work permits cancelled and were deported from Russia.<sup>9</sup> Such Government actions legitimise racial discrimination and help fuel hatred of ethnic minorities amongst the public. Politicians have exploited these sentiments - in September 2008 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (part of the Council of Europe) noted an increase in the use of racist and xenophobic rhetoric in Russian politics itself.<sup>10</sup>

Racism is certainly not a problem exclusive to Russia. But no country – least of all a signatory to numerous human rights conventions – should see 500 victims of racist violence a year and countless instances of discrimination. The Russian Government has taken some commendable political and legal measures to prevent racism and extremism. But they have been partly tainted by their use against political opposition as well. It can only be hoped that in the future, racism in Russia will be recognised for what it truly is: in the words of Commissioner Hammarberg, 'a social ill'.

1 Hammarberg, T. & Kjaerum, M. 4 December 2008. *Joint Statement: Do not miss the opportunity to step up the global fight against racism and discrimination!* [Online]. Available at: <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1382653>.

2 SOVA Centre. December 2008. *Preliminary Annual Results*. [Online]. Available at: <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB41EE/C4055C6>.

3 SOVA Centre. 15 December 2008. *Savage Attack on Guest Workers from Tajikistan near Moscow*. [Online]. Available at: <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/>

6BB41EE/C2E428F.

4 Supra 2.

5 SOVA Centre. 15 December 2008. *A Neo-Nazi Group Convicted in Moscow*. [Online]. Available at: <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB41EE/C2E45E5>.

6 Supra 2.

7 Russian NGOs. 12 August 2008. *Alternative Report on Compliance of the Russian Federation with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial*

*Discrimination*. paras. 45-50. [Online]. Available at: <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4254/B8954EB>.

8 Ibid. paras. 69-81.

9 Ibid. paras. 82-101.

10 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. *Round Table in the Russian Federation: Briefing Paper*. [Online]. Available at: [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/31-Round\\_Table\\_Russia\\_2008/RT\\_Russia\\_briefing\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/31-Round_Table_Russia_2008/RT_Russia_briefing_en.asp).