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**Latest Commissioner for Human Rights'
Report on Russia**

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This article summarises the main points of the Report by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe on his visit, in July and September 2004, to the Russian Federation – 20th April 2005

The Russian Federation has undergone sweeping changes since the first Council of Europe report on its human rights situation nine years ago. The Report of the Commissioner aims to highlight the current human rights situation and recommend ways that the Russian Federation can ameliorate any human rights issues. The Report is not an exhaustive account of all human rights issues but concentrates on several significant human rights issues facing the Russian Federation namely, changes in the legal system, activities of the law enforcement agencies and reform of the prison system, rights of national minorities, foreigners and migrants, problems of xenophobia and racism, the situation in the Chechen Republic, respect for human rights in the armed forces, religious freedoms, freedom of the media, problems linked to the health service, vulnerable people and non-judicial means of protecting human rights. Themes of under-funding and lack of material resources, difficulties with the implementation of legislation, the need to change societal attitudes, lack of co-ordination between federal and regional authorities and disparities in standards between regions tend to be at the root of each significant issue. While the Report praises the extensive legislative reforms made in a very short period of time and the efforts of those involved in reform, it is clear that most of the current shortcomings in ensuring human rights within the region lie in the lack of implementation of such reforms. Greatly increased funding and a change in societal attitude are required to enable these reforms to come to fruition.

The Report emphasises the need for substantial renovation and physical improvement of the courts, detention centres, police stations, prisons and hospitals together with an improvement of living conditions for the armed forces, vulnerable people and particularly those within the Chechen Republic. Strengthening the independence of both the judiciary and media was proposed alongside increasing the training, salaries and prestige of the

police, legal and medical personnel. Tackling corruption was also seen as a necessity across the board.

One of the major positive developments highlighted in the Report was the respect given to minorities within the Russian Federation, although the treatment of the Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar was noted as a sad departure from the norm. While respect for minorities was apparent, problems still abounded in relation to xenophobia and racism. In order to combat such problems the Report recommended firm implementation of the relevant legislation and an increase in and enforcement of penalties, especially on politicians and the media. In relation to immigration, foreigners and refugee rights, the Report suggested that more legal and political thought was needed to be given to these issues.

The Commissioner was very firm in his recommendations regarding the situation in the Chechen Republic, particularly in relation to stopping the practice of 'disappearances', the broader need for economic and civil reconstruction of the Republic and the rehabilitation of the image of Chechens throughout the Federation. He tackled the issue of violence and ill-treatment as sub topics within many of the main issues, particularly, the ill-treatment of persons during interrogation by police, the practice of *dedovshchina* within the armed forces and domestic violence and trafficking of women. He suggested that methods to combat such practices were created and implemented alongside the imposition of severe sanctions. It was noted that a change in societal and institutional mentality is necessary in order to stop a climate of impunity and prevent such abuses. The Report also recommended that Federal and Regional authorities clear up any ambiguities between any clashing legislation and, in particular, plug the gaps between federal framework legislation and needed regional measures with regard to the care of street children (*bezprizorniki*).

The Report highlights the fact that urgent and far-reaching measures need to be taken to address the serious shortcomings of the health service and social welfare system. The general health of Russians has declined since the start of the 1990s and, due to the lack of reimbursements of medicines and long waiting times, many are effectively denied access to health services. The Commissioner strongly recommended that more reimbursements for medicines and care be made and hospitals modernised. In relation to the social welfare system, he suggested that the decline of social and economic conditions of pensioners, in particular, requires address. It is this attitude of 'more needs to be done' that pervades the Report. Praise is given for the amount achieved in such a small period of time and the recognition given that important steps have been taken, especially in relation to legislation, but much more is required to implement these measures and fulfil their promise. The difficulty in attaining such fulfilment lies in the overwhelming need for more funding across the board, for every issue is one of priority. The Commissioner's advice to the Russian Federation to consider joining the Council of Europe Development Bank may prove useful in this regard.

The full Russian Version of the Report can be found at http://www.coe.int/T/E/Commissioner_H.R/Communication_Unit/Documents/pdf.CommDH%282005%292_Rus.pdf

The full English Version of the Report can be found at http://www.coe.int/T/E/Commissioner_H.R/Communication_Unit/Documents/pdf.CommDH%282005%292_E.pdf