



PHILIPPE DAM

Oral Statement
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Item 6 - Adoption of the outcome of the UPR of Russia

Human Rights Watch welcomes the Universal Periodic Review report on Russia, which includes numerous recommendations to improve the human rights situation in the country, including the concrete steps Russia needs to take to protect free expression and foster a normal working climate for civil society.

The most widely addressed issue during Russia's review was the crackdown on civil society that has been under way in the past 16 months. The crackdown has featured a series of laws restricting the rights to freedom of association, expression, and assembly.

Many delegations at the Human Rights Council flagged concern about a law adopted in July 2012, requiring NGOs that receive foreign funding and engage in "political activities" to register as "foreign agents," a term that in Russia is ubiquitously used to refer to "spies" or "traitors," and urged Russia to rescind or significantly amend it. They also voiced concern about the unprecedented wave of government inspections of NGOs in Russia that followed and recommended to foster healthy working climate for civil society groups. The Russian delegation said the aim of the inspections was to "encourage" relevant NGOs to register as foreign agents so that the public "knows whose interests they represent." Persistent failure to register can lead to an organization's suspension and criminal charges against its leader. The rejection by Russia of these recommendations is deeply regrettable, and serves to underscore the need for further, sustained pressure.

The Russian delegation claimed the law was not "repressive," however the implementation of the law clearly evidences its punitive nature. Human Rights Watch is presently aware of more than 80 groups that have received warnings or orders to register as "foreign agents" or have been taken to court by the authorities in connection with the "foreign agents" law.

Human Rights Watch's review of warnings and violation notices issued to NGOs by the prosecutor's office following inspections shows that Russia's prosecutor's office interprets as "political" a very broad spectrum of advocacy and outreach activities.

In the wake of the government's inspection campaign, numerous organizations have suffered varied degrees of harassment from both officials and private actors, including violent attacks by ultranationalists apparently emboldened by the "foreign agents" campaign. Since June, President Putin has repeatedly said the law would be amended. However, it remains unchanged to date.

In response to concerns voiced by numerous delegations regarding the restrictive law on public assemblies, the Russian delegation committed to lowering fines for violations of rules governing public protests, as recommended in a March 2013 ruling by Russia's Constitutional Court. Concrete steps in this direction have yet to be taken.

We ~~regret~~ deeply regret that Russia rejected the recommendations to repeal the regional laws banning "homosexual propaganda" in 11 Russian regions as well as what was then a similar federal draft law. On June 29 President Putin signed the federal bill into law, banning exposing children to "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships." The federal law bans distribution among minors of positive information and communication about LGBT issues, making LGBT persons appear alien or unnatural to Russian society. It degrades LGBT persons and puts them at heightened risk of violence. President Putin said in an interview in September that in Russia "people of nontraditional sexual orientation are not discriminated against in any way" and they are treated as valued and equal citizens. Human Rights Watch strongly encourages all Council members to urge Russia's leadership to immediately introduce a bill to repeal the law on "propaganda" and to speak out against and veto any further legislation that discriminates against LGBT people.

This discriminatory law raises serious concerns as Russia is hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. It is fundamentally at odds with the Olympic Charter's requirement to reject discrimination because it is "incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement". As a sponsor of a resolution at this session of the Human Rights Council on Promoting Human Rights through Sport and the Olympic Ideal, Russia should be urged to abide by such principles.

Preparations themselves for the games have involved such human rights abuses as denial of wages to and other mistreatment of many migrant workers building Olympic venues and infrastructure. We ~~regret~~ that Russia has ~~rejected~~ a recommendation to investigate these abuses. We also note that the authorities have harassed activists concerned about the impact of the construction of Olympic venues on the environment and livelihoods of residents, and have not provided a fair process for compensating residents evicted from their homes to make way for construction. Human Rights Watch urges Council members to call on Russia to live up to its human rights obligations in its final preparations for the games.