



VOICE STATEMENT

Russian Law on NGOs Impact on European Humanitarian Aid in the Northern Caucasus

On the eve of the third Round of the EU-Russia human rights consultations on 3 March, VOICE (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies) would like to draw the attention of EU decision makers to the negative impact which the Russian Federal Law on Non-Governmental and Non-for-profit Organizations will most likely have on the delivery of humanitarian aid in the Northern Caucasus.

Signed by President Putin on 10 January, the above law will come into force on 10 April 2006. The law contains overly complicated administrative and fiscal requests for the registration procedure of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and will highly increase State control and surveillance over their activities.

Ten years after the first conflict in Chechnya started, living conditions in the region have deteriorated and despite official statements, Chechnya is still in a conflict situation. The present budgetary commitment of the European Commission makes the EU assistance to the region the EU's fifth biggest humanitarian operation worldwide and the EU the largest donor in the region. The delivery of this humanitarian aid through international and local NGOs has been and is still crucial in order to respond to the basic and medical needs of the civilian population.

VOICE, the European network representing 90 humanitarian NGOs, is particularly concerned about the consequences which the new Russian legislation on NGOs could have on the delivery of humanitarian aid in Chechnya but also in other parts of the Northern Caucasus:

- According to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (in particular Art. 27 of the fourth Geneva Convention), the civilian population in the Northern Caucasus is entitled to humanitarian relief. The most vulnerable parts of the population will be left without assistance, should the new Russian Federal Law on NGOs further complicate the access of civilian humanitarian actors to the affected areas.
- The Russian authorities are responsible for ensuring the security of humanitarian staff and removing artificial administrative burden. This is in line with the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality, which are the base for the provision of humanitarian assistance according to the Geneva Conventions. Since 1995, administrative restrictions and the lack of operational security have hampered the delivery of humanitarian aid and the new law will worsen the situation and further deteriorate the working conditions for humanitarian organisations. Access and humanitarian space will be severely reduced.

Emphasising the importance of independent and impartial humanitarian relief and the urgent need to improve the precarious living conditions of the civilian population in the Northern Caucasus, VOICE is calling on the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission:

- to remind the authorities of the Russian Federation of their legal obligations under IHL (Art. 1 of the fourth Geneva Convention) concerning access for humanitarian organisations in areas of conflict, this in line with the EU Guidelines on promoting compliance with IHL adopted by the Council in December 2005,
- to monitor the actual implementation of the Russian Federal Law on NGOs, in order to assess its impact on the delivery of humanitarian aid by international – and local - NGOs to the civilian populations in need in the Northern Caucasus.

Brussels, 28 February 2006.

VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing some 90 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. Seeking to involve its members in information, training, advocacy and lobbying, VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid, relief, rehabilitation and disaster preparedness, and promotes the values of humanitarian NGOs.

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