

Russian Human Rights Defenders at Risk

In the Russian Federation a disturbing pattern of threats and assaults against human rights activists has emerged over the past few years. No perpetrators have been brought to justice, and threats against nonviolent government critics of all kinds have escalated. The Russian authorities have also increased bureaucratic and legal harassment of human rights organizations, launching investigations and prosecutions, disrupting public events, and carrying out raids and searches on flimsy grounds. The state-controlled media periodically defames human rights activists, accusing them of being spies, terrorist sympathizers, or extremists. These measures obstruct and undermine the legitimate work of human rights activists and stifle peaceful dissent. As a State Party to binding treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, the Russian Federation is obligated to safeguard the right to life and security of person of everyone. Threats and violent assaults against human rights activists, whether from agents of the state, hired hit men or neo-Nazi youth groups, have a chilling impact on the rights of all Russians. Recent cases include:

◆ **Natalya Estemirova:** On July 15, 2009, Natalya Estemirova, a well-known Russian human rights activist, was found dead in the North Caucasus republic of Ingushetia after being kidnapped the same day in neighboring Chechnya. Estemirova worked at the Memorial human rights center, one of Russia's largest and most respectable rights groups. Traveling throughout the embattled Chechen republic, she collected information about numerous human rights violations in Chechnya: disappearances, kidnappings, extrajudicial executions. In addition to reporting, Estemirova also provided support to the victims and their families by helping them to find medical and legal aid and psychological assistance. Internationally, her work was recognized with a Robert Schuman Medal, the Inaugural Politkovskaya Award, and others. [Read More](#)→



Estemirova

◆ **Yury Samodurov and Andrey Erofeev:** On May 13, 2009, Yury Samodurov, a human rights activist and the Director of the Sakharov Museum in Moscow, and Andrey Erofeev, recently dismissed from his position as a curator at the State Tretyakov Gallery, were charged with violating Article 282(2)(b) of the Russian Criminal Code (incitement to national and religious hatred) for the "Forbidden Art—2006" exhibition. The works displayed had been refused by other museums, and the purpose of the exhibition was thus to study "the nature and tendencies of institutional censorship in the area of culture." The two men could be sentenced to up to five years imprisonment. [Read More](#)→

Samodurov /
Erofeev

◆ **Lev Ponomarev:** On March 31, 2009, 67-year-old activist Lev Ponomarev, one of Russia's most prominent human rights figures, was attacked and seriously injured by several unidentified assailants outside his apartment building in Moscow. Ponomarev was a trusted aide of Andrei Sakharov during the elections for People's Deputies of the USSR, and later became the founding director of the organization *Za Prava Cheloveka* (For Human Rights) and cofounder of the Memorial Rights Group. His work covers a wide range of issues, including abuses in the penal system, human rights violations in the North Caucasus, pensioners' and children's rights, and the rights to freedom of assembly and expression. [Read More](#)→



Ponomarev

- ◆ **Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova.** On January 19, 2009, Stanislav Markelov—a human rights defender, lawyer, and founder of the Rule of Law Institute—was gunned down in the middle of the afternoon in downtown Moscow. Anastasia Baburova, a young freelance reporter working for *Novaya Gazeta*, was fatally shot in the same attack. A well-known and respected figure in Russia’s human rights community, Markelov represented victims of human rights abuses in Chechnya, independent journalists, including Anna Politkovskaya and Igor Domnikov, as well as victims of neo-Nazi violence. Anastasia Baburova wrote about street protests, demonstrations, youth movements, and high-profile court cases, including the latest ruling against Russian skinhead violence. [Read More](#)→



Baburova / Markelov

- ◆ **The SOVA Center:** In 2009, extreme nationalist groups intensified their threats against the leading monitor of racist and bias crimes in Russia, the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis. On multiple occasions, in particular ahead of press conferences concerning the involvement of extremist groups in violence against ethnic and religious minorities, the Center’s Director, Alexander Verkhovsky, and Deputy Director, Galina Kozhevnikova, received direct threats. SOVA is Human Rights First’s main partner in its work combating hate crimes and discrimination in Russia and provides invaluable analysis of rising hate violence. [Read More](#)→



Verkhovsky / Kozhevnikova

- ◆ **Memorial St. Petersburg:** The activities of the Scientific-Information Center Memorial were stalled for six months as a result of a police raid on its office. The Saint Petersburg branch of the national organization researches the history of authoritarian oppression in Soviet Russia. The organization’s electronic archive and research documents had been confiscated during an investigative search by masked men armed with batons on December 4, 2008, and remained in the possession of law enforcement authorities until May 2009. Intergovernmental bodies, international human rights groups, and scholarly institutions have appealed to the Russian authorities for the return of the materials. The case of Memorial is a clear example of the misuse of anti-extremism legislation to target human rights advocates and other government critics with baseless criminal investigations and prosecutions. [Read More](#)→



Memorial

- ◆ **Karina Moskalenko:** Karinna Moskalenko, Russia’s best-known human rights lawyer, and her children were victims of an apparent poisoning attempt in France in October 2008. A preliminary search of Moskalenko’s car revealed a deposit of liquid elemental mercury apparently intended to emit harmful vapor in the vehicle. As Director of the Moscow-based International Protection Center, which assists victims of human rights violations in Russia in submitting complaints to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, Moskalenko represents many victims of violations related to the conflict in Chechnya. Moskalenko’s high-profile clients include Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the family of Anna Politkovskaya. [Read More](#)→



Moskalenko

- ◆ **Anna Politkovskaya:** In October 2006, prominent investigative journalist and human rights defender Anna Politkovskaya was fatally shot at her apartment building in a manner consistent with a contract killing. After a deeply flawed police investigation, on February 19, 2009, a Moscow court acquitted four men accused of helping to organize the murder. Russia’s Supreme Court had overturned the acquittal in June 2009, ordering a new jury trial. The failure to identify and to bring to justice those responsible for one of the most brazen killings of a human rights defender has a chilling effect on activists and investigative journalists throughout Russia. [Read More](#)→



Politkovskaya