President of the Russian Federation  
Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin,  
g. Moskva, Kreml  
Russian Federation  

25 March 2005  

Dear President Putin:  

We are writing to express our grave concern about the prosecution of two human rights professionals and an artist associated with Moscow’s Sakharov Museum and Public Centre. The director of the Sakharov Centre, Yuri Samodurov, faces up to three years imprisonment in a penal colony on charges of “inciting religious hatred” and offending Orthodox believers. The museum’s curator, Ludmila Vasilovskaya, and artist Anna Mikhalchuk are also charged and face imprisonment if convicted. The prosecution has requested the court to issue bans on Samodurov and Vasilovskaya holding office in organizations and to order the destruction of all of the works of art shown in the exhibition. A verdict is expected on March 28 in Moscow’s Taganskaya District Court.

These charges were brought after a group of young men attacked the museum’s “Caution! Religion” exhibit in January 2003, destroying art works and painting slogans. A Moscow court declined to proceed with charges of “hooliganism” brought against the attackers on the grounds that the exhibition had provoked their actions. In December 2003, Samodurov, Vasilovskaya, and Mikhalchuk were indicted as the principal organizers of an exhibition described in the indictment as “insulting and offensive to Christianity in general and to Orthodox Christianity and the Russian Orthodox Church in particular.”

Human Rights First believes that the three are being prosecuted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and that the prosecution is motivated by the fact that Yuri Samodurov and Ludmila Vasilovskaya are leaders of one of the only human rights institutions in Russia that provides a public forum for discussion of the Chechen war and other sensitive human rights issues.

It is ironic that these prosecutions are based on hate crimes legislation in the criminal code enacted to protect minorities’ freedom of expression and religion and to provide safeguards against threats and physical assault. In this case, the seldom-
enforced hate crimes law is being used not to protect the rights and safety of minorities but rather as a political tool to suppress dissent and to advance religious intolerance. It comes in the context of a rising tide of hate crimes by extremist nationalist, religious, and racist groups in the Russian Federation, and attacks on those investigating these attacks. Among them, Nikolai Girenko, an expert witness on hate crimes who testified in the Sakharov Centre case in August 2003, was murdered in June 2004. The crime has reportedly remained unsolved.

We believe that Samodurov, Vasilovskaya, and Mikhalchuk are victims of hate crimes, rather than perpetrators, and their prosecution threatens to chill freedom of thought and religion in Russia and to destroy the human rights institutions that provide a forum for independent discussion and debate. We hope that is not the intention of your government and that you will take steps to remedy the harm that has been done and to provide safeguards against its recurrence. Should Samodorov, Vasilovskaya and Mikhalchuk be convicted of the charges against them, we urge you to issue an immediate pardon. In addition, we ask that you take steps now to ensure that laws designed to combat extremism and hate crimes not be misused to foment religious intolerance and stifle freedom of expression. Finally, we request that you put safeguards in place immediately to prevent further assaults on the Sakharov Museum and Public Centre and its personnel.

Thank you for your attention to this serious matter. We look forward to receiving your reply.

Respectfully,

Elisa Massimino

Washington Director
Human Rights First