

Pressure on Russia's civil society at an alarming level

By Dr Mark Barwick, Human Rights Without Frontiers

On 15th of May, MEP Werner Schulz hosted a seminar in the European Parliament entitled "Russia's Civil Society Under Pressure: What the EU should do." Mr Werner is the Vice-Chair of the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee.

Throughout the seminar, it was apparent that Russian civil society is undergoing an unprecedented crisis, as it faces increasingly tough restrictions from the government of President Vladimir Putin. Yuri Dzhibladze of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum emphasised that the situation is most probably at a tipping point. In recent weeks, there has been an extraordinary crack-down on civil society organisations of all sorts, the likes of which has not been seen since the Stalinist era. If the repression does not stop soon, said Dzhibladze, there will be no more independent civil society organisations in Russia by autumn of this year.

New legislation in Russia requires all civil society organisations receiving foreign donations to be registered as "foreign agents," a designation that carries the strong implication that the organisation is spying on behalf of Western countries. Since the 2012 presidential election, which returned Putin to power, popular unrest prompted the Russian Duma to pass a series of repressive laws that were designed to destroy civil society.

Golos, a Moscow-based organisation for the protection of Russians' electoral rights and to defend civil society, was the first to be targeted for government sanction. Lilia Shibanova, director of Golos (meaning "voice"), testified, saying that her organisation has already been brought to trial and will likely be shut down. Numerous opposition activists have now fled the country. Currently, hundreds of non-governmental organisations are under government scrutiny in view of criminalising their activities and closing their operations.

Various presenters outlined recommendations for policy makers that could reverse this worrisome trend, ensure fundamental liberties in Russia and support civil society. There is fear is that if Russia continues to harden its position toward civil society activists and organisations, other countries in the region will follow its example and similarly restrict freedoms of expression, assembly and association.