

Human Rights Defender Oyub Titiev in Chechnya Should Be Immediately Released and All Charges against Him Dropped

To the Government of the Russian Federation

18 May 2018

The 8th General Assembly (GA) of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum has gathered in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 15-18 May, 2018, bringing together more than a hundred representatives of civil society organisations from across Russia and many EU member states. Participants of the Assembly expressed their outrage about the continued incarceration of and criminal charges against our colleague Oyub Titiev, head of Human Rights Center Memorial's Grozny office in Chechnya. Our members expressed their solidarity with the persecuted human rights defender and his colleagues in "Memorial".

Oyub Titiev is highly respected in the international human rights community, as well as in the North Caucasus, where he is part of a small group of brave human rights defenders still working to uncover and document grave ongoing human rights violations. Titiev has led Memorial's work in Chechnya since the horrific murder of his colleague Natalia Estemirova in 2009. In recent years, he received numerous threats aimed at making him quit human rights work.

Oyub Titiev has been held in pre-trial detention since 9 January when he was charged with the illegal possession of drugs, reportedly a large amount of marijuana. He turned these charges down in strongest terms and filed a complaint, demanding investigation of planting of the drugs on him by the police. Similar trumped-up charges have previously led to several years' imprisonment for activists and independent journalists in Chechnya. Framing people for drug crimes has become an increasingly frequent tactic used by Chechnya's authorities to punish and discredit their critics in the eyes of society.

We are convinced that Titiev was arrested in retaliation for his human rights work, without any plausible proof of his guilt. We consider the suggestion that a highly experienced human rights defender, former school teacher, a well-known proponent of healthy lifestyle and a devout Muslim such as 60 year-old Oyub Titiev would travel around Chechnya with any amount of drugs in his car to be totally absurd, and to be an evidence only of the tactics employed by Chechen authorities against principled human rights defenders. We believe Chechen authorities are seeking to frame Titiev and close down the extremely important work of Human Rights Center Memorial in the region by threats and harassment.

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls on the Russian government to immediately release Oyub Titiev, as there are no legal grounds for his detention in custody. Secondly, we demand a full and

impartial investigation into Titiev's complaint about a crime on the part of police officers who allegedly planted the drugs into his car. Most urgently, both the Titiev case and investigation of his complaint should be transferred from the regional to the federal level, as there is no hope for a just investigation in today's Chechnya, especially after numerous derogatory and threatening statements against human rights defenders by the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov. We believe that all charges against Oyub Titiev should be dropped as he is being punished solely in retaliation for his legitimate and peaceful human rights work.

The Russian Federation is under an obligation to respect and enable the work of human rights defenders. Harassment, threats, attacks, and criminal prosecution on trumped-up charges of human rights organisations and activists, including Memorial Human Rights Centre and Oyub Titiev, should be immediately stopped.

On behalf of the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Co-Chairs of the Board:

Ralph du Long (the Netherlands)

Łukazs Wenerski (Poland)

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 144 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members and supporters of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history, and civic education.

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