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Børge Brende, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs,

With this letter we appeal to you to react to the Tatarstan Supreme Court's liquidation of the human rights organisation *Agora*, a 2014 Rafto Prize laureate and a member of the Russian President's Human Rights Council. On 10 February, it became the first nongovernmental organization to be liquidated by a regional Supreme Court in the Russian Federation.

The decision will be appealed to the Supreme Court, and is not yet in force, but is the first decision of liquidation based on a provision of the new Administrative Code. It shows the intention of Russian authorities to further limit freedom of expression and association in the period up to the Parliamentary elections in September.

*Agora* has been subject to attention from the authorities since its creation in 1999, but has over the last year and a half experienced intensified tax inspections and accusations of tax evasion. Finally, the Ministry of Justice initiated further inspections that led to a liquidation request. The Ministry of Justice presented three main arguments to the court for *Agora* to be liquidated. According to the arguments, *Agora* has:

- Influenced public opinion to believe that Russian authorities violate human rights,
- Published critical articles on the website of the President's Human Rights Council,
- Tried to be removed from the list of foreign agents.

On the basis of these arguments, the Supreme Court of Tatarstan ruled to forcefully liquidate the organization.

Such treatment is a clear violation of the Russian Federation's international human rights obligations. What is more, it runs counter to the UN resolution on human rights defenders that was adopted in the UN general Assembly on 17 December 2015, much due to Norwegian efforts. The resolution says that promoting respect and support for the activities of human rights defenders "is essential to the overall enjoyment of human rights".

*Agora*'s lawyers are currently involved in 300 cases in the Russian Federation, including a range of appeals to the Constitutional Court. They are also engaged in 157 cases in the European Court of Human Rights; two of which are on behalf of *Agora* itself.

Agora has won numerous cases in Russian courts, as well as in the European Courts of Human Rights. These legal victories have a substantial influence on rule of law in Russia. Agora and other networks of lawyers making efforts to use legislation to obtain justice are important for the further development of constitutionalism and rule of law in the country.

Agora stands out together with a range of other human rights organizations, representing a new generation of law-oriented activists and experts, who are not afraid of challenging those in power by referring to the law. They are willing to stand up against an authoritarian state in protection of individual rights. As they appeal to Russian courts for justice in individual cases, it is also a way of promoting respect for the independence of the judiciary and rule of law in the longer term.

The 2014 Rafto Prize was awarded to Agora in recognition of their relentless and professional work to defend the right to fair trial and other human rights in a Russia where organisations and individuals are subjected to increasing pressure from the country's authorities. The foreign agent law precluded Agora from accepting the monetary contribution normally awarded as part of the Rafto Prize for human rights work.

Now, it is time for Norway to again raise this issue with Russian counterparts and prevent further restrictions to the lawful and necessary work of human rights organisations.

By 1 February 2016, the official list of organisations categorized as "foreign agents" by the Ministry of Justice comprised 94 organisations. Several other organisations are under scrutiny by authorities in order to be included on the list that in public is understood as a list of traitors. There is reason to believe Agora is only the first in line to be liquidated by court order and more organisations will follow – the election watchdog Golos has already been mentioned in this connection. Golos is already on the list of "foreign agents", and as such banned from monitoring elections.

It is hardly a coincidence that the crackdown on civil society intensifies just a few months before Parliamentary Elections is scheduled to take place. However, Russian human rights activists do not give up their work.

Norway and other democratic states should stand by the activists. They need support. The democratic world should state clearly that what Russian authorities do is unacceptable. The precarious situation for human rights defenders in Russia should be highlighted publicly, and in particular in the framework of the UN Human Rights Council.

Sincerely,



Bjørn Engesland  
Secretary General  
Norwegian Helsinki Committee



Jostein Hole Kobbeltvet  
Managing Director  
Rafto Foundation for Human Rights