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Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Subject: Intolerable degradation of human rights and the rule of law in Russia

Brussels, 4th September 2013

Honourable Chairman of the Committee of Ministers,

Honourable President of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Honourable Secretary General,

We are extremely concerned that human rights and the rule of law have increasingly come under attack in Russia, to the point that new severe laws now lead directly and at alarming rates to state-sanctioned NGO closures and violence against minorities.

Since the adoption of several laws restricting freedom of expression, assembly and association, notably the 'Foreign Agents' law and bans on the discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity (the federal and regional 'anti-propaganda' laws), numerous organisations reported an increase in violent xenophobic and homophobic attacks.

Several hundred videos have emerged online, showing ultra-nationalist groups beating up and torturing LGBT persons—including teenagers—, migrants and ethnic minorities. Several groups have uploaded disturbing videos of intense humiliation, beatings and torture to Russian social network VKontakte. The videos are senselessly violent¹.

Russian organisations monitoring those grave violations also face a steady and proactive closing-down campaign. Non-governmental organisations, civil and

¹ See <http://paper-bird.net/2013/08/11/truths-behind-the-gay-torture-images-from-russia/> for a comprehensive and researched report of these videos.

political activists defending the human rights of women, young people, ethnic minorities, migrants and LGBT people are finding themselves intimidated and threatened by both vigilante groups and the police.

There is ample evidence of unfair trials in which organisations, like *Side-by-Side LGBT Film Festival*, were fined and forced to shut down. *Coming Out Saint Petersburg* was fined the maximum amount under the 'Foreign Agents' law before seeing the sentence annulled by a higher court, but they remain under the threat of a police visit. Remaining organisations are left unable to operate if they don't declare themselves 'foreign agents', subjecting themselves to disabling legal obligations.

These events bear witness to a sharp contraction of human rights and the rule of law in Russia, two pillars of European peace and stability. As a member of the Council of Europe, Russia committed itself to 'accept the principles of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within its jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms' (Article 3 of the Council of Europe Statute). We hope the seriousness of these concerns and the extreme urgency to quell these grave human rights violations will convince you to raise these concerns firmly with your Russian counterparts, and possibly consider that Russia has seriously violated Article 3 of the Statute.

We trust you will lend this important matter the high attention it deserves.

Yours sincerely,

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