

Paris, 6 May 2008

Dear First Deputy Prime Minister,

On the eve of your taking office as President of the Russian Federation, Reporters Without Borders, an international organisation that defends press freedom, winner of the 2005 Sakharov Prize, would like to draw your attention to its concerns about recent developments in terms of the right to exercise the profession of journalist in Russia.

We sent you a letter on 20 February 2008, in which we proposed four steps which would improve the state of media freedom in Russia. This consisted of amending three articles in the criminal code (Articles 120, 139 and 319) often used to launch legal proceedings against journalists, to reform the law on extremism allowing unfair cases to be brought against non-governmental organisations and independent news websites, to fight against impunity in the murders of journalists and to strengthen pluralism of opinion, especially in the broadcast sector.

Today, not only have these four issues not been resolved but the situation is in danger of worsening still further. In fact, draft amendments to the law on extremism as well as that on the media are being debated. If they are adopted in their current form, they will only further accentuate the already heavy pressure on the media. It will amount to a real encouragement to self-censorship and militate against the responsibility of journalists.

We believe that until now, self-regulation has shown the greatest efficiency in assuring the quality of media content. In addition, the power of ordering the closure of a media or sentencing journalists to prison sentences for defamation is widely disproportionate and counter-productive. They never contribute to an improvement in the press, but on the contrary prevent public debate on matters of general interest.

Mr First Deputy Prime Minister, you have stressed in recent speeches that “the law must be respected”. We can only share this point of view, as long as the laws are consistent with the respect of fundamental freedoms and free expression in particular.

That is why we hope, that in your role as President of the Russian Federation, you will

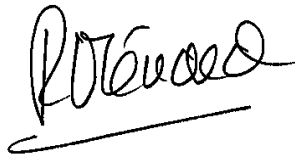
be eager to work for an improvement in the state of press freedom. We repeat our concern about the conditions in which our colleagues are required to work.

We remind you that some journalists, such as Anna Politkovskaya and Paul Klebnikov, paid for their journalistic work with their lives, without those responsible for the killings being identified and put on trial. This situation feeds doubts about the willingness of the Russian authorities to clear up these murders.

Your taking office is the occasion to send a strong message to the international community, indicating that Russia is determined to improve its record in terms of respect for freedoms.

I trust that you will give this letter your careful consideration.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Ménard', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Robert Ménard
Secretary General