



The 9th International NGO Forum on World Heritage at Risk

22-24 February 2021

Resolution

On the Criminalization of Civil Society Activists in the Russian Federation

We, the Civil Society Organizations who have attended the 9th International NGO Forum on World Heritage at Risk organized by World Heritage Watch online from 22-24 February 2021, as active and concerned citizens dealing with Natural and Cultural World Heritage properties at different places, would like to bring the following to the attention of the World Heritage Committee:

We have been informed about unprecedented pressure on the activists of the non-governmental organization Ecodefense! by the Russian State Party responsible for management and protection of the Curonian Spit National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site No. 994.

As we learned, an agency of the Russian State Party, in response to the constructive criticism contained in the Ecodefense! Report 'The Curonian Spit: In Danger of Losing Its Outstanding Universal Value', refused to accept the information on the state of the UNESCO World Heritage site as fair and accused the authors of defamation. In an interview given to reporters, the director of the Curonian Spit National Park said that he had sent a statement to the prosecutor's office and other relevant authorities, as he believes that the Ecodefense! Report harms Russia's reputation.

In accordance with the Criminal Code of the RF, updated in December 2020, which is distributed, including on the Internet, the maximum penalty for defamation is imprisonment for up to two years.

We confirm that the Ecodefense! Report does not contain anything whatsoever which could be considered defamatory. It is an extremely detailed technical description and scientific analysis of facts. Certainly it includes conclusions from this analysis which are critical of certain institutions of the Russian State Party, but these are exclusively based on facts established in the Report, and not on assumptions or attitudes. In particular, the Report does not contain any language which could be interpreted as an attack on anyone's personal integrity.

Therefore we conclude that the accusation by the agency of the Russian State Party is in its entirety unfounded and apparently fabricated in order to intimidate civil society activists whose only intention is to contribute to the protection and safeguarding of the World Heritage. It constitutes a clear infringement of the universally guaranteed human rights to freedom of speech and the expression of opinion. In the special context of the World Heritage Convention, it is in direct contradiction to Decision 41WHCOM 7.40 (Krakow 2017). The Russian Federation has ratified both the Human Rights Conventions and the World Heritage Convention and is bound by them.

Civil society organizations, as well as any individual person, have a right to submit reports to UNESCO. Making use of that right cannot be a criminal act. As a present member of the World Heritage Committee, the Russian Federation has a special obligation to uphold these rights instead of undermining them.

UNESCO, being a member of the UN family and reporting to ECOSOC, which is directly responsible for upholding the Human Rights Convention, has a special obligation to ensure that human rights are upheld in all its activities.

We call upon UNESCO and its Advisory Bodies ICOMOS, ICCROM and IUCN, as well as all State Parties to the World Heritage Convention,

- to address the Russian State Party expressing their opposition to the criminalization and intimidation by institutions of the Russian State Party of Ecodefense!, who only make use of their universal human rights;
- to request the State Party to investigate the behavior of the NP Director to understand why instead of acting in accordance with the Operational Guidelines of the Convention and providing his own arguments to respond to the criticism, this public servant chose to start a politically motivated witch hunt to punish those who criticized an alleged mismanagement of the National Park;
- to call upon the Russian State Party to stop the persecution of Ecodefense!, and to cease and desist from any future attempts to stop them from exercising their rights under the World Heritage Convention;
- to do all they can in order to protect the integrity of the processes and procedures of the World Heritage Convention and the role of civil society, including the submission of reports by civil society to the World Heritage Centre and its Advisory Bodies; and
- to establish specific policies and guidelines ensuring the full respect for, and implementation of, human rights in general and the rights of civil society in particular, in all processes and procedures of the World Heritage Convention.

Berlin, 7 April 2021