

Stanislav Markelov: The death of a Roma rights defender

IN MEMORIAM: The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) is saddened and troubled by the assassination of a prominent Russian lawyer on 19 January 2009; a lawyer who built his career on using the legal system to defend human rights and social justice. Stanislav Markelov was a former ERRC associate, a young and brilliant human rights activist. He was killed together with Anastasia Baburova, a young journalist working as a freelancer for Novaya Gazeta, a publication highly critical of the Russian government. The two had just left a news conference where Mr Markelov announced that he would continue to fight against the early release from jail of Mr Yuri Budanov, a former Russian tank commander imprisoned for murdering a young Chechen woman. Mr Markelov and Ms Baburova were killed in broad daylight.

The murder of Mr Markelov apparently bore the characteristics of a contract killing. Such assassinations are unfortunately not uncommon in Russia. The perpetrators of Mr Markelov's killing have not been found, nor has any link to the state been established. However, Mr Markelov,

who as the director of the Rule of Law Institute, had been bringing cases against the Russian military, Chechen warlords and murderous neo-fascists, clearly had many potential enemies both within government and without. Russian government officials have been implicated in other political assassinations, most notably that of Aleksandr Litvinenko.

The ERRC is honoured by its association with Mr Markelov. In 2006-2007, he worked with the ERRC on two Roma rights cases in Russia regarding forced evictions and fair trial. In both cases, Mr Markelov worked hard to keep his clients engaged, urging them to continue their fight despite the frustrations of a justice system that was



not disposed to provide justice.

Mr Markelov's death at the age of 34 has caused deep sorrow and anguish in the human rights community. The ERRC offers its condolences to his family, friends, colleagues and the human rights abuse victims he represented. Most of all, his death is a great loss for Russia, where human rights abuses and xenophobia are on the rise.