

Response to article in *El País*

Joint statement by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the Coordination Committee of the Civic Solidarity Platform

29 October 2017

On 26 October 2017, *El País* published an article on a human rights assessment mission conducted by the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP) entitled "Two Russian NGOs make propaganda on police charges on the October 1 Referendum – OMCT facilitates a visit to Barcelona".

Between 23 and 27 October 2017, a needs assessment mission, organized by a broad international coalition of human rights NGOs called the Civic Solidarity Platform, was conducted in Barcelona following reports of police violence on the referendum day. The CSP brings together more than 90 organizations from 30 countries in Europe, Eurasia, and North America, including the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT).

The mission was composed of two delegates, Yuri Dzhibladze and Olga Zakharova, both Russian citizens, internationally renowned human rights defenders, co-founders of the CSP in 2011 and members of its Coordination Committee.

The OMCT and the Coordination Committee of the CSP wish to clarify the following:

First, we deplore that the *El País* article misrepresents damagingly CSP delegates and by extension member NGOs of the Platform including OMCT, portraying them as "Russian propaganda agents" harming their reputation and questioning their independence. The impermissible irony is that it discredits without any basis whatsoever as 'propaganda agents' the very individuals who like few others and at personal risk have spoken out on human rights violations in the Russian Federation and across the OSCE region, and whose reputation, integrity, objectivity and professionalism is internationally recognized.

Second, while basic information regarding the nature and goals of the mission was shared when OMCT was approached by *El País*, the OMCT notes with great surprise that the article gives as basis for the article "Spanish intelligence sources". While the OMCT and the CSP are not privy to any information in this regard, they recall that any form of surveillance of human rights defenders in and outside Spain would be unacceptable and a breach of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, OSCE's human dimension commitments and OSCE Guidelines on the Protection of Human rights Defenders.

The concern of members of the Civic Solidarity Platform is not the contentious issues of independence or referenda, but human rights. It is the obligation of any state under international law to investigate allegations of excessive use of force – no matter where and no matter when it happens. Addressing those concerns is legitimate in particular in times of tensions, and firmly recognized by the government of Spain who supported the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders as well the Helsinki Final Act's principle of legitimate international concern about the human rights situation in any OSCE participating state.

Finally, in a context of increasing confrontation, the OMCT and the CSP restate the call for an independent, transparent, exhaustive and effective investigation into reports of excessive use of force by law enforcement agents on October 1 in order to rebuild confidence. We urge Spanish and Catalan authorities to guarantee all fundamental rights.