



Svetlana Gannushkina

Svetlana Gannushkina is one of the most accomplished leaders of the human rights movement in Russia today. Through the organisation that she founded and heads – the Civic Assistance Committee – she has provided free legal support, humanitarian aid and education to over 50,000 migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons since 1990. Her personal courage and successful advocacy in the Russian courts and the European Court of Human Rights has prevented the forced repatriation of migrants from Russia to Central Asian countries where they would have almost certainly been subject to imprisonment and torture. As a member of the Russian Presidential Human Rights Council from 2002-2012, Gannushkina successfully advocated for the law on refugees to be amended allowing for over two million persons to be granted Russian citizenship. Passionate about the transformative power of education, Gannushkina has brought repeated challenges to the Russian Supreme Court to grant all children in Russia, including migrants and refugees, the right to attend public schools. She has been outspoken in drawing public attention to human rights violations in the conflict regions, notably the Caucasus.

From mathematician to human rights advocate

Born in 1942 in Moscow, Gannushkina received a postgraduate education in Mathematics and worked from 1970-2000 first as a teacher, and then Associate Professor at the Department of Mathematics at the Russian State Humanitarian University (formerly Histories and Archives Institute). Even as an academic, Gannushkina - who says she approaches legal questions as she would mathematical challenges – took up cases of anti-Semitism and discrimination that she observed within her university.

It was Gannushkina's experience being part of the International Working Group (IWG) investigating the border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan - which broke out immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union – that first got her interested in working on refugee and migrant issues. While her mediation work within the IWG secured the release of over a dozen prisoners of war and hostages, it also made her realise that refugees were not only caught between state borders, but also having to choose between suffering and dignity. To address this issue of pressing concern, Gannushkina founded the Civic Assistance Committee (CAC) in 1990, serving as Co-Chairperson from 1990-1999 and Chairperson from 1999 till date. She is also the founder and since 1996 the Head of the Migration and Law network of 2004 Right Livelihood Award Laureate Memorial's Human Rights Centre.



Providing advocacy, education and assistance to refugees, migrants and IDPs

CAC does more to help refugees and migrants than any other organisation in Russia. Through its network of centres, CAC's 40 staff and many volunteers provide a range of services to internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and migrants in 37 of Russia's regions. These services include free legal aid, medical advice, and supporting migrants in dealing with the authorities. Annually, over three thousand persons visit the CAC's public reception room in Moscow requiring counselling and assistance. The Migration and Law Network of Memorial Human Rights Centre provides 20 000 legal consultations annually to protect the interests of refugees and migrants in some 1000 trials.

Gannushkina and her team have over the years successfully used Russian domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights to obtain orders preventing the deportation of dozens of persons to Chechnya and Ingushetia within Russia, as well Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and other countries where they would have almost certainly been subject to torture or imprisonment. Most recently, in April 2016, Gannushkina's tireless advocacy led to a family of six Syrians being granted temporary asylum after spending an extended period of time in Moscow's airport.

Additionally, Gannushkina's Centre for Education and Adaptation, founded in 1996 in Moscow, provides Russian language courses and general educational assistance to refugee children and adults. Many Russian university students volunteer to teach in the Centre, which prepares children to adapt to the realities of Russian public school life. Plans are underway to establish another school exclusively for Syrian children to serve the needs of the Syrian refugee community growing on the outskirts of Moscow.

Gannushkina is deeply committed towards promoting education as an effective tool for integrating refugees into Russian society and acts as a watchdog against attempts to restrict access to education. CAC successfully challenged a 1999 decision by the governments of Moscow and its surrounding region that would have permitted children's admissions to schools and kindergartens only if their parents had temporary or permanent registration in these regions. This provision was ruled illegal by the Moscow City Court. Further, in 2012, Gannushkina and CAC's advocacy drew attention to a decree by the Ministry of Education and Science that aimed to prohibit access to school for any child without registration on Russian territory. The Ministry subsequently issued an explanatory letter rescinding this restriction. Finally, in response to yet another attempt to make access to school dependent on registration, CAC took the matter all the way to Russia's Supreme Court, which in 2014 ruled that all children have to go to school, although this decision was partially reversed in 2015. Gannushkina and CAC systematically monitor violations of the right to education, and



in 2015 used the Supreme Court's order to persuade schools to grant admissions to 38 children.

In April 2015, CAC was designated a "foreign agent" by Russia's Ministry of Justice under the 2012 foreign agent law. Despite all the negative repercussions of this label, CAC remains steadfast in continuing its work in assisting refugees and migrants.

Engaging with the government to promote human rights

Gannushkina served as a member of Russia's Presidential Council for Human Rights from 2002 to 2012. During this period, she persuaded President Putin to create a commission that led to amendments in the law that resulted in some two million persons – mostly from former Soviet Republics – to secure Russian citizenship. Additionally, Gannushkina joined a fact-finding delegation to travel to Chechnya in January 2002, and subsequently convinced the Russian government to stop forcibly deporting Chechen IDPs from Ingushetia to Chechnya.

Gannushkina resigned from the Presidential Council in 2012 following widespread irregularities in the 2012 Presidential election. She remains a member of the Government Commission on Migration policy since 2009 and actively engages with Russia's Federal Migration Service to promote the rights of refugees and migrants.

Honours

Gannushkina's work has received numerous global awards including the 2004 UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award received on behalf of Memorial's Migration and Law Network, Norwegian Helsinki Committee's Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award in 2007 and the French government's Legion d'Honneur in 2010.