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Russia

The murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaia profoundly shocked the human rights movement in Russia and internationally and symbolized the further deterioration of the human rights situation in Russia. Meanwhile, the Kremlin has tightened its grip on human rights organizations and other independent institutions.

Grave human rights abuses persist in Chechnya, including torture, abductions, and forced disappearances, and the conflict threatens to spill over into other regions of the northern Caucasus.

International scrutiny of Russia's human rights record was grossly inadequate at a time when Russia assumed leadership of two international bodies in 2006, resulting in a lost opportunity to press Russia to improve its record. Russia took over chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in May and held the presidency of the Group of Eight, hosting the organization's summit in St Petersburg in July.

The Northern Caucasus

Despite claims of stability and reconstruction in Chechnya, the ongoing armed conflict continues to claim civilian lives. Russia's federal forces play less of a direct role in Chechnya; pro-Kremlin Chechen forces under the command of Chechnya's prime minister, Ramzan Kadyrov, known as the "kadyrovtsy" now dominate law enforcement and security operations and commit grave human rights abuses.

Although local human rights groups reported a slight decline in the number of abductions leading to forced disappearances in 2006, these disappearances remain a key feature of the conflict, with as many as 5,000 people "disappeared" since 1999 and at least 54 so far in 2006. Reports of torture, especially in unofficial detention centers run by the "Kadyrovtsy" increased in 2006.

The Russian government failed to pursue any accountability process for human rights abuses committed during the course of the conflict in Chechnya. Unable to secure justice domestically, hundreds of victims of abuse have filed applications with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The court issued landmark rulings on Chechnya, finding the Russian government guilty of violating the right to life and the prohibition of torture with respect to civilians who had died or been forcibly disappeared at the hands of Russia's federal troops. Hundreds of similar claims are pending before the court.

Civil Society

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), activists, and independent journalists working on human rights issues, particularly the war in Chechnya, faced increasing administrative and judicial harassment. In some cases, these individuals also endured persecution, threats, and physical attacks.

In October 2006 an unidentified gunman murdered *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anna Politkovskaia. Known for her independent reporting, particularly about abuses committed in the war in Chechnya, Politkovskaia was a fierce critic of the Kremlin and the pro-Russian Chechen government. There seemed little doubt she was killed because of her work. Also, there was a rise in the number of death threats against prominent human rights defenders.

In November 2005 authorities in Dagestan held Osman Boliev—a human rights defender who investigated kidnapping and other abuses by police—for three months on charges of illegal weapons possession. He was tortured in custody and later acquitted and released. In July 2006 police charged him with aiding the terrorists who seized hundreds of hostages in a Moscow theater in 2002. Fearing for his safety, Boliev fled Russia.

In January President Vladimir V. Putin signed into law new regulations that impose burdensome reporting requirements on all NGOs and grant registration officials unprecedented authority to interfere with or restrict the work of NGOs. Under the law, officials may, without a court order, demand any document at any time from an NGO and order an intrusive inspection of an NGO's office. The law requires foreign NGOs

to submit annual and quarterly work plans and permits government officials to ban planned projects or activities that conflict with Russia's national interests. All foreign NGOs had to re-register by mid-October; hundreds had to suspend their operations for weeks while their applications were pending.

In February a criminal court in Nizhni Novgorod handed Stanislav Dmitrievsky, the executive director of the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, a two-year suspended sentence on charges of "inciting racial hatred" for articles he had published in the organization's newspaper. The articles featured statements from leading Chechen separatists that in reality amounted to protected speech. A civil court liquidated the organization, finding that it had failed to distance itself from Dmitrievsky; as of this writing the case was on appeal with the Supreme Court.

Several Russian human rights organizations were threatened with—but avoided—closure for problems with their charter or failing to report their activities. But the International Defense Assistance Center, a Russian group that represents people from Russia at the ECHR received a bill for back taxes and penalties on tax exempt grants for US\$167,000. Under the tax code, money for educational, analytical, and research purposes is not taxable and the tax bill appears to be an attempt to shut down the NGO, which has 250 cases pending before the ECHR.

Xenophobia and Intolerance

Human rights groups reported more than a hundred racist and xenophobic attacks—an increase over last year—including at least 36 murders and 286 people beaten or wounded in the first nine months of the year. Notably, in September violent mobs in Kondopoga, in northern Russia, attacked residents from the Caucasus, causing hundreds to flee the city fearing for their lives. Some of the more serious attacks have been prosecuted, but police routinely characterize racist crimes as hooliganism, a misdemeanor charge, rather than use sentencing enhancement for hate-motivated crimes available in Russian law.

After months of rising tensions between the Russian and Georgian governments, in October 2006 Georgian authorities in Tbilisi briefly detained four Russian military officers on accusations of espionage. In retaliation, the Russian government

deported hundreds of Georgians, forced Georgian-owned businesses to close, and asked teachers for lists of school children with Georgian last names so their parents could be investigated for visa or tax violations.

After a court upheld Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzkhov's ban on a gay and lesbian pride march, on May 27, 2006, several dozen gay activists and supporters attempted to hold two protest rallies in support of freedoms of assembly and expression. Hundreds of anti-gay protesters, including skinheads, nationalists, and Orthodox followers, attacked the participants, beating and kicking many, and chanted threats. The mayor's office had earlier made homophobic statements and circulated directives to restrict gay and lesbian rights.

Entrenched Problems

A gruesome case of hazing in the army, which resulted in a conscript having to have his legs and genitals amputated, once again pushed violent hazing in Russia's military into the spotlight. The Ministry of Defense took steps to address this crime, but maintained that violent hazing is not widespread in Russia's military and blamed television and "the decline of traditional values" for hazing rather than taking responsibility for the problem. Violent hazing results in the death of dozens of young soldiers every year, and serious injuries to thousands more. Many conscripts commit or attempt suicide and thousands defect from their units to escape harm.

Russia continued to increase attention and resources to combat HIV/AIDS. It proposed an ambitious plan to develop treatments and vaccines and raise awareness about the disease and made infectious diseases one of the key agenda items at the summit of G8 leaders in July. However, police abuse, harassment, and widespread discrimination against injection drug users and other groups at high risk for HIV/AIDS continued to interfere with HIV prevention, care, and treatment efforts. Access to treatment remained a major problem, with only a fraction of people living with the disease receiving anti-retroviral drugs.

Russia violated its obligations under the Convention against Torture by forcibly returning Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, where they face a risk of torture. In March 2006 the government announced it had returned 19 Uzbeks. In October it returned Rustam Muminov, an

asylum seeker wanted on politically-motivated charges in Uzbekistan, in violation of Russian law and after the ECHR imposed an injunction to stop the deportation.

Key International Actors

While many global leaders expressed concern over developments in Russia, such as the NGO law and the murder of Politkovskaia, human rights issues remained on the margins of Russia's bi-lateral and multi-lateral relations, with many key interlocutors failing to press Russia to reform or call it to account for continuing problems, especially in Chechnya.

The EU held two rounds of human rights consultations with Russia. But human rights did not figure prominently in the broader EU-Russia agenda, which was dominated by energy security. The EU and its member states appeared to surrender to a false assumption that robust promotion of human rights would result in Russia cutting Europe's energy supply, without due concern to the long-term consequences of sidelining Russia's growing human rights problems. Germany played a key role in shaping EU policy emphasizing friendly relations at the expense of human rights; Germany's energy transportation projects with Russia were paramount in its bilateral relations.

The United States government issued several strong statements on human rights but similarly appeared to lack the appetite to challenge Russia forcefully on its worsening human rights record. However, President George Bush did issue a strong statement on Anna Politkovskaia's death and Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, met with her family.

In May 2006 Russia won a seat on the new United Nations Human Rights Council. After refusing access for many years, Russia issued an invitation to the UN special rapporteur on torture, but the rapporteur cancelled his visit just two days before it was planned to begin in October. The cancellation took place due to the Russian government's refusal to grant the conditions necessary for the visit, such as unfettered access to places of detention and private interviews with detainees, citing conflict with Russian law.

In January the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a strong report on Chechnya and expressed concern that many governments and the organization's Committee of Ministers failed to address human rights violations in Chechnya and impunity for them "in a regular, serious and intensive manner." The Assembly's bureau, however, subsequently decided not to renew the Assembly's Chechnya monitoring and reporting mandate, silencing this critical voice.

The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) conducted two visits to the North Caucasus in 2006, an indication of its serious concerns in the region. The Russian government is the only Council of Europe member state not to authorize the publication of CPT's reports.

In its new country strategy for Russia, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) noted "concerns in the international community over the Russian authorities' continued weakening of the checks on executive power" and called for stronger protection for human and civic rights. The bank announced plans to hold its 2007 annual meeting in Kazan, in the Volga region.