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denied access to a building in Bucharest that allegedly hosted such a site.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

In May, the UN Committee against Torture criticized the treatment and living conditions of people with mental disabilities in psychiatric facilities, and the lack of investigation into thousands of deaths in these institutions over the last decade. There are still around 25,000 children in 717 institutions across the country, despite long-standing commitments to reduce the number of people with mental and physical disabilities in psychiatric institutions.

The Committee also expressed concern over the inadequacy of police detention facilities, the low number of prosecutions and convictions in cases of ill-treatment and torture and the lack of an independent complaints mechanism for violations by law enforcement officials.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Asylum-seekers continued to face obstacles in accessing asylum proceedings. Rejected asylum seekers and Dublin returnees – asylum-seekers due to be transferred from one EU state to another, under the Dublin III regulation – continued to be detained unnecessarily. Recognized refugees faced obstacles in accessing education, housing and health care.

Around 900 people applied for asylum between January and September 2015, compared to around 1,150 people in the same period in 2014. Romania opposed the mandatory quotas for the relocation of people in need of international protection from Greece, Italy and other EU member states. Following the adoption of the scheme in September, Romania was earmarked to receive 6,351 refugees over a period of two years.

1. Romania: Eforie municipality threatens to evict Roma families third time in two years (EUR 39/1560/2015)
2. Europe: Complicit governments must act in wake of US Senate torture

report (News story, 20 January); Europe: Breaking the conspiracy of silence: USA's European "partners in crime" must act after Senate torture report (EUR 01/002/2015); USA: Crimes and impunity: Full Senate Committee report on CIA secret detentions must be released and accountability for crimes under international law ensured (AMR 51/1432/2015)

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Russian Federation

Head of state: **Vladimir Putin**

Head of government: **Dmitry Medvedev**

Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly remained severely restricted. The authorities dominated the print and broadcast media, and further extended their control over the internet. NGOs faced further harassment and reprisals under the "foreign agents" law, while their access to foreign funding was further restricted by a new law banning "undesirable" organizations. Growing numbers of individuals were arrested and criminally charged for criticizing state policy and publicly displaying or possessing materials deemed extremist or otherwise unlawful under vague national security legislation. Four people faced prosecution under the 2014 law that made repeated violations of the law on public assemblies a criminal offence. Deep flaws in the judicial system were further exposed through several high-profile cases; a new law gave the Constitutional Court the authority to overrule decisions by the European Court of Human Rights. Refugees faced numerous obstacles in accessing international protection. Serious human rights violations continued in the North Caucasus, and human rights defenders reporting from the region faced harassment.

BACKGROUND

In the face of Russia's growing international isolation and mounting economic problems,

the authorities sought to consolidate public opinion around the notions of unity and patriotism, “traditional values” and fear of the country’s purported enemies abroad and within. Opinion polls showed a consistently high level of support for President Putin’s leadership. Government critics were smeared as “unpatriotic” and “anti-Russian state” in the mainstream media, and were occasionally assaulted. On 27 February, one of Russia’s most prominent opposition activists, Boris Nemtsov, was shot dead within sight of the Kremlin. Mourners wishing to commemorate him at the site of his death were harassed by city authorities and pro-government supporters.

The government continued to dismiss mounting evidence of Russia’s military involvement in Ukraine, while President Putin decreed in May that human losses among the military during “special operations” in peacetime were a state secret.¹

The authorities estimated that as of November, 2,700 Russian citizens had joined the armed group Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, the majority of them from the North Caucasus. Independent experts gave higher estimates.

On 30 September, Russia began air strikes in Syria with the stated aim of targeting IS, but also frequently targeted other groups opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Numerous civilian casualties were reported, which Russia denied. On 24 November, Turkey shot down a Russian military jet for allegedly entering its airspace, leading to mutual recriminations and a diplomatic stand-off between the two countries.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Media freedom remained severely restricted, through direct state control and self-censorship. The editorial policy of most media outlets faithfully reproduced official views on key domestic and international events.

The authorities extended their control over the internet. Thousands of websites and pages were blocked by internet providers on orders from the media regulator

Roskomnadzor. Those targeted in violation of the right to freedom of expression included political satire, information shared by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists, information on public protests and religious texts. A growing, but still small, number of individuals faced criminal prosecution for online postings, usually on charges under anti-extremism legislation; most of them received fines.

Yekaterina Vologzheninova, a shop assistant from Yekaterinburg, was put on trial on 27 October for her satirical posts on social media in 2014 which criticized Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its military involvement in eastern Ukraine. The prosecution alleged that she had incited violence and “promoted hatred and enmity towards the Russian government officials, Russian volunteers fighting in eastern Ukraine and the specific ethnic group, the Russians”. Her trial was ongoing at the end of the year.²

Harassment of independent media outlets and journalists continued. Past incidents of violence against independent journalists were rarely effectively investigated. Two men were arrested in connection with the beating of journalist Oleg Kashin in November 2010, and a third put on a wanted list. One suspect claimed he had proof that the beating had been ordered by the Governor of Pskov region, which tallied with Kashin’s suspicions, but the authorities declined to investigate the allegation further.

Elena Milashina, a journalist from the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, reported that a 17-year-old Chechen girl was being forcibly married to a senior police officer three times her age and reportedly already married. The story was widely reported and caused a public outcry. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov publicly supported the senior police officer and accused Milashina of lying and interfering in the private lives of the Chechen people. On 19 May, the Chechen government-owned online news agency Grozny-Inform published an article containing thinly veiled death threats against Milashina.

The clampdown on freedom of expression extended beyond journalists and bloggers. Natalya Sharina, director of the state-run Library of Ukrainian Literature in the capital Moscow, was detained on 28 October under extremism-related charges. The investigators claimed that works by Ukrainian nationalist Dmitry Korchinsky had been found at the library, in a pile of literature that had not yet been catalogued. She was detained at a police station without bedding, food or drink until 30 October when she was placed under house arrest, pending possible charges.³

On 15 September, Rafis Kashapov, an activist from Naberezhnye Chelny, Republic of Tatarstan, was convicted of inciting inter-ethnic hatred and threatening the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation; he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. He had been under arrest since 28 December 2014 in connection with posts on social media that criticized Russia's role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the treatment of Crimean Tatars in Russian-occupied Crimea.

On 10 November, the Kirsanovski District Court ruled that the environmentalist Yevgeny Vitishko should be released. He had served over half of his sentence following his conviction on trumped-up charges in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. However, on 20 November, a day before the court's decision came into force, the Prosecutor's Office appealed against the decision; Vitishko was finally released on 22 December after an appeal hearing.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly remained severely curtailed. Protests were infrequent, their number having declined following restrictions introduced in earlier years. Organizers were regularly refused permission to hold street rallies or only allowed to hold them in non-central locations. Those who defied the ban or the rules were penalized through fines and detention.

Monstration, a humorous annual street event in Novosibirsk mocking the pomposity

of the May Day march, was disallowed for the first time since 2005. Its organizer, Artem Loskutov, was arrested and sentenced to 10 days' detention for violating the law on assemblies after he and several other "monstrators" joined the official May Day march instead.

For the first time, a peaceful street protester was convicted under the 2014 law which criminalized repeated participation in unauthorized assemblies.

On 7 December, a Moscow court sentenced Ildar Dadin to three years in a prison colony for his repeated participation in "unauthorized" assemblies between August and December 2014. He had been placed under house arrest on 30 January, after serving a 15-day detention for joining a peaceful protest in Moscow against the politically motivated conviction of Oleg Navalny, the brother of anti-graft campaigner and opposition leader Alex Navalny.

Two other peaceful protesters from Moscow, Mark Galperin and Irina Kalmykova, also faced criminal prosecution under the same law at the end of the year.

Prisoners of conscience Stepan Zimin, Aleksei Polikhovich and Denis Lutskevich, who had been detained in 2012 in connection with the Bolotnaya Square protests, were released during the year, having completed their prison sentences. Another prisoner of conscience, Sergey Krivov, remained in prison; the authorities brought criminal proceedings against at least two further individuals in connection with the Bolotnaya protests.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Freedom of association was further restricted. By the end of the year, the Ministry of Justice's register of NGOs considered "foreign agents" contained 111 entries, requiring the NGOs concerned to put this stigmatizing label on all their publications and observe onerous reporting requirements. NGOs that defied these requirements faced hefty fines. Not a single NGO succeeded in challenging their inclusion on the register in court. Seven were

struck off the register after giving up all foreign funding, and a further 14 NGOs included on the register chose to close down.

The Human Rights Centre (HRC) Memorial was fined Rub 600,000 (US\$8,800) in September after its sister organization, the Historical and Educational Centre Memorial – which was not on the register – did not mark its publications with the label “foreign agent”. The HRC Memorial lost its court appeal against the decision. Following a regular inspection of the HRC Memorial in November, the Ministry of Justice concluded that criticism by its members of the Bolotnaya Square trials and of Russian policies in Ukraine “undermined the foundations of the constitutional system” and amounted to “calls for the overthrow of the current government and change of the political regime”. The Ministry submitted its “findings” to the Prosecutor’s Office for further investigation.

In May, a law was passed authorizing the Prosecutor’s Office to designate any foreign organization as “undesirable” on the grounds of posing a “threat to the country’s constitutional order, defence or state security”, with the immediate effect of rendering its presence, and any activity on its behalf, unlawful. In July, the US-based National Endowment for Democracy was declared “undesirable”. Three more donor organizations, the Open Society Foundation, the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation and the US Russia Foundation for Economic Advancement and the Rule of Law, were declared “undesirable” in November and December.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

LGBTI activists continued to operate in an extremely hostile environment. Discrimination against LGBTI individuals continued to be widely reported.

On 25 March, a court in St Petersburg ruled that the Children-404 group – an online community set up by journalist Elena Klimova to support LGBTI teenagers – be blocked. In July, a court in Nizhny Tagil, Sverdlovsk

region, fined Klimova Rub 50,000 (US\$830) for “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors”. On 2 October, a court in St Petersburg ruled that the page should be unblocked.

The authorities continued to violate LGBTI individuals’ right to peaceful assembly. In May, LGBTI activist Nikolay Alekseev attempted to hold an unauthorized Pride march in Moscow. It resulted in clashes with anti-LGBTI protesters and 10 days’ detention for three LGBTI activists, including Nikolay Alekseev. In St Petersburg, LGBTI activists were able to conduct some public activities without interference from police.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

Several high-profile trials exposed deep-rooted and widespread flaws in Russia’s criminal justice system, including the lack of equality of arms, the use of torture and other ill-treatment in the course of investigations as well as the failure to exclude torture-tainted evidence in court, the use of secret witnesses and other secret evidence which the defence could not challenge, and the denial of the right to be represented by a lawyer of one’s choice. Less than 0.5% of trials resulted in acquittals.

Svetlana Davydova was one of the growing number of cases of alleged high treason and espionage, under vague offences introduced in 2012. She was arrested on 21 January for a phone call she had made to the Ukrainian Embassy eight months earlier, to share her suspicions that soldiers from her town Vyazma, Smolensk region, were being sent to fight in eastern Ukraine. Her state-appointed lawyer told the media that she had “confessed to everything” and declined to appeal against her detention because “all these hearings and the fuss in the media [create] unnecessary psychological trauma for her children”. On 1 February, two new lawyers took up her case. She complained that her initial lawyer had convinced her to plead guilty to reduce her likely sentence from 20 to 12 years. On 3 February, she was released; on 13 March, in marked contrast to

all other treason cases, criminal proceedings against her were terminated.

In September, the trial of Nadezhda Savchenko, a Ukrainian citizen and member of the Aidar volunteer battalion, began. She was accused of deliberately directing artillery fire to kill two Russian journalists during the conflict in Ukraine in June 2014. She insisted that the case against her was fabricated and the testimonies against her, including by several secret witnesses, were false. Her trial was marred by myriad procedural flaws.

On 15 December, President Putin signed a new law under which the Constitutional Court can pronounce the European Court of Human Rights' and other international courts' decisions "unimplementable" if they "violate" the Russian Constitution's "supremacy".

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

According to official figures, in the first nine months of the year, 130,297 people were given temporary asylum, 129,506 of them from Ukraine and 482 from Syria. Only 96 of the 1,079 applications for permanent refugee status were granted, none of them to Syrian nationals. NGOs reported numerous obstacles, including corruption and deliberate misinformation, intended to discourage those seeking international protection from applying for permanent or temporary asylum.

A family of six refugees from Syria, including four children, were stranded in the international transit zone of Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport for over two months. On 10 September, border officials denied them entry claiming their travel documents were fake. On 19 November, Khimki City Court fined them Rub 10,000 (US\$150) for trying to enter the country under forged documents; the following day, they were registered as asylum-seekers and relocated to Tver region, with help from the NGO Civic Assistance Committee.

There were regular reports of forcible return of individuals to Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries, where they risked being subjected to torture and other serious human rights violations.

NORTH CAUCASUS

Fewer attacks by armed groups were reported in the North Caucasus than in previous years.

Law enforcement agencies continued to rely on security operations as their preferred method of combating armed groups, and continued to be suspected of resorting to enforced disappearances, unlawful detention, as well as torture and other ill-treatment of detainees.

Human rights reporting from the region visibly declined, due to a severe clampdown on human rights defenders and independent journalists, who regularly faced harassment, threats and violence, including from law enforcement officials and pro-government groups.

On 3 June, an aggressive mob surrounded the office building of the human rights group Joint Mobile Group in Chechnya's capital Grozny. Masked men forced their way into the office, destroying its contents and forcing staff to evacuate.⁴ No suspects had been identified by the end of the year.

On 6 November, the office and residence in the Republic of Ingushetia of human rights defender Magomed Mutsolgov were searched by armed law enforcement officers, who seized documents and IT equipment. According to Mutsolgov, the warrant authorizing the search stated that he was "acting in the interests of the USA, Georgia, Ukraine and the Syrian opposition".

1. Russian Federation: Making troop deaths a secret "attacks freedom of expression" (News story, 28 May)
2. Russian Federation: Prosecuted for criticizing government: Yekaterina Vologzheninova (EUR 46/2682/2015)
3. Russian Federation: Natalya Sharina. Librarian detained for holding "extremist books" (EUR/2900/2015)
4. Russian Federation: Joint Mobile Group office ransacked by mob (EUR 46/1802/2015)