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The State of the World's Human Rights; Russia 2023

Russia continued its war of aggression against Ukraine and allowed its forces to commit war crimes with impunity. Meanwhile, the human rights situation at home continued to deteriorate. Freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association were further severely restricted. Government critics faced arbitrary prosecution, lengthy prison terms, violent attacks committed with impunity, and other reprisals. Authorities used extensive anti-terrorism and anti-extremism legislation against opposition and religious groups, individual critics and lawyers. Torture and other ill-treatment in detention were widespread and largely went unpunished. Trials were unfair, especially in political cases and those involving Ukrainian prisoners of war. New transphobic legislation was adopted, and the so-called “LGBT movement” was designated as “extremist”. Russia refused to cooperate with international human rights institutions and, after the ICC issued an arrest warrant for President Vladimir Putin, criminalized assistance to it. Authorities failed to prevent antisemitic and anti-refugee violence. Measures to tackle the climate crisis were insufficient and major environmental NGOs were banned from the country.

Background

Russia committed numerous violations of international humanitarian law in Ukraine (see Ukraine entry), while its invasion largely stalled. Ukrainian military attacks reached deeper inside Russian territory, and Russian authorities reported dozens of civilian casualties. The government continued to heavily control and manipulate information on the war. Estimates of Russian military casualties reached hundreds of thousands killed and wounded. Dozens of arson attacks on conscription centres and other governmental buildings were reported across the country. On 23-24 June, Evgeny Prigozhin led the Wagner Group, a private military company he had founded, in an aborted military coup. He avoided prosecution but was killed in a suspicious plane crash on 25 August.

Russia continued to face international isolation. In September, the newly appointed UN Special Rapporteur on the situation on human rights in the Russian Federation reported on “the increasingly repressive crackdown on the peaceful exercise of human rights.” Authorities refused to recognize the mandate or permit a country visit. In November, Russia withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

Despite its refusal to cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms, Russia sought to return to the Human Rights Council, but lost the vote in October. Authorities continued to ignore decisions of the European Court of Human Rights regarding Russia’s violations of the European Convention on Human Rights committed while Russia was a state party.

Freedom of expression

Any form of criticism of the authorities was severely suppressed.¹ Media outlets, social media platforms and individuals faced heavy fines, arbitrary blocking, prosecution and other reprisals under an expanding set of punitive legal rules. These included being designated a “foreign agent” and allegations of “extremism”, “justification of terrorism”, “dissemination of knowingly false information”, “discreditation”, “incitement to hatred” and LGBTI “propaganda”.

On 29 March, authorities arrested US journalist Evan Gershkovich on questionable espionage charges. His trial remained pending at year's end.

On 4 May, theatre director Evgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk were arrested on false charges of “justification of terrorism” for their award-winning play about women who married members of armed groups in Syria. They were still awaiting trial in detention at the end of the year.

People expressing opposition to the invasion of Ukraine, to Russia's violations there or to war in general faced particularly harsh persecution.² At least 140 individuals were sentenced to prison for statements, protests or other activities opposing the war, compared with 22 in 2022.

Opposition and human rights activist Vladimir Kara-Murza was sentenced in April to 25 years' imprisonment on false charges of state treason, dissemination of “fake information” about the armed forces and participation in an “undesirable organization”.

Aleksei Moskalyov, a businessman and single father in Tula region, was arrested on 27 February on charges of “discrediting the armed forces” for criticizing the war on Ukraine on social media. Authorities placed his 13-year-old daughter in an orphanage; after a campaign on her behalf, they handed her to other family members. Aleksei Moskalyov's sentence of two years' imprisonment was overturned in December.

On 13 April, a court upheld the three-year sentence on Vladimir Rumyantsev, a coal stoker from the city of Vologda, for “disseminating knowingly false information about the Russian armed forces”. Vladimir Rumyantsev had used a home radio studio to rebroadcast banned media outlets with information about the war.

Oleg Orlov, a well-known human rights defender, was on trial for publishing an article criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Many university professors and schoolteachers were said to have lost their jobs for criticizing the authorities or the invasion of Ukraine. Svetlana Drugoveyko-Dolzhanskaya was dismissed from St Petersburg State University on 11 October after she testified as a linguistic expert in support of prisoner of conscience Aleksandra Skochilenko.

Some of those imprisoned faced additional, new charges while already serving their terms. For example, in October, prisoner of conscience and former opposition municipal councillor Aleksei Gorinov, who had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in 2022 for an anti-war speech at a council meeting, was charged with “justification of terrorism”.

In November, another prisoner of conscience, journalist Maria Ponomarenko, who had been sentenced to six years' imprisonment for sharing a video about Russia's bombing of the drama theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine, faced new dubious charges for “causing bodily harm” to penal colony personnel.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Freedom of assembly remained suppressed. Relevant unduly restrictive legislation used vague language allowing for arbitrary interpretation. Domestic laws prohibited spontaneous assemblies and protests near governmental buildings and in many other places, and contained numerous other restrictions on venues and organizers. Authorities used their broad powers to deny authorization, and the police showed zero tolerance for “unauthorized” assemblies, however small and infrequent.

In some parts of the country, peaceful rallies remained prohibited under the pretext of Covid-19 regulations. Restrictions were often discriminatory; for example on 29 September, Moscow city authorities banned a vigil to commemorate victims of Soviet-era repressions while allowing a large pro-government rally to proceed on the same day.

Freedom of association

Authorities continued to target civil society organizations, including human rights groups, using Russia's extensive repressive legislation. In 2023, 54 organizations and 172 individuals were labelled "foreign agents" and 56 organizations were designated "undesirable".

Leading human rights groups, including the Moscow Helsinki Group, Sakharov Centre and Sova Centre, were officially dissolved on the pretext of violations of "foreign agent" regulations or technicalities.

Several politically motivated criminal cases were initiated against members of Memorial, the country's oldest human rights organization, which had been liquidated in 2022. They included charges of "discrediting the armed forces" and "rehabilitation of Nazism". Memorial member Aleksandr Chernyshov was arrested on 5 May and accused of "smuggling items of cultural value" for allegedly trying to take Memorial's archive out of the country. He remained incarcerated at the end of the year.

Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of Golos, Russia's leading election watchdog, was arrested on 17 August for cooperating with an international coalition of election monitors deemed an "undesirable organization". He was placed in pretrial detention.

Charges of extremism were used against groups and individuals critical of the authorities. On 17 May, a court upheld the arbitrary designation of youth pro-democracy group Vesna as an "extremist" organization and prohibited its activities. Six individuals remained in detention at the end of the year on accusations of participating in Vesna.

Prominent opposition figure Aleksei Navalny and his associates faced further extremism-related charges on account of their involvement with NGOs he had founded. On 4 August, Aleksei Navalny, who had been arbitrarily deprived of liberty since 2021, received another politically motivated sentence increasing his imprisonment to 19 years. His associates Lilia Chanysheva, Ksenia Fadeeva, Daniel Kholodny and Vadim Ostanin had been arrested, tried and sentenced, or were serving prison terms at the end of the year. Individuals who had donated money, no matter how small the amount, were also prosecuted, including activist Gleb Kalinychev who was awaiting trial in detention for allegedly donating about USD 30 to Aleksei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation.

In August, the criminal code was amended to penalize "carrying out activities" of foreign NGOs without registered offices in Russia. It effectively criminalized any forms of cooperation with most civil society groups outside the country.

Freedom of religion and belief

Authorities continued the unfounded prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses since their church was arbitrarily banned in 2017. As of December, more than 100 believers remained in detention.

Members of Muslim groups, including Hizb ut-Tahrir, faced prosecution and unfair trials on extremism and terrorism-related charges for their religious views.

Conscientious objectors' rights

In a rare precedent, on 16 March, a court allowed Pavel Mushumansky, a Christian believer who had been enlisted to take part in Russia's war against Ukraine, to undergo alternative civilian service. This option, however, remained unattainable for nearly all other conscientious objectors.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment in custody remained widespread. Perpetrators enjoyed impunity or received lenient sentences. Only one case ended in conviction under the article of the criminal code penalizing torture that was introduced in 2022.

Authorities targeted specific prisoners such as Aleksei Navalny with various forms of ill-treatment, including denial of adequate medical care, arbitrary placement in punishment cells (often for multiple consecutive terms), psychological pressure, threats and use of physical force.

On 14 June, anti-war activist Anatoly Berezikov was found dead in a detention centre in the city of Rostov-on-Don, where he had been placed following dubious administrative proceedings, a day before his release. Shortly beforehand, he had told his lawyer and a court that he feared for his life, having been threatened by officers of the Federal Security Service and tortured with electric shocks. These allegations were ignored by the authorities, and police declared his death to be suicide. His lawyer, and a human rights defender who was helping Anatoly Berezikov, had to leave the country after the police searched their homes.

Unfair trials

Criminal courts demonstrated a profound bias against defendants. Only 0.4% of defendants were acquitted or had their prosecution terminated by courts. Judges routinely and unquestioningly accepted the prosecution's evidence, including testimony given under torture, and rejected strong evidence of innocence. Trials, especially involving charges related to terrorism, extremism or high treason, were often closed to the public.

Lawyers working on high profile political cases, especially those involving terrorism or extremism-related accusations, faced pressure and harassment. On 13 October, authorities arrested three of Aleksei Navalny's lawyers and accused them of "participation in an extremist association" for their professional activities. They awaited trial in detention at year's end.³

On 4 July, unidentified people severely assaulted, humiliated and badly injured journalist Elena Milashina and lawyer Aleksandr Nemov on their way to a court hearing in the republic of Chechnya. No proper investigation into the attack was conducted.

Authorities subjected Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians to unfair trials. On 22 August, a court in Moscow upheld a 13-year prison sentence against Ukrainian prisoner of war and human rights defender Maksym Butkevych for purported war crimes that he could not have committed based on evidence of his location at the time. He was likely forced to "confess" to the crimes on camera.⁴

Unfair trials were also deployed against activists and dissenters. On 12 September, Dagestani journalist Abdulmumin Gadzhiev was sentenced to 17 years' imprisonment on trumped-up terrorism-related charges. On the same day, Zarema Musayeva, mother of Chechen human rights defender Abubakar Yangulbaev, was sentenced to five-and-a-half years' imprisonment on fabricated charges of using violence against a police officer.

LGBTI people's rights

On 24 July, President Putin signed into law transphobic legislation that prohibited gender-affirming treatment and legal gender recognition for transgender people. The law also annulled previously registered marriages and prohibited adoption of children by transgender people.

On 30 November, the Supreme Court designated what it called “the international public LGBT movement” as an “extremist organization” and banned its activities. Several LGBTI organizations and activists had to stop their work or leave Russia in the wake of the judgment. Within days, police raided LGBTI-friendly clubs in various cities, photographed patrons’ documents and intimidated them.

Authorities issued dozens of fines to video streaming services for hosting “LGBT propaganda”. Many films and television shows were subjected to censorship to remove any references to same-sex relationships.

Right to education

On 1 September, in a clear example of indoctrination violating the right to quality education, high school students across the country and in occupied territories of Ukraine were issued new “unified” history textbooks. These sought to whitewash the historical human rights record of Russian and Soviet authorities and their colonial policies, while also falsely justifying Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine as an act of self-defence.

Impunity

On 17 March, the ICC issued arrest warrants for President Putin and the Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on charges of the war crime of unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children from occupied territories.⁵ Russia refused to cooperate with the ICC and introduced criminal liability for assisting international organizations or foreign governments in the prosecution of Russian officials or military personnel. The Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against ICC judges and the ICC prosecutor, accusing them of prosecuting “obviously innocent” individuals. In July, President Putin decided not to attend a BRICS summit in South Africa shortly before a court there decided he would be arrested upon arrival.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

Discrimination and violence against migrants, including by police, remained widespread. Police arrested hundreds of alleged undocumented migrants in raids across the country in May; many reported physical and psychological abuse in custody.

Authorities used deception and pressure to recruit foreign migrants to military service.

Discrimination

On 29 October, hundreds of people stormed Makhachkala airport in Dagestan, North Caucasus, seeking to target Jewish people who they believed had recently arrived from Israel. Police intervened hours later to restore order. Similar antisemitic incidents took place in other parts of North Caucasus.

Right to a healthy environment

Russia remained a leading producer and exporter of fossil fuels, as well as one of the highest greenhouse gas emitters, and took no effective steps to reduce its environmental impact. Rather, it planned to massively increase production and export of coal and gas and continued to invest in new

production overseas. Climate Action Tracker described Russia's emissions targets, policies and provision of finance as "critically insufficient".

Forest wildfires between May and September, exacerbated by global warming and often going unchecked for weeks, further increased carbon emissions and reduced absorption of CO₂.

In May and July, authorities designated two major environmental organizations, Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Foundation, as "undesirable," thereby banning them from the country. Previously, Greenpeace had played an important role in dealing with the forest fires in Russia.

1. *Russian Federation: Dark Times for Human Rights. Amnesty International Submission to the 44th Session of the UPR Working Group, 13 November 2023, 3 May*
2. "Russia: 20,000 activists subject to heavy reprisals as Russia continues to crack down on anti-war movement at home", 20 July
3. "Russian Federation/Ukraine (Crimea): Human rights lawyers must be immediately and unconditionally released", 27 October
4. "Ukraine: Russia's reprisals against prominent Ukrainian human rights defender who joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine", 17 August
5. "Russia: ICC's arrest warrant against Putin a step towards justice for victims of war crimes in Ukraine", 17 March