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The COVID-19 pandemic exposed chronic under-resourcing in health care. The authorities used the pandemic as a pretext to continue the crackdown on all dissent, including through amendments to a vaguely worded law on “fake news” and tightening restrictions on public gatherings. Peaceful protesters, human rights defenders and civic and political activists faced arrest and prosecution. Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses intensified. Torture remained endemic, as did near total impunity for perpetrators. The right to a fair trial was routinely violated while legal amendments resulted in a further reduction in judicial independence. Reports of domestic violence rose sharply during COVID-19 lockdown measures, although the draft law on domestic violence remained stalled in Parliament. LGBTI people continued to face discrimination and persecution. Thousands of labour migrants lost their jobs during the pandemic but were unable to leave because of border closures. Evidence emerged to corroborate allegations of war crimes by Russian forces in Syria.

Background

The economic downturn, underpinned by falling oil prices, dwindling investment and foreign sanctions, and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, led to a further impoverishment of a growing proportion of the population. Discontent widened, with a slow but steady increase in protests. The government continually faced, and ignored, mounting allegations of corruption at all levels. Measures announced by President Vladimir Putin and his government, like extended fully paid leave for all workers in response to COVID-19, failed to address people’s broader concerns.

The authorities introduced multiple amendments to the Constitution, with the apparent purpose of removing legal restrictions on President Putin’s participation in future presidential elections.

Russia maintained a strong influence on its immediate neighbours, and its occupation of Crimea and other territories continued.

Right to health

The COVID-19 pandemic placed further strain on the health care system, exposing chronic under-resourcing. A shortage of hospital beds, key protective and medical equipment and medications, together with the delayed wages of health workers, were frequently reported across the country. Official and independent numbers on infection and mortality rates varied greatly, indicating government under-reporting.

Health workers

Whistle-blowers from among health workers and other groups faced reprisals, including disciplinary measures and prosecution for “fake news”.

Doctor Tatyana Revva was arbitrarily reprimanded and threatened with dismissal after she repeatedly complained about the shortage and inadequacy of protective equipment. Police considered and dismissed “fake news” allegations against her following a complaint from the hospital’s head doctor.¹

Prison conditions

Health care and sanitary provisions in penitentiary institutions remained inadequate and further exacerbated by the pandemic. Although the authorities implemented restrictive and additional sanitary measures, they did not take measures to reduce the prison population. Official COVID-19 figures in custody were considered unreliable by independent monitors.

Freedom of assembly

Freedom of peaceful assembly remained constrained with further restrictions introduced in December. The rules relating to public assemblies and single-person pickets were further restricted in response to the pandemic, and some regions banned them outright. Public protests were typically small but regular, despite reprisals. There was a sharp increase in the numbers of single picketers arrested and prosecuted.

On 15 July, over a hundred peaceful protesters against constitutional changes were arbitrarily arrested and at least three severely beaten by the police in Moscow. Dozens were heavily fined or detained for five to 14 days.

The 9 July arrest of Sergey Furgal, who in 2018 had defeated the pro-Kremlin candidate to be elected Governor in the Far East Khabarovsk Region, prompted weekly peaceful mass protests in Khabarovsk as well as solidarity protests across Russia. Unusually, tens of thousands were allowed to march repeatedly in Khabarovsk before police made the first arrests on 18 July. On 10 October, police dispersed the protest for the first time, arresting at least 25 people, with at least five later sentenced to several days in detention. The protests in Khabarovsk were continuing at year's end.

In December, peaceful protester Konstantin Kotov was released following his imprisonment in 2019 for “repeated violation” of regulations on public assemblies. In January, the Constitutional Court had ordered a review of his case, and in April, the Moscow City Court reduced his sentence from four years to 18 months. Others prosecuted for the same offence included political activist Yulia Galyamina, who was given a two-year conditional sentence in December, activist Vyacheslav Egorov standing trial in Kolomna, and protester Aleksandr Prikhodko from Khabarovsk. In December, Aleksandr Prikhodko's case was dropped.

While police routinely used excessive and unnecessary force against protesters, they also allowed anti-protester violence by other groups. In Kushtau, Bashkiria, peaceful environmental activists who opposed a local mining project were repeatedly assaulted, with impunity, by private security staff, occasionally operating alongside police. Late on 9 August, around 30 private security guards and around 100 masked men attacked a camp of 10 environmental activists. Police were called but did not intervene. This triggered further local protests which forced the closure of the mining project in late August.

Freedom of expression

Restrictions on freedom of expression continued. On 1 April, amendments to the so-called “fake news” law, first passed in 2019, criminalized dissemination of “knowingly false information about circumstances posing a threat to the lives and security of citizens and/or about the government's actions to protect the population.” Individuals face up to five years' imprisonment if dissemination of information leads to bodily harm or death, with hefty fines for the media. Hundreds of people were fined under administrative proceedings, and at least 37 faced criminal proceedings under this law, many of them critical civil activists, journalists or bloggers. At least five media outlets were prosecuted. The newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and its chief editor were fined twice, in August and September, for publications about COVID-19 and ordered to delete respective articles online.

Journalists

Harassment, prosecution and physical attacks against journalists continued. On 30 June, police in Saint Petersburg assaulted reporter David Frenkel at a polling station and broke his arm. On 15 October, a journalist from Khabarovsk, Sergei Plotnikov, was abducted by masked men, driven to the woods, beaten and subjected to a mock execution. He reported the incident to the police once released but by year's end, he had not been informed about any investigation.

A journalist from Nizhnii Novgorod, Irina Slavina, faced routine harassment by the authorities. On 1 October, her home was raided and searched, and police summoned her as a witness in a criminal case against a local activist under the “undesirable organizations” law. On 2 October, she died after self-immolating in protest in front of the regional police headquarters.

On 6 July, a military court in Pskov convicted journalist Svetlana Prokopieva of “public justification of terrorism” and fined her RUB500,000 (US\$6,300) for her public comments on repressive policies that may have motivated a 17-year-old to blow himself up near the Federal Security Service building in Arkhangelsk.

Internet

Censorship of the internet continued. In June, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in *Vladimir Kharitonov v. Russia* and three other cases ruled that internet-blocking measures were “excessive and arbitrary” and violated the right to impart and receive information. A court in Moscow fined Google RUB1.5 million (US\$18,899) in August and RUB3 million (US\$ 40,580) in December for its search engine listing “dangerous content” banned by Russian authorities. In December, President Putin signed a law introducing sanctions on foreign internet platforms for blocking Russian media content. Another law passed in December introduced imprisonment for libel committed via the internet.

Repression of dissent

Opposition activists and other dissenting voices faced severe reprisals. As part of the politically motivated criminal case against opposition leader Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund, 126 bank accounts belonging to his associates were frozen in January, followed by criminal and civil libel cases against Alexei Navalny and others. On 20 August, Alexei Navalny was taken ill on a flight from Tomsk. He was urgently hospitalized, and later flown to Germany where he was diagnosed with poisoning by a military-grade nerve agent. The Russian authorities failed to investigate the poisoning.

Siberian shaman Aleksandr Gabyshev, who had vowed to “purge” President Putin from the Kremlin, was on 12 May confined to a psychiatric hospital after he refused to be tested for COVID-19. He was discharged on 22 July following criticism in Russia and abroad.

In June, political blogger Nikolay Platoshkin was placed under house arrest on criminal charges of “calls to mass disturbances” and dissemination of “knowingly false information” for planning a peaceful protest against constitutional amendments.

Human rights defenders

Harassment, prosecution, and physical attacks against human rights defenders remained commonplace.

Activists Alexandra Koroleva, in Kaliningrad, and Semyon Simonov, in Sochi, were charged and faced possible imprisonment for non-payment of arbitrary and heavy fines by their respective NGOs.

Journalist Elena Milashina and lawyer Marina Dubrovina were assaulted by a mob in a hotel in Grozny, Chechnya, on 6 February.² A formal investigation started in March but was manifestly ineffective. Meanwhile, Chechen head Ramzan Kadyrov issued thinly veiled death threats against Elena Milashina, with impunity.

Lawyer Mikhail Benyash’s appeal against his criminal conviction – which could lead to disbarment – started in October and was still ongoing at year’s end.

Freedom of association

Laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” were actively used to smear independent NGOs, deprive them of funding and severely penalize their members. In December, further draconian legislative changes were signed into law, including to extend the “foreign agents” provisions to NGOs’ staff, unregistered groups and individuals.

In April, the education NGO Projectoria was forced to register as a “foreign agent” to avoid fines while its foreign donor, Project Harmony, was declared “undesirable”.

In October, activist Yana Antonova from Krasnodar was sentenced to 240 hours of forced labour for association with an “undesirable organization”, re-posting Open Russia-branded materials online and taking part in single person pickets. She was subsequently fined again under new administrative proceedings.

Freedom of religion and belief

The prosecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses under “extremism” charges escalated, including in occupied Crimea, with a growing number of convictions, and longer sentences. At year’s end, 362 people were under investigation or standing trial, 39 had been convicted and six were imprisoned. Artem Gerasimov, for example, was sentenced on appeal in June to six years’ imprisonment and a fine of RUB400,000 (US\$5,144) by the de facto Supreme Court of Crimea.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment remained pervasive, and the number of perpetrators convicted was negligible. Prosecutions were typically for “abuse of authority” and resulted in lenient sentences.

Twelve former prison officers from Yaroslavl colony were sentenced to up to four years and three months’ imprisonment after a leaked video showed an inmate being beaten in 2017. Six of them were immediately released on account of time already spent in detention. The former head and deputy head of the colony were acquitted.

Unfair trials

Violations of the right to a fair trial remained common. Detainees were denied meetings with their lawyers and a number of trials continued to be closed to the public, with the COVID-19 pandemic being often abusively used as a justification.

In February and June respectively, seven young men from Penza, and two from Saint Petersburg, received sentences of up to 18 years’ imprisonment under trumped-up terrorism charges over their purported involvement with a non-existent organization called “Network”. Numerous allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, and of fabrication of evidence, were ignored.³

Constitutional and legislative amendments further eroded the right to a fair trial, including by giving the President power to nominate the judges of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, and initiate the appointment of all federal judges and dismissal of senior federal judges.

Counter-terrorism

Counterterrorism legislation was widely abused, often to target dissent.

Journalist Abdulmumin Gadzhiev, from Dagestan, remained in custody under fabricated charges of financing terrorism and participation in terrorist and extremist organizations. His trial started in November.

In occupied Crimea, allegations of membership of the Islamist organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir (labelled as a “terrorist” movement by Russia in 2003) were widely used to imprison ethnic Crimean Tatars. In June, Crimean human rights defender Emir-Usein Kuku lost the appeal against his 12-year prison sentence. In September, another Crimean human rights defender, Server Mustafayev, was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

In September, 19 men from Ufa, Bashkiria, convicted for alleged Hizb-ut-Tahrir membership and sentenced to between 10 and 24 years, lost their appeal, with one defendant’s sentence reduced by a year.

Violence against women and girls

Proposals to introduce legislation on domestic violence remained stalled in Parliament, while NGOs reported a sharp increase in domestic violence following COVID-19 lockdown measures.

In June, the ECtHR held in *Polshina v. Russia* that deficiencies in the legal system related to domestic violence violated the prohibitions of torture and discrimination. The Court underlined Russia’s consistent failure to investigate abuse, and years-long tolerance of “a climate which was conducive to domestic violence”.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people

LGBTI people continued to face discrimination and persecution. Constitutional amendments redefined marriage as a “union between a man and a woman”, reinforcing existing limitations on same-sex marriage and ensuing restrictions, including adoption by same-sex couples.

LGBTI rights activist Yulia Tsvetkova was fined RUB75,000 (US\$1,014) for posting online her drawings in support of same-sex couples and faced other penalties, including ongoing prosecution for pornography relating to her body positive drawings featuring female genitalia.⁴

Migrants’ rights

Over a third of foreign labour migrants reported having lost work owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, and thousands were stranded in Russia due to related border closures. In April, a presidential decree eased work permit and residency rules for migrants and refugees, and temporarily suspended forcible returns of foreign and stateless individuals. Some regional authorities ceased temporary detention of migrants, although new decisions on forcible returns were also reported.

Unlawful attacks

Evidence including witness statements, videos, photographs and satellite imagery of seven air strikes against medical facilities and schools by Russian forces, and four by Syrian or Russian forces, between May 2019 and February 2020 in Syria, corroborated allegations of serious violations of international humanitarian law amounting to war crimes (see Syria entry).⁵

1. [Russian Federation: Russian doctor’s persecution continues: Tatvana Revva \(EUR 46/2970/2020, 2 September\)](#)
2. [Russia: Prominent investigative journalist and lawyer attacked during visit to Chechnya \(News story, 7 February\)](#)
3. [Russia: Prosecution for membership of a non-existent “terrorist” organization must stop \(News story 7 February\)](#)
4. [Russian Federation: Activist faces jail for female body drawings: Yulia Tsvetkova \(EUR 46/2977/2020\)](#)
5. [Syria: ‘Nowhere is Safe for Us’: Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in north-west Syria \(MDE 24/2089/2020\)](#)

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