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Riot police arrest a protester during a peaceful demonstration in Moscow, August 2019. © Amnesty International

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Russian Federation

Head of state: **Vladimir Putin**

Head of state: **Dmitry Medvedev**

Russia's human rights record continued to deteriorate, with the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly consistently restricted, in law and practice. Those attempting to exercise these rights faced reprisals, ranging from harassment to police ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest, heavy fines and in some cases criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Human rights defenders and NGOs were targeted via the laws on "foreign agents" and "undesirable organisations". Hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted for their faith. Other vulnerable

minorities also faced discrimination and persecution. Counter-terrorism provisions were widely used to target dissent across the country and in Crimea. Torture remained pervasive, as did impunity for its perpetrators. Violence against women remained widespread and inadequately addressed. A draft law on domestic violence tabled at the parliament provoked heated opposition from conservative groups and threats against its proponents. Refugees were forcibly returned to destinations where they were at risk of torture.

BACKGROUND

The year culminating with Vladimir Putin's 20th anniversary as Russia's leader, was marked by simmering political tensions and social discontent, underpinned by generally sliding

standards of living and growing popular distrust in the ruling United Russia party. Endemic corruption, environmental concerns, deteriorating and ill-considered urban planning and worsening human rights prompted local protests across the country. In Moscow, some of the biggest protests in years were sparked by the authorities' refusal to register opposition candidates for the Moscow City Duma election.

Five years after its voting rights were suspended following the annexation of Crimea, Russia returned to the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) after a diplomatic compromise. Some in the Russian human rights community viewed this as a betrayal of the Council's core values, while others welcomed the opportunity to retain Russia within its orbit and preserve Russians' access to the European Court of Human Rights.

Russia pursued further integration of occupied Crimea, and its ongoing overt and covert military presence in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere continued to fuel human rights violations.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Due to the growing disconnect between the authorities and general public, street protest was on the rise, including over political but also increasingly over local economic, social or environmental issues, such as waste disposal, but also wider political demands. The authorities often responded by refusing authorisation for public assemblies (their express permission remaining a legal precondition), breaking up peaceful gatherings, and prosecuting organisers and participants in administrative and criminal proceedings. This treatment of protesters, in turn, galvanised unprecedented public solidarity with them.

In July and August, more than 2,600 people were arrested during protests in Moscow which remained peaceful until the police and National Guard officers forcibly intervened. Although there were numerous reports of arbitrary arrest, use of excessive and indiscriminate force and ill-treatment of protesters by the officers, none were known to have been investigated. Some victims of police violence included random bystanders, including jogger Konstantin Konovalov who was arbitrarily stopped before the protest on 27 July had even began and thrown on the pavement. A police officer allegedly stamped on his leg and broke it. Scores of those arrested, in Moscow and elsewhere, were subjected to detention and heavy fines, while criminal proceedings were launched against several individuals as part of an investigation into purported “mass riots.” At least 28 people were prosecuted in connection with the demonstrations, most of them for “violence against representatives of the authorities”; 16 were convicted and 10 sentenced to imprisonment following deeply flawed trials.¹

In their crackdown on protest, the authorities resumed the use of Article 212.1 of the Criminal Code, “repeated violation of the rules of conducting public assemblies”. Three peaceful protesters, Vyacheslav Egorov, Andrey Borovikov and Konstantin Kotov, were prosecuted under it. Kotov was sentenced to four years’ imprisonment, Borovikov to 400 hours of mandatory works and Egorov was still awaiting trial at the end of the year.²

In October, peaceful activists Yan Sidorov and Viacheslav Mordasov were each sentenced to over six years’ imprisonment in a strict regime penal colony, for their 2017 brief peaceful picket in Rostov-on-Don, southern Russia,. The appeal court upheld the sentence in December. Their co-defendant Viacheslav Shashmin received three years’ probation.³

A series of overwhelmingly peaceful protests against a territorial settlement with neighbouring Chechnya were held in the Ingushetian capital of Magas in the North Caucasus in late 2018-early 2019. Although tolerated throughout this period, the authorities dispersed the peaceful protestors on 27 March provoking isolated incidents of violence by the demonstrators. Over 30 individuals were then prosecuted for “violence against a representative of authority”, including six activists accused of organizing it.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Impunity for past violence against human rights defenders prevailed. Repressive legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” was regularly used against human rights and other NGOs and their members, alongside criminal prosecutions and smears in government-controlled media.⁴

Ten years after her abduction and murder, the suspected killers of Natalia Estemirova, a prominent member of the NGO Memorial in Grozny, had still not been brought to justice.⁵ Similarly, the perpetrators of the vicious attack on environmentalist Andrey Rudomakha in

Krasnodar Region in southern Russia in December 2017 were not identified, and neither were those who abducted and mock executed of Amnesty International’s researcher Oleg Kozlovsky in Ingushetia in October 2018. Investigations into some of these crimes were still nominally open.

In March, Shali City Court convicted the Head of Memorial’s Grozny office Oyub Titiev of drugs possession, under manifestly fabricated charges, and sentenced him to four years’ imprisonment. In June, Titiev was released on parole, having already spent a third of this term behind bars since his arrest in January 2018.⁶

Five activists faced criminal prosecution for “cooperation” with “undesirable” organizations. Anastasia Shevchenko, in Rostov-on-Don, was arrested on 21 January and, after two days in detention, spent the entire year under house arrest pending trial.⁷ The trial against Yana Antonova, in Krasnodar, started in November.⁸ Both were accused of association with the opposition movement Otkrytaya Rossia, facing up to six years’ imprisonment if found guilty.

In October, a court in Krasnodar convicted human rights lawyer Mikhail Benyash of “use of violence against representatives of authorities” and fined him 60,000 roubles (US\$ 969), reduced by half on account of the two months he had spent in pretrial detention. The case against him had been fabricated after he was arrested and beaten by plainclothes police in September 2018, though his counter-allegations were consistently ignored.

The Ministry of Justice instigated administrative proceedings against several organisations for allegedly violating the “foreign agents” legislation. Consequently, courts issued a string of severe fines against the Human Rights Center Memorial and International Memorial, amongst others, and ordered that the For Human Rights movement be dissolved. A total of five unfounded criminal cases were opened against the head of Ecodefence, Aleksandra

Koroleva, forcing her to leave the country and seek international protection. In August, the Investigation Committee started a criminal investigation against Aleksey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) for purported money laundering. Under this pretext, the homes of hundreds of its supporters and other opposition activists were searched across the country, and the personal bank accounts of FBK staff and various activists were frozen. In October, the authorities registered FBK as a "foreign agent". It was by then one of the most successful crowdfunded projects in Russia.⁹

Four more foreign organizations, including Prague-based NGO People in Need, were declared "undesirable", bringing their total number to 19, and making them and any association with them illegal in Russia. Several Russian NGOs were heavily penalised for spurious links with "undesirable organizations". In April, Environmental Watch for the North Caucasus, based in Krasnodar Region, was fined by a court in Maikop for sharing links to blogs that had been previously published on the "undesirable" Otkrytaya Rossiya movement's website. In September, a court in Barnaul, western Siberia, fined Young Journalists of Altai for having a defunct hyperlink to the "undesirable" Open Society Institute on its website.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The right to freedom of expression was further constrained in law and practice, including through additional restrictions on the internet and new reprisals against online dissent. There was an ever greater disparity between how legislation governing expression was applied to state media and authorities, as opposed to those who expressed critical or dissenting views.

While "incitement of hatred and enmity" (Article 282 of the Criminal Code) was partially decriminalized in January, other criminal provisions, including Article 280 (propagation of "extremism"), continued to be used selectively against dissenters.

Under new legislation adopted in March, "spreading fake news" and "insulting" the state, its symbols and organs on the internet became administrative offences punishable by heavy fines. Prosecutions promptly followed, with over 20 individuals fined as "offenders" by December, mostly for criticizing the president. By contrast, smears of government critics and "fake news" about them in state-controlled media was commonplace. The head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, publicly and with full impunity threatened to "kill, jail, intimidate" bloggers for "discord and gossip".

Criminal proceedings were opened in February against journalist Svetlana Prokopieva, from Pskov, northwest Russia, for "justifying terrorism" in an October 2018 article that criticized the authorities in connection with a suicide bomber's attack on a Federal Security Service office. In June, a journalist from Dagestan's independent *Chernovik* newspaper, Abdulmumin Gadzhiev, was arrested under unfounded charges of funding terrorism and spent the rest of the year in pretrial detention.¹⁰ The same month, police in Moscow framed investigative journalist Ivan Golunov for drugs. An unexpected vigorous reaction from journalists and the general public forced the authorities to admit having falsified the evidence and release him without charge. The police officers responsible for his arrest were dismissed but Ivan Golunov's legal team was only informed of criminal investigation against them at the end of the year.¹¹

In November, the law on "sovereign RuNet" intended to enable Russian authorities to fully control internet routing in emergency situations, came into force. In December, President Vladimir Putin signed a new law under which individuals may be required to register and be regulated as "foreign agents" for disseminating information produced by foreign media or "agents" and receiving foreign funds. Failure to comply is punishable by fines of up to 5,000,000 rubles (US\$ 80,000).¹²

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

Hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses faced prosecution across Russia for their religious beliefs after the organization was declared as "extremist" and banned in 2017. In February, the first person to be detained following the ban, Danish national Dennis Christensen of the local Jehovah's Witnesses' group in Orel, central Russia, was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for "organizing activities of an extremist organization."¹³ After losing his appeal in May, he was sent to serve his six-year sentence 200km away in Kursk Region. At least 17 other Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted during the year, seven of them receiving custodial sentences, while many more faced harassment, including intrusive house searches.¹⁴ Some members alleged torture and other ill-treatment during questioning.

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

Discrimination and harassment of LGBTI people remained pervasive, with the homophobic "gay propaganda law" repeatedly used to suppress their free expression. Threats against LGBTI rights activists were common, their perpetrators enjoying impunity.

The mounting evidence of abduction, torture and killing of gay men by the authorities in Chechnya over previous years, was consistently ignored by the federal authorities. In May, Maxim Lapunov, a survivor who failed to attain any justice in Russia filed a complaint at the ECtHR, which accepted it in November and requested Russia's response within four months. In November LGBTI activist Yulia Tsvetkova, from Komsomolsk-on-Amur in Russia's far east, was charged with "production and distribution of pornographic materials" and placed under house arrest for publishing online her body-positive drawings of female genitalia. The charge carries up to six years' imprisonment.¹⁵

COUNTER-TERRORISM

Counter-terrorism legislation was widely used for politically motivated prosecution. In March and May, court hearings began in St Petersburg and Penza in the case against several men accused of having organized or participated in a “terrorist” organization named Set’ (Network). In December, the prosecution in Penza requested from six to 18 years’ imprisonment for the defendants. Credible allegations of torture by several defendants, including Viktor Filinkov and Dmitry Pchelintsev, were consistently ignored, while the case itself, targeting mostly political opponents and activists, and based on forced “confessions” – prompted suspicion that the charges had been fabricated. Other cases, marred by remarkably similar concerns were ongoing elsewhere, including the *Novoe Velichie* case in Moscow.

In November, the military court in Rostov-on-Don convicted six prisoners of conscience from occupied Crimea, including human rights defender, Emir-Usein Kuku, and sentenced them to between seven and 19 years’ imprisonment. They stood accused of membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir (designated as “terrorist” in Russia in 2003, but existing legally in Ukraine). In Crimea, allegations of its membership are widely used by the de facto authorities as a pretext for politically-motivated reprisals against ethnic Crimean Tatars. Similarly harsh sentences were handed to at least 15 other alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Russia during the year.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment in places of detention remained pervasive, and impunity for the perpetrators near-total. Countless allegations of torture were reported across Russia. In December, the

charitable foundation Nuzhna Pomosch obtained statistics on torture in places of detention from the Investigative Committee. According to the committee, from 2015 to 2018, between 1,590 and 1,881 complaints of “abuse of authority” by penitentiary officers were registered annually. Of these, only 1.7 – 3.2% were investigated.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Several high-profile cases were emblematic of violence against women, and particularly domestic violence. Pickets and flash mobs were held throughout the summer in Moscow and elsewhere in support of sisters Angelina, Krestina and Maria Khachaturyan. Arrested in July 2018, and aged 17, 18 and 19 at the time, they admitted killing their father following years of systematic physical, sexual and psychological abuse. To campaigners they epitomized countless other survivors and the state’s response: lack of protection and harsh prosecution for acts of desperation. In June, the initial charges were replaced with more serious ones (premeditated killing by a group) which carries up to 20 years’ imprisonment.

In July, in its first-ever ruling on domestic violence in Russia, in favour of the applicant (*Volodina v Russia*), the ECtHR emphasised Russia’s “continued failure to adopt legislation to combat domestic violence” and described the existing provisions as “inadequate ... to provide sufficient protection for its victims”. A second ECtHR ruling on the issue (*Barsova v Russia*) followed in October, with around 100 similar complaints from Russia awaiting response, according to an ECtHR judge. An official Ministry of Justice communication to the ECtHR, sent in October, disputed the significance and scale of the problem in Russia and its disproportionate effect on women, and

argued that discrimination against men was greater.

In November, a long-awaited bill on domestic violence was tabled in parliament. Its draft provisions fell far short of effective measures for protection of individuals at risk and survivors. Nonetheless, it was met with fierce opposition from conservative groups, including the Russian Orthodox Church, who saw it as a threat to Russia’s “traditional values” and “the family”. Proponents of legislation on domestic violence, including member of the State Duma Oksana Pushkina and lawyer Mari Davtyan, reported threats issued against them by the bill’s opponents.

REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

Russia continued to return individuals in need of international protection to destinations where they were at risk of torture and other human rights violations, including by practices amounting to secret rendition.

Fakhraddin Abbasov (Aboszoda), a political emigre from Azerbaijan resident in Russia since 2008, had been in detention since September 2018 following an extradition request from Azerbaijan whose authorities accused him of crimes against the state. His asylum application was rejected by the Ministry of the Interior in October 2018 on the grounds that he already had a Russian residence permit, valid until February 2019. He appealed this decision and was due to appear in court about it on 28 February. However, on 27 February he was taken by unidentified law enforcement officers from his cell to an unknown location. The hearing was postponed. On 1 March, the Azerbaijani State Security Service reported they had taken Fakhraddin Abbasov into custody on his arrival at Baku International Airport on 28 February.¹⁷

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