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Russia

As the March 2018 presidential election approached, the government increased its crackdown against political opposition and peaceful protesters and took new steps to stifle independent voices online. In Chechnya, local authorities carried out a large-scale anti-gay purge, rounding up and torturing dozens of men because of their presumed homosexuality. Parliament decriminalized acts of domestic violence not involving serious bodily harm. The government continued to support “separatists” in eastern Ukraine, who committed abuses in areas under their control, and it aimed to silence Crimean Tatars and other critics in occupied Crimea, including through criminal prosecution.

Freedom of Assembly

In the first six months of 2017 alone, the number of people administratively punished by Russian authorities for supposedly violating the country’s regulations on public gatherings was two-and-a-half times higher than throughout 2016.

In spring and summer, government critics in numerous cities across Russia held peaceful anti-corruption protests that authorities refused to authorize. Officials harassed and intimidated protesters, including schoolchildren and university students, and also parents whose children participated. University administrators directly or indirectly threatened students with expulsion for involvement. In July, a university in Kaliningrad expelled a law student, apparently for his active role in the protests.

Police arbitrarily detained hundreds of peaceful protesters on June 12 in Moscow and St. Petersburg. If protesters questioned their detentions, riot police handled them roughly, and in some cases beat them with truncheons and kicked and punched them. One protester in Moscow spent a week in a hospital with a concussion after a police officer hit her.

Police apprehended people who were not causing a disturbance, and in many cases were not even chanting slogans or carrying posters, and charged them groundlessly with various administrative violations. Most were fined or handed 10 to 15 days' jail time, following flawed, pro-forma court hearings. Protesters detained in St. Petersburg spent up to two nights sleeping on the floor or in chairs at overcrowded precincts, and had to rely on activists to bring food and drinking water. Police at some precincts denied detainees access to lawyers.

In February, the Constitutional Court ruled that criminal penalties for repeated breaches of public assembly regulations should not be applied in cases where protesters did not constitute a threat. Later in February, the Supreme Court quashed the two-and-a-half-year criminal sentence of Ildar Dadin, the first person convicted under that provision, and ordered his immediate release. Dadin's prior allegations of torture by penitentiary officials have seen no effective investigation.

Suppression of Political Opposition Campaigning Activity

From spring 2017 onward, authorities systematically interfered with the presidential campaign of a leading opposition politician, Alexei Navalny. Formally disqualified from the race due to an outstanding criminal conviction resulting from a politicized, unfair trial, Navalny opened campaign offices in most of Russia's regions.

Police across Russia searched Navalny's offices and seized campaign materials. Authorities frequently refused to authorize campaign sidewalk displays, and detained campaigners on groundless charges. Police also raided the homes of local campaigners and their relatives.

Navalny campaigners and offices also faced increasing attacks by ultra-nationalist groups and pro-Kremlin activists. Attackers vandalized campaign offices or campaigners' homes, stormed into meetings, stole campaign materials, and damaged office equipment and campaigners' vehicles. They also physically assaulted campaigners, beating and throwing eggs and other objects at them. In some cases, police merely stood by or arrived too late to catch the attackers. Authorities registered complaints filed by campaigners, but typically failed to carry out effective investigations.

Freedom of Association

Authorities used a 2015 law on “undesirable organizations” to ban four more foreign organizations, bringing the total to 11, and to intimidate protesters and independent groups.

Russians maintaining ties with “undesirables” face penalties ranging from fines to up to six years in prison. In June, a Krasnodar court fined an activist 15,000 rubles (US\$260) for supposed involvement with the UK-based pro-democracy group Open Russia, banned in 2017, and in August, a Tula court fined another activist 1,000 rubles (\$17) for the same.

Also, between June and November, the government filed charges against at least eight Russian groups for their supposed “participation in the activities of undesirable organizations.” In September, the Moscow city prosecutor’s office charged SOVA Center, an independent think tank, and its director, Alexander Verkhovsky, with involvement with “undesirable organizations.” The charges stemmed from hyperlinks on SOVA’s website to two US foundations, which had funded some of SOVA’s projects until they were banned as “undesirable” in 2015. In November, a court in Moscow found the Andrei Rylkov Foundation, a prominent Russian group dedicated to responsible drug policy, in violation of the law on “undesirable organizations” and fined it 50,000 rubles (US\$862). The charges stemmed from a hyperlink to the website of a banned US organization in an article published on the foundation’s website.

Authorities also continued demonizing as “foreign agents” advocacy groups that accept foreign funding. The number of organizations on the government’s “foreign agent” register dropped from almost 150 to 88 as some of the designated groups either abandoned foreign funding or closed. Over 30 groups, including several rights organizations and environmental groups, have closed since the foreign agents’ law was adopted in 2012. In June, authorities in Rostov region brought criminal proceedings against Valentina Cherevatenko, a prominent rights activist, for “malicious evasion” of the foreign agents law, but dropped the case several weeks later.

Freedom of Expression Online and Freedom of Information

Legislation adopted in July banned anonymous use of online messenger applications and software designed to circumvent internet censorship.

By February 2017, the number of people imprisoned for extremist speech spiked to 94, from 54 in 2015.

In December 2016, a court in Tyumen sentenced Alexey Kungurov, a journalist and blogger, to two-and-a-half years in prison for “publicly justifying terrorism.” The charges had stemmed from his blog post criticizing Russia’s actions in Syria.

In May, a court convicted video blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky for inciting hatred and insulting the feelings of religious believers, and handed down a three-and-a-half-year suspended sentence. The charges stemmed from a prank video mocking the Russian Orthodox Church, which Sokolovsky shared on social media. The sentence was reduced to two years and three months on appeal.

In June, a Moscow court convicted the director of the Moscow Library of Ukrainian Literature, Natalia Sharina, for “inciting hatred” for books in the library that authorities said were “extremist,” and handed down a four-year suspended sentence. Sharina had spent one year and seven months under house arrest.

In November, the parliament amended Russia's media legislation to enable the government to designate any media organization or information distributor of foreign origin as “foreign media performing the functions of a foreign agent.” Those designated must comply with the requirements for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) set out in the 2012 “foreign agents” law.

Freedom of Religion

In April, the Supreme Court banned as extremist the Jehovah’s Witnesses organization, which has more than 100,000 worshippers across Russia.

Since July 2016, when the “Yarovaya Law” entered into force, authorities fined over 100 religious activists, mainly evangelist Christians, for either preaching without special authorization or distributing religious literature without the religious distributor’s name on the cover.

In June, authorities stated that the Interior Ministry for Dagestan, in the south of Russia, was no longer placing “adherents of non-traditional Islam” on police watchlists. However, persecution of Salafi Muslims, including arbitrary detentions and harassment, continued.

Chechnya

Early in 2017, Chechen security officials illegally detained and tortured presumed jihadists. *Novaya Gazeta* reported that in December 2016 and January 2017, Chechen police extrajudicially killed 27 detainees; Human Rights Center Memorial stated that, based on their investigation, 23 of the people on *Novaya Gazeta*’s list disappeared and two died following abduction-style detentions by local security officials.

From late February and through early April, security officials unlawfully rounded up dozens of men they believed were gay, searched their cell phones for contacts of other presumably gay men, and tried to coerce them, including through torture, into naming their gay acquaintances. They kept the men in several unofficial facilities, where Chechen authorities have for years held and tortured individuals suspected of dissent or sabotage. They exposed some of the captives to their families as gay and encouraged honor killings. At least two high-level local officials watched police humiliate and torture the detainees.

Chechen authorities responded to the allegations by denying the existence of gay people in Chechnya, suggesting obliquely that families kill their gay relatives, and accusing journalists and human rights defenders of seeking to destabilize the republic. Chechen officials and public figures made serious threats against *Novaya Gazeta*, the newspaper that broke the story.

The Russian LGBT Network opened a special hotline for those in immediate danger and provided evacuation-related assistance to 79 people. Most of them eventually found safe sanctuary abroad. Chechen police allegedly harassed relatives of those who fled, attempting to pressure them into disclosing the men’s whereabouts, and forcing them to sign documents with false statements that the men were traveling outside Chechnya at the time the purge was ongoing.

The Kremlin initially dismissed reports about the violence but, faced with consolidated international pressure, federal authorities eventually investigated. By summer, the investigation apparently stalled. In September, Russian investigative authorities received an official complaint by one of the victims of the purge, Maxim Lapunov, detailing his abduction-style detention and torture by Chechen security officials in March. At time of writing, authorities had not carried out an effective investigation into Lapunov's complaint.

Chechen authorities also stepped up their "women's virtue campaign" aimed at ensuring that women wear headscarves in public and adhere to traditional family roles. With apparent approval by local authorities, Carthage, a Chechen online group published photos of numerous women and called for their punishment. In September, federal authorities blocked the website for "extremist" content.

In June, Chechnya's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, launched a "family reunification" program, creating local councils of public officials and religious authorities, who draw up lists of divorced couples and approach the spouses separately, suggesting reconciliation. In September, Chechen media reported that the program led to the reuniting of over 1,000 divorced couples. Some of those reluctant to cooperate, including women who had fled abusive marriages, alleged pressure from the councils.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Authorities continued to enforce discriminatory policies and laws against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

In May, St. Petersburg authorities refused to approve a flashmob on International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, citing the "gay propaganda" ban.

In June, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that the "gay propaganda" law violated freedom of expression, was discriminatory, and encouraged homophobia.

In October, a court in Samara fined a local activist 50,000 rubles (US\$865) for violating the "gay propaganda" ban.

In a positive development in August, a court in Omsk ruled in favor of a man who sued a shop for denying him a job because of his apparent sexual orientation. The court found the refusal to hire him “unlawful” and awarded him 30,000 rubles (\$505) in damages.

Abuses Linked to the 2017 FIFA Confederations Cup and 2018 World Cup

Workers on stadiums being built for the 2017 FIFA Confederations Cup and 2018 World Cup reported exploitation, including non-provision of contracts, non-payment of wages, and retaliation for reporting abuses. The Building and Woodworkers International trade union reported at least 17 deaths on stadiums since construction began.

In April, authorities arbitrarily detained a Human Rights Watch researcher seeking to interview workers near the Volgograd stadium; he was released without charge after three hours. In June and July, police detained at least 33 people, citing a May presidential order unduly restricting peaceful assemblies in confederations and World Cup host cities.

Women’s Rights

Despite persistently high rates of domestic violence, in February the Russian government enacted a law decriminalizing acts of domestic violence that do not cause serious harm leading to hospital treatment, or which aren’t reported more than once a year. The law leaves domestic violence victims more vulnerable to escalation of abuse. Moscow’s mayor denied activists authorization to protest the law. A comprehensive domestic violence law has been stalled in parliament since 2014.

Disability Rights

Reports persisted of discrimination against people with disabilities and abuse of children and adults with disabilities in state institutions. In July, a psychiatrist published videos showing several residents in an adult institution in Trubchevsk chained to beds, radiators, and other objects. Former staff publicly confirmed this practice. A criminal investigation is ongoing.

In March, the Prosecutor General's Office noted that violations of the rights of people with disabilities persist at high rates, including lack of physical accessibility, employment discrimination, and denial of medical treatment.

According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, authorities in some regions have taken steps to move children out of institutions and promote family-based care; education reforms for children with disabilities to study in mainstream schools with proper supports are ongoing.

Russia and Ukraine (see also Ukraine chapter)

The government continued to provide political and material support to armed “separatists” in eastern Ukraine but took no measures to rein in their abuses, such as arbitrary detentions and torture. Russian authorities also continued repression against critics, primarily Crimean Tatars, in occupied Crimea. (See Ukraine chapter).

In September 2016, Russian authorities arrested Roman Sushchenko, a Ukrainian journalist with the state news service, Ukrinform, on dubious espionage charges. At time of writing, he remained in custody pending investigation.

Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian filmmaker, continued to serve a 20-year prison sentence resulting from his 2015 conviction on trumped-up charges of running “terrorist organizations” in Crimea.

Russia and Syria (see also Syria chapter)

Between April and August, Russia conducted at least 13,000 air strikes. While the number of civilian casualties appeared to decrease, partially as a result of local ceasefires, monitoring groups reported hundreds of civilian deaths each month, including from unlawful aerial attacks. Syrian and Russian forces carried out unlawful attacks, including airstrikes on schools and hospitals, and air-dropped cluster munitions and incendiary weapons in populated areas.

Russian ground forces became more active in Syria. Russia also played a role in negotiating local ceasefires and evacuations and participated in the evacuation of fighters

and civilians from opposition-controlled areas. Some evacuations could amount to forced displacement, where civilians may have been transferred to other areas without their informed consent and beyond the exceptions of imperative military or protection reasons.

Russia continued to protect Syria from repercussions for violating the laws of war. At the United Nations Security Council, Russia, along with China, vetoed a February 2017 resolution proposing sanctions on those responsible for chemical attacks. Russia was also the only member to veto an April 2017 resolution condemning a chemical attack in northern Syria and calling for an international investigation.

Russia continued its efforts to shield the Syrian government from accountability by lobbying against the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), established by the General Assembly in December 2016 to investigate serious crimes committed in Syria and prepare and preserve evidence.

Moscow has openly criticized the IIIM as illegitimate and suggested that the assembly had no authority to establish a quasi-special prosecutor's office. At the Security Council in November, Russia twice vetoed a proposed renewal of the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) of the UN and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons after JIM issued a report blaming the Syrian government for a sarin gas attack in April 2017. The vetoes brought to 11 the number of times Russia has cast its veto at the council since 2011.

Key International Actors

Russia's role in the Syria conflict, sanctions against Russia for occupying Crimea, and engagement with Russian authorities to end hostilities in eastern Ukraine continued to dominate the agenda of key international actors. But many spoke out strongly against abuses.

In January, the European Union and the secretary general of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, spoke out against Russia's decriminalization of domestic violence.

In February, the EU called the repeated conviction of Alexei Navalny on embezzlement charges “an attempt to silence another independent political voice.” The UK, French, and German governments raised similar concerns.

Also in February, Jagland welcomed the overturning of Ildar Dadin’s verdict and his release from prison. He also called on Russia to amend its law on public gatherings.

Numerous international actors, both institutional and individual such as the EU, Jagland, UN human rights experts, and governments of the US, UK, France, and Germany spoke out against the mass detentions of peaceful protesters at the March 26 and June 12 rallies.

In April, key international actors including the EU, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and UN human rights experts responded vocally and publicly to news of the anti-gay purge in Chechnya. The governments of Canada, the US, France, Germany, and the UK deplored the purge, and the foreign ministers of France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and Sweden sent a joint letter to Russia’s foreign minister urging the Russian government to investigate.

In a joint press conference with President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel raised the issue and asked him “to utilize his influence to protect these minority rights.” French President Emmanuel Macron also raised the issue at his May summit with Putin. Canada and several EU member states provided refuge to some of the men who fled.

In April, UN human rights experts, officials of the OSCE, the UK human rights minister, the US State Department, and the EU expressed concern over Russia’s Jehovah’s Witnesses ban.

In June, the EU criticized Russia for labeling NGOs “foreign agents” and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights called the “foreign agents” law incompatible with international human rights standards.

In August, Russia was reviewed before the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which raised concerns, including lack of protection from discrimination, vague and overly broad counter-extremism legislation, flawed laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations”, hate crimes and hate speech. It also

called on Russia to allow the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) full access to Crimea, and address alleged violations against Crimean Tartars, Roma, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups.

In September, Russia was reviewed before the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which raised concerns about a broad range of issues, including “foreign agent” restrictions on NGOs, harassment of human rights defenders, corruption, and discrimination.

In 2017, Russia-US relations hit a new low over the allegations of Russia’s interference in the 2016 US presidential election.