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Media pluralism and the space for the expression of dissenting views shrank markedly. Restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, introduced in 2012, were assiduously enforced and further added to. Some NGOs faced harassment, public smear campaigns and pressure to register as “foreign agents”. Several protesters and civil society activists were convicted following unfair, politically motivated trials. Torture and other ill-treatment continued to be used with impunity. The situation in the North Caucasus remained volatile and marred by human rights violations, with no effective legal remedies for victims, and human rights defenders, independent journalists and lawyers continuing to face personal risks in their work.

Background

In February, Russia hosted the well-attended Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. By the end of the year, following its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March and its continuing support for separatists in Ukraine’s eastern region of Donbass, Russia was facing increasing international isolation.

The Russian authorities adopted an increasingly belligerent anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, which was widely echoed in the government-controlled mainstream media. Despite growing economic difficulties and projected cuts in social spending – caused in part by Western sanctions and falling oil prices (Russia’s major export commodity), and corruption – the Russian leadership enjoyed a surge in popular support, fuelled in large measure by the widely hailed annexation of Crimea (which had been under Russian administration in the Soviet Union until 1954).

Fighting in Ukraine continued after a Russian-brokered truce in September, albeit on a reduced scale. The government consistently denied that Russia was supplying military hardware, personnel and other assistance to the separatists in Donbass, despite growing evidence to the contrary. In occupied Crimea, Russian laws took effect, and the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association were significantly curtailed as a result.

Freedom of expression

Media and journalists

The government strengthened its control over mainstream media, which became noticeably less pluralistic. Most media not nominally under state control exercised an increasing degree of self-censorship, seldom if ever giving platform to views unwelcome by the authorities. Dissenting media outlets faced considerable pressure in the form of official warnings, the removal of editorial staff and the severing of business ties. Publicly owned and private media outlets with pro-government sympathies were used to smear political opponents and critical voices, including independent NGOs.

Dozhd TV was taken off air by satellite and cable broadcasters in late January after it initiated a controversial debate about the siege of Leningrad in World War II. It was also refused an extension on the lease of its studio space. Although commercial reasons were cited, the political influence on these business decisions was apparent. Dozhd TV was well known for its independent political broadcasting, giving the floor to opposing views and offering markedly different coverage of EuroMaydan events in Ukraine. It was forced to broadcast online only and resort to “crowdfunding” to survive.

In March, the owner of online news outlet Lenta.ru replaced its editor-in-chief after receiving an official warning for publishing an interview with a right-wing Ukrainian nationalist activist who had come to prominence during EuroMaydan. Many members of staff resigned in protest, and the previously independent editorial policy changed markedly.

Greater controls were imposed on the internet. In February a law was enacted giving the Prosecutor’s Office the authority to order the media regulator, Roskomnadzor, to block websites without judicial authorization for purported violations, including publishing calls to participate in unauthorized public assemblies.

In March, popular online news outlets Ezhednevnyi Zhurnal (Daily Journal), Grani.ru and Kasparov.ru were blocked after reporting on the dispersal of several peaceful spontaneous street protests in Moscow. The Prosecutor’s Office argued that their sympathetic reporting on these demonstrations amounted to calls for further “unlawful actions”. Its decision was repeatedly upheld in subsequent legal challenges and the outlets remained blocked at the end of the year.¹

Several independent media outlets received official warnings about “extremist” or other purportedly unlawful content. Independent radio station Echo Moskvyy was forced to remove a transcript from its website of a studio discussion on 29 October with two journalists who had witnessed the fighting at Donetsk airport and expressed pro-Ukrainian views. Roskomnadzor alleged that the programme contained “information justifying the commission of war crimes”. The host of the discussion, Aleksandr Pliushev, was later suspended for two months in connection with an unrelated inappropriate personal tweet. His suspension was the result of a compromise reached between the editor-in-chief Aleksey Venediktov and the management of Gazprom Media, the station’s principal shareholder, who had initially sought to dismiss Aleksandr Pliushev and threatened to remove Aleksey Venediktov.

Physical attacks on journalists continued. In August, several were assaulted in separate incidents, as they attempted to report on secretive funerals of Russian military servicemen allegedly killed in Ukraine.

On 29 August, Lev Shlosberg, publisher of Pskovskaya Guberniya, the first newspaper to report on the secret funerals, was brutally beaten and hospitalized with head injuries. The investigation failed to identify his three assailants and was suspended at the end of the year.

Timur Kuashev, a journalist from Kabardino-Balkaria who worked closely with local human rights defenders, was found dead on 1 August. His unexplained death was reportedly caused by a lethal injection. The killings of other journalists in the North Caucasus in previous years, including Natalia Estemirova, Hajimurad Kamalov and Akhmednabi Akhmednabiev, were not effectively investigated and their killers remained unidentified. In June, five men were sentenced to imprisonment for the killing of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow in October 2006, but those who ordered her killing remained unidentified.

Activists

Individuals and groups with dissenting views also continued to be denied their right to freedom of expression. Sexual minorities were among those targeted, including under the 2013 federal law prohibiting “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors”. LGBTI activists were consistently prevented from holding peaceful assemblies, including in locations specifically designated for public gatherings without prior permission, typically less frequented parks with low footfall. Courts upheld the right of LGBTI activists to peaceful assembly in relation to previously banned events on three occasions, but their rulings had no impact on future decisions.

In January, activist Elena Klimova, from Nizhniy Tagil, was accused of “propaganda” for her online project “Children 404” aimed at supporting LGBTI teenagers.² Charges were issued against her, then dropped, then issued again, threatening the closure of her project. In April, the screening of a film about “Children 404” in Moscow was disrupted by protesters who forced their way into the auditorium and shouted abusive slogans. They were accompanied by armed police who insisted on checking the identity documents of all those present in order to establish whether any minors were present.

Freedom of assembly

Street protest activity declined overall in comparison to previous years, but spiked briefly in February and March, and again in December, in response to the Bolotnaya trial and Russia’s military involvement in Ukraine, and to the announced health care system reforms and the conviction of Aleksei and Oleg Navalny.

Onerous approval procedures for public assemblies remained in place. With few exceptions, most public protests were severely restricted, barred or dispersed. In July, penalties were significantly increased and criminal liability punishable by imprisonment introduced for repeated violations of the law on public assemblies.³

The authorities proceeded with the prosecution of those accused in connection with the May 2012 Bolotnaya Square protest: 10 individuals were sentenced to between two and a half and four and a half years in prison for their participation in and alleged violence during the protest, which was qualified as “mass disorder”. Sergei Udaltsov and Leonid Razvozhayev were convicted of organizing the “mass disorder”.

On 20 and 24 February, police violently dispersed hundreds of peaceful protesters assembled outside the court building in Moscow as it was delivering its verdict in the Bolotnaya trial and at subsequent gatherings in the city centre. Over 600 were arbitrarily arrested, most of whom received fines. At least six were sentenced to between five and 13 days’ “administrative arrest”.

In subsequent weeks, numerous peaceful protesters were arrested, fined and sometimes detained for their participation in protests against Russia’s military involvement in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. At the same time, pro-government demonstrations on Ukraine were allowed to proceed in central locations that were regularly denied to opposition protesters.

In Samara, several activists received anonymous death threats after they held a series of single-person pickets (the only form of protest allowed without a prior authorization) on 2 March.⁴

In August, three women were briefly detained at a police station in Moscow for wearing clothes in blue and yellow, the colours of the Ukrainian flag. Similar incidents were reported across the country.

At the end of the year, small-scale protests took place, mostly unhindered, in a number of cities across Russia against planned health care cuts, but in Moscow, four protesters were sentenced to detention of between five and 15 days after demonstrators briefly blocked a road.

Over 200 people were detained in Moscow on 30 December when the verdict in a politically motivated criminal trial against political activist Aleksei Navalny and his brother Oleg was announced two weeks before it was scheduled, and spontaneous protests took place. Two detainees were sentenced to 15 days' detention and a further 67 held overnight and released pending trial in January.

Freedom of association

Civil society activists continued to face harassment, public attacks on their integrity and, in some instances, criminal prosecution.

Throughout the year, independent civil society organizations faced growing pressure under the so-called “foreign agents law”. This was introduced in 2012 to force NGOs receiving foreign funding and undertaking loosely defined “political activities” to register as “organizations fulfilling the functions of a foreign agent” and mark their public materials accordingly. In 2013 and 2014, hundreds of NGOs were subjected to intrusive official “inspections” and dozens were embroiled in protracted court hearings to fend off this requirement. In May, the law was amended to give the Ministry of Justice the authority to register an NGO as a “foreign agent” without its consent. By the end of the year it had registered 29 NGOs including several leading human rights organizations as “foreign agents”.⁵ At least five NGOs chose to dissolve themselves as a direct result of harassment under the “foreign agents law”.

Members of the NGO Environmental Watch for North Caucasus (Ekovakhta), who were highlighting environmental damage caused by the Sochi Olympics, were subjected to a sustained campaign of harassment by security officials ahead of the Games.⁶ Two of them, Yevgeny Vitishko and Igor Kharchenko, were arrested on trumped-up administrative charges and detained during the Games' opening. While in detention, Yevgeny Vitishko lost an appeal in a criminal case on exaggerated charges brought to silence him and his NGO, and was transferred directly to a prison colony to serve his three-year sentence.⁷ The work of Ekovakhta was suspended by a court decision in March, and the NGO was liquidated by another decision in November, for a minor formal transgression.

The Ministry of Justice applied to the courts to close the Russian Society Memorial for a purportedly incorrect form of registration. The hearing was postponed while the NGO took formal steps to rectify this.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment continued to be reported across the country, while many of those who sought redress faced pressure to withdraw their complaints. Investigations into such allegations were almost invariably ineffective. Confessions extracted under torture were used as evidence in court. In only a handful of cases, typically involving human rights NGOs, charges were brought against the implicated law enforcement officials.

Members of an independent public monitoring commission repeatedly documented instances of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees at the prison colony and pre-trial detention centre IK-5 in Sverdlovsk Region. In July, they requested the authorities to investigate allegations of the torture of E.G., held there on remand pending trial, and produced photographic evidence of his injuries. A member of the Prosecutor's Office responded in a letter that,

based on staff questioning at IK-5 and the paperwork held by its administration, E.G. had not been subjected to violence at this institution and that his injuries predated his transfer there. No further investigation was undertaken.

North Caucasus

The situation in the North Caucasus remained volatile, with armed groups engaging in sporadic attacks against security officials. Over 200 people reportedly lost their lives in multiple incidents, including dozens of civilians. Security operations, conducted in Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya and elsewhere, were accompanied by serious human rights violations, including unlawful detention, torture and other ill-treatment, alleged enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions.

On 4 December, armed fighters attacked government buildings in Grozny, Chechnya, killing at least one civilian and 14 police officers. The next day Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Republic, publicly promised to expel relatives of the armed group members from Chechnya and demolish their houses. At least 15 houses, homes to dozens of people including small children, were burnt down or demolished.⁸ Human rights defenders who condemned this practice and demanded an investigation were pelted with eggs at a press conference in Moscow on 11 December. Ramzan Kadyrov used social media to accuse Igor Kalyapin, leader of the Joint Mobile Group for Chechnya, of supporting terrorists. The Group's office in Grozny was destroyed by fire on 14 December in an apparent arson attack, and its two members searched and detained for several hours by police without explanation, their phones, cameras and computers confiscated.

The near-total lack of legal remedies for victims of human rights violations prevailed, as the criminal justice system remained ineffective and subject – for the most part clandestinely – to high-level political pressure. However, in Chechnya judges and jury members were openly admonished by Ramzan Kadyrov for decisions in criminal cases that he considered lenient towards the defendants.

Reporting on human rights violations remained a difficult, and often dangerous, occupation, and many violations were believed to have gone unrecorded. Human rights defenders, independent journalists and lawyers who worked on cases involving human rights violations continued to face threats and harassment from law enforcement officials and unidentified individuals.

Civil society activist Ruslan Kutaev complained of torture, including beatings and electrocution, after his arrest in February on trumped-up charges of heroin possession. His injuries were well documented by independent monitors.⁹ However, the investigative authorities accepted the alleged perpetrators' explanation that Ruslan Kutaev's injuries resulted from a fall, and refused to investigate his complaints further. He was convicted following an unfair trial in July in Urus-Martan, Chechnya, and sentenced to four years in prison, reduced by two months on appeal in October.

Dagestani lawyer Sapiyat Magomedova, who was seriously assaulted by police in 2010 at a police station when visiting a detained client, continued to receive anonymous death threats and threats from investigation officials, both veiled and open. None of her official complaints were effectively investigated. She remained concerned for her own, her colleagues' and her family's safety, but refused to give up her work.¹⁰ The investigation into her beating by police in 2010 was formally reopened, but the authorities failed to demonstrate any progress or intention to prosecute her assailants.

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