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RUSSIA 2024

Russia continued its war of aggression against Ukraine. The rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association remained severely restricted. Dissenters faced arbitrary prosecutions, unfair trials, heavy fines and lengthy prison terms under a plethora of laws that failed to meet international human rights standards. Counter-extremism and counterterrorism legislation was weaponized to prosecute government critics and religious groups as well as children. A growing number of people were prosecuted for treason and espionage. More than 60 organizations were declared “extremist” and banned. Trials failed to meet international standards of fairness. Torture and other ill-treatment in custody prevailed and was committed with near total impunity. Persecution of LGBTI people increased. Regional authorities continued introducing barriers to abortion. Russia failed to demonstrate any commitment to addressing climate change.

Background

Russia continued its war of aggression against Ukraine, committing numerous violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes (see Ukraine entry).

In August, Ukrainian forces occupied part of Russia's Kursk region. According to unconfirmed reports by authorities, dozens of civilians were killed, hundreds injured, hundreds went missing and more than 150,000 people were internally displaced. The Russian Ombudsperson reported that around 50,000 of the displaced were provided with temporary housing by the authorities. Many evacuees complained that there had been no organized evacuation by the Russian authorities at the beginning of the Ukrainian offensive. Fighting in the region hampered humanitarian assistance to those who remained in these occupied territories. In November, the Russian Ombudsperson reported that 46 civilians transferred by Ukrainian forces to Ukraine had been returned to Russia. In December, missile attacks on the towns of Rylsk and Lgov in Kursk region left nine people dead and 19 injured. Ukraine's strikes into the Belgorod region continued and Russian media reported at least 161 civilians killed by the end of the year. Ukraine used drones to attack oil depots and other objects in Russia. Some of these attacks resulted in civilian deaths and injuries and damaged civilian infrastructure.

On 22 March, an armed group attacked the Crocus City Hall concert venue in the capital, Moscow, killing 145 people and injuring 551 others.

In August, Russian authorities pardoned, released and exiled 15 prisoners, including prominent civil society activists, journalists and human rights defenders as part of an exchange deal brokered with some European countries and the USA.

In August, Russia left the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. It still refused to recognize the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on Russia, which was extended by the UN Human Rights Council in October for another year.

Despite reported economic growth driven by huge military spending, the cost of living increased for many due to spiking inflation and ongoing international sanctions.

Violations of international humanitarian law

In October, nine Ukrainian prisoners of war were reportedly shot dead by Russian forces in the Kursk region; no investigation was conducted into the allegations (see also Ukraine entry).

On 2 November, the Military Investigative Committee reported that it was "documenting proof of crimes by Ukrainian nationalists" based on a photo (not provided) allegedly featuring "Russian military prisoners without signs of life" in the Kursk region.

Impunity

In February, prominent opposition leader Aleksei Navalny died in custody under suspicious circumstances. The authorities delayed releasing his body for nine days and tried to insist on a secret funeral, but his mother refused to accept this. In September, an investigative journalist from The Insider published documented allegations that Aleksei Navalny had been poisoned. The circumstances of his death were not effectively investigated.

In March, the ICC issued arrest warrants against two top Russian commanders, followed in June by warrants for former defence minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, all for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

A law adopted in March legalized the pre-existing practice under which prisoners and criminal suspects were released and relieved of criminal liability if they agreed to join Russian forces in military combat.

Freedom of expression

The authorities used legislation on “foreign agents”, “undesirable organizations” and “war censorship” to persecute civil society and silence criticism of the ongoing war against Ukraine and other policies. At least 98 new criminal cases were initiated and 171 people sentenced under the “war censorship” laws.

The use of counter-extremism and counterterrorism legislation against government critics surged. At least 114 new criminal cases were initiated under “justification of terrorism” charges for merely sharing views on specific events or individuals.

Books, films and theatre and television productions were censored or withdrawn due to references to same-sex relationships, other prohibited topics or their authors’ status as “foreign agents”.

In August and December respectively, authorities blocked the Signal and Viber messaging platforms.

In February, prominent human rights defender and co-chair of Memorial, Oleg Orlov, was sentenced to 30 months’ imprisonment on charges of “discrediting the Armed Forces” for an article published in the French media. He was released in August as part of the prisoner exchange.

In March, journalist Roman Ivanov was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment for “disseminating knowingly false information about the Armed Forces”, based on his publications about alleged war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine.

In July, theatre director Evgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk were sentenced to six years’ imprisonment on charges of “justification of terrorism” for their award-winning play about women who married members of armed groups in Syria.

In July, detained pianist Pavel Kushnir started a dry hunger strike and died days later. He had been arrested under charges of “public calls to terrorism” for expressing his peaceful anti-war views on YouTube.

Following the death of Aleksei Navalny, the authorities continued reprisals against his Anti-Corruption Foundation and other groups associated with him. Trials of his three lawyers and four journalists on arbitrary charges of “participation in an extremist association” started in September and October respectively.

In October, the trial of six activists from the youth movement Spring started in St Petersburg, under a set of charges arising from their peaceful opposition to the war in Ukraine. They faced up to 15 years’ imprisonment.

In October, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in a case of 107 organizations and individuals designated as “foreign agents” that Russia had violated the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and private and family life.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Authorities continued to violate the right to freedom of peaceful assembly by refusing to authorize protests and dispersing them, while allowing pro-government assemblies to proceed.

In January, authorities dispersed a mostly peaceful protest against the sentencing of civil activist Fail Alsynov in the town of Baymak, Bashkortostan, and prosecuted at least 81 participants. Many complained of torture and one detainee died in police custody. Trials of some of the protesters were ongoing at year’s end while allegations of torture remained uninvestigated.

In February, the authorities arbitrarily arrested at least 387 people in 39 cities across Russia for publicly mourning Aleksei Navalny. Dozens received severe administrative penalties including fines and short periods in detention.

In the same month, police arrested around 30 individuals, mostly journalists, covering a rally organized by The Way Home, a group of women demanding the return of their relatives mobilized to fight in the war against Ukraine.

In May, The Way Home was declared a “foreign agent”. Their June and September rallies were also dispersed. At least four participants were fined for violating the restrictive rules covering public assemblies.

Freedom of association

The authorities continued to target civil society using repressive legislation, listing 169 more organizations, media and individuals as “foreign agents” and 65 more organizations as “undesirable”. Dozens of people faced administrative or criminal penalties for alleged violations of laws on “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations”. Many proceedings were conducted in absentia.

Restrictions on individuals and organizations designated “foreign agents” were ramped up. A new law passed in March prohibited the promotion of or advertising on platforms belonging to “foreign agents” and was punishable by heavy fines or up to two years’ imprisonment.

In May, amendments to the “foreign agents” legislation banned “foreign agents” from running for election at all levels. At least six local politicians who had been designated as “foreign agents” were expelled from elected bodies.

Amendments to the “undesirable organizations” legislation enacted in August extended its scope from non-governmental organizations to organizations established by or with the participation of foreign governments.

In June, the Supreme Court banned what it called the Anti-Russian Separatist Movement, a group which did not appear to exist, as “extremist”. Following this decision, in July, the Ministry of Justice listed 55 organizations, including those of Indigenous Peoples, as “extremist”.

In September, the trial of Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of the election watchdog Golos, began. He was charged in connection with purported links between Golos and the “undesirable” European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, and faced up to six years’ imprisonment.

Freedom of religion and belief

Arbitrary prosecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses under “extremism” charges continued: 24 new criminal cases were opened against 34 believers and 116 believers were sentenced, with 43 of them imprisoned for up to eight years. As of December, 171 Jehovah’s Witnesses from Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine were serving sentences in penal colonies.

Russian Orthodox priests who expressed an anti-war position were defrocked or otherwise disciplined, with more than 60 punished since February 2022.

Arbitrary detention and unfair trials

Russia continued to unlawfully prosecute Ukrainian prisoners of war, charging them with crimes related merely to their participation in hostilities and sentencing them to lengthy prison terms in unfair trials.

In July, human rights defender Aleksei Sokolov was remanded under “extremist” charges for displaying Facebook’s logo online. In September, he spent two weeks in a psychiatric hospital for “examination”. He remained in pretrial detention at year’s end. A growing number of dissenters were tried in their absence.

Trials on charges of terrorism, extremism, treason or espionage were increasingly common. In the first six months of the year, convictions for treason and espionage were over three times (52 individuals) and nine times (18 individuals) higher, respectively, compared with the same period in 2023.

Prosecution of imprisoned dissenters, under new false charges, proliferated. Journalist Maria Ponomarenko was tried for attacking prison officers. Former municipal councillor Aleksei Gorinov, serving a seven-year imprisonment under “war censorship” laws, was sentenced to a further three years’ imprisonment for “justification of terrorism”.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment in custody remained endemic, with perpetrators enjoying near total impunity.

Four men suspected of the armed attack on the Crocus City Hall venue in March appeared in court with apparent signs of torture. Footage circulated online allegedly showed one of the suspects’ ears being cut off during interrogation by a security official and another suspect being subjected to electrocution. No investigation followed.

Ukrainian prisoners of war and detained civilians were held in inhumane conditions and systematically subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, and enforced disappearance.

Conditions in detention across the country commonly amounted to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and adequate healthcare was often denied. The authorities targeted those incarcerated on politically motivated charges by depriving them of contact with their family and subjecting them to arbitrary disciplinary punishments, including solitary confinement.¹

Aleksei Gorinov (see above) continued to be subjected to prolonged solitary confinement as an arbitrarily imposed disciplinary punishment, and refused adequate medical care.

In August, the UN Human Rights Committee called on Russia to provide the necessary medical treatment to Igor Baryshnikov, a civil society activist from Kaliningrad region imprisoned for over seven years under “war censorship” laws. He had his long overdue surgery in September.

LGBTI people’s rights

Persecution of the LGBTI community grew, including through arbitrary criminal or administrative penalties for “extremism” and “LGBT propaganda”. At least 24 police raids on LGBTI nightclubs were conducted across the country.

In March, two staff members and the owner of a nightclub in the city of Orenburg were detained pending trial under criminal charges of “extremism”, which carry up to 10 years’ imprisonment. The same charges were brought in October against the owner of a nightclub raided by police in the city of Chita.

Also in October, police raided a nightclub in the city of Yaroslavl. They physically assaulted and humiliated its patrons, forcing them to lie face down on the floor for

several hours. Some were arrested and accused of administrative violations under the “LGBT propaganda” law.

Sexual and reproductive rights

Regional authorities continued introducing barriers to abortion. In June, parliament in the Komi Republic prohibited “coercion to abortion”, effectively introducing heavy fines for facilitating the procedure. Similar local laws were passed in 14 other regions. Various private clinics refused to perform an abortion despite it not being expressly prohibited.

In November, a federal law prohibiting “propaganda of refusal to bear children” was signed into law. It envisaged censorship, heavy fines and arrests for disseminating information promoting the voluntary choice not to have children.

Right to education

In October, it was reported that indoctrination lessons called “Conversations about important things”, introduced in schools in 2022, would be extended to kindergartens. Topics for such classes included promotion of so-called “traditional values” and the glorification of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

A law adopted in December prohibited the children of foreigners from enrolling in school unless they passed a Russian-language test and were in Russia legally.

Children’s rights

Authorities persecuted children for their anti-war position and fabricated criminal cases against them under “counterterrorism” charges.²

In June, a military court in Moscow sentenced 15-year-old Arseniy Turbin to five years’ imprisonment for alleged “participation” in the Freedom of Russia Legion, a military unit formed in Ukraine of Russian and Belarussian citizens and designated as a “terrorist” organization in Russia. The sentence was upheld on appeal in November.

Migrants’ rights

Migrants’ rights continued to be violated and discrimination against them was rife. Authorities in a further 24 regions banned migrants from working in certain occupations on grounds such as national security or “prioritizing the employment of Russian citizens”, despite reported shortages in the work force. In seven regions the list of existing prohibitions on employment was extended.

Following the Crocus City Hall attack, when the suspects were described as migrants, the authorities ramped up anti-migrant rhetoric and practices.

Migrants who sought Russian citizenship were targeted for military recruitment after naturalization. In June police raids to identify undocumented migrants, or those who had received Russian citizenship but had not registered at military commissariats, were reported in at least eight regions. Also in June, the Head of the Investigative Committee claimed that more than 10,000 migrants who had received Russian citizenship were deployed in Ukraine.

Amendments adopted in August and set to come into force in 2025 introduced further restrictions on the rights of undocumented and some other categories of migrants.

In November, foreign citizenship was made an aggravating circumstance when committing a crime.

Right to a healthy environment

Russia further increased its output of oil and gas by around 10% and demonstrated no commitment to either addressing climate change or reducing its reliance on fossil fuels. Only about 1% of its energy came from renewable sources, far short of its unambitious pledge of 4.5% by 2024.

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1. [*Russia: “I Would Love To Hug Her, but It Is Impossible”: Imprisoned Dissenters Deprived of Family Contact, 26 June ↗*](#)
 2. [*“Russia: “Your Children will Go to an Orphanage”: Children and the Crackdown on Protest”, 31 May ↗*](#)

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