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Russia: Harassment of Critics

Russian authorities are cracking down on government critics at the same time as they are tolerating large public protests, Human Rights Watch said today.

In the three months between the December 2011 parliamentary election and the March 4, 2012 presidential vote, the authorities have harassed a major election-monitoring nongovernmental organization, directly and indirectly interfered with the operation of independent news outlets critical of the government, and tried repeatedly in cities around the country to intimidate civic activists. Several activists have also been violently attacked by unidentified people.

“The Russian government has done the right thing by allowing unprecedented public protests and proposing some reforms,” said [Hugh Williamson](#), Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “But the authorities are also trying in numerous ways to make their critics think twice about speaking out or protesting. Despite the positive developments, the climate for civil society is as hostile as it ever was.”

Interference with nongovernmental organizations and independent media outlets and their staff has included lawsuits, detention, and threats from state officials. State-controlled media have run articles that seek to discredit the protest movement, government critics, and the political opposition.

Civil society activists from several major [Russian](#) cities told Human Rights Watch that police officials had summoned them, and in some cases their family members, for questioning, during which they were either intimidated or overtly threatened. New regulations make it possible for websites to be shut down without a court order. Members of parliament have suggested new restrictions on nongovernmental organizations that receive foreign funding.

“I never had problems of this nature before – not until I got involved in political activism,” one activist told Human Rights Watch, describing an attack outside his apartment building that left him bruised and with a concussion. Another activist was forced into a car, threatened, and beaten up by men who told him they were from the Federal Security Service.

Already angered over President Dmitry Medvedev’s announcement in September that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would seek another term as president, thousands took to

the streets following the December 4 Duma elections to protest alleged election fraud. They also called for an end to government corruption, the release of political prisoners, and even Putin's resignation. The unprecedented [wave of protests](#) continued throughout the winter in Moscow and several other major Russian cities.

Toward the end of December, Medvedev announced reforms aimed at political liberalization and increasing political pluralism. The reforms included restoring a system to regional governors, who under Putin had become political appointees, and simplifying registration for political parties. The Kremlin maintained that the reforms had been planned for some time instead of in response to the protests.

"Russia's new president, whoever it is, needs to show he's serious about reform by putting an end to the harassment of the very people who are advocating for it," Williamson said.

Intimidation and Attacks on Activists

Following the December parliamentary elections, there were a number of reports of harassment and attempts to intimidate civil society activists. In some of these cases, activists said law enforcement officials, in particular the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs Extremism Prevention Unit, widely known as Center "E," were involved.

Numerous activists in various regions of Russia, and in some cases their relatives, were summoned to Center "E" and police precincts for informal conversations that took on a threatening nature. In several cases, activists were held in administrative detention on the eve of planned rallies, and in others, activists were beaten up by unidentified strangers.

Some of the starkest reports, described below, came from St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, and Moscow.

Moscow

In January, officials from the FSB and the local Center "E" contacted the parents of Ilya Klishin, a Moscow-based activist who created a Facebook page "For Fair Elections," where people could sign up to participate in the December 10 protest. Klishin's parents live in Tambov, about 450 kilometers southeast of Moscow.

Klishin told Human Rights Watch that his father received a notice to appear at the anti-extremism unit for questioning as a witness in an unspecified criminal case. During the questioning, however, Center "E" officials spoke with Klishin's father about his son's recent trips and political views and activities. They also implied that his son was suspected of extremism and inciting racial hatred, but refused to provide him with any details of any alleged suspicious behavior on Klishin's part.

St. Petersburg

On February 3, Philip Kostenko, an anti-fascism activist who works for Memorial Anti-Discrimination Center, was attacked on the street by two unidentified men. He was hospitalized with a concussion and a broken leg. The attack took place the day before a scheduled demonstration calling for fair elections, which Kostenko planned to attend.

Reports from Memorial Anti-Discrimination Center said that police officers who came to the scene of the attack tried to talk Kostenko out of filing a police report. The next day, Kostenko received signed emails threatening more attacks if he persisted with his participation in public protests and other activism.

Memorial Anti-Discrimination Center program coordinator Stephania Kulaeva told Human Rights Watch that local law enforcement agencies have a long history of trying to silence Kostenko. In particular, in November 2010, officials from St. Petersburg's Center "E" searched his apartment, and one of them threatened Kostenko that he would face repercussions for his human rights activities.

Kulaeva said that on February 16, human rights defenders from Memorial Anti-Discrimination Center and other activists organized a protest against the actions of Center "E" and in support of Kostenko. Although the protest was approved by the authorities, one of its organizers, Irina Putilova, received anonymous phone calls

threatening repercussions if she participated, and emails warning threatening physical violence if she took part.

Nizhny Novgorod

On January 27, police from Nizhny Novgorod's Extremism Prevention Unit arrested four activists from the political opposition movement The Other Russia as they discussed logistical details for a February 4 protest. The human rights organization Agora reported that law enforcement officers said the activists were detained on grounds they "look like criminals who committed a robbery." After being held in police custody for hours, all four were charged with participation in an unsanctioned gathering, and one was also charged with disobeying police orders. All were later sentenced to fines in administrative court hearings.

On February 19, an unidentified person attacked Alexei Sadomovsky, one of the organizers of the voters' rights' movement For Fair Elections, when he was on his way to a rally in support of fair elections. The assailant got out of a car outside Sadomovsky's apartment building, hit him in the face, and kicked him in the head after he fell to the ground. He had a concussion and had multiple bruises on his face.

Sadomovsky told Human Rights Watch that he had little doubt that the attack was a direct result of his active role in organizing protests during the election period. "First, they knew exactly where I was going that day and were waiting right outside my apartment building to stop me," he told Human Rights Watch. "Second, I never had problems of this nature before – not until I got involved in political activism." He filed a police report but said he had not been able to find out whether a criminal investigation had been opened.

In December, Sadomovsky received a phone call from a deputy dean of the university from which he had graduated a year and a half earlier, inviting him for a conversation. When he declined, the deputy dean told him that there was, in fact, an FSB officer already on the university premises wanting to talk to him. The same day, while Sadomovsky's mother was at work, an FSB officer asked her supervisor to pressure her son to stop his "internet activism against Putin."

Nikolai Nikolaev, another leading For Fair Elections activist, was assaulted on February 4 by a group of men in civilian clothing. Nikolaev told Human Rights Watch that the men approached him on the street as he was returning with a group of friends from a rally in support of fair elections. The men introduced themselves as FSB officers but showed no identification.

Nikolaev refused to get into their car, but they forced him in. After they rode for a short period of time, the car stopped and another man got in. Without introducing himself, he told Nikolaev to stop attending protests and threatened him with violence if he did not leave Nizhny Novgorod.

The men hit Nikolaev multiple times on the head and shoulders with their elbows and fists. They drove him a few more blocks and threw him out of the car. Nikolaev suffered multiple bruises and an arm injury. Nikolaev reported the attack to police, but has not been able to find out whether a criminal investigation has been opened.

Nikolaev told Human Rights Watch that he recognized one of the men in the car as an officer from the Nizhny Novgorod police's Extremism Prevention Unit. The officer's face was also clearly recognizable on a video made with a cell phone camera by one of Nikolaev's friends when Nikolaev was being forced into the car.

On the afternoon of January 30, Nizhny Novgorod police arrested a local political activist, Anna Kuznetsova. She was charged with failure to pay a fine for organizing an unauthorized rally on July 31.

Kuznetsova is a main organizer of the Strategy-31 rally in defense of freedom of assembly in Russia, which has been taking place on the 31st day of each month with 31 days in many Russian cities for the last two years. Kuznetsova had been organizing a rally to take place in Nizhny Novgorod the day after her arrest.

Kuznetsova told Human Rights Watch that she had not received a fine notice in the mail prior to her arrest, nor had there been a court order saying she had committed an offense, but she offered to pay the fine on the spot. The police declined.

She was then taken to administrative court, which was already closed for the day, but an administrative hearing took place anyway. Kuznetsova's lawyer, husband, and sister were not allowed into the court building, and no defense witnesses were at the hearing. Kuznetsova was promptly sentenced to two days of administrative arrest.

Kuznetsova also told Human Rights Watch that while she was in administrative detention, she was visited by an officer of the Nizhny Novgorod police's Extremism Prevention Unit. In an "informal conversation," she said, the officer threatened Kuznetsova that if she "keeps up with all the protest activity" she will "never get out of this place."

Samara

According to local activists, in the week between January 23 and 30, officers of the Extremism Prevention Unit in Samara visited a number of political activists and invited them for "conversations about extremism." The Center "E" officers also visited parents of an activist who moderates the For Fair Elections page on Vkontakte, a Russian social networking site. Officers demanded that the parents convince their son to close down the webpage.

On February 14, a human rights defender and journalist, Alexander Lashmankin, was attacked on his way to a meeting of the local For Fair Elections committee. As he was about to enter the building, two unknown men ran up to him and tried to grab his shoulder bag, containing his laptop. He fought back and did not let go of his bag. The attackers beat him and took his cell phone. Lashmankin was hospitalized with a head injury, a broken nose, and multiple cuts and bruises on his face.

A lawyer from Agora who is working on the case told Human Rights Watch that a criminal investigation was opened into the case and that Lashmankin remains in the hospital.

Volgograd

On January 27, Alevtina Dupri, an activist who regularly organizes and takes part in protests calling for transparent elections in Russia and other gatherings, was invited for a "talk" at the Volgograd police's Extremism Prevention Unit. The two officers who questioned her refused to identify themselves, asked her about her political activism, and told her to sign a paper confirming that she was warned about "criminal liability" for extremism under article 16 of the Federal Law on Extremism.

Harassment of Independent Media

Novaya Gazeta

At the end of February, the National Reserve Bank blocked the account of Alexander Lebedev, the main shareholder of the prominent weekly newspaper that has been fiercely critical of Kremlin policies. The bank claimed it took the action due to alleged financial violations by Lebedev and an "unplanned" extensive audit of the National Reserve Bank by the Central Bank of Russia. The action has kept Lebedev from providing funds to *Novaya Gazeta*.

In a public statement, *Novaya Gazeta*'s editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov, said that his staff members had agreed to work without pay temporarily so that the newspaper could continue to operate. He also said that the newspaper's situation is part of a broader effort on the part of the authorities to put pressure on independent media in Russia in the period leading up to the presidential election.

Independent TV Channel Dozhd

In February, the Zamoskvoretskii district prosecutor's office sent a query to the management of Dozhd, a popular independent online TV channel, demanding information about the sources used to finance the broadcasting of the anti-Kremlin protests in Moscow on Bolotnaya Square on December 10 and Sakharov Avenue on December 24. Dozhd's owner, Natalia Sindeeva, told the press that the inquiry was made at the request of Robert Shlegel, a Duma member from the ruling United Russia party.

Days after the parliamentary vote, Russia's federal agency overseeing information technologies and mass communications, Roskomnadzor, also ran a check of Dozhd's December 5 and 6 broadcasts to ensure their compliance with the law. To date, the results of that inspection are unknown.

Echo of Moscow

On December 4, the website of Echo of Moscow, a radio station well-known for its sharp commentaries on politically-sensitive issues, crashed after a large-scale hacker attack. Echo of Moscow reported the attack to the Prosecutor General's office and the Central Election Committee, which in turn forwarded the complaint to the Investigative Committee of Russia. In late February, the Investigative Committee informed Echo of Moscow in writing that it found "no grounds" to investigate the complaint.

During a meeting with editors of leading Russian media outlets on January 18, Prime Minister Putin openly had criticized Echo of Moscow, saying there was a constant "diarrhea" of "biased criticism" directed at him and President Medvedev.

On February 14, Echo of Moscow's main shareholder, Gazprom Media, announced a sudden decision to replace the broadcaster's board of directors. Gazprom Media, which is largely controlled by the Kremlin, explained that its decision was influenced by a number of factors, including financial reasons as well as "heightened attention to the radio station" in the recent months.

Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of the radio station for the past 12 years, resigned from Echo of Moscow's board of directors in protest. In a public statement made on February 14, he said that he viewed this development as political pressure caused by "eager senior officials' reaction" to Putin publicly expressing frustration with the radio station. Many leading journalists and media experts also expressed concern that the Gazprom Media decision was a politically motivated attempt to influence Echo of Moscow's editorial policies.

Internet Restrictions

In recent years, numerous high level public officials have called for more restrictive regulations of the Internet, but no concrete steps had been taken until this year's election season.

On February 24, new regulations governing one of Russia's leading domain registration centers, RU-CENTRE, came into force. Under the new regulations, RU-CENTRE can decide to close down any registered website for non-compliance with RU-CENTRE's regulations or if it finds the content of a particular website contrary to "public interest." Previously, a court order was required.

The head of the human rights organization Agora, Pavel Chikov, who has been monitoring these changes, told Human Rights Watch that he is troubled by the new regulations because they can lead to arbitrary closure of sites deemed undesirable to the state, with little opportunity for legal recourse.

Pressure on Nongovernmental Organizations

In a November 27 statement at the United Russia congress, Prime Minister Putin remarked that some unspecified "recipients of [foreign] grants" were following "the instructions of foreign governments" and interfering with the Russian elections. He repeated this allegation on December 15, during his annual live televised call-in show with the Russian public, implying that Russia's civil society was sponsored by the West and accusing the opposition and his critics of "feeding off" Western grants.

Those statements echoed several high-profile statements Putin made during his presidency, which in some cases were followed by similar statements by high-level officials and fostered a [hostile environment](#) for [groups](#) that work on politically controversial or sensitive issues.

In January, the head of the FSB for Komi Republic, Alexander Kalashnikov, made public remarks in which he called the Komi regional branch of Memorial, one of Russia's oldest independent human rights organizations, as well as the Komi office of Golos "extremist" organizations. He said their work was "inspired by the West" and aimed at "changing the

political regime” in Russia. He also contended that the participants in the recent public protests were trying to jeopardize the upcoming presidential election.

In early February, during a series of round-table discussions in the Duma, a number of members proposed creating more distinctly separate sets of regulations for domestically funded nongovernmental organizations and those funded from abroad. At one of the roundtables, a Justice Ministry representative said that a new inspection regime may be introduced to allow “unplanned” inspections of nongovernmental organizations.

Yuri Dzhibladze, head of the Centre for Development of Democracy and Human Rights and a member of the Presidential Human Rights Council, told Human Rights Watch that, should such initiatives become enacted into law, they could lead to unjustified government interference with and control of nongovernmental organizations, and could curb their activities.

Harassment of Election Monitors

On December 4, the day of the national parliamentary vote, the website of Golos, a leading election-monitoring nongovernmental organization active in 40 regions of Russia, crashed after a large-scale hacker attack. The websites of several independent media outlets – including Echo of Moscow Radio, the daily newspaper *Kommersant*, and the magazine *Slon* – that published information about election-related violations also crashed as a result of similar hacker attacks.

Golos’s director, Lydia Shibanova, told Human Rights Watch that, on election day, many of the organization’s monitors were **threatened** by officials who interfered with their efforts to carry out monitoring.

At some polling places, security guards and election commission officials prevented Golos monitors from entering or ordered them to leave on arbitrary pretexts. Numerous monitors found that their cell phones had suddenly and inexplicably been cut off from their networks. There were cable, internet, and phone outages in at least two of Golos’s offices, and one experienced a suspicious electricity blackout.

In the week before the vote, several leading state-controlled media outlets, including the Russian government newspaper, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, published a series of critical articles about Golos, accusing the organization of being biased and corrupt. One of the leading state-controlled TV channels, NTV, also ran a half-hour documentary with sharp criticism of Golos.

On December 2, Golos was charged before an administrative court with allegedly violating a far-reaching law that prohibits publication of research relevant to the elections during the last five days before voting. The case was initiated on a complaint by the head of Russia’s Central Election Commission, which referred in particular to an online map that Golos produced, tracking complaints of election-related violations it had received from citizens across the country.

Moscow’s Meshchansky District Court rejected Golos’s argument that the information it had posted was about alleged wrongdoing related to the elections, not party politics, and that the organization should have been protected from sanction under international standards of freedom of expression. Following on a speedy proceeding, the court fined the organization 30,000 rubles (US\$1,000) for violating electoral legislation.

On December 3, customs officials stopped Shibanova at Sheremetevo International Airport as she returned to Moscow from abroad. They confiscated her laptop computer, saying they needed to “examine” the software on it and told her she was not entitled to consult a lawyer. After 12 hours, Shibanova was allowed to leave the airport, but without her laptop.

Shibanova told Human Rights Watch that, in early January, Golos’s landlord attempted to terminate their lease but as the rent agreement requires a 60-day notice for termination, Golos refused to move out. The landlord then asked the organization to vacate its office between March 1 and 6, due to a temporary “cut in the electricity supply” in the building. Shibanova said she had little doubt that this request was a direct attempt to pressure the organization and interfere with its work during the election period.

“They could not kick us out without breaking the law, so they came up with another false pretext instead,” Shibanova said. She also told Human Rights Watch that the building where Golos had rented temporary office space for use while the electricity is cut off had already been “visited” by an official from the FSB, who requested from the building administration a list of all organizations renting office space there.

Interference with Protests

Pro-Kremlin youth groups have significantly boosted their activity during the presidential election period aimed at interfering with and discrediting civil society and the political opposition.

These groups commonly organize rallies in support of Putin parallel with the public protests, submitting official notifications to the Moscow city authorities for the same dates, time slots, and sites as the protestors. They also gather in large numbers in the cafes where protest organizers usually meet in central Moscow, booking the tables in advance, putting up “For Putin!” signs, photographing opposition activists, and making a show of listening in on their conversations.

Numerous protesters reported attempts by Kremlin-sponsored activists to provoke them during rallies by using offensive language and physical provocation. In just one recent case, on February 26, Putin’s supporters attacked Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the Yabloko party, during the “[White Ring](#)” protest gathering, during which supporters of free and fair elections, wearing white ribbons as a sign of peaceful protest, formed a chain along the sidewalks of the Garden Ring, the main road circling the city center.

When Mitrokhin arrived at Zubovsky Boulevard, which is a part of the Garden Ring, he was immediately approached by an aggressive group of young men with “For Putin” placards. They stood in Mitrokhin’s way, blocking him from the crowd, and effectively forcing him to step off the sidewalk into the street, which could have resulted in his detention by police for blocking traffic. Mitrokhin told the media the incident was an overt provocation.

Victor Shenderovich, a prominent journalist and writer who is very active in the protest movement, has been receiving threatening phone calls from pro-Kremlin youth activists for the past year and a half, he wrote in the Internet-based daily *Ezhednevny Zhurnal*. He said the telephone harassment intensified and turned especially aggressive in the period leading up to the presidential vote.

He said that on February 24, two days before the “White Ring” event, a caller used offensive language and aggressively inquired when he would “kick the bucket.” Shenderovich wrote that the callers have been using identifiable cell phone numbers, which he always duly reported to the investigation authorities. His complaints, however, resulted in no effective investigation.

On the afternoon of February 26, during another large protest in Moscow, the work of a telephone hotline organized by human rights groups to provide emergency legal advice to protesters was disrupted by unidentified callers. The unknown callers repeatedly dialed the hotline number at one-minute intervals and hung up. The prank calling continued for about an hour and made the hotline practically inaccessible for bona fide callers.

During the same time period, similar telephone attack was carried out against an activists’ group IHelp, which offers legal and other assistance to protesters detained during demonstrations.

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