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The human rights environment in Russia continued to deteriorate in 2015.

The rule of law remained inconsistent and arbitrarily applied. The UK expressed serious concern publicly and to the Russian authorities about a number of judicial cases, including those of Ukrainian nationals Nadiya Savchenko, Oleg Sentsov and Oleksandr Kolchenko. Representatives of the British Embassy in Moscow observed hearings in these and other cases.

The space for civil society shrank further with the enforcement of restrictive legislation, notably the so-called "foreign agents" and "undesirable organisations" laws, which have the effect of depriving NGOs of vital funding and subjecting them to unreasonably burdensome reporting requirements and disproportionate sanctions, up to and including closure. During the course of 2015, 81 Russian NGOs were added to the "foreign agents" register, 13 chose to close down, and four foreign organisations were labelled "undesirable". The UK is deeply concerned about this crackdown on civil society.

Freedom of expression remained under pressure. State- controlled media, particularly television, overwhelmingly emphasised a pro-government narrative. Although space for independent media continued to exist, most notably online, a small number of individuals faced criminal prosecution for posting critical comments. A number of independent journalists reported that they had experienced harassment, particularly in the North Caucasus region.

The UK's human rights work in Russia during 2015 focused on five priority themes: civil society and democracy; equality and non-discrimination; rule of law; the North Caucasus; and freedom of expression. We supported a range of projects within these broad themes, including on LGB&T rights, disability rights, and media freedom. We raised our concerns about human rights regularly, including at senior official and ministerial level. In December, the FCO Minister for Europe, David Lidington, met leading Russian human rights defenders (HRDs) in Moscow, and raised our concerns during his meeting with First Deputy Foreign Minister Titov.

Recent legislation makes it more difficult for the international community to support human rights organisations in Russia. We judge it unlikely that the situation will improve in 2016, and anticipate increasing pressure on government critics as the Duma (parliamentary) elections in September 2016 approach. Nevertheless, the UK will continue to support the promotion and protection of human rights in Russia. In meetings with the Russian government and through our

project funding, we will strive to highlight the vital contribution made by HRDs and independent journalists. We will attend trials when we have concerns that justice is not being served, and we will speak out when we believe rights are at risk. We will continue to work with EU partners and through multilateral organisations – such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and the UN – to keep the spotlight on Russia's deteriorating human rights situation, thus maintaining pressure on the Russian authorities to implement international human rights commitments. The UK will continue to offer practical support to those people working in increasingly difficult circumstances for the rights of all.

Russian Actions in Ukraine

Russia's actions in Ukraine led to a severe deterioration in the human rights situation in both Donbas and Crimea in 2015.

In the areas under Russian-backed separatist control in Donbas, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) continued to report killings, torture and other ill-treatment, illegal detention, and forced labour during 2015. Also deeply concerning are details of increasing restrictions being placed on civil society.

Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, the human rights situation continued to deteriorate through 2015. Arrests, torture and other ill treatment, and intimidation against political opponents and minorities persisted, particularly the Crimean Tatar community, with the knowledge or participation of "law enforcement" or other affiliated groups. Crimean Tatar institutions and organisations were increasingly branded as "extremist" and members arrested as "terrorists". Access to international monitoring agencies continued to be denied.

Throughout 2015, the UK continued to call on Russia and Russian-backed separatists to respect international law and allow unimpeded access to international human rights monitoring agencies. We also continued to push for independent investigations into all serious allegations of human rights violations and abuses. Without improved access for international monitoring agencies and proper accountability for human rights violations and abuses, there is little prospect of the human rights situation improving in Donbas and Crimea during 2016.

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