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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2014: Russia -in-year update July 2015

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During the last six months the human rights situation in Russia has continued to deteriorate.

Pressure on civil society continued. Forty-six more Russian NGOs were added to the “foreign agents” register, bringing the total to 76. On 25 May, the scientific foundation Dynasty was added to the register, prompting strong criticism from the scientific and educational community. On 1 June, the Presidential Human Rights Council issued a statement urging the Ministry of Justice to revoke the decision.

On 9 March, President Putin signed an amendment that allows the Ministry of Justice to remove NGOs from the “foreign agents” register. Under the amendment, NGOs must undergo an inspection and prove that they are no longer receiving foreign funding for political activity. On 19 June, two NGOs were removed from the “foreign agents” register – GRANI Centre and the Kostroma Centre for Civic Initiatives.

On 23 May, President Putin signed a law that allows for foreign and international NGOs operating in Russia to be labelled “undesirable” if deemed to pose a threat to Russia’s constitutional order, defence capability or national security. The Chair of the Presidential Human Rights Council and Human Rights Ombudswoman both publicly opposed the new law before it passed, including for its potential to be used selectively and arbitrarily in the same way as the “foreign agents” law. In a joint statement, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said the law was “set to bolster an ongoing draconian crackdown which is squeezing the life out of civil society” in Russia. Minister for Europe, David Lidington, issued a [statement](#) expressing deep concern at the adoption of the law. The EU issued a [statement](#) referring to the law as “a worrying step in a series of restrictions on civil society, independent media and political opposition”.

On 4 February, Memorial Human Rights Centre lawyer, Murad Magomedov, was severely beaten by unknown attackers in Makhachkala. Human Rights Watch condemned the incident as “a terrible crime against a courageous defence lawyer, and a chilling signal to lawyers like him in Dagestan.” On 4 June, the Grozny office of Russian NGO the Committee Against Torture (CAT) was attacked for the second time in recent months. According to reports, masked men attacked their vehicle with hammers, before breaking into the office, ransacking it, and taking several documents. After initially calling for an investigation into the unlawful actions, Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, then said that CAT had provoked the attack. International human rights organisations [condemned](#) the latest incident, calling on the Russian authorities to “take urgent steps to protect human rights defenders working in Chechnya from attacks and harassment”. On 5 June, the Presidential Human Rights Council sent a letter to the Ministry of Internal Affairs requesting that they provide official protection to Igor Kalyapin, chair of CAT and member of the Human Rights Council. This is the first time the Council has appealed for protection to be provided to one of its members. Mr Lidington raised concerns about the increasing pressure on civil society in Russia, including the adoption of the law on “undesirable” organisations and the attack against CAT, in a meeting with the Russian Ambassador on 5 June. FCO officials have also raised these concerns in Moscow with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On 21 January, Svetlana Davydova, a mother of seven from the town of Vyazma, was detained on charges of treason for allegedly reporting her concerns to the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow that Russian troops might be heading for Ukraine. Over 50,000 people added their signatures to two separate petitions calling on President Putin to release Davydova. She was released on bail on 3 February. The charges against her were dismissed for “absence of a crime in the act” on 13 March.

Opposition politician Alexei Navalny continued to come under pressure. On 17 February, his brother Oleg's three-and-a-half year prison sentence (the Yves Rocher case) was upheld on appeal. Alexei Navalny's three-and-a-half year suspended sentence was also upheld, but his house arrest was lifted. On 20 February, Alexei Navalny was sentenced to 15 days in prison for violating public order and calling for an unsanctioned rally after he handed out leaflets on the Moscow metro to promote an opposition rally on 1 March. On 13 May, a Moscow court turned down a request by the Federal Penitentiary Service to convert Alexei Navalny's suspended sentence into a real jail term due to alleged violations. However, it extended his probation period by a further three months to five-and-a-half years.

On 26 February, Ivan Nepomnyashchikh, the thirty-third defendant in the "Bolotnaya case", was placed under house arrest for "participation in a mass riot" and "violence against an authority" in May 2012. On 1 June, his appeal against the house arrest, due to expire in September, was dismissed. In April, criminal investigations commenced against a thirty-fourth person (opposition political activist Natalia Pelevina) in connection with the 2012 protests. Pelevina is accused of "organising and financing mass unrest".

On 27 February, Boris Nemtsov, a Russian opposition leader and former Deputy Prime Minister, was shot and killed in central Moscow. The Prime Minister issued a [statement](#) on 28 February calling for a full and transparent investigation into the murder. Sir John Major attended the memorial in Moscow on 3 March. On 8 March, a Moscow court charged two Chechen men in connection with the murder and remanded three other Chechen men in custody. On 10 March, a representative of the Presidential Human Rights Council issued a statement saying that three of the suspects in the case showed signs of beatings, and there were reasonable grounds to believe they had been tortured. A further request by the chairman of the council to visit the suspects was denied as "inadvisable" by Russia's Investigative Committee. Investigations into Nemtsov's murder continue, and we will continue to monitor their progress.

On 15 April, a district court in Tambov refused to grant parole to environmental activist Evgeny Vitishko as prison staff insisted that he had committed a number of violations. These included giving one of his personal clothing items to another prisoner who did not have warm clothes and was cold; sitting on his bed at an unauthorised time; and "negligent attitude towards weeding tomatoes". Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Deputy Director said, "The penal colony authorities must halt this harassment. It beggars belief that the Russian authorities are using such mundane actions as an excuse to keep Vitishko locked up. Evgeny Vitishko must be released immediately and unconditionally". On 25 June, Vitishko's appeal against the refusal to grant him parole was dismissed.

Ukrainian pilot Nadiya Savchenko's pre-trial detention has been extended three times in the last six months and is now due to expire on 30 September. She was hospitalised in April after her health seriously deteriorated due to being on hunger strike on and off since December 2014. She is no longer on hunger strike, and her health is reportedly stable but fragile. 17 June marked the one-year anniversary of her detention. Mr Lidington wrote an [open letter](#) to Savchenko to mark the anniversary and called for her immediate release. The EU also made a [statement](#) criticising the unnecessary prolonging of her custody and calling for her release. The UK has raised concerns about her case with the Russian government on multiple occasions. The British Embassy in Moscow has also attended court hearings.

Estonian security officer, Eston Kohver, remains in detention in Moscow with no evidence against him having yet been presented. His detention has been extended twice in the last six months and is now due to expire on 8 August. The EU issued a [statement](#) expressing its concern about his case at the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Permanent Council meeting on 18 June.

Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov's pre-trial detention in Moscow has been extended twice in the last six months, and is now due to expire on 11 July.

Mr Lidington raised the UK's strong concerns about the rule of law in Russia (including the cases of Savchenko, Navalny, Kohver and Sentsov) in meetings with the Russian Ambassador in February and June. FCO officials in Moscow also raised concerns about the rule of law with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On 4 June, Russian NGO, Memorial, published an updated list of "political prisoners" in Russia. The list contains 50 names, an increase of four since the list was last published in October 2014.

On 12 February, Reporters without Borders issued their 2015 press freedom index. Russia was ranked 152 out of 180 countries, a drop of four places on the 2014 index. Reporters without Borders said: "While Russia's leading TV channels continue to inundate viewers with propaganda, the Ukrainian crisis led to an increase in pressure on independent media, with a string of draconian laws, website blocking and leading independent news outlets either being brought under control or throttled out of existence." Russia dropped a point in Freedom House's 2015 [report](#) on political rights and civil liberties, and remains classed as "not free". Russia's civil liberties rating declined due to "expanded media controls, a dramatically increased level of propaganda on state-controlled television, and new restrictions on the ability of some citizens to travel abroad."

On 2 April, the UN Human Rights Committee published its [Concluding Observations](#) on its seventh periodic report of Russia's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The Committee highlighted some positive aspects of Russia's implementation of the ICCPR, including legislative steps to prohibit discrimination based on disability. It also raised several matters of concern, including freedom of expression, independence of the judiciary, and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity.

On 31 March, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Ms. Dunja Mijatović, [welcomed](#) the sentencing of two people for the murder of newspaper editor Abdulmalik Akhmedilov in August 2009 in Makhachkala, in Dagestan. However, colleagues of the murdered journalist claimed that the investigation was conducted with violations, and defence lawyers insisted that the confession had been given under torture. In a [report](#) on media freedom in OSCE participating states on 18 June, Ms Mijatovic highlighted a number of concerns about freedom of the media in Russia. These included physical attacks on journalists and the intimidation of media NGOs.

Russian authorities refused to grant permission for a march to mark the third anniversary of the opposition protests on Bolotnaya Square on 6 May. Around 70 people were detained at the march.

On 28 May, Russia amended its state secrecy law to prohibit the release of spoken, written or broadcast information on the deaths of soldiers "in peacetime during special operations" as well as in wartime. The change was viewed by some human rights activists as a response to information from Russian opposition, journalists and bloggers about deaths of Russian soldiers in eastern Ukraine. Sergey Krivenko, a member of the Presidential Council for Human Rights, said he was certain the decree was linked to the events in Ukraine, and was an intimidation of those who talk about the dead.

On 24 January, the founder of online support group Children 404 was fined RUR 50,000 for violating Russia's law against the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" to minors. Children 404 offers Russia's LGB&T teenagers professional psychological support and advice on what to do if they are being bullied. Russia's media watchdog, Rozkomnadzor, claims to have received 150 complaints from members of the public, and complained that the website tried to "create a positive image of non-traditional relations in the eyes of children, to make them seem equivalent, and in some cases, superior to traditional ones". In January, a female music teacher filed a lawsuit against her December 2014 dismissal from a St Petersburg school for disabled children for being gay. Human rights organisations report that she is one of many teachers who have been dismissed or harassed because of their sexual orientation.

On 17 May, police in Moscow detained 17 protesters as they gathered outside a theatre in central Moscow to release colourful balloons to mark the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT). In St Petersburg, over 350 LGB&T activists participated in peaceful IDAHOT celebrations without any major disruptions. FCO officials attended IDAHOT events in St Petersburg to offer support. In May, the Russian authorities turned down a request to hold a Pride event in Moscow, without providing any clear reason for the refusal. On 30 May, a group of LGB&T activists held an unsanctioned Pride event in central Moscow. Around 20 protestors were detained by the police, and LGB&T activist Nikolai Alexeyev was sentenced to ten days' administrative arrest. This incident demonstrates that Russia is not implementing a judgment handed down by the European Court of Human Rights in 2011, which ruled that Russia should allow Pride events to take place.

In June, LGB&T initiative group, Coming Out, published a [report](#) on incidents of discrimination and violence on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in St Petersburg in 2014. The key issues covered in the report were: homophobic and transphobic violence, hate speech, the failure to legally recognise LGB&T as a social group, problems in interaction with the police, the effects of the homophobic law on "propaganda", forced disclosure of sexual orientation and/or gender identity following dismissals of homosexual and transgender teachers, and violations of the rights of transgender people.

In May, Russian media reported on the arranged polygamous marriage of a 17-year-old Chechen girl to a Chechen police chief close to Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic. The Human Rights Ombudsman and Chair of the Presidential Human Rights Council complained to the Russian authorities about the case, after it was alleged that the girl had been coerced into the marriage and her family had been threatened. Elena Milashina, a Russian journalist at the independent newspaper, Novaya Gazeta, received death threats via an article on the Chechen government's online news agency Grozny-Info after she reported on the case. The EU called for the threats to be "thoroughly and independently investigated" in a [statement](#) on 18 June.

Russian local and regional elections will take place on 13 September. In May and June, President Putin accepted the early resignation of a number of regional governors; however, they will remain acting governors whilst they run for re-election in September. Independent political analysts suggest the move increases their chances of re-election and does not allow the governors' opponents enough time to prepare for a campaign.

On 26 April, independent election observation groups were physically attacked after detecting ballot stuffing in the village of Zheleznodorozhny near Moscow. The groups complained to the authorities and press, but the head of the regional elections commission refused to take action and accused the monitors of deliberately provoking a scandal.

On 28 April, the Ministry of Justice stripped Alexei Navalny's opposition party, the Party of Progress, of its registration as a political party on the grounds that it had not registered the required number of branches in the Russian regions. Navalny claimed it had done so, but many registrations had been deliberately cancelled. The Party of Progress has announced its intention to bring a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights. Nevertheless, the Party of Progress has joined an opposition coalition. On 21 June, Dmitri Taralov, an activist who works with Alexei Navalny, was beaten up in a shopping centre while on an election campaign trip in Magadan.

On 25 February, Bagir Kazikhanov was sentenced to three-and-a-half years' imprisonment for the "organisation of extremist activity" for his involvement in the banned organisation "Nurdzhular". Two other defendants received suspended sentences. Human rights organisations deny that the works of late Turkish theologian Said Nursi are extremist. Muslims who study the works of Said Nursi strongly deny the existence of "Nurdzhular" as a formal organisation.

On 4 March, a court in the Krasnodar region denounced a local branch of Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist" and ordered it be disbanded. The group's building and surrounding land is due to be confiscated by the local government. On 2 June, the Ministry of Justice granted the Moscow branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses formal registration as a religious organisation, over ten years after it was banned by the courts in Moscow.