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Corporate report

Human Rights Priority Country update report: January to June 2016

Updated 21 July 2016

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1. Human rights in Russia

The human rights environment in Russia has continued to deteriorate over the past 6 months.

The crackdown on civil society has continued. In March, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) (<https://www.ndi.org/Statement-Russian-Undesirable-Organizations-List>) was added to the list of “Undesirable Organisations”, ending over 20 years of support for democracy in Russia. 23 NGOs have been added to the “Foreign Agents” register since the start of the year, bringing the total to 134.

In February, the “Foreign Agents” legislation was used for the first time to close an organisation forcibly, when a Russian court ruled to liquidate the prominent NGO Agora, which provided legal support to victims of human rights abuses.

In June, a criminal case was opened for the first time under the “Foreign Agents” legislation when criminal charges were brought against human rights defender Valentina Cherevatenko. Ms Cherevatenko is the head of the NGO “Union of Women of the Don” which provides human rights education and peace-building measures. Human rights groups have expressed concern that this could set a dangerous precedent.

In a further concerning development in June, President Putin approved an amendment to the “Foreign Agents” legislation that defined “political activity”. Many civil society organisations had been calling for a definition in the hope that it would clarify and limit the scope of the law. But the definition adopted in the amendment was so broad that it provides substantial scope for many activities carried out by NGOs to be interpreted as “political”. Human rights groups have widely criticised the amendment and its potential further to harm civil society. Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/27/russia-sham-upgrade-foreign-agents-law>) has commented that the amendments “do nothing good for independent groups or to halt the erosion of freedom of association in Russia”.

Members of the independent political opposition continued to come under pressure during the first half of 2016. In January, Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic, told a press conference that members of the opposition were “traitors”, “jackals” and “enemies of the people”. Mr Kadyrov’s supporters went on to label the opposition “devils” working for foreign governments, and to post a threatening image of a dog which they said was “itching” to attack named opposition politicians. In February, Mr Kadyrov posted a video online (since removed) of opposition figures Mikhail Kasyanov and Vladimir Kara-Murza in the crosshairs of a gun. The international community condemned these attempts to intimidate the opposition. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) found that Mr Kadyrov’s post contained “no attributes of any illegal actions”.

In May, opposition politician Alexei Navalny was attacked by a group of people in the southern city of Anapa. He was with his family at the time, as well as colleagues from his Anti-Corruption Foundation, one of whom was hospitalised after a blow to the head. The Presidential spokesperson questioned whether it was really an attack. The Head of the Central Elections Commission and former Human Rights Ombudsman Ella Pamfilova spoke out, describing the events as “disgusting”.

In June, the Investigative Committee announced it had officially closed its case into the murder of opposition politician, Boris Nemtsov. Five defendants from Chechnya will stand trial on charges of committing murder for payment, and the illegal acquisition, transportation and storage of firearms.

Freedom of expression remained a serious concern. In February, Ekaterina Vologzheninova was sentenced to 320 hours’ corrective labour for “inciting hatred and enmity” by posting messages online that were critical of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and military involvement in the Donbas. In May, Andrei Bubeyev was sentenced to 2 years and 3 months in a penal colony after being found guilty of inciting extremism and undermining Russia’s territorial integrity. His crime was reposting an article on social media entitled “Crimea is Ukraine” and an image with a caption reading “Squeeze the Russia out of yourself”.

In March, a group of Russian and international journalists accompanied by the NGO Committee Against Torture (CAT) was attacked while travelling through Ingushetia, close to the border with Chechnya. The group was stopped by 15 armed men, pulled from their vehicle and beaten. Five members of the group were hospitalised and, shortly afterwards, CAT’s office in Ingushetia was stormed by masked men. This was the third attack CAT had suffered in 15 months and it was condemned by representatives of both the Kremlin and the Duma. As yet, the perpetrators have not been apprehended.

In May, 3 senior members of the editorial staff of the RBC news outlet left the organisation following what many commentators have argued was pressure from the Kremlin after RBC published reports about the Panama Papers and the fortunes allegedly amassed by President Putin’s family and friends. The Kremlin has denied exerting pressure on the owner of RBC.

Also in May, journalist Denis Kuchmenko was brutally beaten by 2 masked men near his home in the Irkutsk region, suffering a broken arm. The police have launched an investigation into the attack, which Mr Kuchmenko has linked to his reporting about the local authorities. As yet, the perpetrators have not been apprehended.

The same month, journalist and deputy editor of the Minuta Istiny newspaper Oleg Kunitsy was shot twice by an unidentified assailant in Vologda City. The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Representative on Freedom of the Media issued a statement (<http://www.osce.org/fom/243026>) following the attacks, expressing concern for the safety of journalists in Russia.

The LGB&T community continued to face serious and widespread discrimination. In January, Sergei Alekseenko – the Director of LGB&T rights group, Maximum – was found guilty of promoting “non-traditional sexual relations” to minors and fined 100,000 roubles (£1,156). In April, the Side-by-Side LGB&T film festival in Moscow attracted its largest audience to date, but was disrupted several times by anonymous bomb threats.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to come under pressure in Russia, including through the use of anti-extremism legislation. The community continued to fight in court to prevent religious literature – including a Bible translation – being labelled “extremist”. In March, the Prosecutor General’s Office issued a warning threatening to liquidate the Administrative Centre of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia for alleged “extremist activity”. If liquidation is carried out, over 2,500 local congregations could face closure.

Ukrainian national Nadiya Savchenko was released from prison and transferred back to Ukraine on 25 May, after more than 22 months in illegal detention in Russia. The Foreign Secretary issued a statement (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-welcomes-the-release-of-nadiya-savchenko>) welcoming the news of Ms Savchenko’s release, and calling on Russia to honour its commitments under the Minsk Agreements to release all illegally detained persons. Many other Ukrainian nationals remain in prison in Russia as a result of politically motivated charges, including Oleg Sentsov, Oleksandr Kolchenko, Stanislav Klykh and Mykola Karpyuk.

2. Russian actions in Ukraine

Following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, the human rights situation continued to deteriorate through the first half of 2016. Non-Russian nationals in Crimea continue to face pressure to renounce their Ukrainian citizenship in favour of Russian citizenship, or be denied access to basic services such as pensions and medical treatment. Some have been forced into exile.

Crimean Tatars in particular have faced harassment, including arrests, detentions, disappearances, threats to seize property, and restrictions on their rights of worship, assembly and expression. Homes and mosques have also been raided. In April Russian authorities banned the Mejlis council, an integral part of the Crimean identity, as an extremist organisation for its objection to Russia’s illegal occupation. 18 Crimean Tatars were detained in Russian prisons while several more are under arrest charged with extremism and terrorism. In March the Foreign Secretary denounced Russia’s continuing illegal annexation of Crimea and the ongoing human rights abuses suffered by the victims of Russia’s aggression, and FCO Minister for Human Rights, Baroness Anelay, met Refat Chubarov, the Leader of the Crimean Mejlis.

Russia continues to supply troops and equipment to the separatists involved in the crisis in eastern Ukraine. Since the crisis began in 2014, the UN report over 9,300 lives have been lost with another 21,000 casualties. Between 800,000 and one million people have been internally displaced in Ukrainian-controlled territory. Despite repeated efforts to implement a sustainable ceasefire, fighting along the line of contact has increased since January with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recording 113 civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine between 1 January and 15 May.

The UK has called on Russia to use its considerable influence over the separatists to stop violating the ceasefire, respect the agreement on weapons withdrawal, and give full and unhindered access to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) and other international humanitarian agencies. The SMM, which is working to reduce tensions and foster peace, stability and security in the region, continues to face restrictions by separatists on access to areas of eastern Ukraine. Human rights activists report that

some pro-Ukraine residents who have remained in separatist-held territories have been tortured and imprisoned for their beliefs and, in some cases, charged with treason or spying. The UK has continued to push for independent investigations into all serious allegations of human rights violations and abuses by all sides.

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 eastern Ukraine and Crimea.