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Russian Federation

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Head of State	Vladimir Putin
Head of government	Viktor Zubkov (replaced Mikhail Fradkov in September)
Death penalty	abolitionist in practice
Population	141.9 million
Life expectancy	65 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f)	24/18 per 1,000
Adult literacy	99.4 per cent

The Russian authorities were increasingly intolerant of dissent or criticism, branding it ‘unpatriotic’. A crackdown on civil and political rights was evident throughout the year and in particular during the run-up to the State Duma (parliament) elections in December. Given the strict state control of TV and other media, demonstrations were the flashpoint during the year for political protests, with police detaining demonstrators, journalists, and human rights activists, some of whom were beaten. Activists and political opponents of the government were also subjected to administrative detention.

The number of racist attacks that came to the attention of the media rose; at least 61 people were killed across the country. Although authorities recognized the problem and there was an increase in the number of prosecutions for racially motivated crimes, these measures failed to stem the tide of violence.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russia was responsible for enforced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial executions in 15 judgments relating to the second Chechen conflict which began in 1999. There were fewer reported cases of disappearances in the Chechen Republic than in previous years; however, serious human rights violations were frequent and individuals were reluctant to report abuses, fearing reprisals. Ingushetia saw an increase in serious violations, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions.

NGOs were weighed down by burdensome reporting requirements imposed by changes to legislation. Torture was used by police against detainees, including to extract “confessions”; violence against inmates in prisons was also reported.

Background

Pervasive corruption undermined the rule of law and people’s trust in the legal system. A new structure, the Investigation Committee, was established within the office of the Prosecutor General, and was charged with

responsibility for criminal investigations. It was unclear at the end of the year what impact these changes would have on the work of the Prosecutor's office.

New laws regulating immigration were brought in designed to simplify immigration procedures and the obtaining of work permits, but at the same time increasing the penalties for employing irregular migrants. The January 2007 law against foreign workers in Russian retail markets, presented by President Putin as a way of protecting "native Russians", was perceived by some as legitimizing xenophobia.

The ruling United Russia party won a clear majority in State Duma elections in December; President Putin headed the party's electoral list. An observation mission of parliamentarians from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe pronounced the elections "not fair".

The North Caucasus remained a violent and unstable region. The security situation in Ingushetia deteriorated with armed groups launching numerous attacks, often fatal, against members of law enforcement agencies.

Unidentified gunmen committed numerous attacks against non-Ingush civilians, including ethnic Russians. In Chechnya sporadic fighting continued, with incursions by armed groups into the capital Grozny and other areas. Ramzan Kadyrov was appointed President of Chechnya in March, following the resignation of Alu Alkhanov.

Human rights defenders

Government representatives and state-controlled media repeatedly accused human rights defenders and members of the opposition movement of working for foreign interests and being "anti-Russian". Human rights defenders and civil society activists were subjected to harassment and intimidation. Criminal charges, such as for using unlicensed computer software or for inciting hatred, were taken out selectively against human rights defenders and independent journalists.

- Oleg Orlov, head of the human rights centre Memorial, and three journalists from a Russian TV station, who had all planned to monitor a demonstration against serious abuses by law enforcement officials in Ingushetia, were abducted on 24 November from a hotel in Ingushetia by armed masked men. They stated that they were beaten and threatened with being shot before being left in a field.
- In April Russian NGOs were obliged for the first time to submit information about their activities under the new law on NGOs to the Federal Registration Service (FRS). In the following months, many human rights defenders were subjected to repeated reviews of their activities, were forced to re-register their NGOs in lengthy bureaucratic procedures and to challenge allegations against their NGOs in court.
- Citizen's Watch, a human rights organization in St Petersburg focusing on such issues as police reform and combating racism, used non-Russian donor funding for their publications. The FRS considered that printing the names of donors on their publications constituted advertising for the donors, for which the NGO would have had to pay tax. In July the FRS demanded copies of all the NGO's outgoing communications since 2004. Citizen's Watch disputed the right of the FRS to receive such information.
- In August, new amendments to the law on combating "extremist activities" came into force. They added a new motivation of hatred against a specific group to the list of possible "extremist" motivations: the list now includes hatred against not only a specific race, religion, or ethnicity but also political, ideological and social groups. The law allows for acts of minor hooliganism to be more severely punished if committed on grounds of hatred against a specific group. Human rights defenders were concerned that the law may be used to clamp down on dissent.

- On 27 January, the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of human rights defender Stanislav Dmitrievskii, who had received a conditional sentence in 2006 for inciting ethnic enmity after publishing articles by Chechen separatist leaders. In November a court in Nizhnii Novgorod imposed stricter conditions on him.
- Nine people reportedly were charged in relation to the October 2006 murder of human rights journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

Freedom of expression

In the months prior to the State Duma elections, the authorities became more restrictive of public expressions of dissent. Scores of people, including journalists and monitors, were briefly detained prior to, during and following demonstrations and many were convicted of violations of the Administrative Code in trials which did not always meet international standards of fair trial.

- In November opposition leader Garry Kasparov was sentenced to five days' administrative detention after he had participated in a "dissenters' march" in Moscow a week before the Duma elections. Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience and called for his immediate release.

Police used excessive force on a number of occasions in order to break up demonstrations organized by opposition parties and anti-government activists. Following a demonstration in St Petersburg on 15 April, several people had to undergo hospital treatment.

The authorities used various methods to prevent journalists, well-known political activists and human rights activists from attending and monitoring demonstrations. In May, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov banned a gay rights march in Moscow. Gay rights activists, including several members of the European Parliament, were briefly detained when they attempted to hand over a petition to Yuri Luzhkov, urging him to respect the right to freedom of expression and protesting against his decision to ban a gay rights march from taking place in Moscow.

Armed conflict in the North Caucasus

Federal and local law enforcement agencies operating in the region responded in an arbitrary and unlawful fashion to violent attacks by armed groups. Serious human rights violations, including enforced disappearances and abductions, arbitrary detention, torture including in unofficial places of detention, and extrajudicial executions, were reported in the Republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan and North Ossetia. People were convicted of crimes in cases where forced "confessions" formed part of the evidence against them. People mounted demonstrations in Ingushetia and Dagestan against disappearances and other arbitrary actions by law enforcement agencies. A rally against disappearances was banned in Chechnya's capital, Grozny, in October. Human rights abuses, including abductions, were reportedly committed by armed groups against civilians in the region.

In Ingushetia, in at least six cases where men were shot dead by law enforcement officers, witnesses claimed that the men had been summarily executed; the authorities stated that they had put up armed resistance. Relatives of a six-year-old boy, shot dead by law enforcement during a raid on the family home in November, claimed he had been killed deliberately. Detainees were tortured and ill-treated in order to extract "confessions" or information. At

least three people subjected to enforced disappearance or abduction during the year remained missing at the end of the year.

- Ibragim Gazdiev was seized by armed men in camouflage in August in Karabulak, Ingushetia, and subsequently disappeared. The armed men were allegedly law enforcement officials from the Federal Security Service (FSB). The authorities officially denied that Ibragim Gazdiev had been detained. He has not been seen or heard from since.

In Chechnya the number of reported enforced disappearances and abductions decreased, compared with previous years, although cases continued to be reported. Torture and ill-treatment by Chechen law enforcement officials was reported, including in illegal and secret places of detention. During his visit to Chechnya in March, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the CoE stated that he had “the impression that torture and ill-treatment are widespread” and added that perpetrators of torture had a feeling of “utter impunity”. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) issued its third public statement on Chechnya in March, naming six police detention facilities where detainees were at a high risk of torture.

In Kabardino-Balkaria a trial began in October against 59 suspects accused of an armed attack on Nalchik in October 2005 in which over 100 people died. Many of the detainees, including former Guantánamo detainee Rasul Kudaev, alleged they were tortured into giving confessions.

Impunity

Victims of human rights violations and their relatives were frequently afraid to submit official complaints. In some cases the victim or their lawyer was directly threatened not to pursue a complaint. Human rights groups in the region publicizing the violations and offering assistance to victims came under pressure from the authorities. Some individuals were reportedly reluctant to lodge applications at the European Court of Human Rights, because of reprisals against applicants before them.

- 76-year-old Sumaia Abzueva was allegedly beaten up on the way to the market in Argun on 9 January by a group of young men. She had been seeking an investigation into the killing of her son in 2005. She said she had been threatened more than once by the men who had detained and taken her son away from the family home, and who were suspected to be members of Chechen security forces.

When investigations concerning human rights violations were opened they were often ineffectual, and suspended for failure to identify any suspect. The CPT highlighted gross inadequacies in many of the investigations opened into allegations of torture. There was no single comprehensive list of disappeared persons, no work to collect DNA from relatives of the disappeared, no work to exhume the mass graves, and no fully functioning forensic laboratory carrying out autopsies. Very few cases reached trial.

- In June, a military court in Rostov-on-Don convicted four members of a special Russian military intelligence unit for killing six unarmed civilians from Dai village, Chechnya, in January 2002. They were sentenced to imprisonment in strict-regime prison colonies for terms of nine to 14 years. This was the third hearing into the case. Three of the four were sentenced in their absence, having failed to appear. The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld the convictions.

European Court of Human Rights rulings

In 15 judgments the European Court ruled Russia responsible for enforced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial executions relating to the second Chechen conflict. The Court sharply criticized the ineffectual investigations.

- Peace activist Zura Bitieva was tortured in 2000 in an unofficial detention centre at Chernokozovo, and killed in 2003, along with three members of her family. She had filed a case with the Court relating to her torture. The Court ruled that her detention in Chernokozovo had been in “total disregard of the requirement of lawfulness”; that her and her relatives’ killing could be attributed to the State; and that there had been no effective, prompt and thorough investigation into the killings.

Internally displaced people

Many thousands of people remained internally displaced in the North Caucasus as a result of the second Chechen conflict. At least seven temporary accommodation centres were closed in Grozny. Some individuals were reportedly forced to leave without a guaranteed safe and sustainable return to their homes, without adequate alternative housing being offered, and without due process being followed. Reportedly some individuals were forced to sign statements that they left voluntarily.

Over 18,000 people displaced by the Chechen conflict were estimated to be living in Ingushetia and Dagestan at the end of 2007, some of them living in extremely poor conditions in temporary camps. Thousands of others remained displaced in Ingushetia from the Prigorodnii district, a territory disputed with North Ossetia.

Forcible return

Individuals who were detained under deportation or extradition proceedings, were denied access to a meaningful asylum procedure and were vulnerable to arbitrary actions by law enforcement agencies. Amnesty International was aware of at least three cases of forcible return to countries (in these cases Uzbekistan and China), where they faced a high risk of serious human rights violations including torture, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement. In one case, an individual was returned over 24 hours after the European Court of Human Rights had issued an order to stay the deportation. In May, the head of a detention centre for foreigners in Moscow was convicted of exceeding official authority for his participation in the October 2006 deportation of Uzbekistani national Rustam Muminov, in violation of Russian and international law.

Torture and other ill-treatment

There were many reports of torture and ill-treatment during investigations by law enforcement officials and in places of detention. Police and investigators allegedly beat detainees, placed plastic bags or gas masks over their heads, used electroshocks and threatened them with further forms of torture and ill-treatment if they refused to admit their “guilt” and to sign a “confession”.

During the year a number of police officers were found guilty of crimes relating to torture and ill-treatment during investigations and interrogations.

- In July, Valerii Dontsov, an elderly disabled man from Kstovo in the region of Nizhnii Novgorod, was reportedly beaten and ill-treated by police in order to make him confess to the murder of his son. After being subjected to ill-treatment by the police, he had to undergo hospital treatment.

Riots in several prison colonies were reported. Prisoners were protesting against ill-treatment and violations of their rights, such as denials of family visits and receipt of food parcels, and the frequent use of punishment cells for minor violations of prison rules. Similar reports were received from prison colonies in Krasnodar, Sverdlovsk and Kaluga Regions. The media reported that three prisoners died as a result of the suppression of a riot in Sverdlovsk Region.

In January President Putin spoke in favour of ratifying the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture. Proposals to allow for public monitoring of places of detention were under discussion; however, by the end of the year no effective system of unannounced inspections was in place.

Fair trial concerns

In April, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on the Russian authorities to “use all available legal means” to release Igor Sutiagin, Valentin Danilov and Mikhail Trepashkin. The parliamentarians expressed concern about the authorities’ failure to meet international fair trial standards and about alleged inadequate medical treatment.

- Igor Sutiagin, sentenced in 2004 to 15 years’ imprisonment for espionage, spent three months in a punishment cell, for reportedly being in possession of a mobile phone in the prison colony.
- Lawyer and former security service officer Mikhail Trepashkin was sentenced in 2004 for revealing state secrets and unlawful possession of ammunition. He was transferred in March from an open prison colony to a stricter regime for allegedly violating prison rules, but his lawyers and human rights defenders believed this to be a punishment for his complaints against the prison authorities. On 30 November Mikhail Trepashkin was released.
- New charges were filed against imprisoned former YUKOS oil company head Mikhail Khodorkovskii and his associate Platon Lebedev in February, alleging their involvement in money laundering and embezzlement. The Office of the Prosecutor General failed to respect court decisions concerning the criminal proceedings and the men’s legal team was harassed.

Violence against women

Violence against women in the family was widespread. Government support for crisis centres and hotlines was totally inadequate. No measures under Russian law specifically addressed violence against women in the family.

Racism

Violent racist attacks occurred with alarming regularity, mostly concentrated in big cities such as Moscow, St Petersburg and Nizhnii Novgorod, where the majority of foreigners and ethnic minorities lived. While exact figures

for numbers of attacks and racist incidents were hard to verify, the non-governmental SOVA Information and Analytical Centre reported that at least 61 people were killed and at least 369 were injured in racially motivated attacks, an increase on 2006. Anti-Semitic attacks and desecration of Jewish cemeteries were also reported. The real level of such violence remained hidden due to chronic under-reporting.

Despite increased efforts by authorities to recognize the issue of racism, and some indications that legal provisions against racially motivated crimes were being used more effectively, there were few convictions for racist attacks and victims stated that their attempts to report racist attacks to the police were futile.

Amnesty International visits/reports

- Amnesty International delegates visited Russia in July and December. An October visit to Chechnya was postponed at the request of authorities.
 - Russian Federation: What justice for Chechnya's disappeared? (EUR 46/015/2007)
 - Russian Federation: Update briefing: What progress has been made since May 2006 to tackle violent racism? (EUR 46/047/2007)
 - Russian Federation: New trial of Mikhail Khodorkovskii and Platon Lebedev must meet international fair trial standards (EUR 46/052/2007)
 - Russian Federation: Human rights defenders at risk in the North Caucasus (EUR 46/053/2007)