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The Covid-19 pandemic continued to exacerbate the dire state of healthcare services. The rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly were routinely violated. Public assemblies organized by the political opposition were almost completely prohibited. Legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations”, together with prosecutions on trumped-up charges and other forms of pressure, were widely used to suppress dissent. Threats and attacks against journalists, human rights defenders and other activists were perpetrated with impunity. Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses intensified. Torture and other ill-treatment in places of detention remained endemic and prosecutions of perpetrators rare. Enforced disappearances were reported in Chechnya. The authorities failed to address domestic violence. LGBTI people continued to face discrimination. Arbitrary deportations of refugees and asylum seekers persisted.

Background

The parliamentary election in September was accompanied by unprecedented pressure on independent opposition candidates, including through barring them from running on spurious grounds. A record number of violations were reported by independent election monitors over three days of voting.

Corruption remained pervasive.

Low Covid-19 vaccine uptake and a rapid growth in the infection rate led all regional governments to introduce mandatory vaccination for certain groups of workers. The government repeatedly announced fully paid “non-working days” to halt the pandemic’s spread, forcing businesses to pick up the cost with limited government support.

Unprecedented wildfires raged in Siberia and the Far East following record-breaking heat and drought. Toxic smoke spread widely, further reducing the already poor air quality in large cities.

Russia continued to occupy Crimea and other territories.

Right to health

Soaring Covid-19 infection and death rates exacerbated problems in healthcare, already dismal in some places. Worn-out infrastructure, negligent use of equipment and underfinancing, for example, were cited among the reasons for a cut in oxygen supply in a North Ossetian hospital in August, resulting in the deaths of at least nine patients on life support. Despite a shortage of healthcare workers reported across the country, the government adopted further cuts to the health budget. The large number of hospitalized Covid-19 patients led to delays in planned medical care.

The vaccination of homeless people and undocumented migrants against Covid-19 was complicated by a requirement for identification documents and medical insurance, often unavailable to such groups. Documented migrant workers also encountered difficulties, with many having to pay for their vaccination.

Freedom of assembly

Public assemblies organized by the opposition were mostly prohibited, including under the pretext of public health restrictions, unlike pro-government mass events. Individuals staging single-person pickets were routinely arrested and prosecuted, in violation of an unduly restrictive law.¹

Rallies in support of opposition leader Aleksei Navalny resulted in unprecedented numbers of mass arbitrary arrests² and administrative and criminal prosecutions on spurious charges.³ In Moscow, facial recognition technologies were reportedly used to identify and reprimand peaceful protesters.

Police enjoyed impunity for the unlawful use of force, including with stun guns, against peaceful protesters.⁴

Around 10 criminal cases for “repeated violation of public assembly regulations” were opened. In October, environmental activist Vyacheslav Egorov was sentenced to 15 months’ imprisonment for organizing a peaceful protest.

Freedom of association

Civil society organizations suffered further reprisals and restrictions due to newly amended legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations”, which widened their scope (for instance, outlawing cooperation with “undesirable organizations” abroad) and increased respective administrative and criminal sanctions.

In July, the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission sharply criticized the new amendments to the “foreign agents” legislation noting that “they constitute serious violations of basic human rights”. It urged Russia to “abandon” this special regime or alternatively revise “the entire body of the legislation”. The government ignored these recommendations.

A further eight NGOs were added to the list of “foreign agents”, including the independent health workers’ union, Doctors’ Alliance, and 18 more listed as “undesirable”, including the International Partnership for Human Rights and European Network of Election Monitors. Authorities continued penalizing those on the list of “foreign agents” with heavy fines.

In July, the human rights group Team 29 announced its closure after its website was blocked for alleged publication of materials by a Czech NGO newly designated as “undesirable”. The group deleted all its online publications and web archive to prevent prosecutions.

In August, the election watchdog Golos became the first entity to be designated as an unregistered “public association – ‘foreign agent’” under the amended legislation, followed by five more groups. In December, the country’s oldest and most influential human rights groups, International Memorial and Human Rights Centre Memorial, were ordered to close down, on grounds of their alleged violations of the “foreign agents” legislation. The organizations appealed against the ruling.

Persecution of the NGO Open Russia as “undesirable” continued, including after its disbanding in May to protect its activists. In February, Anastasia Shevchenko received a four-year suspended sentence, reduced to three on appeal in August.⁴ In May, its former executive director Andrey Pivovarov was arrested after boarding an international flight, for cooperation with an “undesirable organization” due to his Facebook posts. His trial started in November.

Freedom of expression

Authorities used laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” to curb the right to freedom of expression and silence independent media, journalists and activists. Fines were introduced for non-inclusion of the mandatory headline-style “foreign agents” disclaimer in relevant publications.

Fourteen media outlets and 70 people were designated “foreign agents”, while the investigative Project Media was outlawed as “undesirable”. In June, its founder, Roman Badanin, later designated as “foreign agent”, and two other journalists faced searches under a libel case.

Journalist Elena Milashina received thinly veiled death threats after her newly published investigation into extrajudicial executions and torture by the Chechen police. The threats were not effectively investigated.

In August, a BBC Moscow correspondent was barred from Russia indefinitely as “a threat to national security”.

In April, four journalists from the student magazine *DOXA* were placed under travel restrictions as criminal suspects, and accused of “involving minors in dangerous activities” in relation to a video that called on students to brave threats of expulsion for participation in peaceful protests. Their trial started in December.

Dissenting musicians faced cancelled concerts. In October, poet and journalist Tatyana Voltskaya’s concert was cancelled because of her newly imposed “foreign agent” status.

Arbitrary and extrajudicial blocking of websites continued, while the scope of respective related legislation was widened. In July, over 40 websites associated with Aleksei Navalny’s anti-corruption and political activities were blocked under the pretext that they were used “for prohibited extremist activities”.

In September, the Moscow Arbitration Court ordered Google and Yandex to delete “Smart Voting” from their search engine results. Google and Facebook were repeatedly fined for not removing “prohibited content”. Journalist Igor Khoroshilov was sentenced twice to 10 days’ administrative detention for “propaganda of extremist insignia” after mentioning “Smart Voting” on Facebook.

In September, the Federal Security Service published an extensive list of unclassified topics, ranging from crimes in the army to delayed space programmes, the monitoring of which would render an individual a “foreign agent”. A veteran human rights NGO, the Soldiers’ Mothers of St Petersburg, declared in response that it would end its work on human rights violations in the army.

In October, Dmitry Muratov, editor of the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his contribution to freedom of expression in an increasingly repressive media climate.

Human rights defenders

Reprisals against human rights defenders were widespread and egregious.

In April, Ivan Pavlov, a human rights lawyer and founder of Team 29, was arbitrarily charged with “divulging the results of a preliminary investigation”. He left Russia in September and was subsequently placed on a “wanted” list. He was also at risk of being stripped of his lawyer’s licence. In November, Ivan Pavlov and four of his colleagues were designated “foreign agents”.

The trial of feminist and LGBTI activist Yulia Tsvetkova, who was accused of “disseminating pornography” for sharing online her body-positive drawings of female bodies, started in Komsomolsk-on-Amur in April and was ongoing at the end of the year.

Prominent human rights defender Ernest Mezak faced trumped-up charges of contempt of court in June for his critical remarks on social media on the role of judges in the prosecution of peaceful protesters.⁵

In October, Galina Arapova, lawyer and director of the Mass Media Defence Centre (placed on the “foreign agents” register in 2015), was designated as an “individual – ‘foreign agent’”.

Impunity

Impunity for crimes committed against human rights defenders and journalists persisted. Numerous crimes, past and ongoing, remained unsolved with investigations unopened or manifestly stalled.

In August, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) held that the Russian authorities had failed to properly investigate the abduction and murder of Natalia Estemirova in 2009, but did not find them directly responsible for the murder.

In October, the 15-year statute of limitation in the murder of prominent investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya expired. The masterminds behind her killing had not been identified.

Repression of dissent

Reprisals against opposition activists and dissenters intensified as the authorities and the ruling United Russia party were confronted by increasingly critical public opinion in the run-up to parliamentary elections.

In February, prominent opposition activist Aleksei Navalny was sentenced in a politically motivated trial to 32 months’ imprisonment for violating the terms of his probation in relation to an unfounded prosecution in 2014. The same month, the ECtHR ordered his immediate release as interim measures related to his physical safety, but Russia refused to comply. Aleksei Navalny complained of inhuman and degrading treatment, including denial of essential healthcare. In June, his movement’s regional offices and two NGOs associated with him were declared “extremist” and banned by a court. In September, Russia ignored a call by the Council of Europe to release him and overturn his convictions. Instead, in October, the authorities announced five new criminal cases against him and his associates.

Other associates and supporters of Aleksei Navalny faced persecution across Russia, including unfounded criminal and administrative proceedings. In April, Andrey Borovikov, in Arkhangelsk, was sentenced to over two years’ imprisonment for “disseminating pornography” in relation to a videoclip by the German band Rammstein that he had shared on social media in 2014 and long since deleted. In July, Violetta Grudina, in Murmansk, was confined to a hospital for 19 days on a false Covid-19 related pretext. This also prevented her from running as an independent candidate in the local election. Ufa activist Lilia Chanysheva faced 10 years’ imprisonment on “extremism” charges for her role as a regional coordinator in Aleksei Navalny’s organization.

Other dissenting voices were also repressed. In May, Nikolay Platoshkin, leader of the For New Socialism movement, was given a five-year suspended sentence and an extortionate fine for purported “calls to mass disturbances” and dissemination of “knowingly false information”. He had criticized the authorities, including their response to Covid-19, and planned peaceful protests.

Mikhail Iosilevich, an activist from Nizhni Novgorod, was falsely accused of cooperation with an “undesirable organization” and threatening a witness, and spent over six months in pretrial detention. He was released in August under restrictions pending trial. His trial started in December.

Siberian shaman Aleksandr Gabyshev, who had vowed in 2019 to “purge” President Putin from the Kremlin, was violently arrested by some 50 police officers at his home in Yakutsk. In July, a court confined him indefinitely to a psychiatric hospital for compulsory treatment. In October, he was moved to a specialized psychiatric institution in Novosibirsk, thousands of kilometres from his home.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment in custody remained endemic and prosecutions of perpetrators rare.

Those arrested during pro-Navalny rallies complained of inhuman and degrading conditions in detention, including

severe overcrowding at the Sakharovo detention facility for migrants, outside Moscow, and elsewhere.

Although several criminal investigations were initiated into multiple allegations of torture, including rape, of prisoners in Irkutsk region in 2020, they were stalled with victims and witnesses complaining of threats and intimidation.

In February, brothers Salekh Magamadov and Ismail Isaev were abducted by police in Nizhnii Novgorod and taken to Chechnya where they were remanded on false charges of aiding an armed group. They complained of torture and other ill-treatment, but the Chechen authorities refused to open a criminal investigation.

In October, Maksim Ivankin, sentenced to 13 years’ imprisonment for alleged participation in a fictitious “terrorist” organization named Network, told his lawyers that he had “confessed” to a double murder under torture while being transferred to a penitentiary in another region.

Smuggled graphic videos of inmates’ torture, including rape, in Saratov prison hospital and other penal institutions were made public in October by activists from the Gulagu.net group. In response to widespread media coverage and a public outcry, the authorities initiated criminal investigations and sacked some prison officials. Threats against the whistle-blower who procured the footage, Sergei Savelyev, forced him to leave Russia.

Enforced disappearances

There were new reports of enforced disappearances, particularly from Chechnya. The fate and whereabouts of Salman Tepsurkayev, moderator of Telegram channel IADAT, remained unknown. A critic of the authorities, he was seen being tortured in a video that was anonymously published after his disappearance in 2020. In October, the ECtHR found Russia responsible for his arbitrary, unacknowledged detention and torture, and for the failure to effectively investigate his torture.

Freedom of religion and belief

Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses intensified after the organization’s arbitrary designation as “extremist” in 2017, with intrusive home searches and criminal cases initiated across the country and in occupied Crimea. At least 105 people were convicted, with those imprisoned sentenced to increasingly long terms.

In October, a court in Astrakhan sentenced Olga Ivanova to three-and-a-half-years’ imprisonment, and Rustam Diarov, Sergei Klikunov and Evgenii Ivanov to eight years’ imprisonment, the longest sentences issued to Jehovah’s Witnesses yet.

Violence against women and girls

In August, a study by the Women’s NGOs’ Consortium found that 66% of women murdered from 2011 to 2019 had been victims of domestic violence. Significant efforts to address the issue were absent, with the draft law on domestic violence, stalled from previous years, still failing to make the parliamentary agenda. The situation of survivors continued to be exacerbated by pandemic-related restrictive measures.

In September, the ECtHR ruled in *Volodina v Russia No. 2* that the authorities had failed to protect the applicant from cyberviolence, and to effectively investigate and bring the perpetrator to justice. The Court concluded that the ensuing impunity “was enough to shed doubt on the ability of the State machinery to produce a sufficiently deterrent effect to protect women from cyberviolence”.

LGBTI people’s rights

Discrimination against LGBTI people remained widespread, spearheaded by the homophobic “gay propaganda” legislation.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

Refugees and asylum seekers continued to face refoulement.

In September, Valentina Chupik, a refugee from Uzbekistan and a human rights defender working on migrants’ rights, was detained in Sheremetyevo airport transit zone on returning to Russia, stripped of her refugee status, banned from entering the country for 30 years and faced a forcible return to Uzbekistan. Only following a widespread outcry, was she allowed to leave for Armenia in October.

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