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Russia - Country of Concern: latest update 31 December 2014

0.1 Latest update: 31 December 2014

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

1. Civil society

Pressure on civil society continued. Sixteen more NGOs were added to the “foreign agents” register, bringing the total to 30. In October, 148 NGOs from 32 countries wrote an open [letter](#) to President Putin, calling on him to overturn the “foreign agents” law and stop the clampdown on freedom of association in Russia. On 14 November, a Saint Petersburg court denied a request to return files and electronic devices belonging to the Director of the Regional Press Institute, Anna Sharogradskaya, after they were seized at Pulkovo airport in June. In December, a Saint Petersburg court fined the Regional Press Institute 400,000 roubles (approximately £4,338) on charges of non-compliance with the “foreign agents” law.

In September, the Ministry of Justice asked the Russian Supreme Court to liquidate Russian NGO Memorial due to problems with its organisational structure. Memorial seeks to preserve the memory of the victims of Soviet political repression. The EU issued a [statement](#) at the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Permanent Council on 16 October, stating that “this decision illustrates once again the determination of Russian authorities to use all possible provisions of the legislation on non-commercial organisations to further weaken or suppress independent NGOs, instead of empowering them”. On 17 December, the Supreme Court postponed a hearing of the case until 28 January to allow Memorial time to address the Ministry of Justice’s complaints. Memorial had already made significant organisational changes in order to ensure legal compliance.

The Minister for Europe, David Lidington, discussed the difficult situation for Russian civil society in a meeting with three Russian NGOs at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Basel in December. He also raised concerns about the “foreign agents” law with the Russian Ambassador in London in October and December.

2. Freedom of expression and assembly

Pressure on independent media outlets has continued in the last three months, including on independent radio station Ekho Moskvy and independent TV channel Dozhd. Dozhd was forced to leave its premises in October, and again in December. It is now operating out of the apartment of one of its employees. On 2 October, Amnesty International published a report: “[Violation of the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly in Russia](#)”, which focused on concerns about attacks on independent media and NGOs, protesters being denied the right to express their views publicly, and harassment of the LGBT community. On 7 October, the eighth anniversary of Anna Politkovskaya’s murder, the FCO called on Russia to protect the safety of human rights defenders and journalists.

On 15 October, President Putin approved a law to limit foreign ownership of Russian media outlets to 20%. The law will come into force in January 2016, and existing media outlets will have until 1 February 2017 to comply or face closure. Human Rights Watch said “the adoption of this law underlines the Russian government’s determination to control the media and limit speech to those opinions it finds convenient”. According to a Freedom House [report](#) on global internet freedom published in December, Russia registered the biggest annual drop in global internet freedom of the 65 countries surveyed.

Baroness Anelay raised concerns about freedom of expression in Russia with the Russian Ambassador in London in November. Mr Lidington also raised concerns with the Russian Ambassador, and highlighted the restrictions on media freedom in Russia in a [blog](#) marking Human Rights Day on 10 December.

3. Rule of law

On 10 October, the thirtieth defendant in the “Bolotnaya case”, Dmitry Ishevsky, was sentenced to three years and two months in prison for participating in mass riots in May 2012. On 13 October, Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko was forced to undergo a psychiatric assessment at the Serbsky Institute in Moscow, despite the fact that her appeal against it had not yet taken place. She was declared mentally fit and transferred back to pre-trial detention at the end of October. Her period of detention has been extended until 13 February 2015. On 15 December, Savchenko declared a hunger strike after prison officials refused to allow a doctor to treat her for an ear infection. In November, a Russian court extended the detention of Estonian security officer Eston Kohver until 5 January, and ruled that he should undergo a psychiatric assessment. Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov remains in detention.

On 15 December, Russia’s Supreme Court turned down a request to review opposition figure Alexei Navalny’s period of probation in the Kirovles case. In a separate case, on 30 December, Navalny and his brother Oleg were found guilty of de-frauding cosmetics company

Yves Rocher Vostok, and both sentenced to three-and-a-half-years imprisonment. Oleg was remanded in custody and Alexei's sentence was suspended. The verdict was originally scheduled for 15 January, but was unexpectedly and unusually brought forward to 29 December. The EU issued a [statement](#) describing the verdict as "politically motivated", noting that "the charges against them have not been substantiated during the trial." Navalny has questioned the legality of his continuing house arrest. Around 200 arrests were made during an opposition protest in central Moscow on 30 December in support of the Navalny brothers, including Alexei Navalny, who breached his house arrest to attend. A Facebook page on which 12,000 people had signed up to a 15 January protest in support of the Navalny brothers in central Moscow was blocked by the Russian authorities on 20 December. In a separate fraud case, in December a Moscow court extended the house arrest of one of Navalny's associates, Konstantin Yankauskas, until April 2015.

In a statement marking the fifth anniversary of Sergei Magnitsky's death on 16 November, the Chair of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's human rights committee, Isabel Santos, called for an end to impunity in Russia and greater attention to the persistent link between corruption and human rights transgressions. FCO officials raised concerns about the Magnitsky case in a meeting with the Russian Embassy in November, urging Russia to strengthen the rule of law and prosecute those who abuse it. On 8 December, Russia's Supreme Court turned down an appeal against Magnitsky's posthumous prosecution for tax evasion.

Russia was downgraded from 127th place to 136th place in Transparency International's latest [Corruption Perceptions Index](#), released on 3 December.

4. North Caucasus

Following a militant raid in Grozny on 4 December, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov commented that the families of militants should be collectively responsible for the militants' crimes, including through deportation or the burning down of family members' homes. Memorial claim that since Kadyrov's comments, several homes in villages around Grozny have been burned to the ground by masked men, including homes inhabited by people with no direct connection to militants involved in the raid on 4 December.

Igor Kalyapin, the Chairman of Russian NGO the Committee Against Torture, which documents human rights violations in Chechnya and helps victims seek legal redress, asked the Prosecutor General to investigate whether Kadyrov's comments constituted a criminal act under Article 286 of the Russian Criminal Code – "abuse of power". Soon after, Kalyapin reported receiving death threats and, after Kadyrov accused him of funding terrorists, is now the subject of an official investigation. On 13 December, the Grozny office of the Committee Against Torture (CAT) was burned down in a suspected arson attack. Mr Lidington expressed concern at the attack and urged the Russian authorities to investigate.

5. Freedom of religion or belief

Pressure on Jehovah's Witness groups across Russia continues. On 12 November, Russia's Supreme Court upheld the ruling of the Samara regional court that the Jehovah's Witnesses of Samara was an extremist organisation, and ordered that the organisation should be disbanded. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses of Samara expressed concern that criminal charges would also be brought against individuals. On December 12, the Rostov Regional Court ordered a re-trial in the criminal case against 16 Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog who were found guilty of "extremism" in July. Similar cases against other groups of Jehovah's Witnesses are ongoing in 16 other locations across Russia.

6. LGB&T rights

On 15 December, Human Rights Watch released a [report](#) documenting an increase in violence and harassment against LGB&T people in Russia since the 2013 law banning the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relations" to minors. The report concluded that the "Russian authorities have failed in their obligation to prevent and prosecute homophobic violence". Mr Lidington raised concerns about LGB&T rights in a meeting with the Russian Ambassador on 18 December.