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Russia

World Report 2005: Index

In 2004 Russia endured the worst terrorist attack in its modern history. The year also saw further erosion of fundamental rights that underpin the country's fledgling democracy. Now entering its sixth year, the bloody war in Chechnya continues unabated with both sides committing numerous and unpunished human rights abuses. The government once again failed to take on Russia's numerous entrenched human rights problems, including widespread police torture and violent hazing in the armed forces.

Political Rights and Freedoms

Throughout his first term in office, Russian President Vladimir Putin kept Russia experts guessing about the role of democracy and human rights in his vision for Russia's political development. While speaking of a commitment to democracy, he presided over slow but deliberate moves to marginalize opposition forces. While Putin expressed support for the free press, his administration gradually established control over television channels and other key news sources. By his reelection in 2004, both the political opposition and independent television had been obliterated. Yet Putin continues to present himself as a believer in democracy and human rights—and most of the international community continues to believe him.

In September 2004, a few days after the worst terrorist attack in Russia's history ended in the massacre of hundreds of children, their parents and teachers at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, Putin revealed his vision. In a speech to the nation, he linked terrorism to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the deficiencies of Russia's transition to democracy, and announced a package of political measures that would take the Kremlin's already overwhelming dominance of Russian politics to a new level. The proposals would give the president *de facto* power to appoint governors, even more sway over the parliament, or State Duma, and increase the executive's influence over the judiciary. Though many Russians were privately unhappy with these proposals, checks and balances on the president's power had already eroded so badly there was no force capable of stopping the proposals.

Russia's political institutions may have been flawed and dysfunctional when Putin came to power in 1999, but public debate of policy issues, one of the great achievements of glasnost and a basic element of any democracy, was vigorous. Political parties of different persuasions clashed regularly in parliament over issues ranging from foreign affairs to agricultural policy. The electronic and print media, though dominated by oligarchs who used them as tools to promote their own interests, presented a wide variety of different opinions. Regional governors were a force to be reckoned with, and the courts had gained a degree of real, though limited, independence from the executive. Finally, a sophisticated and expanding community of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had started playing a role in policy-making.

Four years on, this picture is dramatically different. Public debate on key policy issues has all but disappeared. The pro-presidential United Russia party controls more than two-thirds of all seats in the State Duma, enough to adopt any law or even change the constitution. Opposition parties have been either decimated or eliminated altogether, partially a result of the deeply flawed elections of December 2003. During this election campaign and the presidential election that followed, television media shamelessly promoted United Russia and a few other Kremlin-favored parties while constantly vilifying the opposition.

After a two-year long assault on the independent electronic media, all television stations are firmly under Kremlin control, as are most radio stations. Television news has become monotone, perpetually portraying the president in a positive light and avoiding criticism of his policies. Most programs featuring live debate on political issues have been cut. Only a small number of newspapers and internet publications provide some plurality of opinion, but their readership is marginal.

After convincing regional governors to give up their seats in Russia's senate as a concession to Putin early in his presidency, the Kremlin gradually destroyed them as an independent political force. Through intensive meddling in gubernatorial election campaigns, using its sway over television media and its enormous administrative resources, the Kremlin effectively made the gubernatorial candidates dependent on its support. By September 2004, the governors' power had been reduced to such an extent that not one of them dared publicly to criticize Putin's proposal to scrap gubernatorial elections.

It is conventional wisdom that the executive has also sought to increase its influence over the judiciary. Opinion polls show that few Russians believe that the courts are independent. The Kremlin's use of selective criminal prosecutions against perceived opponents, like Mikhail Khodorkovskii, and scientists working with foreigners on sensitive topics, has put considerable pressure on the courts. Indeed, in several of these cases, like that of arms researcher Igor Sutiagin, the courts have recently found defendants guilty on highly dubious charges. In another such case, the Supreme Court overturned scientist Valentin Danilov's acquittal of espionage charges and ordered a retrial, at which he was found guilty. After Beslan, Putin proposed establishing executive control over the nomination of members of a key Supreme Court body that supervises the hiring and dismissal of judges—another erosion of the independence of the judiciary.

Until recently, the NGO community was the only part of civil society that had not faced any significant meddling by the Kremlin. However, in May 2004 Putin used his state-of-the-nation speech to launch an attack on NGOs. He accused them of "receiving financing from influential foreign foundations and serving dubious groups and commercial interests," and of forgetting "about some of the most acute problems of the country and citizens." Just days after the address, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused humanitarian organizations in Chechnya of using their missions as a cover for anti-Russian activities. One of the central Russian television stations, TVC, devoted an hour-long primetime program to denouncing the work of human rights groups, accusing them of what the presenter called their "hatred" for Russia. Along the same lines, a political analyst close to the Kremlin, Gleb Pavlovskii, rebuked rights activists for being "engrossed" in Western ideals.

The day after President Putin's state-of-the-nation address, on May 27, masked intruders ransacked the office of a major human rights organization in Tatarstan that provides legal support for victims of torture. The group continues to face harassment from law enforcement agencies, as do many other regional human rights NGOs. In October, an influential member of parliament called for an investigation into the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, Russia's oldest and most widespread grass roots human rights organizations, which helps victims of violent hazing in the Russian military.

Chechnya

The Chechnya conflict entered its sixth year, with the Kremlin continuing to insist that it was successfully restoring peace in the republic. However, the assassination of pro-Moscow Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov in May 2004, and a series of terrorist attacks linked to the conflict, belied Russia's claims of normalization. As in earlier years, Russian troops committed hundreds of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions, and tortured detainees on a large scale. They did so with almost complete impunity. Official statistics released in September reveal that since the beginning of the Chechen war in 1999, a total of twenty-two servicemen are serving active prison terms for crimes committed against

civilians. Russian troops also stepped up their pattern of harassment of Chechen applicants to the European Court of Human Rights.

Chechen rebels were responsible for numerous direct and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, both inside Chechnya and elsewhere in Russia. They conducted devastating terrorist attacks, including the hostage-taking and murder of several hundred people at a school in Beslan. They also assassinated Akhmad Kadyrov and numerous local Chechen leaders working with the Russian authorities.

Entrenched Problems

The government failed to make use of Russia's current economic prosperity to reform state institutions that have entrenched human rights problems. Despite his image of a can-do leader, Putin's administration has not devised or implemented sound strategies to deal with systematic hazing practices in the armed forces, torture and ill-treatment of criminal suspects by police, poor treatment of children in orphanages, and inhumane treatment of persons committed to psychiatric institutions. The administration also failed to take effective steps to fight a rapidly spreading HIV epidemic that is being fueled by human rights abuses. The only area where truly significant reform has taken place is in the prison system, where overcrowding has eased.

Key International Actors

The international community believed for years that Putin's lip service to democratic principles was sincere. Although many Western leaders expressed concern about Putin's plans to abolish gubernatorial elections, several continued to insist that Russia was on the right track. Neither the U.S. nor E.U. governments developed a strategy for Russia that spelled out diplomatic or economic consequences for Russia's turn toward authoritarianism. Although a European Commission document in early 2004 frankly assessed the situation in Russia and observed that the E.U. can "influence developments in Russia if it is ready to take up difficult issues... in a clear and forthright manner," for too long the E.U. did not follow this observation.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe continued to be one of the few international bodies willing to frankly assess and openly discuss the situation in Chechnya. It adopted sharply worded resolutions in October that called for a real accountability process for crimes committed in the conflict. In October, the European Court of Human Rights held hearings on the first six applications by Chechens. The U.N. Commission on Human Rights failed for the third consecutive time to adopt a resolution expressing concern over the situation in Chechnya. Despite repeated requests, the U.N. Special Rapporteurs on torture and extrajudicial executions were not able to visit Chechnya.

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