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2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Russia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Russian Federation has a highly centralized, authoritarian political system dominated by President Vladimir Putin. The bicameral Federal Assembly consists of a directly elected lower house (State Duma) and an appointed upper house (Federation Council), both of which lack independence from the executive. The 2018 presidential election and the September 19 State Duma elections were marked by accusations of government interference and manipulation of the electoral process, including the exclusion of meaningful opposition candidates.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, Federal Security Service, Investigative Committee, Office of the Prosecutor General, and National Guard are responsible for law enforcement. The Federal Security Service is responsible for state security, counterintelligence, and counterterrorism, as well as for fighting organized crime and corruption. The national police force, under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, is responsible for combating all crime. The National Guard assists the Federal Security Service's Border Guard Service in securing borders, administers gun control, combats terrorism and organized crime, protects public order, and guards important state facilities. The National Guard also participates in armed defense of the country's territory in coordination with Ministry of Defense forces. Except in rare cases, security forces generally report to civilian authorities. National-level civilian authorities maintained, at best, limited control over security forces in the Republic of Chechnya, which are accountable only to the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. There were credible reports that members of the Russian security forces committed numerous human rights abuses.

The country's occupation and purported annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula continued to affect the human rights situation there significantly and negatively. The Russian government continued to arm, train, lead, and fight alongside Russia-led separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. Authorities also conducted politically motivated arrests, detentions, and trials of Ukrainian citizens in Russia, many of whom claimed to have been tortured (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Ukraine).

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: extrajudicial killings and attempted extrajudicial killings, including of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons in Chechnya by local government authorities; enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities; pervasive torture by government law enforcement officers that sometimes resulted in death and occasionally involved sexual violence or punitive psychiatric incarceration; harsh and life-threatening conditions in prisons; arbitrary arrest and detention; political and religious prisoners and detainees; politically motivated reprisals against individuals located outside the country; severe arbitrary interference with privacy; severe suppression of freedom of expression and media, including violence against journalists and the use of “antiextremism” and other laws to prosecute peaceful dissent and religious minorities; severe restrictions on internet freedom; severe suppression of the freedom of peaceful assembly; severe suppression of freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable foreign organizations”; severe restrictions of religious freedom; refoulement of refugees; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; severe limits on participation in the political process, including restrictions on opposition candidates' ability to seek public office and conduct political campaigns, and on the ability of civil society to monitor election processes; widespread corruption at all levels and in all branches of government; serious government restrictions on and harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence and violence against women; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting persons with disabilities, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer persons.

The government failed to take adequate steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, or punish most officials who committed abuses and engaged in corruption, resulting in a climate of impunity.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were several reports the government or its agents committed, or attempted to commit, arbitrary or unlawful killings. Impunity was a significant problem in investigating whether security force killings were justifiable (see section 1.e.).

Officers of the Federal Security Service (FSB) poisoned opposition activist and anticorruption campaigner Aleksey Navalny in August 2020 with a form of Novichok, a nerve agent that was also used in the 2018 attack on former Russian intelligence officer Sergey Skripal in the United Kingdom. In December 2020 investigations published by the independent outlets *Bellingcat* and *The Insider* identified eight FSB officers suspected to have been involved in Navalny’s poisoning based on telephone records and travel data as well as an inadvertent confession by one of the FSB officials. On June 11, Navalny’s Anticorruption Foundation published the results of an investigation that alleged the doctors who treated Navalny at a hospital in Omsk falsified his original medical records to hide evidence of his poisoning. At year’s end Russian Federation representatives continued to reject requests to open an investigation into the circumstances of Navalny’s poisoning and repeated denials that he had been poisoned by a nerve agent.

In an investigation published on January 27, *Bellingcat*, *The Insider*, and *Der Spiegel* implicated several of the same FSB officials in the deaths of at least two other Russian activists between 2014 and 2019: Timur Kuashev, a journalist critical of Russia’s invasion of Crimea who died in 2014, and Ruslan Magomedragimov, an activist for the Lezgin ethnic minority group who died in 2015. According to reporting at the time, both died of apparent poisoning, although neither death was investigated by authorities as suspicious. In another joint investigation, *Bellingcat*, *The Insider*, and *Der Spiegel* reported on February 12 that some of the same FSB officials had followed opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza immediately preceding his poisoning with an unknown substance in two assassination attempts in 2015 and 2017. On June 10, *Bellingcat* and *The Insider* reported that the same FSB officers were also implicated in the 2019 poisoning and near death of writer, journalist, and Russian government critic Dmitriy Bykov.

Credible nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media outlets continued to publish reports indicating that, from December 2018 to January 2019, local authorities in the Republic of Chechnya renewed a campaign of violence against individuals perceived to be members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community. In February the news outlet *Novaya Gazeta* published information corroborating previous reports that Chechen security officials extrajudicially executed 27 residents of the Republic of Chechnya in 2017. As part of its investigation into the abuses, *Novaya Gazeta* interviewed former Chechen police sergeant Suleyman Gezmakhmayev, who testified that his police regiment, the Akhmat Kadyrov Police Patrol Service Regiment, carried out mass arrests and some of the extrajudicial killings of the 27 residents between December 2016 and January 2017. Media reported that Chechen police officers subsequently sought to force Gezmakhmayev to recant his testimony by putting pressure on relatives who remained in Chechnya. On March 15, presidential press secretary Dmitriy Peskov told reporters that the government was aware of *Novaya Gazeta*’s investigations into the extrajudicial executions in Chechnya but did not have the prerogative to investigate. Media outlets reported that the former head of the regiment, Aslan Irskhanov, was appointed head of Chechnya’s police at the end of March. According to human rights organizations, as of December authorities had failed to open investigations into the allegations or reports of extrajudicial killings and mass torture of LGBTQI+ persons in Chechnya and continued to deny there were any LGBTQI+ persons in the republic.

There were multiple reports that, in some prison colonies, authorities systematically tortured inmates (see section 1.c.), in some cases resulting in death or suicide. According to media reports, on February 27, a prisoner, Adygzyh Aymyr-ool, was found dead at the Irkutsk Penal Colony No. 25 (IK-25) prison with signs of torture on his body. Relatives of Aymyr-ool told media that he had previously complained of beatings and poor detention conditions. The Federal Penitentiary System Office of the Irkutsk Region told media it would investigate the cause of his death but denied reports detailing signs of a violent death. On October 5, the human rights group Gulagu.net announced it had obtained more than 1,000 leaked videos showing Russian prison officials torturing and sexually abusing inmates or forcing inmates to subject other inmates to such abuse in the Saratov region and elsewhere.

There were reports that the government or its proxies committed, or attempted to commit, extrajudicial killings of its opponents in other countries. On February 19, Ukraine filed a complaint against the Russian Federation in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for its role in the “political assassinations of opponents.” Ukraine claimed that “operations to target the alleged opponents of the Russian state are carried out in Russia and on the territory of other states, including the member states of the Council of Europe, outside the situation of armed conflict.” On December 15, a German court sentenced a Russian citizen, Vadim Krasikov, to life in prison for killing a former Chechen rebel commander of Georgian nationality, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, in a Berlin park in 2019. Prosecutors claimed that Krasikov traveled to Germany under an alias and belonged to a special unit of the FSB. The presiding judge concluded that “the central government of the Russian Federation was the author of this crime.”

The country continued to engage in armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, where human rights organizations attributed thousands of civilian deaths, widespread displacement of persons, and other abuses to Russia-led forces. Russian occupation authorities in Crimea also committed widespread abuses (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Ukraine).

Since 2015 the country’s armed forces conducted military operations, including airstrikes, in the conflict in Syria. According to human rights organizations, the country’s forces took actions, such as bombing urban areas, that intentionally targeted civilian infrastructure (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Syria).

Since 2017 the country provided the Central African Republic Army unarmed military advisors under the auspices of parameters established by the UN Security Council sanctions regime. According to a report presented by the UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic to the UN Security Council Committee on May 20, the Russian advisors actively participated in, and often led, combat operations on the ground and participated in abuses against

civilians, including cases of excessive use of force, harsh interrogation tactics, numerous killings of civilians, and looting of homes on a large scale (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the Central African Republic).

The news website Caucasian Knot reported that violent confrontations with security forces resulted in at least 19 deaths in the North Caucasus during the first half of the year. Chechnya was the most affected region, with five law enforcement officers injured and six suspected armed insurgents killed.

b. Disappearance

There were reports of disappearances perpetrated by or on behalf of government authorities. Enforced disappearances for both political and financial reasons continued in the North Caucasus. According to the August 2020 report of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, there were 896 outstanding cases of enforced or involuntary disappearances in the country.

There were reports that police committed enforced disappearances and abductions during the year.

Security forces were allegedly complicit in the kidnapping and disappearance of individuals from Central Asia, whose forcible return was apparently sought by their governments (see section 2.f., Protection of Refugees).

There were continued reports of abductions and torture in the North Caucasus, including of political activists, LGBTQI+ persons, and others critical of Chechnya head Kadyrov. For example, in September 2020 Salman Tepsurkayev, a 19-year-old Chechen activist and moderator of IADAT, a social media channel that was highly critical of Kadyrov, was kidnapped and subjected to abuse and humiliation in a disturbing video, reportedly by officers of the Akhmat Kadyrov Post and Patrol Service Regiment of the Chechen Police. Media outlets reported in January that the Investigative Committee of Gelendzhik in Krasnodar Krai opened an investigation into Tepsurkayev’s disappearance. As of December, however, Tepsurkayev’s whereabouts were unknown. On October 19, the ECHR found Russian state agents responsible for the disappearance and torture of Tepsurkayev and ordered the Russian Federation to pay 26,000 euros (\$29,900) in compensation.

On June 23, the ECHR ordered Russia to pay damages of almost two million euros (\$2.3 million) to the relatives of 11 persons, mainly from the ethnic Avar minority, who went missing in Chechnya in 2005 during an operation by a military unit composed of ethnic Chechens. In its ruling, the ECHR stated that Russia had violated several articles of the European Convention on Human Rights, including the right to life.

There were reports Russia-led forces and Russian occupation authorities in Ukraine engaged in enforced disappearances (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Ukraine).

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution prohibits such practices, numerous credible reports indicated law enforcement officers engaged in torture, abuse, and violence to coerce confessions from suspects, and authorities only occasionally held officials accountable for such actions.

There were reports of deaths because of torture (see section 1.a., above).

Physical abuse of suspects by police officers was reportedly systemic and usually occurred within the first few days of arrest in pretrial detention facilities. Reports from human rights groups and former police officers indicated that police most often used electric shocks, suffocation, and stretching or applying pressure to joints and ligaments because those methods were considered less likely to leave visible marks. The problem was especially acute in the North Caucasus. According to the Civic Assistance Committee, prisoners in the North Caucasus complained of mistreatment, unreasonable punishment, religious and ethnic harassment, and inadequate provision of medical care.

There were reports that police beat or otherwise abused persons, in some cases resulting in their death. Police used excessive force and harsh tactics to encircle and detain protesters during countrywide protests in late January and early February calling for the release of Aleksey Navalny, who was detained on January 17 upon his return to Russia and sentenced to prison on February 2 (see section 1.d.). On April 26, the online news outlet *Meduza* published an article detailing multiple instances of excessive use of force and harsh treatment against detainees held in custody during the April 21 protests in St. Petersburg. In one example, police detained a protester for filming the arrests and shocked him with a taser on the way to the police van, “triggering symptoms of cardiac arrhythmia,” according to *Meduza*.

There were reports that law enforcement officers used torture, including sleep deprivation, as a form of punishment against detained opposition and human rights activists, journalists, and critics of government policies. For example, on March 31, Navalny initiated a hunger strike to protest authorities’ failure to provide him a requested medical examination and treatment for pain and loss of mobility in his legs after he was transferred on March 15 to the Penal Colony No. 2 (IK-2) in the Vladimir region (see section 1.d., Arbitrary Arrest and Detention). Prison authorities also subjected Navalny for months to hourly wake-ups through the night by prison authorities on the pretense that he was a “flight risk.” Navalny likened this treatment to torture through sleep deprivation. On April 23, he ended his hunger strike after being permitted access to outside medical care. On June 28, a Moscow district court rejected Navalny’s request to be removed from the “prone to escape” list. Navalny continued to be treated as a flight risk until October 11, when he was instead designated an extremist and a terrorist.

Several activists affiliated with Navalny and his political activities or the Anticorruption Foundation also reported being tortured or abused by security officials while in their custody. Alena Kitayeva, a volunteer for Navalny associate Lyubov Sobol, who was issued a 12-day administrative arrest in February, accused police officers of torture after they placed a bag over her head and threatened her with a stun gun if she did not provide them her cell phone password.

In several cities police reportedly subjected members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, a religious group banned without basis under antiextremism laws, to physical abuse and torture during and following their arrest. For example, on October 4, during coordinated home raids by Interior Ministry and National Guard forces targeting members of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Irkutsk, four members of the group alleged that they were severely beaten, one of whom additionally alleged he was tortured. One member, Anatoliy Razdabarov, was allegedly kicked in the head and kidneys and threatened with rape, while his wife Greta was dragged by her hair before being beaten. Nikolay Merinov was hit in the face with a blunt object, breaking one of his teeth and knocking him unconscious. When he regained consciousness, an officer was sitting on him and beating him. Merinov’s wife Liliya reported she was also dragged by her hair and physically assaulted.

There were reports of the FSB using torture against young “anarchists and antifascist activists” who were allegedly involved in several “terrorism” and “extremism” cases.

In the North Caucasus region, there were widespread reports that security forces abused and tortured both alleged militants and civilians in detention facilities. For example, on October 24, newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported on the case of Salman Mukayev, a Chechen man who was detained and allegedly tortured in 2020 because security forces, based on a text message, believed him to be gay. The officers reportedly suffocated Mukayev with a bag, kicked him, subjected him to electric shocks for hours and attempted to co-opt him to identify members of the LGBTQI+ community in Chechnya. After his release, Mukayev fled Russia.

There were reports of authorities detaining defendants for psychiatric evaluations to exert pressure on them or sending defendants for psychiatric treatment as punishment. Prosecutors and certified medical professionals may request suspects be placed in psychiatric clinics on an involuntary basis. For example, on January 27, authorities forcibly hospitalized Siberian shaman Aleksandr Gabyshev after he renewed his 2019 calls to “expel” Vladimir Putin from power and missed a court-mandated appointment related to his May 2020 detention (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Russia for 2020). In mid-March the Yakut psychiatric hospital declared Gabyshev insane. On July 26, the Yakutsk City Court ruled that Gabyshev be confined indefinitely to a psychiatric hospital for compulsory intensive treatment.

Reports of nonlethal physical abuse and hazing continued in the armed forces. Activists reported such hazing was often tied to extortion schemes. On May 27, the online media outlet 29.ru published an article describing the abuse of a 21-year-old conscript, Dmitriy Lapenkov, who was serving in the city of Yurga in Kemerovo Oblast. Lapenkov’s mother told the outlet he was subjected to severe hazing, including being forced to take an unknown tablet and call relatives to ask for large sums of money. He was subsequently transferred to a psychiatric hospital in the city of Novosibirsk in an incoherent state. His mother claimed he had sustained a brain injury because of beating.

There were reports that Russia-led forces in Ukraine’s Donbas region and Russian occupation authorities in Crimea engaged in torture (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Ukraine).

Impunity was a significant problem in the security forces. In most cases where law enforcement officers or other government officials were publicly implicated in human rights abuses, authorities denied internal and external requests for independent investigation and engaged in disinformation campaigns or other efforts to obfuscate such allegations. The government’s propensity to ignore serious human rights allegations along with the uneven application of the rule of law and a lack of judicial transparency resulted in impunity for most perpetrators.

The few investigations into official abuses that were conducted often concerned allegations of torture in detention and pretrial detention facilities that were exposed by whistleblowers or independent media. For example, on June 28, the Kanavinskiy District Court of Nizhny Novgorod sentenced former police officers Aleksey Khrulev and Nikolay Atamashko to two and one-half years in prison for abuse of office with violence. In 2015 the officers detained and beat Leonid Murskiy until he signed a confession for selling drugs.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in prisons and detention centers varied but were often harsh and life threatening. Overcrowding, abuse by guards and inmates, limited access to health care, food shortages, and inadequate sanitation were common in prisons, penal colonies, and other detention facilities.

Physical Conditions: Prison overcrowding remained a serious problem. While the law mandates the separation of women and men, juveniles and adults, and pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners in separate quarters, anecdotal evidence indicated not all prison facilities followed these rules. In March 2020 Amnesty International stated that prisons’ overcrowding, poor ventilation, and inadequate health care and sanitation led to a high risk of COVID-19 infection among prisoners and detainees. According to a Council of Europe report released on April 8, the mortality rate of the Russian prison population in 2019 increased by more than 12 percent, compared with the previous year.

Physical and sexual abuse by prison guards was systemic. For example, on February 8, media outlets reported that the Russian Investigative Committee brought charges of torture and extortion against the former head and staff of detention center No. 1 in Makhachkala. According to an investigation conducted from 2015 to 2019, the former head of the center, Daud Davydov, and two of his subordinates regularly beat a former investigator of the Investigative Committee, who was himself accused of torture and illegal imprisonment. The detention center officials faced charges of abuse of power with the use of violence, extortion, fraud with the use of an official position, and bribery by a group of persons. As of October no date was set for the court case.

Prisoner-on-prisoner violence was also a problem. For example, the lawyer of Pavel Sheremet, a detainee in the regional tuberculosis hospital No. 1 in Saratov, told media that inmates at the facility beat and sexually assaulted Sheremet on June 3. Media outlets reported that the prosecutor’s office of the Saratov Region initiated an investigation into the allegations, although as of October no further information was available on the outcome of the case.

There were reports prison authorities recruited inmates to abuse other inmates. For example, on March 3, authorities detained the head of the Irkutsk penal colony No. 6 (IK-6) after reports emerged that he condoned the rape and beating of prisoner Takhirzhon Bakiyev by prison staff. According to media reporting, on January 20, after transferring to IK-6 from another facility, Bakiyev was placed in a “torture squad,” where, with the knowledge and complicity of the prison guards, his cellmates then proceeded to rape and beat him before tying him up. Videos obtained by the NGO Gulagu.net in October documented numerous cases of prisoners in the Saratov region being enlisted or coerced by prison officials to abuse and in some cases rape other inmates.

Overcrowding, ventilation, heating, sanitation, and nutritional standards varied among facilities but generally were poor. Opportunities for movement and exercise in pretrial detention were minimal. Potable water was sometimes rationed, and food quality was poor; many inmates relied on food provided by family or NGOs. Access to quality medical care remained a problem. For example, in early April the former governor of Khabarovsk Krai, Sergey Furgal, contracted COVID-19 while detained in the Lefortovo pretrial detention center, according to his lawyer. NGOs reported that approximately 50 percent of prisoners with HIV did not receive adequate treatment, with treatment provided only to inmates with a CD4 white blood cell count below a certain level. NGOs reported the supplies of some antiretroviral drugs were occasionally interrupted.

There were reports that political prisoners were placed in particularly harsh conditions and subjected to punitive treatment within the prison system, such as solitary confinement or punitive stays in psychiatric units. For example, on March 2, the *New York Times* reported that prisoners in the isolation unit of penal colony IK-2, including Aleksey Navalny, were forced to stand for hours with their hands clasped behind their backs and were forbidden from making eye contact with prison guards. Former political prisoners described having to carry out meaningless tasks multiple times a day and being sent to the “punishment brigade” for minor infractions, conditions that one prisoner described as psychologically harrowing. In March media outlets reported that authorities issued 20 violations to Navalny in his first month of prison, including for getting out of bed 10 minutes before the scheduled “wake up” command. On January 20, Navalny filed a complaint to the ECHR concerning the poor conditions of his detention center, which he characterized as a “friendly concentration camp.” On April 16, the ECHR gave the government of Russia notice it should respond by July 12. No public announcement concerning Russia’s response had been made by year’s end.

During the year media coverage of multiple allegations of torture at several penal colonies and testimony from victims and their family members prompted investigations by the Federal Penitentiary System. In one example, on February 23, the Investigative Committee opened an investigation into abuse of power after media published two videos of abuse at penal colony No. 1 (IK-1) in Yaroslavl. Staff at the prison had previously been convicted of torture-related crimes stemming from a separate 2018 video depicting the abuse of an inmate. In May media outlets reported that the Investigative Committee had detained 10 staff members of the IK-1 prison, although as of July, no information was available on the outcome of the investigation. On October 5, after the release of numerous videos depicting the torture and rape of inmates in the Saratov regional tuberculosis hospital No. 1, the Federal Penitentiary System opened an investigation into abuses at the facility.

Administration: While prisoners may file complaints with public oversight commissions or with the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson, they often did not do so due to fear of reprisal. Prison reform activists reported that only prisoners who believed they had no other option risked the consequences of filing a complaint. Complaints that reached the oversight commissions often focused on minor personal requests.

Convicted inmates and individuals in pretrial detention have visitation rights, but authorities may deny visitation depending on circumstances. By law prisoners with harsher sentences are allowed fewer visitation rights. The judge in a prisoner’s case may deny the prisoner visitation. Authorities may also prohibit relatives deemed a security risk from visiting prisoners. Some pretrial detainees believed authorities sometimes denied visitation and telephone access to pressure them into providing confessions.

Independent Monitoring: Authorities permitted representatives of public oversight commissions to visit prisons regularly to monitor conditions. According to the Public Chamber, there were public oversight commissions in almost all regions. Human rights activists expressed concern that some members of the commissions were individuals close to authorities and included persons with law enforcement backgrounds.

By law members of oversight commissions have the right to videotape and photograph inmates in detention facilities and prisons with their written approval. Commission members may also collect air samples, conduct other environmental inspections, conduct safety evaluations, and access prison psychiatric facilities. The law permits human rights activists not listed in public oversight commissions to visit detentions centers and prisons. The NGO Interregional Center for Women’s Support, working with detained migrants, noted that only after a specific detainee submits a request and contacts the NGO may the organization obtain permission to visit a given detention center.

Authorities allowed the Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture to visit the country’s prisons and release some reports on conditions but continued to withhold permission for it to release all recent reports.

There were reports of authorities prosecuting journalists and activists for reporting torture. For example, Vladimir Taranenko, an employee of the human rights organization Siberia Pravovaya detained in pretrial detention facility No. 1 of the Kemerovo region on extortion charges, told media on July 6 that he had been tortured by prison authorities who sought access to the Siberia Pravovaya YouTube channel. Siberia Pravovaya provides legal assistance to convicts and prisoners and publishes accounts of prison abuse on its YouTube channel, and human rights defenders alleged that Taranenko was prosecuted on fabricated charges because of his activism.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

While the law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, authorities engaged in these practices with impunity. The law provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention, but successful challenges were rare.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

By law authorities may arrest and hold a suspect for up to 48 hours without court approval, provided there is evidence of a crime or a witness; otherwise, an arrest warrant is required. The law requires judicial approval of arrest warrants, searches, seizures, and detentions. Officials generally honored this requirement, although bribery or political pressure sometimes subverted the process of obtaining judicial warrants.

After an arrest, police typically took detainees to the nearest police station, where they informed them of their rights. Police must prepare a protocol stating the grounds for the arrest, and both the detainee and police officer must sign it within three hours of detention. Police must interrogate detainees within the first 24 hours of detention. Prior to interrogation, a detainee has the right to meet with an attorney for two hours. No later than 12 hours after detention, police must notify the prosecutor. They must also give the detainee an opportunity to notify his or her relatives by telephone unless a prosecutor issues a warrant to keep the detention secret. Police are required to release a detainee after 48 hours, subject to bail conditions, unless a court decides, at a hearing, to prolong custody in response to a motion filed by police not less than eight hours before the 48-hour detention period expires. The defendant and his or her attorney must be present at the court hearing, either in person or through a video link. In May the State Duma adopted and President Putin signed into law amendments to the penal code that prohibit lawyers from bringing “communications technologies on the grounds of a correctional institution,” effectively barring lawyers from bringing their cell phones or other recording devices into detention facilities when meeting with their clients.

Except in the North Caucasus, authorities generally respected the legal limitations on detention. There were reports of occasional noncompliance with the 48-hour limit for holding a detainee. At times authorities failed to issue an official detention protocol within the required three hours after detention and held suspects longer than the legal detention limits.

By law police must complete their investigation and transfer a case to a prosecutor for arraignment within two months of a suspect’s arrest, although an investigative authority may extend a criminal investigation for up to 12 months. Extensions beyond 12 months need the approval of the head federal investigative authority in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the FSB, or the Investigative Committee and the approval of the court. According to some defense lawyers, the two-month time limit often was exceeded, especially in cases with a high degree of public interest.

Detainees had trouble obtaining adequate defense counsel. While the law provides defendants the right to choose their own lawyers, investigators sometimes did not respect this provision, instead designating lawyers friendly to the prosecution. These “pocket” defense attorneys agreed to the interrogation of their clients in their presence while making no effort to defend their clients’ legal rights. For example, on July 6, Aleksey Vorsin, an opposition activist and former head of Aleksey Navalny’s Khabarovsk headquarters, was denied his request to replace his court-appointed public defender with legal representation of his choosing on procedural grounds. Vorsin was charged with repeated participation in protests and received a three-year suspended sentence. Moscow-based international human rights organization Memorial, which regularly publishes a list of political prisoners in Russia, considered Vorsin’s incarceration politically motivated.

In many cases, especially in more remote regions, defense counsel was not available for indigent defendants. Judges usually did not suppress confessions taken without a lawyer present. Judges at times freed suspects held in excess of detention limits, although they usually granted prosecutors’ motions to extend detention periods.

There were reports that security services sometimes held detainees in incommunicado detention before officially registering the detention. This practice usually coincided with allegations of the use of torture to coerce confessions before detainees were permitted access to a lawyer. The problem was especially acute in the Republic of Chechnya, where incommunicado detention could reportedly last for weeks in some cases.

Media reported that police used facial recognition technology to detain several individuals days after public demonstrations, with some instances of misidentification leading to the arrest of the wrong individuals. For example, the internet freedom NGO Roskomsvoboda published an interview on July 16 with a Moscow municipal deputy, Vladimir Zalizhchak, who, after attending the January 23 demonstrations in Moscow as a representative of the state, was arrested by police based on facial recognition software placing him at the protest. A court quickly sentenced Zalizhchak to 15 days’ detention without permitting him access to a lawyer. Media outlets reported that Moscow police also detained several activists and journalists identified using facial recognition technology as attendees of the peaceful rally in support of Navalny on April 21. The director of Amnesty International’s Moscow office, Natalia Zviagina, characterized the use of facial recognition technology to identify and target protesters as “extremely disturbing.”

There were also reports that authorities targeted lawyers involved in the defense of political prisoners. For example, on April 30, security forces searched the hotel room of human rights lawyer Ivan Pavlov and detained him for allegedly disclosing data related to the case of former *Kommersant* journalist Ivan Safronov (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Russia for 2020), a charge he denied. On July 17, Komanda 29 (Team 29), the lawyer’s association led by Pavlov, announced its decision to legally dissolve after the Prosecutor General’s Office blocked its website on July 16 for allegedly affiliating with the Czech NGO Společnost Svobody Informace (Freedom of Information Society), which was designated an “undesirable foreign organization” on June 29 (see section 2.b.).

Arbitrary Arrest: There were many reports of arbitrary arrest or detention, often in connection with demonstrations or single-person pickets, such as those organized January 23 and 31 and February 2 and 14 calling for Navalny’s release (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees, and section 2.b., Freedom of Assembly).

On February 4, police in the city of Nizhny Novgorod arrested 20-year-old Salekh Magamadov and 17-year-old Ismail Isayev and forcibly transferred them to Chechnya, where their whereabouts were unknown to their lawyers and family members for several days. According to human rights organizations, the two men were targeted for having operated a social media channel critical of the government and for their real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. As of December, Magamadov and Isayev remained in detention in Chechnya’s capital Grozny for having allegedly aided an illegal armed group, charges that human rights organizations called fabricated.

Police detained single-person picketers in Moscow and other regions of the country. In one example, on February 2, police in Mari El opened a case against the leader of the For New Socialism movement, Dmitriy Mishin, for “violating the procedure for holding a picket” after he hung banners expressing support for Navalny on several snowmen. The charge was dropped on April 9. On August 21, at least eight journalists were detained while conducting separate single-person protests against the “media foreign agent” law outside FSB headquarters in Moscow.

During the year human rights monitoring groups reported an increase in so-called carousel arrests, in which police immediately rearrest protest participants upon exiting detention facilities after having completed court-ordered administrative sentences. In contrast to earlier cases of protesters being arrested multiple times, the new charges filed against these activists and journalists stemmed from the same underlying activities or events, allowing authorities to impose lengthy periods of detention for minor infractions. For example, OVD-Info reported that from May to July, members of the Pussy Riot movement were repeatedly sentenced up to the 15 days’ maximum administrative detention for disobeying a police officer. One of the activists, Veronika Nikulshina, was sentenced three times in three months to 15-day detentions, including on July 2, the day after her release from a June 16 detention. Her lawyer speculated that the systematic detentions were intended to prevent the movement from organizing demonstrations during a European soccer championship match hosted in Russia.

There were reports that Russia-led forces and Russian occupation authorities in Ukraine engaged in arbitrary detention (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Ukraine).

Pretrial Detention: Observers noted lengthy pretrial detention was a problem, but data on its extent were not available. By law pretrial detention may not normally exceed two months, but the court has the power to extend it to six months, as well as to 12 or 18 months if the crime of which the defendant is accused is especially serious. For example, Yuriy Savelyev, a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, was held in pretrial detention from October 2019 to December 2020 prior to being sentenced to six years in prison for participating in the activities of a “banned extremist organization.” Media outlets reported that the Eighth Cassation Court of Kemerovo ruled on March 29 that his lengthy pretrial detention was illegal.

Detainee’s Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: By law a detainee may challenge the lawfulness of detention before a court. Due to problems with judicial independence (see section 1.e.), however, judges typically agreed with the investigator and dismissed defendants’ complaints.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary, but judges remained subject to influence from the executive branch, the armed forces, and other security forces, particularly in high-profile or politically sensitive cases, as well as to corruption. The outcomes of some trials appeared predetermined. Acquittal rates remained extremely low. In 2020 courts acquitted 0.34 percent of all defendants.

There were reports of pressure on defense attorneys representing clients who were being subjected to politically motivated prosecution and other forms of reprisal. According to a 2019 report from the Agora International Human Rights Group, it was common practice for judges to remove defense attorneys from court hearings without a legitimate basis in retaliation for their providing clients with an effective defense. The report also documented a trend of law enforcement authorities using physical force to interfere with the work of defense attorneys, including the use of violence to prevent them from being present during searches and interrogations.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, but executive interference with the judiciary and judicial corruption undermined this right.

The defendant has a legal presumption of innocence and the right to a fair, timely, and public trial, but these rights were not always respected. Defendants have the right to be informed promptly of charges and to be present at the trial. The law provides for the appointment of an attorney free of charge if a defendant cannot afford one, although the high cost of legal service meant that lower-income defendants often lacked competent representation. A Yekaterinburg-based legal and human rights NGO indicated many defense attorneys did not vigorously defend their clients and that there were few qualified defense attorneys in remote areas of the country. Defense attorneys may visit their clients in detention, although defense lawyers claimed authorities electronically monitored their conversations and did not always provide them access to their clients. Prior to trial, defendants receive a copy of their indictment, which describes the charges against them in detail. They also may review their file following the completion of the criminal investigation.

Non-Russian defendants have the right to free interpretation as necessary from the moment charged through all appeals, although the quality of interpretation was typically poor. During trial the defense is not required to present evidence and is given an opportunity to cross-examine witnesses and call defense witnesses, although judges may deny the defense this opportunity. Defendants have the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt and have the right of appeal.

The law provides for trial by jury in criminal cases if the defendant is charged with murder, kidnapping, narcotics smuggling, and certain other serious crimes. Nonetheless, trials by jury remained rare, and most verdicts and sentences were rendered by judges. The acquittal rate in trials by jury was higher (23 percent in 2019) than in trials before a judge (0.34 percent in 2020), although acquittals by jury were sometimes overturned by judges in appellate courts.

The law allows prosecutors to appeal acquittals, which they did in most cases. Prosecutors may also appeal what they regard as lenient sentences.

Authorities particularly infringed on the right to a fair trial in Chechnya, where observers noted that the judicial system served as a means of conducting reprisals against those who exposed wrongdoing by Chechnya head Kadyrov.

In some cases judicial authorities imposed sentences disproportionate to the crimes charged. For example, on January 15, Pavel Zelenskiy, an employee of Navalny’s Anticorruption Foundation, was detained and charged with “public calls for extremist activities” for writing a pair of tweets in response to the October 2020 suicide of journalist Irina Murakhtayeva (known professionally as Irina Slavina; see Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Russia for 2020). A Moscow court sentenced Zelenskiy to two years in prison on April 16. Memorial considered Zelenskiy to be a political prisoner.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were credible reports of political prisoners in the country and that authorities detained and prosecuted individuals for political reasons. Charges usually applied in politically motivated cases included “terrorism,” “extremism,” “separatism,” and “espionage.” Political prisoners were reportedly placed in particularly harsh conditions of confinement and subjected to other punitive treatment within the prison system, such as solitary confinement or punitive stays in psychiatric units.

As of December 7, Memorial’s list of political prisoners contained 426 names, including 343 individuals who were allegedly wrongfully imprisoned for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Memorial estimated that the actual number of political prisoners in the country could be three to four times greater than the number on its list. Memorial’s list included opposition activists and politicians, including Aleksey Navalny and his associates (see section 1.d.); journalists jailed for their work, such as members of the student publication *DOXA* and Chernovik editor Abdulmumin Gadzhiyev (see section 2.a.); human rights activists jailed for their work, such as Yuriy Dmitriyev; many Ukrainians (including Crimean Tatars) imprisoned for their vocal opposition to the country’s occupation of Crimea; individuals jailed for participating in the 2019 Moscow protests as well as the nationwide protests during the year; and members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, certain Muslim groups, and other religious groups.

Memorial noted the average length of sentences for the cases on their list continued to increase, from 5.3 years for political prisoners and 6.6 years for religious prisoners in 2016 to 6.8 and 9.1 years, respectively, in 2018. In some cases sentences were significantly longer, such as the case of Aleksey Pichugin, a former security official of the Russian oil company Yukos, imprisoned since 2003 with a life sentence for conviction of alleged involvement in murder and attempted murder; human rights organizations asserted that his detention was politically motivated to obtain false evidence against Yukos executives.

On January 17, authorities detained anticorruption campaigner Aleksey Navalny at the Sheremetyevo Airport upon his return to Moscow from Berlin where he had been recovering from his poisoning by a Novichok nerve agent (see section 1.a.). Russian authorities justified the detention with a December 2020 order for Navalny to “register” with authorities to stay in compliance with the terms of the suspended prison sentence he received following conviction in the Yves Rocher “money laundering” case, which was set to expire December 30. The ECHR had previously characterized Navalny’s conviction in the Yves Rocher case as “arbitrary and manifestly unreasonable” and ordered the Russian government to pay Navalny compensation.

Alleging Navalny had violated the terms of his probation when he failed to appear, the Simonovskiy District Court of Moscow scheduled a hearing on January 29 to adjudicate the prison authorities’ request that he serve out his suspended sentence – for which he had already served his time – in prison. Human rights experts believed at the time that authorities sought to discourage Navalny from returning to Russia ahead of the State Duma elections on September 19. Navalny nonetheless voluntarily returned on January 17. Independent Russian and international journalists accompanied him on his return flight and live-streamed his trip, including the plane’s diversion from its original destination airport in an apparent attempt to avoid his awaiting supporters, as well as his detention by security authorities at customs control.

After being delayed access to his lawyer, Navalny was sentenced on January 18 in a makeshift court hearing at the Khimki police station to 30 days in pretrial detention. Independent observers characterized the hearing as a “mockery of justice.” On February 2, the Simonovskiy District Court of Moscow ruled to convert Navalny’s suspended sentence into a prison sentence of three and one-half years, which was subsequently reduced to two years and eight months to account for the time he had previously spent under house arrest. During the hearing the prosecutor and prison authorities claimed not to know Navalny’s whereabouts in the fall of 2020, when he had been in a well publicized coma and receiving medical care in Germany following his poisoning by the Russian government.

On February 16, the ECHR issued a ruling that obliged Russian authorities to release Navalny from pretrial detention due to threats to his safety. Russian authorities dismissed the ECHR ruling as undue interference in the Russian judicial system and claimed it was without merit after a 2020 constitutional amendment gave Russian law primacy over international law or any treaty to which Russia is a party. On March 2, authorities transferred Navalny from the SIZO-1 detention center near Moscow to the penal colony No. 2 in the Vladimir Region, a prison notorious for having some of the harshest conditions in the country. In the subsequent months, Navalny’s associates reported that his health deteriorated and that prison authorities routinely restricted his access to his lawyers. The courts repeatedly denied Navalny’s efforts to appeal the basis for his detention or challenge the conditions of his detention. In response to the conditions of his detention, Navalny went on a hunger strike from March 31 to April 23 (see section 1.c.). At year’s end Navalny remained in prison. Memorial, Amnesty International, and other prominent human rights organizations considered Navalny to be a political prisoner.

According to Memorial, Navalny had been charged in 11 other politically motivated criminal cases since 2011. In one case, on February 20, a Moscow court found Navalny guilty of defamation after he criticized participants in a propaganda video supporting President Putin’s constitutional amendments package on social media (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Russia for 2020). The court fined Navalny 850,000 rubles (\$11,500).

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence: On August 6, a court in Austria sentenced an ethnically Chechen Russian citizen, Sarali Akhtayev, to life in prison after finding him guilty of murdering Chechen dissident Mamikhan Umarov near Vienna in July 2020. Investigators were unable to establish a definitive motive for the crime, although some members of the Chechen exile community in Austria believed the murder was politically motivated. In addition to maintaining a blog critical of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Umarov had given testimony in murder trials involving Chechens. Soon after Umarov’s death, purported relatives of Umarov released a video in which they took responsibility for Umarov’s killing and called on Austrian authorities to release suspects held in connection with his murder.

On September 21, the ECHR ruled in favor of the widow of Russian whistleblower Aleksandr Litvinenko, who was fatally poisoned with the radioactive isotope polonium-210 in the United Kingdom in 2006, finding that the Russian government was responsible for Litvinenko’s death. The court concluded there was a strong prima facie case that the two men who poisoned Litvinenko, Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitriy Kovtun, had been acting as agents of the Russian state. It noted that the Russian government had failed to provide any other satisfactory and convincing explanation of the events or to counter the findings of the British inquiry. The court also found that Russian authorities had not carried out an effective domestic investigation capable of leading to the establishment of the facts and, where appropriate, the identification and punishment of those responsible for the murder.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: On March 26, authorities detained Yuriy Zhdanov, the father of Navalny associate Ivan Zhdanov, for alleged abuse of office. On May 19, the Investigative Committee for the Arkhangelsk Region instead charged Zhdanov with the more serious charges of forgery and fraud on a large scale that carry up to 10 years in prison if convicted. On July 19, Zhdanov’s pretrial detention was extended, and his trial did not commence until October 25. On December 20, Zhdanov was given a three-year suspended sentence and released nine months after his initial detention. Memorial recognized Zhdanov as a political prisoner.

Misuse of International Law-enforcement Tools: There were credible reports that authorities attempted to misuse international law enforcement tools for politically motivated reprisal against specific individuals located outside the country. For example, on February 10, a Moscow court ordered the arrest of a prominent Navalny associate, Leonid Volkov, who resided in Lithuania at the time, on charges of encouraging minors to participate in unauthorized rallies, an offense that could be punished by up to three years in prison. The warrant was sent via Interpol to Lithuanian authorities, who refused to enforce it on the grounds that it was politically motivated.

On July 21 in Warsaw, Polish authorities detained Yevgeniy Khasoyev, a human rights activist from Buryatiya, at the request of Moscow’s Interpol office. Khasoyev’s lawyer told media that he was detained for 48 hours while a Polish court decided on Russia’s extradition request. Khasoyev had left Russia in March after authorities charged him with “threatening violence against a government official.” Khasoyev characterized the case as politically motivated and an effort to hinder his activism in Buryatiya, where he defended the interests of victims of police violence and those detained during pro-Navalny protests earlier in the year. On October 26, a Warsaw district court declined to extradite Khasoyev to Russia. According to Khasoyev, the judge said it was obvious Russian authorities were trying to defame Khasoyev because he had provided legal support to pro-Navalny protesters.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Although the law provides mechanisms for individuals to file lawsuits against authorities for human rights violations, these mechanisms often were not effective. For example, the law provides that a defendant who has been acquitted after a trial has the right to compensation from the government. While this legal mechanism exists in principle, it was very cumbersome to use. Persons who believed their human rights were violated typically sought redress in the ECHR after domestic courts ruled against them. Amendments to the constitution that were approved in a nationwide vote in July 2020 and signed into law in December 2020 established the primacy of Russian domestic law over international law by providing that decisions by interstate bodies interpreted in a manner contrary to the constitution are not enforceable in the country. Many experts interpreted the provision as giving Russian courts greater power to ignore rulings from international human rights bodies, including the ECHR; the courts had already set a precedent by declaring such bodies’ decisions “nonexecutable.”

Property Seizure and Restitution

The country has endorsed the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Restitution but declined to endorse the 2010 Guidelines and Best Practices. No legislation or special mechanism in the country addresses the restitution of or compensation for private property; the same is true for heirless property. The government has laws in place providing for the restitution of cultural property, but according to the laws’ provisions, claims may only be made by states and not individuals.

The Department of State’s *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act* report to Congress, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the Department’s website at <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law forbids officials from entering a private residence except in cases prescribed by federal law or when authorized by a judicial decision. The law also prohibits the collection, storage, utilization, and dissemination of information about a person’s private life without his or her consent. While the law previously prohibited government monitoring of correspondence, telephone conversations, and other means of communication without a warrant, those legal protections were significantly weakened by laws passed after 2016 granting authorities sweeping powers and requiring telecommunications providers to store all electronic and telecommunication data (see section 2.a., Internet Freedom). Politicians from minority parties, NGOs, human rights activists, and journalists alleged that authorities routinely employed surveillance and other measures to spy on and intimidate citizens.

Law enforcement agencies required telecommunications providers to grant the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FSB continuous remote access to client databases, including telephone and electronic communications, enabling them to track private communications and monitor internet activity without the provider’s knowledge. The law permits authorities with a warrant to monitor telephone calls in real time, but this safeguard was largely pro forma. The Ministry of Information and Communication requires telecommunications service providers to allow the FSB to tap telephones and monitor the internet. On July 1, President Putin signed into law a bill that allows security services to obtain data on the location of mobile telephones without a court order for a period of 24 hours, or 48 hours in the case of a missing minor. Prior to the adoption of this amendment, even though the Ministry of Information and Communication maintained that authorities would not access information without a court order, the FSB was not required to show it.

Law enforcement officials reportedly accessed, collected, or used private communications or personal data arbitrarily or unlawfully or without appropriate legal authority.

The law requires explicit consent for governmental and private collection of biometric data via facial recognition technology. Laws on public security and crime prevention, however, provide for exceptions to this consent requirement. Human rights activists claimed the law lacks appropriate safeguards to prevent the misuse of these data, especially without any judicial or public oversight over surveillance methods and technologies.

Authorities punished family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives. On January 27, police detained Aleksey Navalny’s brother Oleg (see section 1.d.) the same day as police searched the houses of at least 13 Navalny associates, including those of his wife Yuliya and his colleague Lyubov Sobol, as well as the headquarters of “Navalny Live,” Navalny’s anticorruption YouTube channel. Critics characterized the police tactics as efforts to punish or pressure Navalny, who remained detained at the time. In subsequent months authorities exerted similar pressure on the families of Navalny’s associates residing outside of the country, such as Leonid Volkov, Navalny’s former campaign manager, and Ivan Zhdanov, the former director of the Anticorruption Foundation.

According to a December 2020 study by the information and analytical agency TelecomDaily, the country had more than 13 million closed-circuit television cameras in 2020, with approximately one-third of these installed by the government and the rest by businesses and individuals to protect private property. By the end of 2020, approximately 200,000 government surveillance cameras were installed in Moscow and equipped with Russian-developed automated facial recognition software as part of its “Safe City” program. The system was initially installed in key public places, such as metro stations and apartment entrances, to scan crowds against a database of wanted individuals. During the demonstrations on April 21 (see section 1.d.), authorities used facial recognition data to identify protesters, sometimes incorrectly, days after the demonstration.

In 2020 the State Duma adopted a law to create a unified federal register containing information on all the country’s residents, including their names, dates and places of birth, and marital status. According to press reports, intelligence and security services would have access to the database in their investigations. There were reports that authorities threatened to remove children from the custody of parents engaged in political activism or some forms of religious worship, or parents who were LGBTQI+ persons. Several families reportedly left the country due to fear of arrest, although as of October no related arrests were reported.

The law requires relatives of terrorists to pay the cost of damages caused by an attack, which human rights advocates criticized as collective punishment. Chechen Republic authorities reportedly routinely imposed collective punishment on the relatives of alleged terrorists, including by expelling them from the republic.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Members of the Press and Other Media

While the constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press and other media, the government increasingly restricted this right. Regional and local authorities used procedural violations and restrictive or vague legislation to detain, harass, or prosecute persons who criticized the government or institutions it favored. The government exercised editorial control over media, creating a media landscape in which most citizens were exposed to predominantly government-approved narratives. Significant government pressure on independent media constrained coverage of numerous topics, especially of the unauthorized pro-Navalny demonstrations early in the year and investigations into Navalny’s poisoning; events in Belarus; treatment of LGBTQI+ persons; problems involving the environment, elections, COVID-19, and corruption; and criticism of local or federal leadership, as well as secessionism or federalism. The government used direct ownership or ownership by large private companies with government links to control or influence major national media and regional media outlets, especially television. Censorship and self-censorship in television and print media and on the internet was widespread, particularly regarding points of view critical of the government or its policies.

Freedom of Expression: Authorities continued to misuse the country’s expansive definition of extremism, under which citizens may be punished for certain types of peaceful protests, affiliation with certain religious denominations, and even certain social media posts, as a tool to stifle dissent. As of October the Ministry of Justice had expanded its list of extremist materials to include 5,215 books, videos, websites, social media pages, musical compositions, and other items. According to the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, in 2020 authorities “inappropriately initiated” 145 new cases against individuals under antiextremism laws, including for exercising free speech on social media and elsewhere or for their religious beliefs.

The law prohibits the dissemination of false “socially significant information” online, in mass media, or during protests or public events, as well as the dissemination of “incorrect socially meaningful information, distributed under the guise of correct information, which creates the threat of damage to the lives and health of citizens or property, the threat of mass disruption of public order and public security, or the threat of the creation of an impediment to the functioning of life support facilities, transport infrastructure, banking, energy, industry, or communications.”

The law criminalizes “offending the religious feelings of believers” (blasphemy). Actions in public “demonstrating clear disrespect for society and committed with the intent to insult the religious feelings of believers” are subject to fines of up to 300,000 rubles (\$4,000), compulsory labor for up to one year, or imprisonment for up to one year. If these actions are committed in places of worship, the punishment is a fine of up to 500,000 rubles (\$6,700), compulsory labor for up to three years, or a prison sentence of up to three years.

The law prohibits showing “disrespect” online for the state, authorities, the public, flag, or constitution. For example, on March 4, a court in the city of Samara convicted civil rights activist Karim Yamadayev of promoting extremism and insulting authorities for mocking President Putin and two of his close associates in a 2019 YouTube video. The prosecutor originally sought to sentence Yamadayev to six years and seven months in prison. Yamadayev spent more than a year in detention before the court released him on March 4 with a 300,000 ruble (\$4,000) fine and prohibition from serving as an administrator for social media networks.

During the year the government enacted new restrictions on the content that could be shared on the internet. In December 2020 President Putin signed into law amendments to communications legislation that allow Roskomnadzor to block websites that “violate the rights of [Russian citizens],” including by restricting the “dissemination of socially significant information.” Experts characterized the new law as restricting “Russophobic” content and noted that it was adopted during a government public relations campaign against YouTube after it blocked content posted by progovernment media personality Vladimir Solovyov. In December 2020 President Putin also signed a law prohibiting journalists and websites from publishing the personal data of law enforcement officers and certain other state employees affiliated with the country’s security services. Expanding the definition of sensitive data, the FSB published a list on June 20 of topics that could be “used against the security” of Russia, including information and assessments of Russia’s military, security sector, and space agency, Roscosmos. Individuals who collect information in the specified categories could be subject to designation as “foreign agents” (see section 2.b.).

During the year authorities invoked laws prohibiting “inciting minors to participate in dangerous activities” or “violations to the established procedure for organizing or holding a public event” to charge individuals who published material online related to the demonstrations in January and February. For example, on February 3, authorities sentenced Sergey Smimov, editor in chief of the independent *Mediazona*, to 25 days in prison for “repeatedly violating the rules of public demonstrations” after he retweeted a joke referencing the January 23 demonstration. The Moscow City Court subsequently reduced his sentence to 15 days. In another example, authorities filed charges on January 22 against four editors of the student journal *DOXA* – Armen Aramyan, Alla Gutnikova, Vladimir Metelkin, and Natasha Tyshkevich – after *DOXA* published a YouTube video on January 23 expressing solidarity with students interested in participating in the unauthorized demonstrations and stating that it was unlawful for universities to punish those who did. All four were subjected to restrictions on their movement and communications until September 14 and faced up to three years in prison if convicted. Memorial considered the editors to be political prisoners.

During the year authorities invoked a 2013 law prohibiting the distribution of “propaganda on nontraditional sexual relations” to minors to punish the exercise of free speech by LGBTQI+ persons and their supporters. For example, on March 30, a court in Krasnodar convicted Anastasiya Panchenko, coordinator of Aleksey Navalny’s Krasnodar office, of distributing content prohibited by the law after she posted a photograph on her Instagram account of two same-sex couples kissing.

The law bans the display of Nazi symbols and the symbols of groups placed on the government’s list of “extremist” organizations. There was no official register or list of banned symbols, although the Duma adopted legislation in June that prohibits displaying images of individuals found guilty of committing crimes in accordance with the verdict of the Nuremberg Tribunal. On April 5, President Putin signed two related laws codifying penalties for the dissemination of information “denying the facts established by judgment of the International Military Tribunal” and about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War (covered in the administrative code) and strengthening the rehabilitation of Nazim (covered in the criminal code).

In 2019 the Supreme Court of the Komi Republic designated the Union of Slavic Forces of Russia an extremist organization for claiming that the USSR had not dissolved as a political entity. During the year authorities prosecuted individuals for speech that allegedly sought to restore the rights of citizens of the USSR. On July 12, the Leninskiy District Court sentenced three supporters of the Citizens of the USSR organization – Sergey Vorontsov, Vyacheslav Podchufarov, and Svetlana Vorontsova – with up to three years in prison under the extremism law for denying the fall of the USSR. On July 13, the Volga City Court sentenced Aleksandr Mordovskiy, a leader of Citizens of the USSR, to six years in prison on the same charges.

During the year authorities enforced a law prohibiting the “propaganda of narcotics” to prosecute or threaten to block independent outlets and journalists. For example, in June authorities opened an administrative case against popular YouTube personality and journalist Yuriy Dud for purportedly promoting drugs in recent interviews published on his YouTube channel. On October 20, Dud was found guilty and fined 100,000 rubles (\$1,350).

On June 8, authorities arrested video blogger Yuriy Khovanskiy on suspicion of “publicly justifying extremism,” reportedly based on a song he recorded about the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis.

During the year authorities used a law banning cooperation with “undesirable foreign organizations” to restrict free expression (see section 2.b.).

Government-controlled media frequently used derogatory terms such as “traitor,” “foreign agent,” and “fifth column” to describe individuals expressing views critical of or different from government policy, leading to a societal climate intolerant of dissent.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: The government continued to restrict press and media freedom. More than 80 percent of country’s mass media was funded by the government or progovernment actors. Government-friendly oligarchs owned most other outlets, which are permitted to determine what they publish within formal or informal boundaries set by the government. In the regions each governor controlled regional media through direct or indirect funding or through affiliated structures. The federal government or progovernment individuals completely or partially owned all so-called federal television channels, the only stations with nationwide reach. The 29 most-watched stations together commanded 86 percent of television viewership; all were owned at least in part by the federal or local governments or by progovernment individuals. Government-owned media outlets often received preferential benefits, such as rent-free occupancy of government-owned buildings, and a preferential tax rate.

On a regional level, state-owned and progovernment television channels received subsidies from the Ministry of Finance for broadcasting in cities with a population of less than 100,000 and on the creation and production of content. At many government-owned or controlled outlets, the state increasingly dictated editorial policy. While the law restricts foreign ownership of media outlets to no more than 20 percent, another provision of the ambiguously worded law apparently bans foreign ownership entirely. The government used these provisions to consolidate ownership of independent outlets under progovernment oligarchs and to exert pressure on outlets that retained foreign backers. In its annual report on freedom of the press, Freedom House rated the country “not free.”

By law the Ministry of Justice is required to maintain a list of media outlets that are designated “foreign agents.” The decision to designate media outlets or individual journalists as foreign agents may be made outside of court by other government bodies, including law enforcement agencies. The law allows authorities to label individuals (both Russian and foreign citizens) as “foreign agents” if they disseminate foreign media to an unspecified number of persons, receive funding from abroad, or, after a December 2020 amendment, “carry out the interests of a foreign state.” The new amendment specifies that a foreign journalist “performing the functions of a foreign agent, incompatible with his professional activities as a journalist” could be declared an individual foreign agent.

Human rights defenders expressed concern that the “foreign agent” law was being used to restrict further the activities of or selectively punish journalists, bloggers, and social media users. Individuals labeled a “foreign agent” are required to register with the Ministry of Justice, and those living abroad also must create and register a legal entity inside the country to publish materials inside the country. All information published by the “foreign agent” individual must be marked as having been produced by a “foreign agent.” Fines for noncompliance with the law range from 10,000 to five million rubles (\$135 to \$67,500). In December 2020 authorities utilized the “individual media foreign agent” category for the first time by adding five individuals to this registry, including Lev Ponomarev, a well known human rights activist and Memorial Human Rights Center cofounder, who closed his NGO following the designation.

As of December 30, there were 37 outlets and 74 individuals designated as “media foreign agents,” the majority of whom were journalists. Several of those designated as “foreign agents” tried unsuccessfully to reverse their designation. For example, in March feminist activist Darya Apakhonchich filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Justice for her inclusion on this list, arguing that she had never received money or other property from foreign sources. All three Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) contributors initially designated also lost their appeals to reverse the designation.

At the end of 2020, the government imposed new onerous labeling requirements for media outlets designated as foreign agents, which at the time only included Voice of America, RFE/RL and its affiliated outlets, and a news site run by Medium-Orient, based in the Czech Republic. In February, President Putin signed into law additional legislative changes related to the labeling “foreign agents.” The amendments introduced fines for the dissemination of information or media content about or belonging to a “foreign agent” without specifying this “foreign agent” status. Fines for noncompliance with this new amendment range from 2,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$27 to \$675).

During the year authorities vigorously implemented the law to impose fines or noncompliance of labeling requirements. As of July authorities had imposed 252 million rubles (\$3.4 million) in fines on RFE/RL and frozen its bank accounts due to alleged noncompliance with the new law, which RFE/RL maintained imposed devastating financial reporting and labeling requirements for all electronic media to pressure the media outlets to close. RFE/RL challenged the “foreign agent” law labeling requirements and the millions of rubles in fines levied on its Russian operations in the ECHR, filing a complaint on May 19. In July the ECHR granted RFE/RL’s request to grant the case priority status, giving the Russian government until October 5 to reply. Following a response from the Russian government in November, the case remained pending as of year’s end. State-owned media outlets were also fined under the law. For example, on May 6, the Moscow Arbitration Court fined the government-controlled Channel One media outlet 30,000 rubles (\$400) for broadcasting a story from a “foreign agent” without labeling it as such.

During the year the government significantly intensified its campaign against so-called media foreign agents. As of December 30, the Ministry of Justice’s register of “media foreign agents” comprised 111 media outlets and individuals, 94 of which had been added since the beginning of the year. The news site *VTimes*, which was established in 2019 by former *Vedomosti* journalists, ceased operation on June 12 following its May 14 “foreign agent” designation. In a letter to its supporters on June 4, *VTimes* stated it saw no viable way to continue its operations after the designation placed its employees at risk of criminal prosecution and undercut its ability to attract advertising revenue and engage with sources. On June 16, Reporters Without Borders condemned the designation of outlets *Meduza* and *VTimes* and warned that the “draconian ‘foreign agents’ law is steadily killing off the country’s independent media.”

On July 15, the Ministry of Justice added independent investigative outlet *Proyekt* to the list of “undesirable foreign organizations,” making it the first media entity to receive that designation, which effectively bans its operations in the country. Under legislative changes adopted during the year (see section 2.b.), individuals who cooperate with “undesirable foreign organizations” could be charged with a fine or up to six-year prison sentence. Even quoting or reposting material from such an organization places individuals or organizations at risk of a fine. Independent media and human rights organizations characterized the inclusion of *Proyekt* on the “undesirable foreign organizations” list as a significant escalation in the government’s efforts to restrict independent media.

By law authorities were able to close any organization a court determines to be extremist, including media outlets and websites. Roskomnadzor, the country’s media oversight agency, routinely issued warnings to newspapers and internet outlets it suspected of publishing extremist materials. Three warnings in one year sufficed to initiate a closure lawsuit. On December 30, President Putin signed a law requiring Roskomnadzor to block without a court decision websites deemed to justify extremism or terrorism, if the prosecutor general or his deputy submit a request.

Violence and Harassment: Journalists continued to be subjected to arrest, imprisonment, physical attack, harassment, and intimidation as a result of their reporting. According to the Glasnost Defense Foundation, in January alone incidents of violence and harassment against journalists included 22 attacks, 161 detentions by law enforcement officers, one criminal prosecution and 12 lawsuits, and three threats. Journalists and bloggers who uncovered government malfeasance or who criticized the government often faced harassment, either in the form of direct threats to their physical safety or threats to their livelihood, frequently through legal prosecution.

There were reports of attacks on journalists by government officials and police. For example, on March 10, Russian occupation authorities in Crimea arrested freelance journalist Vladislav Yesypenko on espionage charges that were widely described as politically motivated and reportedly tortured him in detention. On July 15, Yesypenko was indicted on weapons-related charges that many activists considered baseless; his trial was underway as of December.

There were reports of police briefly detaining journalists to interfere with or punish them for their reporting. According to Reporters Without Borders and Open Media, during the January 23 demonstration more than 50 journalists were arbitrarily detained, with more than 82 journalists arbitrarily detained on January 31. Journalists reported that they had been detained and charged with “participation in an unauthorized mass event,” even when clearly wearing press credentials. Some correspondents for independent news outlets reported that they were questioned by authorities about their supposed participation in the demonstrations or had received threats of violence or other efforts at intimidation.

There were reports of police framing journalists for serious crimes to interfere with or to punish them for their reporting. For example, Ivan Safronov, a former national security journalist for major national daily newspapers *Kommersant* and *Vedomosti*, was arrested by the FSB and charged with treason in July 2020, a charge that carries a 20-year prison sentence if convicted. According to media, Safronov’s case itself was classified, and the FSB declined to disclose what information he allegedly shared with Czech intelligence in 2012. Observers speculated the charges might be related to a 2017 *Kommersant* article coauthored by Safronov, detailing the potential sale of Russian military aircraft to Egypt. Safronov also provoked a strong reaction from the government for a 2019 article in *Kommersant* speculating on a shakeup of the leadership in the Federation Council. The court extended Safronov’s pretrial detention five times, including most recently on October 4 through the end of the year. On July 17, the freedom of information legal defense group Team 29, led by Safronov’s lawyer Ivan Pavlov, announced its dissolution as a result of pressure from authorities (see section 1.d.).

On May 28, the Moscow City Court convicted former police officer Igor Lyakhovets and his three subordinates on charges of fabricating a criminal case against *Meduza* correspondent Ivan Golunov in July 2019 (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for 2019 for Russia). Lyakhovets, who was the principal officer in Golunov’s illegal arrest, was sentenced to 12 years in prison while his subordinates each received an eight-year prison sentence. The court also banned them from serving as public officers for up to five years.

There were reports of police raids on the offices of independent media outlets that observers believed were designed to punish or pressure the outlets. For example, on April 9, the FSB searched the home of prominent investigative journalist and *IStories* editor in chief Roman Anin, seizing his equipment, notebooks, and materials. *IStories*, which specialized in investigative reporting, said that its offices had been searched as well. In an interview with Ekho Moskvy on April 12, Anin speculated that authorities seized his personal records in response to a 2016 investigation he conducted into Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin and his former wife’s wealth and more recent articles on the security services. Authorities charged Anin with “violation of privacy by abusing his professional functions,” an offense that is punishable by up to four years in prison.

Journalists reported threats in connection with their reporting. For example, Amnesty International considered journalist and human rights defender Yelena Milashina to be a “case of concern” due to repeated threats against her for documenting Chechen officials’ abuses in *Novaya Gazeta*. In 2020 Milashina received a death threat on Instagram from the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, and was physically attacked in Grozny along with human rights lawyer Marina Dubrovina. Chechen officials began a defamation and intimidation campaign against Milashina after she published the testimony in *Novaya Gazeta* on March 15 of a former police officer who said he witnessed extrajudicial executions, torture, and other grave human rights violations in 2017.

In another example, Andrey Afanasyev, a journalist with RFE/RL Russian Service’s Siberia.Realities, was severely beaten by unknown assailants on June 9. Afanasyev reported that the attackers demanded “less reporting about respectable people.” Prior to his attack, Afanasyev had been investigating allegations of corruption against Adam Magomadov, a former leader of the Chechen diaspora and manager of the Akhmat martial arts club in Blagoveshchensk, and Andrey Domashenkin, a local lawmaker from the ruling United Russia party who founded the club. The Investigative Committee opened an investigation on June 17 into the attack on “hooliganism” charges, rather than “obstruction of journalist activities” as Afanasyev had requested. As of July the attackers were not identified.

There was no progress during the year in establishing accountability in several high-profile killings of journalists, including the 2004 killing of Paul Klebnikov, the 2006 killing of Anna Politkovskaya, and the 2009 killing of Natalia Estemirova.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The government directly and indirectly censored media, much of which occurred online (also see Internet Freedom and Academic Freedom and Cultural Events, below).

There were reports that the government retaliated against those who produced or published content it disliked. For example, authorities conducted searches of the houses of Roman Badanin, *Proyekt* editor in chief, deputy editor Mikhail Rubin, and journalist Mariya Zholobova on June 29, the same day the outlet intended to publish an investigation alleging corruption by Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Kolokoltsev, his son, and other members of his family. OVD-Info reported that authorities had opened an investigation into Badanin and his colleagues on criminal libel charges related to the 2017 showing of a documentary series that linked President Putin to Ilya Traber, a businessman suspected of having mafia connections. On July 15, the Ministry of Justice added Badanin and four *Proyekt* journalists to its list of media “foreign agents” and *Proyekt* to the list of “undesirable foreign organizations.”

On July 19, media reported that the country’s Office of Consumer Rights blocked a Russian-language website operated by Czech Radio. Authorities cited a 2001 online article about Jan Palach, a student who set himself on fire on Prague’s Wenceslas Square in 1969 to protest the 1968 Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Experts noted that although the government cited the article’s “promotion of suicide” as the rationale, the decision came as part of a series of retaliatory steps after the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Prague earlier in the year due to Russia’s role in the 2014 Vrbetice ammunition site explosion.

Self-censorship in independent media was also reportedly widespread.

Libel/Slander Laws: Officials at all levels used their authority to restrict the work of and to retaliate against journalists and bloggers who criticized them, including taking legal action for alleged slander or libel, which are criminal offenses. President Putin signed new legislation in December 2020 that introduced criminal penalties of up to two years’ imprisonment for slander or libel “using information and telecommunications networks, including the internet.” Authorities used these laws to target human rights defenders and civil society activists in criminal investigations, most recently by accusing them of spreading unreliable information related to the COVID-19 pandemic or libelously criticizing public officials.

National Security: Authorities cited laws against terrorism or protecting national security to arrest or punish critics of the government or deter criticism of government policies or officials. There were reports that critics of the government’s counterterrorism policies were themselves charged with “justifying terrorism.” For example, in July 2020 RFE/RL contributor Svetlana Prokopyeva was convicted of “justifying terrorism” and fined for a 2018 radio piece that explored the motivations of a teenage suicide bomber who had attacked a regional FSB office (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for 2020 for Russia). In February the Moscow Region’s Military Court of Appeal upheld her 2020 verdict and fine.

Internet Freedom

The government monitored all internet communications (see also section 1.f.).

The law requires internet providers to install equipment to route web traffic through servers in the country. The government continued to employ its longstanding use of the System for Operative Investigative Activities, which requires internet service providers (ISPs) to install, at their own expense, a device that routes all customer traffic to an FSB terminal. The system enables police to track private email communications, identify internet users, and monitor their internet activity. Internet freedom advocates asserted the measure allows for surveillance by intelligence agencies and enables state authorities to control information and block content.

Declaring it necessary to protect the sovereignty and national interests of Russia, President Putin signed into law new regulations on February 24 allowing authorities to impose fines of up to six million rubles (\$81,000) for internet providers and social media companies that became repeat violators of Russia’s “sovereign internet” law by failing to install and operate state-controlled software on their systems.

The “sovereign internet” law also prescribed the creation of an independent domain name system (DNS) for the country, separate from the global DNS, which would allow the country to isolate itself from the global internet, further restricting the free flow of information. On February 1, the deputy chairman of the country’s Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, claimed the government was “legally and technologically” ready to isolate the country from the global internet but stated the option was only a contingency in the event that foreign governments “disconnect” Russia.

The law requires domestic and foreign businesses to store citizens’ personal data on servers physically located in the country. Companies refusing to localize Russian users’ data may be subject to penalties ranging from 5,000 rubles to six million rubles (\$67 to \$81,000), with fines of up to 18 million rubles (\$243,000) for repeat offenses or being blocked from operating in the country. The courts fined Twitter and Facebook four million rubles (\$54,000) each in 2020 for failure to provide information on the localization of databases of Russian users in the country. In April, Roskomnadzor reported Facebook had paid this fine, but Twitter had not. On May 26, authorities ordered social media companies, including Facebook and Twitter, to store all citizens’ personal data within the country by July 1 or face additional fines.

Telecommunications companies are required to temporarily retain user data and make it available to law enforcement bodies. Regulatory requirements specify users’ voice records must be stored for a period of six months, and electronic correspondence (audio, images, and video) for three months. Observers believed that the country’s security services were able to intercept and decode encrypted messages on at least some messaging platforms. The law also requires telecommunications companies to provide authorities with “backdoors” around encryption technologies. Companies are fined up to six million rubles (\$81,000) if they refuse to provide the FSB with decryption keys that would allow it to read users’ correspondence.

On July 1, President Putin signed a law requiring foreign tech companies with a daily audience larger than 500,000 users in the country to open official representative offices in the country by the end of the year. Local representation affords authorities leverage to enforce fines and regulations through pressure on domestically located employees. If tech companies do not comply, Roskomnadzor is authorized to block their access to Russian users’ personal data. The preliminary list contained 20 companies, including social media networks, instant messenger platforms, search engines and mail services, hosting providers, and online stores.

The government blocked access to content and otherwise censored the internet. Roskomnadzor maintained a federal blacklist of internet sites and required ISPs to block access to web pages that the agency deemed offensive or illegal, including information that was already prohibited, such as items on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. The law gives the prosecutor general and Roskomnadzor authority to demand that ISPs block websites that promote extremist information and “mass public events that are conducted in violation of appropriate procedures.” A law requiring social media companies to independently block and remove “obscene language” or other prohibited content went into effect on February 1.

There was a growing trend of authorities seeking to pressure social media platforms to censor posts and remove content deemed objectionable. Early in the year, nationwide demonstrations following the return and jailing of prominent oppositionist Aleksey Navalny spurred Roskomnadzor to issue increasingly stern warnings to major social media companies demanding they remove “unauthorized” content, such as publications related to the demonstrations. Roskomnadzor warned that failure to comply with censorship laws and to remove prohibited content would result in additional fines and, if banned content continued to appear on the platforms, their potential banishment from the country’s network. Media outlets reported that both the Russia-based VKontakte and China-based TikTok complied with the authorities’ demand to remove content perceived as attracting minors to participate in the January protests. Many observers believed that authorities were concerned about social networks’ ability to mobilize persons for social protests before the September Duma elections. In late June authorities sent a letter to Google demanding that it cease providing technical support for the Navalny organization’s Smart Vote initiative website and application. On September 17, the first day of voting, Google and Apple removed the Smart Vote application from their respective app stores after reportedly being subjected to pressure by authorities.

On March 1, Roskomnadzor accused Twitter of the “malicious violation” of the country’s laws and purported that Twitter failed to remove almost 3,000 posts with “with calls for extremism,” child pornography, and drug use. According to the *Twitter Transparency Report* published in July and covering the period of July to December 2020, 64 percent of the removal requests from authorities pertained to prohibiting the promotion of suicide, although Twitter also received an increase in the number of removal requests related to journalists and verified news outlets. In one example, in March authorities demanded that Twitter remove the account of MBKh Media due to its affiliation with Open Russia, an “undesirable foreign organization” established by exiled political activist Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

On March 9, Roskomnadzor filed a lawsuit against five social media companies for failing to delete content allegedly urging youth to attend protests. Twitter, Google, and Facebook each had three cases filed against them, while TikTok and Telegram were each charged in one case. On March 10, Roskomnadzor began to slow Twitter’s traffic throughout Russia, citing Twitter’s failure to comply with their requests to remove prohibited information as the justification for the slowdown. On May 18, Roskomnadzor announced that, although Twitter had complied with requests to remove more than 90 percent of the “prohibited content,” it would continue to slow its traffic on mobile networks.

In a statement published March 10, Twitter expressed concern regarding “increased attempts to block and throttle online public conversation” and stressed that the company has a “zero-tolerance policy” regarding efforts to use Twitter for any unlawful behavior or to further illegal activities, such as child sexual exploitation. Experts said that the authorities used Twitter to test technology that could later be used to slow or block the service of the more popular social media platforms in the country, such as Facebook or VKontakte. The censorship measurement platform Censored Planet noted in an April 6 report that this incident represented “the first known centrally controlled attempt by the Russian government to use throttling (instead of outright blocking) to put pressure on

social media websites,” giving “significant power to the authority to unilaterally impose desired restrictions.” On March 16, Sarkis Darbinyan, a Digital Rights Center law partner, told *Proyekt* that the country’s “censorship environment has become incompatible with Western practices,” noting that 10 government agencies can block content without court orders and that officials “notoriously” flag content either too broadly or too politically, such as banning information about protests. During the year authorities issued numerous fines on social media companies for their supposed violations of the censorship laws and used the courts to exert pressure on these outlets to remove or restore content. For example, in early April authorities fined Twitter 8.9 million rubles (\$120,000) and TikTok 2.3 million rubles (\$31,000) for failing to remove undesirable content related to the January protests. According to media reporting, Google, Facebook, Telegram, and the Russian sites VKontakte and Odnoklassniki also received similar fines. In another example, on April 23, Google filed a lawsuit against Roskomnadzor challenging the latter’s demand that Google block 12 YouTube links to “illegal content,” including calls to participate in “unauthorized rallies” in January. On May 24, Roskomnadzor informed Google that it had 24 hours to remove objectionable content from its YouTube platforms or be subject to a slowdown in traffic like the one imposed on Twitter. Google’s suit was dismissed by the Moscow Arbitration Court on August 4. In July, Roskomnadzor blocked the website of Aleksey Navalny’s Anticorruption Foundation and 49 related sites for “propaganda and banned extremist activity.”

According to the internet freedom NGO Roskomsvoboda, as of September a total of 340,000 websites were unjustly blocked in the country. The Agora International Human Rights Group recorded 275,532 cases of government interference with internet freedom in 2020 in its report, *Internet Freedom 2020: The Second Wave of Repression*, representing a slight decline from 2019. Agora reported that the number of criminal prosecutions for violations of unauthorized online activity increased (to 289 cases) as did reports of violence against media representatives and cyberattacks. According to the report, the Novosibirsk region and most of Siberia were among the regions where social media administrators, media, and ordinary users faced the greatest risk of prosecution.

The law requires owners of internet search engines (news aggregators) with more than one million daily users to be accountable for the truthfulness of “publicly important” information before its dissemination. Authorities may demand that content deemed in violation be removed and impose heavy fines for refusal. For example, on January 31, the Prosecutor General’s Office and Roskomnadzor announced that they would block access to “false information, with overstated figures on the number of participants in illegal rallies, on alleged facts of violence and clashes, and the death of protesters.” Fines for noncompliance ranged from 800,000 to four million rubles (\$10,800 to \$54,000) for the first violation, with up to one-fifth of a company’s total annual revenues in Russia for a second violation. On October 25, Google paid 32 million rubles (\$432,000) in fines for failure to remove content authorities deemed illegal.

Roskomnadzor also sought to pressure social media companies into unblocking certain progovernment sites or individuals. For example, Google filed an appeal on May 20 against a Moscow City Court order obliging it to unblock the YouTube account of Tsargrad TV, an Orthodox Christian news channel owned by Konstantin Malofeyev, who is subject to European and other foreign sanctions. The court ordered Google to reinstate Tsargrad TV’s access or face exponentially increasing penalties for noncompliance. In another example, Roskomnadzor demanded Facebook justify its March 4 announcement and actions in the blocking of 530 Russian Instagram users for “coordinated attempts to mislead others.” The Instagram accounts had published posts critical of Navalny, and Roskomnadzor demanded Facebook explain why these accounts were illegal.

A 2015 law on the “right to be forgotten” allows individuals in the country to request that search-engine companies block search results that contain information about them. According to Freedom House’s 2020 *Freedom on the Net* report, the law was “routinely applied to require search engines to delete links to websites that contain personal information about an individual if it is no longer considered relevant.” The law fails to limit the “right to be forgotten” when the information requested for removal is in the public interest or concerns public figures impeding freedom of expression.

There was a growing trend of social media users being prosecuted for the political, religious, or other ideological content of posts, shares, and “likes,” which resulted in fines or prison sentences (see section 2.a., *Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media*).

The government prohibited online anonymity. The law requires commercial virtual private network (VPN) services and internet anonymizers to block access to websites and internet content prohibited in the country. The law also authorizes law enforcement agencies, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FSB, to identify VPN services that do not comply with the ban. By law Roskomnadzor may also block sites that provide instructions on how to circumvent government blocking. In March, Roskomnadzor announced the forthcoming launch (in 2022) of Oculus, an automated system for checking proxies, VPNs, and search engines for compliance with the requirements for blocking access to prohibited sites, images, and videos. On December 8, Roskomnadzor announced it had blocked the popular online anonymity service TOR.

The law prohibits companies registered as “organizers of information dissemination,” including online messaging applications, from allowing anonymous users. Messaging applications and platforms that fail to comply with the requirements to restrict anonymous accounts may be blocked.

There were reports of politically motivated cyberattacks. On April 2, hackers gained access to the email address database of a website, Free Navalny!, through which hundreds of thousands of Navalny supporters had registered to participate in a nationwide protest. On April 16, registered email addresses began receiving threats, and some who

had registered to protest lost their jobs because of the public disclosure of their support for Navalny. The news outlet *Meduza* reported that the hack of the Free Navalny! website appeared to be tied to the Presidential Administration Office.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government took further steps during the year to restrict academic freedom and cultural events. On April 5, President Putin signed controversial amendments to the law on education that would potentially subject any educational activity, including informal training sessions, YouTube lectures, and peer-to-peer tutoring, to government regulation and oversight. The amendments also grant the government authority to approve or disapprove all elements of international educational cooperation. The explanatory note that accompanied the draft submitted to the Duma stated that the law’s goal was to protect schoolchildren from “anti-Russian propaganda submitted under the guise of educational activities.” Prominent academics warned that the law would stifle intellectual freedom and creativity. On April 24, Russian Academy of Sciences professor Sergey Popov told TV Dozhd the amendments would hinder foreign professors and Nobel laureates from giving lectures, stifling academic exchanges. Other experts feared authorities could use the amended law to designate Russian professors who work with international partners “foreign agents” and subsequently to ban them from teaching.

On June 21, the Ministry of Justice added Bard College to its list of “undesirable” foreign organizations, effectively terminating a 25-year-old joint degree program between the college and the Smolny University of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Bard’s designation occurred nearly the same week that Russia declared five foreign NGOs “undesirable” (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association). The news outlet Fontanka reported that the Coordination Council of Russian NGOs had asked the Prosecutor General’s Office in March to check Smolny’s links with “foreign NGOs controlled by George Soros and leading destructive activities on the territory of Russia,” and to declare Bard an “undesirable” organization. Bard College was the first academic institution to receive the designation.

There were reports that the government sanctioned academic personnel for their teachings, writing, research, or political views. For example, a school administration in the Republic of Komi forced schoolteacher Nikita Tushkanov to resign after he held a single-picket protest on January 23, the same day as nationwide protests in support of Aleksey Navalny. There were also reports that the government penalized students for their activism or political views. For example, the rector of the Astrakhan State University expelled three students for participating in the January 23 protest. Two of students, Vera Inozemtseva and Aleksandr Mochalov, sued the university in February, demanding their reinstatement. The students argued that their expulsion violated the school’s charter and their right to freedom of assembly under the constitution.

Universities reported that authorities asked them to take down website pages that indicate cooperation with or announce a program partially funded by the U.S. government.

On October 12, Sergey Zuyev, the rector of the Moscow School for the Social and Economic Sciences, was detained in connection with the fraud case against the former deputy education minister, Marina Rakova, and accused of embezzling 21 million rubles (\$283,000) from an Education Ministry foundation. Zuyev maintained his innocence, and some activists said the case appeared politically motivated and part of a broader effort to target higher education institutions viewed as “incubators of dissent.”

On June 21, RFE/RL reported that the internet watchdog Roskomsvoboda discovered that the Russian State University for the Humanities had issued a tender for software that would allow it to monitor, compile, and analyze data gathered from students’ internet use, including posts on social media.

In February the Moscow City Department of Culture announced that it would not renew the contract of the well known Gogol Center theater director Kirill Serebrennikov, who was convicted in 2019 for embezzlement and sentenced to a fine, three years of probation, and a three-year ban on leading a state-funded cultural institution in the country. Observers believed the charges were politically motivated, citing Serebrennikov’s participation in antigovernment protests and criticism of government policies. The prosecution was widely seen by observers as a warning to the artistic community (see Country Practices on Human Rights for Russia for 2010).

There were reports that authorities forced the cancellation of concerts by musicians who had been critical of the government or dealt with subjects considered unacceptable to authorities. In most cases the FSB or other security forces visited the music venues and “highly recommended” cancellation of the concerts, which the owners and managers understood as a veiled threat against the venue if they did not comply. For example, authorities interrupted the presentation of two films during the April Artdocfest film festival, allegedly to search for minors and possible violations of COVID-19 sanitary precautions. The first film, *Quiet Voice*, was a documentary that explored the life of a gay mixed martial arts fighter who had received threats from members of the Chechen diaspora for his sexuality. The second film, *Rastorguyev*, concerned film director Aleksandr Rastorguyev, who was killed in 2018 in the Central African Republic along with the journalist Orhan Dzhemal and their film operator Kirill Radchenko while filming an investigation into the private military company Wagner, widely reported to be owned by Yevgeniy Prigozhin. In another example, on May 4, Moscow police used the pretext of a bomb threat to interrupt the play *Neighbors* about the summer 2020 protests in Belarus.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law provides for freedom of assembly, but local authorities restricted this right. The law requires organizers of public meetings, demonstrations, or marches by more than one person to notify the government, although authorities maintained that protest organizers must receive government permission, not just provide notification. Failure to obtain official permission to hold a protest resulted in the demonstration being viewed as unlawful by law enforcement officials, who routinely dispersed such protests. While some public demonstrations took place, on many occasions local officials selectively denied groups permission to assemble or offered alternate venues that were inconveniently or remotely located. Many public demonstrations were restricted or banned due to COVID-19 measures. Each region enforced its own restrictions.

Although they do not require official approval, authorities restricted single-person pickets and required that there be at least 164 feet separating protesters from each other. By law police officers may stop a single-person picket to protect the health and safety of the picketer. In December 2020 President Putin approved amendments to the law that placed further restrictions on single-person pickets as well as multiperson protests, rallies, or demonstrations. The amended law imposes financial reporting requirements, prohibits protests or public demonstrations near agencies that perform “emergency operational services” (such as law enforcement agencies), and imposes further restrictions on journalists covering these events. In addition, the law prohibits “foreign sources of funding” financing public demonstrations and treats single-person pickets, if held in the general vicinity of other picketers, as “mass demonstrations without a permit,” which are banned. Authorities regularly detained single-person picketers. For example, on February 9, Yekaterinburg police arrested Galina Gastygina, a 79-year-old woman, for holding a placard stating, “Navalny is a hero of our time.” A court subsequently fined her 1,000 rubles (\$13.50) on February 19. Her lawyer reported that guards pushed witnesses and journalists out of the courtroom during what was to have been a public hearing. In another example, on May 25, St. Petersburg police detained civil activist Yevgeniya Smetankina for having held a single-person picket in support of the feminist activist Yuliya Tsvetkova (see section 6, Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity).

The law requires that “motor rallies” and “tent city” gatherings in public places receive official permission. It requires gatherings that would interfere with pedestrian or vehicle traffic to receive official agreement 10 days prior to the event; those that do not affect traffic require three days’ notice. The law prohibits “mass rioting,” which includes teaching and learning about the organization of and participation in “mass riots.” The law allows authorities to prohibit nighttime demonstrations and meetings and to levy fines for violating protest regulations and rules on holding public events.

Following an amendment to the criminal code signed by President Putin in December, the law imposes a fine for destroying infrastructure facilities and blocking roads and a 10-year prison sentence in the case of death of more than one person. During demonstrations early in the year, authorities charged dozens of individuals countrywide under the new law penalizing the blocking of roads. For example, on January 24, the Ministry of Interior opened a criminal case for “blocking roads and sidewalks” during a rally on Pushkin Square in central Moscow. Under the pretext of its investigation, the Ministry of Interior raided the homes of 30 individuals suspected of involvement and seized their equipment and files, purportedly as evidence.

The law provides heavy penalties for engaging in unsanctioned protests and other violations of public assembly law. Protesters convicted of multiple violations within six months may be fined substantially or imprisoned for up to five years. The law prohibits “involving a minor in participation in an unsanctioned gathering,” which is punishable by fines, 100 hours of community service, or arrest for up to 15 days. On June 18, *Novaya Gazeta* reported that several cities filed lawsuits against the supposed organizers of the January and February demonstrations in their areas in a stated effort to recuperate costs incurred by the Ministry of Interior staff and local authorities who worked on the day of the demonstrations. In the Kemerovo region, authorities sought 700,000 rubles (\$9,500) in compensation from former employees of Navalny’s regional headquarters.

Arrests or detentions for organizing or taking part in unsanctioned protests were common. Ahead of the January 23 demonstrations, which were unauthorized, authorities preemptively detained Navalny associates, including his spokesperson, Kira Yarmysh, and his Anticorruption Foundation’s lawyer, Lyubov Sobol, and investigator, Georgiy Albuov. Ten Navalny associates, including Yarmysh, Sobol, and Navalny’s brother Oleg, were subsequently arrested on January 28 and charged with violating COVID-19-related public health rules in connection with the January 23 demonstration and placed under house arrest through June 23. Independent media outlets characterized the arrests as an effort to prevent the political opposition from participating in the September Duma elections. On June 7, a Moscow court extended movement and communications restrictions for Sobol and Oleg Navalny until November, and on July 21, the courts separately extended Yarmysh’s house arrest until January 2022. Memorial considered the 10 activists of the “sanitary case” to be political prisoners.

According to an FSB internal report leaked to media, approximately 12,000 individuals, including 761 minors, were detained nationwide during the January 23 and 31 demonstrations on charges that included violations of COVID-19 preventive measures, violence against persons in authority, incitement of minors, and organization of an unauthorized protest. Media outlets reported that of those detained, 1,200 were sentenced to administrative arrest and 2,490 were fined for their participation in the demonstrations. The independent human rights media project OVD-Info reported that an additional 1,788 individuals were detained on April 21 during countrywide demonstrations after Navalny declared a hunger strike to seek medical care (see section 1.c.).

On February 11, the Ministry of Interior reported that it had opened 90 criminal cases for crimes committed during the demonstrations, with most cases to “illegal actions targeting police officers” or “repeated participation in an unauthorized protest.” For example, on March 3, a court in the Volga region sentenced a man to 18 months of forced labor for attacking a police officer during the January 23 protest after the man pleaded guilty to the charge. Based on information provided by the court reporter to OVD-Info, the man intervened in the detention of another protest participant, “causing the latter physical pain and bodily injury.”

Police often broke up protests that were not officially sanctioned, at times using disproportionate force. OVD-Info registered at least 140 reports of police brutality against demonstrators and monitored the initiation of 90 criminal cases against demonstrators. For example, in one instance filmed on January 23, police officers kicked a woman in the stomach, causing her to collapse and require medical assistance. On February 5, members of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights released a statement urging officials to end the use of riot control weapons during the detention of peaceful demonstrators and to investigate “cases of excess of authority and hindrances to the activity of lawyers and journalists.”

There were reports that the government penalized employees for their participation in or support of unsanctioned assemblies. For example, at least 40 employees of the Moscow metro were dismissed in May for their participation in or support of the January and February protests. On May 14, Moscow City Duma deputy Mikhail Timonov reported that metro management ordered the dismissal of employees whose names or whose relatives’ names appeared in a leaked database of Navalny supporters.

Media reported several instances in which authorities charged individuals for their alleged participation in or other support of the demonstrations even when the individual charged was already detained or the statute of limitations for that particular charge had expired. For example, an employee of Navalny’s political organization, Aleksandr Kopyev, was charged on February 19 for his alleged participation in a January 31 pro-Navalny demonstration, even though he had already been detained for his earlier involvement in a demonstration on January 23.

The courts occasionally acknowledged violations of citizens’ rights to assemble. For example, on March 3, the Smolninskiy District Court of St. Petersburg ordered the Ministry of Internal Affairs to pay compensation for moral damage to Sergey Dumtsev, who was detained for holding a single-person picket in 2019. The court found that the police had no right to stop the picket or to detain the activist and keep him in the police office for more than three hours. In another example, during the spring the Supreme Court of Tatarstan awarded compensation for moral damages to three activists from Naberezhnye Chelny after the executive committee refused their 2018 request to hold a rally against raising the retirement age.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for freedom of association, but the government did not respect it. Public organizations must register their bylaws and the names of their leaders with the Ministry of Justice. The finances of registered organizations are subject to investigation by tax authorities, and foreign grants must be registered.

The government continued to use the “foreign agents” law, which requires NGOs that receive foreign funding and engage in “political activity” to register as “foreign agents,” to harass, stigmatize, and, in some cases, halt their operation, although fewer organizations were registered than in previous years. As of December 7, the Ministry of Justice’s registry of organizations designated as “foreign agents” included 75 NGOs. The Ministry of Justice maintained separate registries of 111 media outlets and journalists designated as foreign agents as well as 49 “undesirable organizations” (see sections 2.a., Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom and Cultural Events). NGOs designated as “foreign agents” are banned by law from observing elections and face other restrictions on their activity.

For the purposes of implementing the “foreign agents” law, the government considered “political activities” to include: organizing public events, rallies, demonstrations, marches, and pickets; organizing and conducting public debates, discussions, or presentations; participating in election activities aimed at influencing the result, including election observation and forming commissions; public calls to influence local and state government bodies, including calling for changes to legislation; disseminating opinions and decisions of state bodies by technology; and attempting to shape public political views, including public opinion polls or other sociological research.

To be delisted, an NGO must submit an application to the Ministry of Justice proving that it did not receive any foreign funding or engage in any political activity within the previous 12 months. If the NGO received any foreign funding, it must have returned the money within three months. The ministry would then initiate an unscheduled inspection of the NGO to determine whether it qualified for removal from the list.

The law requires that NGOs on the foreign agents list identify themselves as “foreign agents” in all their public materials. Authorities fined NGOs for failing to disclose their “foreign agent” status on websites or printed materials. For example, on April 13, the Kuybyshevskiy District Court of St. Petersburg fined the Center for the Development of Nonprofit Organizations and its director, Anna Orlova, for failure to label social media posts appropriately.

Organizations the government listed as “foreign agents” reported experiencing the social effects of stigmatization, such as being targeted by vandals and online criticism, in addition to losing partners and funding sources and being subjected to smear campaigns in the state-controlled press. At the same time, the “foreign agent” label did not necessarily exclude organizations from receiving state-sponsored support.

The law requires the Ministry of Justice to maintain a list of “undesirable foreign organizations.” The list expanded during the year to 49 organizations as of December 7. The Ministry of Justice added three German NGOs involved in efforts to develop relations with Russia, three United Kingdom (UK) affiliates of opposition activist Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s Open Russian Foundation, a French NGO involved in educational exchange, a Czech NGO promoting freedom of information, a foreign college, two Church of Scientology organizations, the investigative outlet *Proyekt*, the International Partnership for Human Rights, four evangelical Christian groups, and the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations.

By law a foreign organization may be found “undesirable” if it is deemed “dangerous to the foundations of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, its national security, and defense.” Authorities did not clarify what specific threats these “undesirable” NGOs posed to the country. Any foreign organization deemed “undesirable” must cease its activities. Any money or assets found by authorities may be seized, and any citizens found guilty of continuing to work with the organization in contravention of the law may face up to seven years in prison. On June 29, President Putin signed into law a bill that prohibits Russian citizens in any country from taking part in the work of NGOs designated as undesirable in Russia and from transferring money to Russia from certain countries under monitoring by the Federal Financial Monitoring Service, regardless of the transferred amount. The law became effective on October 1.

Authorities imposed criminal penalties for purported violations of the law on “undesirable foreign organizations.” On February 18, a court in Rostov-on-Don convicted political activist Anastasiya Shevchenko of violating the “undesirable organizations” law for her work with the UK-based NGO Open Russia. The court sentenced her to four years of parole and ended her house arrest. Shevchenko was the first person criminally charged under the “undesirable organizations” law. Amnesty International considered her a prisoner of conscience.

On March 13, law enforcement authorities detained all 194 participants at a forum for municipal and city council members organized by the unregistered political movement United Democrats. Authorities charged the detainees with administrative violations for allegedly “cooperating with an undesirable foreign organization,” even though United Democrats had not formally been recognized as such. Attendees, including anti-Kremlin analyst and activist Vladimir Kara-Murza, prominent municipal council members Ilya Yashin and Yuliya Galyamina, and former Yekaterinburg mayor Yevgeniy Roizman, had gathered at a hotel in greater Moscow to exchange ideas and undergo training to enhance city and municipal governance. While those detained were released pending court hearings in subsequent months, the courts fined a number of the forum participants, including Galyamina, Roizman, and Yekaterinburg city deputy Konstantin Kiselyov. The Council of Deputies of the Timiryazevskiy district of Moscow announced its decision March 25 to deprive Galyamina of her status as a municipal deputy due to her repeated participation in unauthorized rallies; a Moscow City Court had sentenced Galyamina to two years’ probation for this offense in December 2020.

Citing the pending changes to legislation regarding “undesirable” organizations, director of the Russia-based Open Russia, Andrey Pivovarov, announced on May 27 that the organization would close all branches and annul memberships to prevent the criminal prosecution of its supporters. Even though the Open Russia organization was declared “undesirable” in 2017, the Russian political advocacy group with the same name had not been banned as of July. Despite his announcement, on May 31, Russian security forces boarded a flight prior to its departure from St. Petersburg and arrested Pivovarov. The Investigative Committee subsequently charged Pivovarov for participating in the activities of an “undesirable organization,” detaining him for two months in a pretrial detention facility in Krasnodar. On June 1, authorities also searched the premises of, detained, and opened criminal cases against other prominent Open Russia members, including former director Aleksandr Solovyov. A court in St. Petersburg fined Pivovarov for the production and distribution of materials of an organization acting as a foreign agent, without indicating its status on July 19. The opposition politician told media that he believed authorities were persecuting him for political reasons. On July 21, a court in Krasnodar extended Pivovarov’s pretrial detention through the end of October. He faced up to six years in prison if convicted on the charge of belonging to an undesirable organization. Memorial considered Pivovarov a political prisoner.

NGOs engaged in political activities or activities that purportedly “pose a threat to the country” or that received support from U.S. citizens or organizations are subject to suspension under the 2012 “Dima Yakovlev” law, which prohibits NGOs from having members with dual Russian-U.S. citizenship.

In February, President Putin signed into law new regulations and restrictions regarding “foreign agents” and those who disseminate information about them. The Ministry of Justice subsequently announced the creation of a new registry of “foreign agents,” consisting of unregistered NGOs or loosely defined “public associations” that purportedly receive funding from foreign sources and are engaged in political activity in Russia. Under the new law, individuals and NGOs who meet the criteria of a “foreign agent” are obliged to register or face criminal liability, with penalties of a fine of up to 300,000 rubles (\$4,000), compulsory labor for up to 480 hours, or up to two years of correctional labor or prison. Under the law the Ministry of Justice may also assign the “foreign agent” status directly to individuals or associations. On August 18, the election-monitoring group Golos became the first association to be included in the list. On March 1, when the penalties under the law entered into force, prominent human rights activist Lev Ponomarev announced the closure of the For Human Rights organization, an unregistered group of human rights activists established in 2019 after a Supreme Court ruling to liquidate his rights monitoring and advocacy organization with the same name. Ponomarev, who was designated a “foreign agent” in December 2020 (see section 2.a.), filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 3, demanding his removal from the registry.

On March 3, the Ministry of Justice designated the independent trade union Alliance of Doctors as a “foreign agent,” citing its “repeated receipts of foreign funding, as well as the implementation of political activities.” Anastasiya Vasilyeva, the leader of the trade union and an associate of Navalny, was one of the activists charged as part of the “sanitary case” for violating COVID-19 protocol in the organization of the January 23 protest (see section 2.b.). Memorial considered her a political prisoner.

Authorities continued to misuse the country’s expansive definition of extremism to stifle freedom of association. On June 4, President Putin signed a law that prohibits members of “extremist” organizations from participating in elections at all levels – municipal, regional, and federal. An organization’s founders and leaders are barred from running for elected office for five years from the date of the organization’s ban, while members and others “involved in its work” are barred for three years. In addition to direct membership, a person may be considered by the courts to be “involved” in the organization if that individual makes a statement of support for the group, including on social media, transfers money to it, or offers any other form of “assistance.” The ban may also be applied retroactively, barring individuals from running for office if they were involved with the group up to three years prior to the extremist designation. Experts and both “systemic opposition” (effectively progovernment) and independent politicians decried the law as politically motivated and unconstitutional, citing the law’s retroactive nature and ability to disenfranchise thousands of individuals as evident violations of the constitution.

On June 9, a Moscow city court designated Navalny’s Anticorruption Foundation, his political operations, and the affiliated Citizens’ Rights Protection Fund as “extremist” in a move that experts said was designed to prohibit those affiliated with Navalny and the Anticorruption Foundation from running for office. In April the Moscow Prosecutor’s Office had filed a lawsuit seeking the organizations’ designation as “extremist,” which led to an injunction to freeze the organizations’ bank accounts and the suspension of their activities. Experts characterized this designation and legislative changes to the “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” legislation as targeted political repression against opposition groups ahead of the September elections (see section 3).

In multiple cases authorities arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted civil society activists in political retaliation for their work (see section 1.c.).

There were reports authorities targeted NGOs and activists representing the LGBTQI+ community for retaliation (see section 6, Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity).

Authorities misused antiterrorism and antiextremism laws, as well as other measures to label wrongfully peaceful religious groups and their practices “terrorist,” “extremist,” and “undesirable.” Among those designated without any credible evidence of violent actions or intentions were two foreign-based Church of Scientology organizations, four Protestant groups from Latvia and Ukraine, a regional branch of Falun Gong and seven Falun Gong-associated NGOs, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Fayzrakhmani Islamic community, Tablighi Jamaat, followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. These designations effectively banned their worship and activities, and members were subject to prolonged imprisonment, harsh detention conditions, house arrest and house raids, discrimination, harassment, and criminal investigation for participating in the activities of a “banned extremist organization” (see the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>).

There were reports civil society activists were beaten or attacked in retaliation for their professional activities and that in most cases law enforcement officials did not adequately investigate the incidents. For example, on July 1, an ecological activist in Tambov Oblast, Roman Gerasimov, was attacked and stabbed three times by assailants after he filmed a video for President Putin’s annual call-in press conference requesting that a planned new landfill not be built in his region.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, but in some cases authorities restricted these rights.

In-country Movement: Although the law gives citizens the right to choose their place of residence, adult citizens must carry government-issued internal passports while traveling domestically and must register with local authorities after arriving at a different location. To have their files transferred, persons with official refugee or asylum status must notify the Ministry of Internal Affairs in advance of relocating to a district other than the one that originally granted them status. Authorities often refused to provide government services to individuals without internal passports or proper registration, and many regional governments continued to restrict this right through residential registration rules.

Authorities imposed in-country travel restrictions on individuals facing prosecution for political purposes.

Foreign Travel: The law provides for freedom to travel abroad, but the government restricted this right for certain groups. The law stipulates that a person who violates a court decision does not have a right to leave the country. A court may also prohibit a person from leaving the country for failure to satisfy debts; if the individual is suspected, accused, or convicted of a crime; or if the individual had access to classified material. The law allows for the temporary restriction of the right to leave the country for citizens with outstanding debts.

The government restricted the foreign travel of millions of its employees, prescribing which countries they are and are not allowed to visit. The restriction applies to employees of agencies including the Prosecutor General’s Office, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Federal Prison Service, Federal Drug Control Service, Federal Bailiff Service, General Administration for Migration Issues, and Ministry of Emergency Situations. On July 7, media outlets reported that Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a decree stating that prior to traveling abroad, his deputies and ministers must obtain his written permission. The travel restriction would also apply to lower-ranking officials, such as heads of agencies, who must obtain permission from their supervisors before travel.

Citizenship: There were reports that the government revoked citizenship on an arbitrary or discriminatory basis. For example, in April 2020 the Internal Affairs Ministry stripped the citizenship of Feliks Makhmadiyev and Konstantin Bazhenov, two members of Jehovah’s Witnesses convicted of “extremism” on the basis of their religious beliefs. Makhmadiyev was left stateless as a result. In January authorities deported Makhmadiyev to Uzbekistan. Media outlets reported that authorities revoked the residency permits of several foreign nationals who had participated in the January and February protests in support of Aleksey Navalny and the people of Belarus, including individuals married to Russian citizens.

In another example, on October 26, authorities deported Tajikistan-born Bakhtiyor Usmonov, separating him from his wife and children. Usmonov’s deportation followed his successful case in the ECHR against the Russian state, which annulled his citizenship and held him in a detention center for foreign citizens for two years. The ECHR ordered the Russian government to restore Usmonov’s citizenship and to pay him compensation in the amount of 11,000 euros (\$12,700).

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimated the country was home to 1,230 internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of December 2020. Of these, the center asserted that 130 IDPs were displaced due to weather-related events, such as floods, and 1,100 were displaced because of conflict and violence.

According to the government’s official statistics, the number of “forced” migrants, which under the government’s definition includes refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs, decreased from 9,485 in 2019 to 5,323 in January 2020 and again in January 2021 to 2,512. The government indicated that most forced migrants came from Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

Reliable information on whether the government promoted the safe, voluntary, dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs was not available. According to the independent NGOs Civic Assistance Committee and Memorial, most IDPs in the country were displaced by the Ossetian-Ingush conflict of 1992 and the Chechen wars in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. The Ossetian-Ingush conflict displaced Ingush from the territory of North Ossetia-Alania, and the Chechen wars displaced Chechens. The government provided minimal financial support for housing to persons registered as IDPs. The Civic Assistance Committee criticized the government’s strict rules for qualifying for assistance and long backlog of persons waiting for housing support.

f. Protection of Refugees

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported it had a working relationship with the government on asylum, refugee, and stateless persons problems. The Civic Assistance Committee reported, however, that the government failed to provide protection and assistance to IDPs, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, or other persons of concern. On April 5, President Putin signed a law adopting the charter of the International Organization for Migration, which promotes the organized movement of migrants and refugees.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. NGOs reported applicants commonly paid informal “facilitation fees” of approximately 33,000 rubles (\$445) to General Administration for Migration Issues adjudicators to have their application reviewed. Applicants who did not speak Russian often had to pay for a private interpreter. Human rights organizations noted that nearly all newly arrived asylum seekers in large cities, particularly Moscow and St. Petersburg, were forced to apply in other regions, allegedly due to full quotas. NGOs also noted difficulty in applying for asylum due to long queues and lack of clear application procedures. The General Administration for Migration Issues approved only a small percentage of applications for refugee status and temporary asylum, with exception of applications from Ukrainians, who had a much higher chance of approval.

Human rights organizations noted the government’s issuance of refugee and temporary asylum status decreased over the previous few years, pointing to the government’s systematic and arbitrary refusal to grant asylum. NGOs reported that authorities encouraged applicants to return to their countries of origin.

Authorities reportedly also had blanket authority to grant temporary asylum to Syrians, but local migration experts noted a decrease in the number of Syrians afforded temporary asylum, suggesting that the General Administration for Migration Issues had not renewed the temporary asylum of hundreds of Syrians and, in some cases, encouraged applicants to return to Syria.

Refoulement: The concept of nonrefoulement is not explicitly stated in the law. The government provided some protection against the expulsion or return of persons to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. The responsible agency, the General Administration for Migration Issues, did not maintain a presence at airports or other border points and did not adequately publicize that asylum seekers may request access to the agency. Asylum seekers had to rely on the goodwill of border guards and airline personnel to call immigration officials. Otherwise, they faced immediate deportation to neighboring countries or return to their countries of origin, including in some cases to countries where they may have had reasonable grounds to fear persecution.

According to Memorial, on March 23, Russian authorities rejected the asylum request of Rozgelyd Choliyev, a citizen of Turkmenistan facing prosecution for public criticism of his home country's government. Choliyev had arrived in Moscow from Istanbul and spent three weeks in Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport waiting for a response to his request before being deported back to Turkey because all flights from Moscow to Ashgabat were cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. Memorial said that Choliyev faced extradition from Turkey to Turkmenistan, where he could be prosecuted for his public criticism of the government.

Human rights groups continued to allege that authorities made improper use of international agreements that permit them to detain, and possibly repatriate, persons with outstanding arrest warrants from other former Soviet states. This system, enforced by informal ties among senior law enforcement officials of the countries concerned, permitted authorities to detain individuals for up to one month while the Prosecutor General's Office investigated the nature of the warrants. For example, on July 21, a Russian court ruled that Alyaksey Kudzin, world champion kickboxer and outspoken critic of Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka, could be extradited to face charges for assaulting a security officer during prodemocracy protests in Belarus in August 2020. Despite an earlier ECHR opinion that banned his extradition over concerns that he may be politically persecuted and tortured, Kudzin was handed over to Belarusian authorities and sentenced on August 11 to two and one-half years in prison.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees: NGOs reported that police detained, fined, and threatened migrants and refugees with deportation.

In some cases temporary asylum holders who received refugee status from third countries were not granted exit visas or allowed to depart the country.

Employment: Employers frequently refused to hire applicants who lacked residential registration. UNHCR reported that employers frequently were not familiar with laws permitting employment for refugees and asylum seekers without work permits and refused to hire them. NGOs reported that refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants were vulnerable to exploitation in the form of forced labor because of the lack of proper documents and insufficient Russian language skills.

Access to Basic Services: By law successful temporary asylum seekers and persons whose applications were being processed have the right to work, to receive medical care, and to attend school. The government considered Ukrainian asylum seekers to be separate from asylum seekers from other countries, such as Afghanistan, Georgia, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen. NGOs reported authorities provided some services to Ukrainian asylum seekers, but there were instances in which applicants from other countries were denied the same service, including access to medical care and food banks.

While federal law provides for education for all children, regional authorities occasionally denied access to schools to children of temporary asylum and refugee applicants who lacked residential registration or who did not speak Russian. The Civic Assistance Committee reported that approximately one-third of the children of refugees were enrolled in schools. When parents encountered difficulties enrolling their children in school, authorities generally cooperated with UNHCR to resolve the problem.

Temporary Protection: The government also provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees. As of January 1, a total of 19,817 persons, 92 percent of whom were citizens of Ukraine, held a certificate of temporary asylum in Russia. A person who does not satisfy the criteria for refugee status, but who for humanitarian reasons could not be expelled or deported, may receive temporary asylum after submitting a separate application. There were reports, however, of authorities not upholding the principle of temporary protection.

g. Stateless Persons

According to the 2010 population census, the country was home to 178,000 self-declared stateless persons. Official statistics did not differentiate between stateless persons and other categories of persons seeking assistance. UNHCR data showed 60,185 stateless persons, including forcibly displaced stateless persons, in the country at the end of 2020. Law, policy, and procedures allow stateless persons and their children born in the country to gain nationality. The Civic Assistance Committee noted that most stateless persons in the country were elderly, ill, or single former Soviet Union passport holders who missed the opportunity to claim Russian citizenship after the Soviet Union broke

up. The NGO reported various bureaucratic hurdles as obstacles to obtaining legal status in the country. On February 24, President Putin signed a law authorizing temporary identity certificates for stateless persons that would be valid for 10 years or until the holder receives citizenship or a residence permit in another country.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

While the law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, citizens could not fully do so because the government limited the ability of opposition parties to organize, register candidates for public office, access media outlets, and conduct political campaigns.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: On September 17-19, the country held elections for the State Duma as well as 10 gubernatorial elections and 39 regional parliamentary elections. The independent election observation group Golos concluded the elections were neither free nor fair. Golos noted the electoral campaign was conducted in an unfree and unequal manner and that many politically active citizens were deprived of their constitutional right to be elected. Observers also documented fraud and violations during voting and vote-counting that undermined public confidence in the elections and cast serious doubt on the integrity of the reported results. In the period preceding the elections, authorities intensified repression of independent observers and media, including by designating Golos and dozens of media outlets and individuals as “foreign agents.” In six regions including Moscow, opaque online voting procedures, the reported results of which often favored the ruling party by a larger margin than in-person voting, further called into question the integrity of the vote.

Ahead of the State Duma elections, the government adopted a series of repressive laws targeting independent media, human rights activists, and opposition politicians and used legislation to restrict the political participation of individuals or organizations designated as “foreign agents,” “undesirable,” or “extremist” (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association). Authorities also banned many would-be candidates from running for office and pressured several to leave the country.

At the end of 2020, President Putin signed into law a bill that permits Roskomnadzor to block or entirely remove “certain” online campaign materials during federal or regional elections. At the time, experts assessed that the bill was adopted with Aleksey Navalny’s Smart Voting campaign in mind. On July 26, Roskomnadzor blocked 49 websites linked to Navalny, his associates, and his political organization, including his personal blog, the website of his Anticorruption Foundation, and websites affiliated with the local political offices for alleged “propaganda and extremist activity.” Authorities also adopted legislative changes to expand the number of voting days from one to three, ostensibly to allow physical distancing between voters. Critics of the changes noted, however, that the longer the ballots remained open, the greater the opportunity for fraud and the more time to ensure government loyalists voted. Many experts concluded that these actions were designed to ensure that the ruling United Russia party retained a constitutional majority.

During the year authorities routinely restricted gatherings, campaign communications, and other political activities of opposition candidates and prodemocracy groups. Authorities often charged the opposition and independent politicians with violating COVID-19 protocols, while not restricting similar gatherings by the ruling United Russia party. For example, on May 22, police broke up a gathering of approximately 30 independent municipal and regional deputies attending a conference in Velikiy Novgorod and charged participants with violating pandemic restrictions. The following month, however, dozens of persons attended the June 19 United Russia party congress in Moscow without facing similar restrictions.

Russian media and experts viewed the tightening of the “undesirable” organization legislation as a move intended to place further pressure on political opposition ahead of the September 19 elections, particularly on candidates affiliated with Navalny and exiled oppositionist Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s Open Russia organization. During the year authorities routinely detained members of Navalny’s political operations throughout the country, conducted arbitrary searches of their homes and offices, and charged them with crimes on questionable grounds. In one example, on April 12, two employees of Navalny’s newly opened campaign headquarters in Makhachkala were reported missing only to turn up later in special detention centers in Dagestan. In another example, the Penza police sued the local director of Navalny’s organization for almost 900,000 rubles (\$12,000) to offset the expenses the police department reportedly incurred on the weekend of the January 23 protest.

Authorities did not limit their election-related harassment to Navalny’s Anticorruption Foundation or Open Russia. For example, on June 1, law enforcement officers searched the homes of former State Duma deputy and presumptive Yabloko party nominee Dmitriy Gudkov and his relatives before detaining Gudkov for 48 hours on suspicion of “property damage.” Upon his release, Gudkov fled the country and told media that sources close to the Presidential Administration informed him if he did not leave the country, the fake criminal case would continue until his arrest.

Authorities disproportionately denied registration for independent and nonsystemic opposition candidates. According to an investigation published by *ISStories* on June 8, elections officials denied registration of opposition candidates at a rate of 25 percent over the past year, 10 times greater than the 2 percent of United Russia and systemic (effectively progovernment) opposition party candidates denied registration. In a related investigation, Golos reported on June 22 that at least nine million citizens were prohibited by the state from running in elections

for various reasons, representing an estimated 8 percent of the voting population. In one example, the election commission barred prominent municipal deputy Ilya Yashin from running in the Moscow City Duma elections for his “involvement in extremist activities” due to his support of Navalny.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported that the 2018 presidential election “took place in an overly controlled environment, marked by continued pressure on critical voices,” and that “restrictions on the fundamental freedoms, as well as on candidate registration, have limited the space for political engagement and resulted in a lack of genuine competition.” The OSCE also noted that “television, and in particular broadcasters that are state funded, owned, or supported, remains the dominant source of political information. A restrictive legislative and regulatory framework challenges freedom of media and induces self-censorship. Voters were thus not presented with a critical assessment of the incumbent’s views and qualifications in most media.” Observers noted that the most prominent potential challenger, Aleksey Navalny, was prevented from registering his candidacy due to a previous politically motivated criminal conviction.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The process for nominating candidates for the office of the president was highly regulated and placed significant burdens on opposition parties and their candidates. While parties represented in the State Duma may nominate a presidential candidate without having to collect and submit signatures, prospective self-nominated presidential candidates must collect 300,000 signatures, no more than 7,500 from each region, and submit the signatures to the Central Election Commission for certification. Presidential candidates nominated by parties without State Duma representation must collect 100,000 signatures. An independent presidential candidate is ineligible to run if the commission finds more than 5 percent of signatures invalid. On April 5, President Putin signed a law resetting his presidential term limits, reflecting amendments approved during the July 2020 constitutional referendum.

Candidates to the State Duma may be nominated directly by constituents, political parties in single-mandate districts, or political parties on their federal list, or they may be self-nominated. Political parties select candidates for the federal lists from their ranks during party conventions via closed voting procedures. Party conventions also select single mandate candidates. While any of the country’s formally registered political parties may run candidates on the party list portion of the ballot, only political parties that overcame the 5 percent threshold during the previous elections may form federal and single-mandate candidate lists without collecting signatures. Parties that did not overcome the 5 percent threshold must collect 200,000 signatures to register a candidate for the Duma. A total of 32 parties qualified to participate in the State Duma elections, of which 14 parties met this threshold. Self-nominated candidates generally must gather the signatures of 3 percent of the voters in their districts.

Observers and would-be candidates reported the municipal filter was not applied equally and that authorities pressured municipal deputies not to provide signatures to candidates who were not preapproved by authorities. They asserted that no independent candidate with the potential to defeat authorities’ favored candidates was permitted to pass through the municipal filter, while progovernment candidates were passed through the filter without fulfilling technical requirements.

In some cases opposition parties were repeatedly denied registration or faced court-mandated suspensions of their activities. The Central Election Commission announced on September 10 it had removed 16 State Duma candidates (from the Yabloko, Party for Growth, and Russian Party for Freedom and Justice parties) from their respective races for holding foreign assets. On September 11 in Sterlitamak, a Fair Russia candidate for State Duma, Vadim Iskandarov, and seven of his supporters were detained while distributing campaign materials. The candidate was participating in the City Day, an event where legal pre-election campaigns could be held, when National Guard officers detained the group claiming an official United Russia party event was occurring on the square. The detainees were later released; no charges were announced.

Systemic opposition parties (i.e., quasi-independent parties permitted by the government to appear on the ballot) also faced pressure. For example, on July 24, the Central Election Commission excluded from the party list candidate Pavel Grudinin, a prominent member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation who had run an unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2018, on the grounds that he allegedly possessed foreign assets. Party members and other observers claimed Grudinin’s disqualification was politically motivated. On September 8, Roman Yakovlev, a Communist Party candidate for State Duma and deputy of the Novosibirsk Legislative Assembly, attempted to hold a meeting with voters. Local authorities allowed Yakovlev to organize the meeting, but later blocked the only road to the site of the gathering. The authorities cited COVID-19 regulations and concerns as rationale for their actions, despite the decision of Governor Andrey Travnikov to allow all candidate meetings with voters as an exception to bans on mass gatherings. On September 15, Yelena Beshtereva from Fair Russia, Yevgeniya Bogdanova from the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and Igor Kapelyukh from United Russia withdrew their candidacies for deputies of the Legislative Assembly of Eastern Petropavlovsk in protest of unfair elections and electoral procedures.

State entities or entities closely aligned with the state also influenced their employees to vote a certain way or in a specific location. For example, employees of the Orenburg Oblast Tax Service reported that they received a text message instructing them to unregister themselves at their home polling stations and vote instead in a precinct near their workplace.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women and members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Women’s participation remained low, accounting for approximately 15 percent of elected seats in the national legislature. As of July women held

approximately 10 percent of ministerial positions. While members of national minorities took an active part in political life, ethnic Russians, who constituted approximately 80 percent of the population, dominated the political and administrative system, particularly at the federal level.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, but the government acknowledged difficulty in enforcing the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were numerous reports of government corruption during the year.

Corruption: Corruption was widespread throughout the executive branch, including within the security sector, as well as in the legislative and judicial branches at all levels. Its manifestations included bribery of officials, misuse of budgetary resources, theft of government property, kickbacks in the procurement process, extortion, and improper use of official position to secure personal profits. While there were prosecutions for bribery, a general lack of enforcement remained a problem. Official corruption continued to be rampant in numerous areas, including education, military conscription, health care, commerce, housing, social welfare, law enforcement, and the judicial system. According to the Prosecutor General’s Office, at the start of the year, corruption-related crimes increased by approximately 12 percent compared with the previous year, with the total amount of material damage caused by corruption crimes exceeding 63 billion rubles (\$851 million) in 2020. Bribery accounted for half of the detected corruption crimes. The Prosecutor General’s Office reported that approximately one-third of bribery cases related to “petty bribery” of less than 10,000 rubles (\$135) given by citizens to police officers, schoolteachers, and prison authorities. Transparency International’s *Corruption Perception Index*, published in January, assessed corruption in the country as high.

There were reports of corruption by government officials at the highest level. During the year Aleksey Navalny’s Anticorruption Foundation and other investigative news outlets reported on previously undisclosed properties owned by President Putin, his family, and his close associates. In a widely viewed video expose released on January 19, Navalny’s investigative team documented the excesses of a luxury estate on the Black Sea coast that they traced back to President Putin and his inner circle. The investigation tracked corrupt proceeds from illicit deals and the president’s own alleged misuse of office to fund the property’s construction, which Navalny’s team estimated cost 74 billion rubles (one billion dollars) to construct and furnish.

Authorities selectively sentenced officials on corruption-related charges. For example, on March 22, a court in Moscow sentenced the governor of the Penza region, Ivan Belozertsev, to two months in prison on allegations that he accepted 31 million rubles (\$420,000) in bribes in 2020. The Investigative Committee also opened investigations into Belozertsev for embezzlement of three billion rubles (\$40.5 million) and falsification of election results in the 2020 election for governor.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups operating in the country investigated and published their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were rarely cooperative or responsive to their concerns. Official harassment of independent NGOs continued and, in many instances, intensified, particularly of groups that focused on monitoring elections, engaging in environmental activism, exposing corruption, and addressing human rights abuses. Some officials, including Tatyana Moskalkova, the high commissioner for human rights, and her regional representatives regularly interacted and cooperated with NGOs.

Authorities continued to use a variety of laws to harass, stigmatize, and in some cases halt the operation of domestic and foreign human rights NGOs (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association). In an investigation published in February, the investigative outlet *Proyekt* reported that the harassment of renowned historian of the gulag and human rights activist Yuriy Dmitriyev had been supervised by Anatoliy Seryshev, an assistant to President Putin and former head of the FSB in Karelia. *Proyekt* noted that Dmitriyev began to receive threats after Memorial, the human rights organization he led, published a list in 2016 of individuals who had participated in the Stalinist repressions, which included Vasilii Mikhailovich Seryshev, a suspected relative of Anatoliy Seryshev. On February 16, a court rejected Dmitriyev’s appeal and ordered him to serve out his 13-year prison sentence on charges that many observers assessed to be in retaliation for his work to expose Stalin-era crimes. Memorial considered Dmitriyev to be a political prisoner (see *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Russia for 2020).

Officials often displayed hostility toward the activities of human rights organizations and suggested their work was unpatriotic and detrimental to national security. Authorities continued to apply several indirect tactics to suppress or close domestic NGOs, including the application of various laws and harassment in the form of prosecution, investigations, fines, and raids (see sections 1.e. and 2.b.).

Authorities generally refused to cooperate with NGOs that were critical of government activities or listed as a foreign agent. International human rights NGOs had almost no presence east of the Ural Mountains or in the North Caucasus. A few local NGOs addressed human rights problems in these regions but often chose not to work on politically sensitive topics to avoid retaliation by local authorities. One NGO in this region reported that the organization’s employees sometimes had to resort to working in an individual capacity rather than as representatives of the organization.

In November authorities initiated legal proceedings to close two key branches of the country’s most prominent and widely cited human rights association, Memorial. On November 8, the Moscow Prosecutor’s Office filed suit in Moscow City Court to liquidate the Memorial Human Rights Center on the grounds that the group had “hidden information about the performance of the function of a foreign agent.” The center was also accused of “justifying extremism and terrorism” by maintaining its widely referenced list of political prisoners, which included individuals Memorial assessed had been labeled as extremists or terrorists for political reasons.

On November 11, the Prosecutor General’s Office filed a parallel lawsuit seeking to liquidate International Memorial for alleged “systemic” violations of the country’s “foreign agent” NGO law. On December 28, the Supreme Court ordered the closure of International Memorial, and the Moscow City Court concluded its proceedings and ordered the Memorial Human Rights Center to close the next day. Russian and international human rights organizations widely decried the moves to close the branches of Memorial as politically motivated, incommensurate to the alleged offenses, and a grave blow to independent civil society in the country.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: Authorities refused to cooperate with the OSCE Moscow Mechanism rapporteur investigating human rights abuses in Chechnya in 2018 and did not permit him to visit the country. Three years after the release of the rapporteur’s report, the government had not provided the OSCE a substantive response to the report.

Government Human Rights Bodies: Some government institutions continued to promote human rights and intervened in selected abuse complaints, despite widespread doubt as to these institutions’ effectiveness.

Many observers did not consider the 168-member Civic Chamber, composed of government-appointed members from civil society organizations, to be an effective check on the government.

The Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights is an advisory body to the president tasked with monitoring systemic problems in legislation and individual human rights cases, developing proposals to submit to the president and government, and monitoring their implementation. The president appoints some council members by decree, and not all members operated independently. Experts noted that the head of the council and senior member of the ruling United Russia party, Valeriy Fadeyev, worked closely with government authorities and often echoed their assessment of well known human rights cases. The high commissioner for human rights, Tatyana Mosalkova, was viewed as a figure with very limited autonomy. The country had regional ombudspersons in all regions with responsibilities similar to Mosalkova’s. Their effectiveness varied significantly, and local authorities often undermined their independence.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is illegal, and the law provides the same punishment for a relative, including a spouse, who commits rape as for a nonrelative. The penalty for conviction of rape is three to six years’ imprisonment for a single offense, with additional time imposed for aggravating factors. According to NGOs, many law enforcement personnel and prosecutors did not consider spousal or acquaintance rape a priority and did not encourage reporting or prosecuting such cases. NGOs reported that local police officers sometimes refused to respond to rape or domestic violence calls unless the victim’s life was directly threatened. Authorities typically did not consider rape or attempted rape to be life threatening.

Domestic violence remained a significant problem. There is no domestic violence provision in the law and no legal definition of domestic violence, making it difficult to know its actual prevalence in the country. The law considers beatings by “close relatives” an administrative rather than a criminal offense for first-time offenders, provided the beating does not cause serious harm requiring hospital treatment. The anti-domestic-violence NGO ANNA Center estimated that 60 to 70 percent of women who experienced some form of domestic violence did not seek help due to fear, public shame, lack of financial independence from their partners, or lack of confidence in law enforcement authorities. Laws that address bodily harm are general in nature and do not permit police to initiate a criminal investigation unless the victim files a complaint. The burden of collecting evidence in such cases typically falls on the alleged victims. The law prohibits threats, assault, battery, and killing, but most acts of domestic violence did not fall within the jurisdiction of the Prosecutor’s Office. The law does not provide for protection orders, which experts believed could help keep women safe from experiencing recurrent violence by their partners.

Open Media reported in January that the government “drastically cut” funding for domestic violence initiatives in the previous year, from 16.5 million rubles (\$223,000) in 2019 to two million rubles (\$27,000) in 2020. During the year the government provided a grant to only one NGO of dozens of domestic violence crisis centers and legal aid organizations that sought government funding. According to Open Media, the government instead funded projects aimed at preventing divorce or promoting “Orthodox Christian traditions to strengthen families.”

In December 2020 the Ministry of Justice added the prominent women’s rights NGO Nasiliu.net – Russian for No to Violence – to the registry of “foreign agents,” a move media attributed to the organization’s support of a draft bill to recriminalize domestic violence introduced to the State Duma in 2019. Director Anna Rivina characterized the designation as a political reaction by the government and an effort to silence dissent and criticism of its stance on domestic violence, which experts said was influenced by conservative “traditional values.”

COVID-19-related stay-at-home orders and general restrictions on movement trapped many women experiencing domestic violence in the same space as their abusers. Many survivors noted they could not leave their homes due to fear of being punished for violating the stay-at-home order.

There were reports that women defending themselves from domestic violence were charged with crimes. In March authorities recognized three sisters accused of murdering their abusive father in 2018 as victims after the Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against the father on charges of sexual assault, coercion into sexual acts, and torture. Their lawyers expressed hope this “breakthrough” in the case would result in the dismissal of the sisters’ murder charges.

According to the ANNA Center, when domestic violence offenses were charged, articles under the country’s criminal law were usually applied that employed the process of private prosecution. The process of private prosecution requires the victim to gather all necessary evidence and bear all costs after the injured party or his or her guardian took the initiative to file a complaint with a magistrate judge. The NGO noted that this process severely disadvantages survivors. Experts estimated that seven of 10 such cases were dropped due to reconciliation of the parties as a result of the abuser pressuring, manipulating, and intimidating the survivor who often had to continue living in the same house.

According to NGOs, police were often unwilling to register complaints of domestic violence, saying that cases were “family matters,” frequently discouraged survivors from submitting complaints, and often pressed victims to reconcile with abusers.

Most domestic violence cases filed with authorities were either dismissed on technical grounds or transferred to a reconciliation process conducted by a justice of the peace whose focus was on preserving the family rather than punishing the perpetrator. NGOs estimated that only 3 percent of such cases eventually reached the courts. Survivors of domestic violence in the North Caucasus experienced difficulty seeking protection from authorities.

NGOs noted government-operated institutions provided services to affected women such as social apartments, hospitals wards, and shelters. Access to these services was often complicated, since they required proof of residency in that municipality, as well as proof of low-income status. In many cases these documents were controlled by the abusers and not available to survivors. A strict two-month stay limit in the shelters and limited business hours of these services further restricted survivors’ access to social services. After COVID-19-related restrictions forced many shelters to close temporarily, NGOs rented out apartments and hotels to shelter the survivors.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not specifically prohibit FGM/C. NGOs in Dagestan reported that FGM/C was occasionally practiced in some villages. On October 23, media outlets reported that the first case of FGM/C to be prosecuted in a Russian court was likely to end without resolution due to procedural delays that extended proceedings beyond the two-year statute of limitations for the offense stipulated by law. Criminal charges of “causing minor harm to health” were brought against a doctor in Ingushetiya who performed an FGM/C operation on a nine-year-old girl at her father’s request in 2019.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Human rights groups reported that “honor killings” of women persisted in Chechnya, Dagestan, and elsewhere in the North Caucasus, but the cases were rarely reported or acknowledged. Local police, doctors, and lawyers often collaborated with the families involved to cover up the crimes. In some parts of the North Caucasus, women continued to face bride kidnapping, polygamy, forced marriage (including early and child marriage), legal discrimination, virginity testing before marriage, and forced adherence to Islamic dress codes. Women in the North Caucasus often lost custody of their children after the father’s death or a divorce due to traditional law that prohibits women from living in a house without a man.

Sexual Harassment: The law contains a general provision against compelling a person to perform actions of a sexual character by means of blackmail, threats, or by taking advantage of the victim’s economic or other dependence on the perpetrator. There is no legal definition of harassment, however, and no comprehensive guidelines on how it should be addressed. Sexual harassment was reportedly widespread, but courts often rejected victims’ claims due to lack of sufficient evidence.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities during the year, although there had been such reports in previous years.

There were significant social and cultural barriers to family planning and reproductive health in the North Caucasus republics, including cases of FGM/C.

There are no legal restrictions on access to contraceptives, but very few citizens received any kind of sexual education, hampering their use. Senior government officials and church and conservative groups in the country stridently advocated for increasing the birth rate, and their opposition to family planning initiatives contributed to a social stigma that also affected the use of contraceptives.

Access to family planning and skilled medical attendance at birth varied widely based on geography and was often extremely limited in rural areas.

According to various human rights groups, COVID-19 restrictions negatively affected accessibility for the full range of reproductive health services.

The government did not deny access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence, but survivors did not always seek needed treatment due to social stigma. Emergency contraception was readily available as part of clinical management of rape in urban centers, but not necessarily in rural areas.

Discrimination: The constitution and law provide that men and women enjoy the same legal status and rights, but women often encountered significant restrictions. Women experienced discrimination in the workplace, in pay, and in access to credit. At the start of the year, the government lifted Soviet-era gender-based employment restrictions, enabling women to do approximately 350 types of jobs that had previously been forbidden, such as truck driving. The Ministry of Labor ruled 100 jobs to be especially physically taxing, including firefighting, mining, and steam boiler repair, which remained off-limits to women.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The law prohibits discrimination based on nationality, but according to a 2017 report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, officials discriminated against minorities, including through “de facto racial profiling, targeting in particular migrants and persons from Central Asia and the Caucasus.” Activists reported that police officers often stopped individuals who looked foreign and asked them for their documents, claiming that they contained mistakes even when they were in order, and demanded bribes.

Hate crimes targeting ethnic minorities continued to be a problem. According to a 2018 report by the human rights group Antidiscrimination Center Memorial, Roma faced widespread discrimination in access to resources and basic utilities; demolitions of houses and forced evictions, including of children, often in winter; violation of the right to education (segregation of Romani children in low-quality schools); deprivation of parental rights; and other forms of structural discrimination.

During the year the government sought to repress expressions of ethnic identity, including calls for the preservation of minority languages and cultures. In February the City Court of Naberezhnye Chelny fined the writer and public figure Fauziya Bayramova for incitement to violate the territorial integrity of Russia. Bayramova was convicted after authorities reviewed the translated transcript of her speech at a scientific conference organized by the All-Tatar Public Center of Kazan in 2020 in which she had spoken of the need to preserve Tatar culture and identity. In another example, in 2019 law enforcement authorities forcibly broke up a protest in Ingushetiya against government efforts to cede disputed territory to Chechnya and detained 51 individuals on charges related to use of violence against security forces. According to Memorial, as of July, 38 individuals had been convicted in relation to the protest, including Magomed Khamkhoyev, who was sentenced to three and one-half years in prison in February. On December 15, seven leaders of the Ingushetiya protest movement were found guilty of forming an extremist group and assaulting law enforcement, and they received prison sentences ranging from seven to nine years. Memorial considered them to be political prisoners.

Indigenous Peoples

The constitution and various statutes provide support for members of “small-numbered” indigenous groups of the North, Siberia, and the Far East, permitting them to create self-governing bodies and allowing them to seek compensation if economic development threatens their lands. The government granted the status of “indigenous” and its associated benefits only to those ethnic groups numbering fewer than 50,000 and maintaining their traditional way of life. A 2017 report by Antidiscrimination Center Memorial noted that the major challenges facing indigenous persons included “seizure of territories where these minorities traditionally live and maintain their households by mining and oil and gas companies; removal of self-government bodies of indigenous peoples; and repression of activists and employees of social organizations, including the fabrication of criminal cases.”

Indigenous sources reported state-sponsored harassment, including interrogations by security services as well as employment discrimination. Such treatment was especially acute in areas where corporations wanted to exploit natural resources. By law indigenous groups have exclusive rights to their indigenous lands, but the land itself and its natural resources belong to the state. Companies are required to pay compensation to local inhabitants, but activists asserted that local authorities rarely enforced this provision. Activists stated that interests of corporations and indigenous persons were in constant conflict.

Children

Birth Registration: By law citizenship derives from parents at birth or from birth within the country’s territory if the parents are unknown or if the child may not claim the parents’ citizenship. Failure to register a birth resulted in the denial of public services.

Education: Education is free and compulsory through grade 11, although regional authorities frequently denied school access to the children of persons who were not registered local residents, including Roma, asylum seekers, and migrant workers.

Child Abuse: The country does not have a law on child abuse, but the law prohibits murder, battery, and rape. The penalties for conviction of such crimes range from five to 15 years in prison and, if they result in the death of a minor, up to 20 years in prison. The law makes beatings by “close relatives” an administrative rather than a criminal offense for first-time offenders, provided the beating does not cause serious harm requiring hospital treatment, applies to children as well. Some State Duma deputies claimed that children needed discipline and authority in the family, condoning beating as a mode of discipline.

Studies indicated that violence against children was common. According to a report published in 2019 by the National Institute for Child Protection, one in four parents admitted to having beaten their children at least once with a belt.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage is 18 for both men and women. Local authorities may authorize marriage from the age of 16 under certain circumstances. More than a dozen regions allow marriage from the age of 14 under special circumstances, such as pregnancy or the birth of a child.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The age of consent is 16. The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation, sale, offering, or procuring of children for commercial sexual exploitation, and practices related to child pornography. Authorities generally enforced the law.

The law prohibits the manufacture, distribution, and possession with intent to distribute child pornography, but possession without intent to distribute is not prohibited by law. Manufacture and distribution of pornography involving children younger than 18 is punishable by two to eight years in prison or three to 10 years in prison if children younger than 14 are involved. Authorities considered child pornography to be a serious problem.

Roskomnadzor has the power to shut down any website immediately and without due process until its owners prove its content does not include child pornography.

Institutionalized Children: There were reports of neglect as well as physical and psychological abuse in state institutions for children. NGOs reported that children with disabilities were especially vulnerable to low-quality care at institutions due to a lack of resources and inadequate reforms. NGOs pointed to the closing of schools and strict stay-at-home orders during the height of COVID-19 measures as especially detrimental to at-risk children, including children in institutions. NGOs noted that many had limited access to social services and teachers or counselors.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

The 2010 census estimated the Jewish population at slightly more than 150,000. The Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) estimated the Jewish population at 172,500, while the Federation of Jewish Communities estimated there were 1.5 million persons of Jewish heritage.

In the most recent data available, the RJC reported a slight decline in the level of anti-Semitic violence in 2020, compared with previous years, and reported similar downward trends in anti-Semitism in the public sphere, with only a few notable anti-Semitic posts on social media sites that caused a negative reaction among the public and journalistic community. The RJC reported, however, that limited political pressure on Jewish organizations continued in 2020. There were no reported cases of anti-Semitic attacks against the Jewish community during 2020. There was one instance in which law enforcement intervened to thwart an attempt to kill a Jewish leader that resulted in the arrest of the would-be killer. There was only one reported instance of anti-Semitic expression on state television and a small number of anti-Semitic statements and publications by journalists and in social media posts by private citizens online. By the end of 2020, the RJC reported 10 criminal sentences had been issued against individuals for statements that directly or indirectly related to anti-Semitism, with the most common sentence a fine for hate speech or “propaganda through the internet.”

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The law provides protection for persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities, including access to education, employment, health services, information, communications, buildings, transportation, the judicial system, and other state services. The government did not enforce these provisions effectively.

The conditions of guardianship imposed by courts on persons with disabilities deprived them of almost all personal rights. Activists reported that courts declared tens of thousands of individuals “legally incompetent” due to intellectual disabilities, forcing them to go through guardians to exercise their legal rights, even when they could make decisions for themselves. Courts rarely restored legal capacity to individuals with disabilities. By law individuals with intellectual disabilities were at times prevented from marrying without a guardian’s consent.

In many cases persons with intellectual or physical disabilities were confined to institutions where they were often subjected to abuse and neglect. Roszdravnadzor, the Federal Service for Surveillance in Health Care, announced that it found abuses in 87 percent of institutions for children and adults with intellectual disabilities during a 2019 audit.

Federal law requires that buildings be accessible to persons with disabilities. While there were improvements, especially in large cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, authorities did not effectively enforce the law in many areas of public transportation and in buildings. Many individuals in wheelchairs reported they continued to have trouble accessing public transportation and had to rely on private cars. Wheelchair-accessible street curbs were not widely available in many regions throughout the country.

Election law does not specifically mandate that polling places be accessible to persons with disabilities, and most of them were not. Election officials generally brought mobile ballot boxes to the homes of voters with disabilities.

The government began to implement inclusive education, but many children with disabilities continued not to study in mainstream schools due to a lack of accommodations to facilitate their individual learning needs. Many schools did not have the physical infrastructure or adequately trained staff to meet the needs of children with disabilities, leaving them no choice but to stay at home or attend segregated schools. Even when children were allowed to attend a mainstream school, many staff and children lacked understanding to meet the educational needs of the child. While the law mandates inclusive education for children with disabilities, authorities generally segregated them from mainstream society through a system that institutionalized them through adulthood. Graduates of such institutions often lacked the social, educational, and vocational skills to function in society.

There appeared to be no clear standardized formal legal mechanism by which individuals could contest their assignment to a facility for persons with disabilities. The classification of children with intellectual disabilities by category of disability often followed them through their lives. The official designations “imbecile” and “idiot,” assigned by commissions that assess children with developmental delays at the age of three, signified that authorities considered the child uneducable. These designations were almost always irrevocable. The designation “weak” (having a slight cognitive or intellectual disability) followed an individual on official documents, creating barriers to employment and housing after graduation from state institutions.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Persons with HIV or AIDS faced significant legal discrimination, growing informal stigma-based barriers, and employment discrimination.

In 2020 the government lifted restrictions on persons with HIV who wanted to adopt children if the adoptive parents met strict criteria, such as being on dispensary observation for at least a year and having a CD4 cell level of more than 350 cells/milliliter. Nonetheless, they also continued to face barriers to adopting children in many cases.

According to NGO activists, men who have sex with men were unlikely to seek antiretroviral treatment, since treatment exposed the fact that these individuals had the virus, while sex workers were afraid to appear in the official system due to threats from law enforcement bodies. Many individuals who injected drugs also did not seek treatment because of the country’s aggressive criminalization of illegal drugs and marginalization of users. By law foreign citizens who are HIV-positive may be deported. The law, however, bars the deportation of HIV-positive foreigners who have a Russian national or permanent resident spouse, child, or parents. Economic migrants concealed their HIV status and avoided treatment due to fear of deportation. Younger women with HIV or AIDS, in particular, faced multiple barriers to accessing treatment because of stigma, discrimination, harmful gender stereotypes, gender-based violence, and difficulty accessing critical sexual and reproductive health care.

Children with HIV faced discrimination in education. NGOs noted that many younger children with HIV faced resistance by other parents when trying to enroll in schools.

The Ministry of Justice continued to designate HIV-related NGOs as foreign agents, effectively reducing the number of organizations that could serve the community (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association).

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

During the year there were reports state actors committed violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, particularly in Chechnya (see section 1.b.).

There were reports that government agents attacked, harassed, and threatened LGBTIQ+ activists. For example, *Meduza* reported that Dagestani police forcibly returned Khalimat Taramova, a 22-year-old woman and victim of domestic violence, to Chechnya after she escaped to a women’s shelter in Makhachkala following threats by her family and local police due to her sexual orientation. In a statement on June 12, Chechen minister Akhmed Dudayev praised law enforcement for having “foiled an attempted kidnapping” by “instigators.” On the same day, the Russian LGBT Network said it would file a complaint with the ECHR about Taramova’s abduction and expressed concern that her sexual orientation placed her at risk of further abuse in Chechnya.

LGBTIQ+ persons were targets of societal violence, and police often failed to respond adequately to such incidents. For example, in March an LGBTIQ+ activist from Murmansk, Valentina Likhoshva, reported to police that she had received threats after receiving an international award recognizing her contributions to social justice and human rights in the Barents region. Media outlets reported that police subsequently refused to investigate her claims, commenting that because the threats came by email, their validity could not be determined.

During the year authorities acted on a limited basis to investigate and punish those complicit in societal violence and abuses by the state. For example, on January 12, a court in Yekaterinburg sentenced Pavel Zuyev to five years in prison on robbery charges after he beat and robbed two gay men in September 2020. The court determined that Zuyev assaulted the men due to their sexual orientation and ordered him to compensate them financially for emotional damages.

In 2020 the Russian LGBT Network released a report that showed 12 percent of LGBTQI+ respondents in a survey had experienced physical violence, 4 percent had experienced sexual violence, and 56 percent had experienced psychological abuse during their lifetime. The report noted that LGBTQI+ persons faced discrimination in their place of study or work, when receiving medical services, and when searching for housing. The report also noted that transgender persons were uniquely vulnerable to discrimination and violence. The Russian LGBT Network claimed that law enforcement authorities did not always protect the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals and were sometimes the source of violence themselves. As a result, LGBTQI+ individuals had extremely low levels of trust in courts and police.

A homophobic campaign continued in state-controlled media in which officials, journalists, and others derided LGBTQI+ persons as “perverts,” “sodomites,” and “abnormal,” and conflated homosexuality with pedophilia.

There were reports police conducted involuntary physical exams of transgender or intersex persons. In April a St. Petersburg court ordered a transgender man, Innokentiy Alimov, to undergo a gynecological examination to determine his gender, on the basis of which he was transferred to a women’s detention center. Alimov was sentenced to four and one-half years in prison in a drug trafficking case and spent at least two months in a “punishment cell,” which prison authorities argued was a safer place than among the general population.

The Association of Russian-speaking Intersex reported that medical specialists often pressured intersex persons (or their parents if they were underage) into having so-called normalization surgery without providing accurate information about the procedure or what being intersex meant.

The law criminalizes the distribution of “propaganda” of “nontraditional sexual relations” to minors and effectively limits the rights of free expression and assembly for citizens who wish to advocate publicly for LGBTQI+ rights or express the opinion that homosexuality is normal. Examples of what the government considered LGBTQI+ propaganda included materials that “directly or indirectly approve of persons who are in nontraditional sexual relationships” (see section 2.a.). Authorities charged feminist and LGBTQI+ rights defender Yuliya Tsvetkova with the criminal offense of disseminating pornography online after she shared images depicting female bodies on her social media accounts. Tsvetkova’s trial began on April 12 and continued as of December.

The law does not prohibit discrimination by state or nonstate actors against LGBTQI+ persons with respect to essential goods and services such as housing, employment, or access to government services such as health care.

LGBTQI+ persons reported significant societal stigma and discrimination, which some attributed to official promotion of intolerance and homophobia. In July a large health-food retail chain, VkusVill, ran and later apologized for an ad featuring a gay couple shopping in the store, which was part of a campaign featuring shoppers who visit the chain. Media outlets reported that the initial reaction to the ad was generally positive. As responses became increasingly critical, however, the chain was accused of promoting homosexuality. Its leadership removed the ad and apologized for “hurting the feelings of a large number of buyers, employees, partners and suppliers.”

High levels of employment discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons reportedly persisted. Activists asserted that the majority of LGBTQI+ persons hid their sexual orientation or gender identity due to fear of losing their jobs or homes, as well as the risk of violence. LGBTQI+ students also reported discrimination at schools and universities.

Medical practitioners reportedly continued to limit or deny LGBTQI+ persons health services due to intolerance and prejudice. The Russian LGBT Network’s report indicated that, upon disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity, LGBTQI+ individuals often encountered strong negative reactions and the presumption they were mentally ill. According to a poll conducted in July by the government-controlled Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 23 percent of respondents considered members of the LGBTQI+ community to be “sick people who need help,” an opinion mainly held by men and persons older than age 60.

Transgender persons faced difficulty updating their names and gender markers on government documents to reflect their gender identity because the government had not established standard procedures, and many civil registry offices denied their requests. When documents failed to reflect their gender identity, transgender persons often faced harassment by law enforcement officers and discrimination in accessing health care, education, housing, transportation, and employment.

There were reports LGBTQI+ persons also faced discrimination in parental rights. The Russian LGBT Network reported LGBTQI+ parents often feared that the country’s prohibition on the “propaganda of nontraditional sexual orientation” to minors would be used to remove custody of their children. On February 15, the ECHR inquired with Russian authorities on behalf of a transgender man who lost guardianship of his two foster children when authorities in Yekaterinburg learned that he had begun to change his gender. The man was granted asylum in Spain.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

The lack of an internal passport often prevented homeless citizens from fully securing their legal rights and social services. Homeless persons faced barriers to obtaining legal documentation as well as medical insurance, without which clinics refused to treat them.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides that workers may form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination, but it does not require employers to reinstate workers fired due to their union activity. The law prohibits reprisals against striking workers. Unions must register with the Federal Registration Service, often a cumbersome process that includes lengthy delays and convoluted bureaucracy. The grounds on which trade union registration may be denied are not defined and can be arbitrary or unjustified. Active-duty members of the military, civil servants, customs workers, judges, prosecutors, and persons working under civil contracts are excluded from the right to organize. The law requires labor unions to be independent of government bodies, employers, political parties, and NGOs.

The law places several restrictions on the right to bargain collectively. For example, only one collective bargaining agreement is permitted per enterprise, and only a union or group of unions representing at least one-half the workforce may bargain collectively. The law allows workers to elect representatives if there is no union. The law does not specify who has authority to bargain collectively when there is no trade union in an enterprise.

The law prohibits strikes in the military and emergency response services. It also prohibits strikes in essential public-service sectors, including utilities and transportation, and strikes that would threaten the country’s defense, safety, and the life and health of its workers. The law additionally prohibits some nonessential public servants from striking and imposes compulsory arbitration for railroad, postal, and municipal workers, as well as public servants in roles other than law enforcement.

Laws regulating workers’ strikes remained extremely restrictive, making it difficult to declare a strike but easy for authorities to rule a strike illegal and punish workers. It was also very difficult for those without a labor contract to go on a legal strike.

Union members must follow extensive legal requirements and engage in consultations with employers before acquiring the right to strike. Solidarity strikes and strikes on matters related to state policies are illegal, as are strikes that do not respect the onerous time limits, procedures, and requirements mandated by law. Employers may hire workers to replace strikers. Workers must give prior notice of the following aspects of a proposed strike: a list of the differences of opinion between employer and workers that triggered the strike; the date and time at which the strike is intended to start, its duration, and the number of anticipated participants; the name of the body that is leading the strike and the representatives authorized to participate in the conciliation procedures; and proposals for the minimum service to be provided during the strike. In the event a declared strike is ruled illegal and takes place, courts may confiscate union property to cover employers’ losses.

The Federal Labor and Employment Service (RosTrud) regulates employer compliance with labor law and is responsible for “controlling and supervising compliance with labor laws and other legal acts which deal with labor norms” by employers. Several state agencies, including the Ministry of Justice, Prosecutor’s Office, RosTrud, and Ministry of Internal Affairs, are responsible for enforcing the law. These agencies, however, frequently failed to enforce the law, and violations of freedom of association and collective bargaining provisions were common. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those under other similar laws related to civil rights.

Employers frequently engaged in reprisals against workers for independent union activity, including threatening to assign them to night shifts, denying benefits, and blacklisting or firing them. Although unions were occasionally successful in court, in most cases managers who engaged in antiunion activities did not face penalties.

In March the medical professional trade union Alliance of Doctors was put on a “foreign agent” list. Anastasiya Vasilyeva, the head of the union, had previously treated Aleksey Navalny. Vasilyeva was detained again in January and again in September. In October, Vasilyeva was convicted of breaching COVID-19 safety protocols for joining protests demanding Navalny’s release, which resulted in one year of restrictions, including a curfew and travel limitations.

In April and May, an estimated 200 workers with the Moscow Metro subway system were fired for registering online to participate in a protest in support of Aleksey Navalny. As of August, 42 of the workers had sued the company and at least two of the workers had been reinstated.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits most forms of forced or compulsory labor but allows for it as a penal sentence, in some cases as prison labor contracted to private enterprises.

The government did not effectively enforce laws against forced labor, although prescribed penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other serious crimes. Compulsory prison labor occurred, which in some cases was used as punishment for expressing political or ideological views. Human rights groups expressed concern regarding the prison system being used in the construction sector in remote regions, due to insufficient numbers of Central

Asian migrant workers. Instances of labor trafficking were reported in the construction, manufacturing, logging, textile, and maritime industries, as well as in sawmills, agriculture, sheep farms, grocery and retail stores, restaurants, waste sorting, street sweeping, domestic service, and forced begging (see section 7.c.). Serious problems remained in protecting migrant laborers, particularly from North Korea, who generally earned 40 percent less than the average salary. Migrant workers at times experienced exploitative labor conditions characteristic of trafficking cases, such as withholding of identity documents, nonpayment for services rendered, physical abuse, unsafe working conditions, and extremely poor living conditions.

Under a state-to-state agreement, North Korean citizens worked for many years in the country in a variety of sectors, including the logging and construction industries in the Far East. To comply with the 2017 UN Security Council resolution prohibiting the employment of North Koreans, Russia had largely eliminated from the workforce North Korean laborers working in the country legally and continued to affirm its commitment to do so. Many North Korean laborers, however, continued to enter the country via fraudulent channels to work informally, for example by obtaining tourist or student visas. Authorities failed to screen departing North Korean workers for human trafficking and indications of forced labor.

There were reports of forced labor in the production of bricks, raising livestock, and at sawmills, primarily in Dagestan. While both men and women were exploited for forced labor in these industries in the Northern Caucasus region, victims were primarily male job seekers recruited in Moscow.

Also see the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits all worst forms of child labor, explicitly prohibiting work in unhealthy or dangerous conditions, underground work, or jobs that might endanger a child’s health and moral development. The law prohibits the employment of children younger than 16 in most cases and regulates the working conditions of children younger than 18. The law permits children at age 14 to work under certain conditions and with the approval of a parent or guardian. Such work must not threaten the child’s health or welfare. RosTrud is responsible for inspecting enterprises and organizations to identify violations of labor and occupational health standards for minors. The government effectively enforced the law, although penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for other serious crimes.

There were no available nationally representative data on the prevalence of child labor in the country, although children reportedly worked in the informal and retail sectors. Some children, both Russian and foreign, were subjected to commercial sexual exploitation, forced participation in the production of pornography, and forced begging (see section 6, Children).

See the Department of Labor’s List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination in respect to employment and occupation based on race, religion, national origin, color, sex, ethnicity, age, and refugee status, but does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, HIV status, gender identity, or disability. Although the country placed a general ban on discrimination, the government did not effectively enforce the law, and penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for other civil rights-related laws.

Discrimination based on gender in compensation, professional training, hiring, and dismissal was common, but very difficult to prove. Employers often preferred to hire men to save on maternity and child-care costs and to avoid the perceived unreliability associated with women with small children. The law prohibits employer discrimination in posting job vacancy information. It also prohibits employers from requesting workers with specific gender, race, nationality, address registration, age, and other factors unrelated to personal skills and competencies. Notwithstanding the law, vacancy announcements sometimes specified gender and age requirements or a desired physical appearance.

According to the Center for Social and Labor Rights, courts often ruled in favor of employees filing complaints, but the sums awarded were often seen as not worth the cost and time required to take legal action.

Women are restricted from employment in certain occupations in the chemical industry, metallurgy, oil production, coal mining, manufacturing of insulation, and some others owing to the harmful effects of certain compounds on women’s reproductive health. In January an amended law went into effect that reduced the number of labor categories prohibited to women from 456 to 98. According to the Ministry of Labor, women on average earned 39 percent less than men in 2019. The legal age requirements for women and men to access either their full or partial pension benefits are not equal.

Sexual harassment in the workplace continued. The law does not prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, and there are no criminal or civil remedies for sexual harassment experienced in the workplace.

The law requires applicants to undergo a mandatory pre-employment health screening for some jobs listed in the labor code or when enrolling at educational institutions. The medical commission may restrict or prohibit access to jobs and secondary or higher education if it finds signs of physical or mental problems. The law prohibits discrimination of persons with disabilities, but they were often subjected to employment discrimination. Companies with 35 to 100 employees have an employment quota of 1 to 3 percent for persons with disabilities, while those with more than 100 employees have a 2 to 4 percent quota. An NGO noted that some companies kept persons with disabilities on the payroll to fulfill the quotas but did not actually provide employment for them. Inadequate workplace access for persons with disabilities also limited work opportunities.

Many migrants regularly faced discrimination and hazardous or exploitative working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic more severely impacted migrant workers. Employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity was a problem, especially in the public sector and education. Employers fired LGBTQI+ persons for their sexual orientation, gender identity, or public activism in support of LGBTQI+ rights. Primary and secondary school teachers were often the targets of such pressure due to the law on “propaganda of nontraditional sexual orientation” targeted at minors (see section 6, Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity).

Persons with HIV or AIDS were prohibited from working in areas of medical research and medicine that dealt with bodily fluids, including surgery and blood drives. The Ministry of Internal Affairs does not hire persons with HIV or AIDS, although persons who contract HIV or AIDS while employed are protected from losing their job.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wages and Hour Laws: The law provides for a minimum wage for all sectors, which was above the poverty income level. Some local governments had minimum wage rates higher than the national rate.

Nonpayment of wages is a criminal offense and is punishable by fines, compulsory labor, or imprisonment. Federal law provides for administrative fines of employers who fail to pay salaries and sets progressive compensation scales for workers affected by wage arrears. The government did not effectively enforce the law, and nonpayment or late payment of wages remained widespread. According to the Federal State Statistics Service, Rosstat, as of November 1, wage arrears amounted to approximately 1.34 billion rubles (\$18.1 million).

The law provides for standard workhours, overtime, and annual leave. The standard workweek may not exceed 40 hours. Employers may not request overtime work from pregnant women, workers younger than 18, and other categories of employees specified by federal law. Standard annual paid leave is 28 calendar days. Employees who perform work involving harmful or dangerous labor conditions and employees in the Far North regions receive additional annual paid leave. Organizations have discretion to grant additional leave to employees.

The law stipulates that payment for overtime must be at least 150 percent for the first two hours and not less than 200 percent after that. At an employee’s request, overtime may be compensated by additional holiday leave. Overtime work may not exceed four hours in a two-day period or 120 hours in a year for each employee.

RosTrud is responsible for enforcing wage and hour laws and generally applied the law in the formal sector. The number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce the law in all sectors. Inspectors have the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions, although there were significant restrictions on inspectors’ authority to inspect workplaces. Experts generally pointed to prevention of these offenses, rather than adequacy of available punishment, as the main challenge to protection of worker rights. RosTrud noted state labor inspectors needed additional professional training and that the agency needed additional inspectors to enforce consistent compliance. Although the labor inspectorate frequently referred cases for potential criminal prosecution, few of these cases were instituted by the Prosecutor’s Office. In addition, courts routinely cancel decisions and penalties imposed by labor inspectors.

The government made efforts to effectively enforce minimum wage and hour laws, although resources and inspectors were limited. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for similar crimes.

Occupational Safety and Health: Occupational safety and health standards were appropriate within the main industries. The law establishes minimum conditions for workplace safety and worker health, but it does not explicitly allow workers to remove themselves from hazardous workplaces without threat to their employment. The law entitles foreigners working in the country to the same rights and protections as citizens.

RosTrud is also responsible for enforcing occupational safety and health laws. The government made efforts to effectively enforce occupational safety and health laws, although resources and inspectors were limited. Serious breaches of occupational safety and health provisions are criminal offenses, and penalties for violations were commensurate with those of other similar crimes.

No national-level information was available on the number of workplace accidents or fatalities during the year. According to Rosstat, in 2019 approximately 23,300 workers were injured in industrial accidents, including 1,060 deaths.

Informal Sector: As of September an estimated 15 million persons were employed in the shadow economy, an 11.5 percent increase from the same period in 2020. Employment in the informal sector was concentrated in the southern regions. The largest share of laborers in the informal economy was concentrated in the trade, construction, and

agricultural sectors, where workers were more vulnerable to exploitative working conditions. Labor migrants worked in low-skilled jobs in construction but also in housing, utilities, agriculture, and retail trade sectors, often informally. Labor law and protections apply to workers in the informal sector.

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