

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	346
Land:	Ukraine
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Annual Report 2019 - Russia
Udgivet:	17. januar 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	4. februar 2019

Document #2002220

HRW – Human Rights Watch

World Report 2019 - Russia

The government increased its crackdown on political opposition and other critics before and after presidential elections that Vladimir Putin won, and that lacked real competition. Authorities continued to stifle critical voices, particularly online, through criminal prosecutions on extremism charges. In November, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), amongst other violations, found that the repeated arrests of opposition figure Alexei Navalny were unlawful and for the purpose of suppressing political pluralism. The Kremlin did not stop authorities in Chechnya from threatening and imprisoning human rights defenders.

The 2017 decriminalization of first battery offenses within the family weakened protections for survivors of domestic violence.

A shocking video of the torture of a prisoner forced the government to acknowledge the use of torture in Russian prisons.

Torture and Cruel and Degrading Treatment

In July, Novaya Gazeta published a leaked video of penitentiary staff in Yaroslavl viciously beating a prisoner. Responding to public indignation, Russia’s criminal investigation agency arrested 15 suspects by November. One suspect testified that staff recorded the video to demonstrate that they had carried out an order by senior officials to punish the prisoner.

The swift, effective investigation was unprecedented in Russia, where authorities typically dismiss prisoners’ complaints of ill-treatment.

In August, Meduza, an independent online media outlet, published data on more than 50 other publicly reported torture cases in 2018. The alleged perpetrators included police, investigators, security agents, and penitentiary officials. Authorities opened only a few criminal investigations into the allegations, and only one case advanced to trial.

Freedom of Assembly

Police arbitrarily detained thousands of protesters in several nationwide peaceful demonstrations. Courts routinely sentenced protesters to fines and short-term arrests for violating restrictive regulations on demonstrations. Authorities pressured universities, schools, and parents to discourage students from participating in protests.

In January, in response to authorities barring Alexei Navalny, a leading opposition politician, from running for president, his supporters organized nationwide rallies at which police detained over 370 people. Police also raided Navalny's campaign offices, and in some cities made home visits to warn people who had indicated on social media that they would attend rallies.

In May, police detained at least 1,600 people, including 158 children, in 27 cities during peaceful protests against Putin's inauguration. In some cases, police officers used excessive force.

In September, police detained at least 1,195 people, including at least 60 children, in 39 cities at peaceful protests against plans to raise the pension age. Police also detained at least 14 journalists covering the protests and beat three of them. Numerous peaceful protesters sustained injuries, including bruising and fractures from police beatings.

In October, authorities did not disperse a two-week mass protest in Ingushetia, over the demarcation of the republic's administrative border with Chechnya. Unidentified security officials kidnapped and beat an Amnesty International researcher who was observing the protests, and subjected him to mock executions. At time of writing, authorities were carrying out an inquiry into his complaint.

Freedom of Association

Authorities continued their large-scale smear campaign against independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The prosecutor general banned four more foreign organizations from Russia as “undesirable.”

In July, the Andrei Rylkov Foundation, a Russian group dedicated to responsible drug policy, filed a complaint with the ECtHR arguing that the law on “undesirable organizations” interferes with freedoms of expression and association. In 2017, a court fined the group 50,000 rubles (at the time, approximately US\$862) over an article on its website that contained a hyperlink to the website of a banned US organization. It was one of at least 11 Russian groups sanctioned over “undesirable” hyperlinks.

In August, the Justice Ministry proposed legislation further restricting foreign funding for Russian NGOs, introducing a procedure for the swift extrajudicial suspension of Russian NGOs on very broad grounds, and further broadening the grounds on which the government may ban foreign organizations as “undesirable.”

Freedom of Expression Online

Authorities continued to use vague anti-extremism legislation to criminally prosecute independent voices for social media posts and reposts. Russia's ombudsperson and Communications Ministry supported draft legislation, introduced in June, to eliminate criminal liability for reposts.

A November 2017 law empowered the prosecutor's office to extrajudicially block content shared by foreign “undesirable” organizations and websites disseminating materials from these organizations.

In December 2017, the Justice Ministry designated Voice of America and eight Radio Free Europe outlets as “foreign media foreign agent” under a law adopted in November 2017.

In April, a court in Moscow ruled to block Telegram, a popular messaging service with almost 10 million users in Russia, for refusing to give encryption keys to security services. In restricting access to Telegram, authorities also temporarily blocked millions of unrelated IP addresses.

In October, a court in Moscow fined The New Times, an independent online magazine, the unprecedented sum of 22.25 million rubles (US\$337,000) for supposed failure to report foreign funding, putting it at risk of closure.

In October, President Putin proposed a draft law decriminalizing a first offense of inciting hatred against ethnic, religious, or social groups. At time of writing, the draft law was pending parliamentary review.

Chechnya

In Chechnya, authorities arbitrarily detained, tortured, and disappeared suspected jihadists and local dissenters, and imposed collective punishment against their families.

In January, Chechen police arrested Oyub Titiev, the Grozny director of Memorial, on bogus marijuana possession charges. Memorial was the only human rights organization left which maintained a presence in Chechnya. Soon after, two separate arson attacks targeted Memorial's property in neighboring regions. Memorial's staff and Titiev's lawyers received anonymous threats and experienced surveillance by Chechen security officials, and the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, publicly threatened human rights defenders, promising to “break the backs of our enemies.” In the ensuing months, he repeatedly called Titiev a “drug addict” and a traitor. Titiev's trial was ongoing at time of writing.

In August, several Chechen youths attacked local police, allegedly killing one and wounding three. Following the attacks, police carried out abusive raids, involving arbitrary detentions and ill-treatment of dozens of young men, some of whom were under 18. Kadyrov stated he would inflict collective punishment on relatives of alleged insurgents and threatened human rights defenders who “have the audacity to ask why we resort to collective responsibility.” He equated human rights defenders with terrorists and said they would be banned from Chechnya after Titiev’s trial.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Federal authorities failed to carry out an effective investigation into the 2017 anti-gay purge in Chechnya, during which local police tortured dozens of men presumed to be gay. Authorities did not launch a criminal investigation into a complaint filed in autumn 2017 by an ethnic Russian victimized in the purge and did not grant his request for state protection. In May, during its universal periodic review before the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the Justice Minister said, “[we] failed to confirm not only the existence of facts of violations of these rights, we were unable to even find members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community in Chechnya.”

Rights activists documented new attacks on LGBT people by relatives and officials in Chechnya. Chechen singer Zelim Bakaev, whom security officials abducted in Grozny in August 2017, remained disappeared. In January, Kadyrov hinted that Bakaev died in an “honor killing.”

In July, a group of individuals in St. Petersburg, of Chechen origin, including at least one security official, attempted to kidnap Zelimkhan Akhmadov, who had fled Chechnya in 2017 because of threats over his presumed sexual orientation. An investigation was ongoing at time of writing.

In spring, police kept in incommunicado detention for over two months and ill-treated a young woman because of her presumed sexual orientation, and eventually released her to her family. Several women fled Chechnya under threat of honor killings over their presumed sexual orientation.

Authorities continued to enforce the discriminatory “gay propaganda” law. In May, authorities ordered the blocking of ParniPlus, a website that raises awareness about the HIV epidemic among gay men. In August, a governmental commission on minors’ affairs in Biisk found a 16-year-old boy in violation of the law because he had posted four images exhibiting males hugging and modeling underwear. The commission fined him and his family 50,000 rubles (US\$745). In October, Biisk City Court overturned the commission’s decision.

In February, a court in Yekaterinburg ruled a 40-year-old woman unfit to foster two children with disabilities, claiming that because she allegedly projected a “style of male behavior,” she violated Russian family legislation, as well as Russian society’s “traditions and mentality.” The boys had been living with the woman and her husband for several years.

World Cup 2018

In 2018, Russia hosted the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, which put several human rights issues in an international spotlight.

In February, workers in Nizhny Novgorod working on World Cup-related metro construction held strikes to protest wage and contract abuses. Workers on World Cup construction sites in other cities had reported similar abuses in previous years.

The same month, FIFA confirmed Chechnya’s capital, Grozny, as the Team Base Camp for Egypt’s national team. Kadyrov exploited Grozny’s selection to boost his prestige.

Authorities used a presidential decree on security around the World Cup to put additional restrictions on demonstrations from May 25 to July 25. Officials used the decree to deny protest permits and detain protesters, including those carrying out single-person pickets, which under regular circumstances do not require authorization.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

In December 2017, three assailants in Krasnodar assaulted Andrei Rudomakha, the head of the leading environmentalist group in southern Russia, and three of his colleagues. Rudomakha spent several weeks in a hospital with traumatic brain injury and multiple facial fractures. Authorities failed to carry out an effective investigation.

In March, in Makhachkala, an unidentified assailant attacked the director of Memorial’s Dagestan office, Sirazhutdin Datsiev, hitting him on the back of the head with a heavy object. Datsiev was hospitalized with a head injury. The investigation into his attack yielded no tangible results.

In April, a court acquitted Yuri Dmitriev, head of the Karelia branch of Memorial, of bogus child pornography charges regarding his adopted daughter. However, police re-arrested him in June on criminal charges of sexual abuse of a child. Memorial asserted that Dmitriev’s prosecution is politically motivated as part of the broader smear campaign against the organization.

Disability Rights

In its March review of Russia, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities welcomed the legislative prohibition of discrimination based on disability and inclusion of more children with disabilities in mainstream education, but expressed concerns about the institutionalization of people with disabilities; violence, restraints, and sedation in institutions; segregated education; and the failure to guarantee full legal capacity, or the right to make decisions, to all people with disabilities.

Freedom of Religion

In 2018, police launched a sweeping campaign against Jehovah’s Witnesses. It included dozens of home searches, raids, and interrogations stemming from a 2017 Supreme Court ruling that banned as extremist all Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations in Russia.

By November, authorities were investigating 85 Jehovah Witnesses worshippers on criminal extremism charges, 26 of whom were in pretrial detention.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence remained widely under-reported, and services for survivors inadequate. Survivors reported police failure to register or respond to domestic violence reports, and significant barriers to accessing the few available shelters.

The implementation of the 2017 amendments which decriminalized first offenses of battery among family made it harder for women to seek criminal prosecution if they are subject to domestic violence. Russian law does not provide for protection orders, which could help keep women safe. A comprehensive domestic violence draft law has been stalled in parliament since 2014.

Russia and Syria (see also Syria chapter)

Russia continued to play a key military role alongside the Syrian government in offensives on anti-government-held areas, indiscriminately attacking schools, hospitals, and civilian infrastructure. The Syrian-Russian military campaign to retake Eastern Ghouta in February involved the use of internationally banned cluster munitions as well as incendiary weapons, whose use in populated areas is restricted by international law.

In June, the Syrian-Russian offensive to regain control of Daraa province displaced more than 320,000 people. Russia remains the biggest weapons supplier to the Syrian government.

Russia continued to use its veto power at the UN Security Council to block accountability for Syrian crimes. After a chemical weapons attack on Douma killed dozens in April, Russia vetoed a UN resolution to create a new inquiry on chemical weapons use in Syria. In February, Russia blocked a UN resolution to establish a ceasefire and allow humanitarian deliveries in Eastern Ghouta. At time of writing, Russia had used its veto 12 times to protect Syria from condemnation and international pressure, six of those on chemical weapons. States parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention in June voted to establish an attribution mechanism at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague, thereby bypassing the deadlocked Security Council.

Russia hosted the Syrian People’s Congress in Sochi, aiming for agreement on a new constitution, and created a working group in Astana on detentions and disappearances alongside Turkey and Iran. Both initiatives failed to make concrete progress. Russian officials urged Western countries to launch reconstruction efforts in order to facilitate the return of refugees, but failed to address key obstacles to return.

Russia and Ukraine (see also Ukraine chapter)

The government continued to provide political and material support to armed groups in eastern Ukraine, but took no measures to rein in their abuses, including arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of detainees. Russian authorities also continued to repress critics, primarily Crimean Tatars, in occupied Crimea.

In June, a court in Moscow sentenced Roman Sushchenko, a Ukrainian journalist, to 12 years in prison on highly dubious espionage charges.

Oleg Sentsov, a filmmaker from Crimea and an opponent of Russia’s occupation of it, continued to serve a 20-year sentence on bogus terrorism charges. From May through October, he held a 145-day hunger strike demanding the release of dozens of Ukrainian nationals jailed in Russia and Crimea. In October, the European Parliament awarded Sentsov its annual Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Key International Actors

Many of Russia’s international partners urged the government to free Titiev, Sentsov, and others. The European Union repeatedly called for the release of Oleg Sentsov and other jailed Crimea activists and pressed Russia to drop the cases against Titiev and Dmitriev and release them. A European Parliament resolution demanded the release of Oleg Sentsov and more than 70 “Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia” and Crimea. Also in June, at a meeting with President Putin in St. Petersburg, French President Emmanuel Macron advocated for the release of Sentsov and Titiev. FIFA informed human rights groups that the organization’s leadership was “personally invested in engagements” on Titiev’s case.

Following a debate among EU foreign ministers on the block’s relations with Russia, the EU’s foreign policy chief noted the shrinking space for independent voices and “waning” respect for human rights and the rule of law.

In April, Secretary General of the Council of Europe (CoE) Thorbjørn Jagland, said that Russia’s threats to pull out of the CoE would be a “disaster.” Russia has not resumed funding contributions to the CoE, which it suspended in 2017.

During Russia’s Universal Periodic Review at the UNHRC in May, Russia faced criticism for failure to end harassment, physical violence and killing of lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders and opposition politicians, attacks on and discrimination of LGBT people, torture, and ill-treatment of suspects and prisoners, and other serious abuses.

In June, the CoE Parliamentary Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution calling on Russia to allow an international investigation into the anti-gay purge and ongoing persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya.

In July, the UN Committee against Torture (CAT) reviewed Russia’s sixth periodic report under the Convention Against Torture. While acknowledging the progress Russia made in “amending legislation on the penitentiary system and criminal justice,” it emphasized that there was “reliable information that torture was practiced widely” and credible torture allegations “rarely resulted in criminal prosecutions.” The committee stressed the need for accountability and underscored that the definition of torture in Russian law still was not in compliance with the convention. In September, Russia’s ombudsperson spoke in support of amending the definition and increasing criminal sanctions against perpetrators.

In August, 15 participating states of the European and North American Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) invoked the organization’s Vienna Mechanism to raise concerns about abuses in Chechnya. Russia had 10 days to outline its actions to stop the abuses, but its written response did not satisfy the other governments. In November, they followed up by invoking the Moscow Mechanism to start an inquiry on Chechnya.

Russia’s relations with the US and EU hit a new low in March, after the attempted killing of former Russian security official Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the UK, allegedly orchestrated by Russia with the use of a chemical nerve agent. The US introduced new sanctions in response to the Skripal incident.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) continued its investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed in the lead-up to, during, and after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia. The ICC prosecutor also continued a preliminary examination as to whether it should open an investigation

into abuses committed during the armed conflicts in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Although Ukraine is not an ICC member country, it has accepted the court’s jurisdiction over alleged crimes committed on its territory since November 2013.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on the human rights situation in 2018



Country:

Russian Federation

Source:

HRW – Human Rights Watch (/en/source/11207.html)

Original link:

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/russia> (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/russia>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

17 January 2019

Document ID:

2002220

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

