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Events of 2015

Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014 and its subsequent support of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine has had considerable impact within Russia itself. To some extent, it has fragmented the Russian nationalist movement between pro-government and opposition groups, meaning that public events such as rallies have attracted fewer supporters than in previous years. Despite this, three 'Russian marches', as well as other nationalistic public events, were held on 4 November 2015, the Day of National Unity. And while public actions focusing on the conflict in Ukraine have generally decreased since 2014, Russian nationalists have intensified the military training of their recruits. Anti-extremism legislation also continued to be used during the course of the year to silence dissent on Russia's involvement in Ukraine. Among others, charges of incitement to ethnic hatred were brought against the director of Moscow's Library of Ukrainian Literature, Natalia Sharina, allegedly for disseminating 'anti-Russian propaganda', as well as against a shop assistant, an ethnic Russian, who had shared social media links to Ukrainian television programmes on the Ukrainian crisis.

While the Russian authorities have been repressive of minority and indigenous organizations in Crimea, as described in the Ukraine section, state officials have also cracked down on freedom of expression and assembly in Russia itself. For example, on the anniversary of the Tatars' defence of the Kazan Khanate before Ivan the Terrible's conquest in 1552, a commemorative event on 10 November in Russia's Republic of Tatarstan was partially disrupted as the demonstrators were prevented from congregating by the walls of Kazan's Kremlin, as is traditionally done. Two Tatar leaders were reportedly prevented from attending as their car was stopped by the police, allegedly for carrying narcotics. The demonstrators called for Tatarstan's sovereignty, education in Tatar language and the freeing of Rafis Kashapov, a community representative who received a three-year prison sentence in September for criticizing Russia's policies in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

In March 2015 the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee adopted its 'Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the Russian Federation'. The Human Rights Committee expressed its concern at 'manifestations of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism as well as other racist and xenophobic acts', including attacks by Cossack patrols. According to data from the Moscow-based SOVA centre, between January and the end of November 2015 nine people were killed and 65 injured as a result of ethnically motivated violence – a reduction from 2014,

however, when 27 people were killed and 123 people injured. Attacks have continued to target predominantly persons of 'non-Slavic appearance': Roma and people originating from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Africa.

Migration law continued to be hostile to migrants: complex regulations for registration and for obtaining work permits, and often the absence of a permanent address, tend to force migrants into a precarious position of illegality or semi-illegality. Problems with registration have affected even those who benefit from a visa-free regime with Russia, such as migrants from Kyrgyzstan, who make up the majority of Russia's migrants. Due to regulations introduced in 2014, migrants from these countries could not remain in Russia for more than 90 days in each 180-day period; many then resorted to crossing the border with a neighbouring country and then re-entering Russia. Violations of migration law were followed by periods in detention centres in extremely poor conditions, then deportation. There were instances of foreign children being deported from Russia without their parents, after they were separated from them during police raids.

Law enforcement officials have also undertaken ethnic profiling, resulting in persons of 'non-Slavic appearance' being disproportionately affected by identity checks, extortion of bribes, as well as harassment, arrests and physical violence. From January 2015, migrants wishing to obtain a work permit have been required to pass an extensive test on Russian language, history and civic rights (including questions on Crimea's 'unification' with Russia), as well as paying higher fees for permits and other documents. The bureaucratic and complex procedures of migration and refugee law have also contributed to the precarious living conditions of the numerous Ukrainian refugees fleeing the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

The right to freedom of religion of some minorities in Russia is at times restricted, through arbitrary application of legislation and discrimination by the government, judges and the police. Among others, those most affected are some Protestant and 'non-traditional' religious groups (such as Jehovah's Witnesses), given that their teachings are often regarded as a possible threat to stability. There have been instances of harassment of Muslim communities practising non-traditional forms of Islam, particularly in the North Caucasus. Some Muslims and members of other religious communities have been detained and tried on criminal charges of extremism.

The authorities continue to maintain tight control over the publication of any materials that are thought to contradict the government's official stance. In 2015 the federal authorities continued to update the Federal List of Extremist Materials: according to SOVA centre, it was updated 26 times in the first six months of 2015, with the addition of 305 items (from 2,562 to 2,867), at twice the rate of the first half of 2014. The banned materials were linked to subversion even when they did not seem to pose a threat to public order, as there is a lack of clear criteria on the classification of documents as extremist. The banned materials included religious texts, such as Islamic and Jehovah's Witnesses' literature.

Another way that the state exerts considerable control over civil society is through restrictions on the funding of Russian NGOs by foreign organizations, including those protecting minority and indigenous rights. Law No. 129-FZ (known as the law on 'undesirable' foreign organizations) was adopted on 23 May 2015: it targets foreign or international NGOs implementing 'undesirable' activities (representing a threat to the country's 'constitutional order, its defence potential or national security'). The law foresees the banning of organizations engaging in such activities and the prosecution of Russian activists or organizations involved with them, including those in receipt of their funding. The provisions thus threaten the funds of minority and indigenous organizations from foreign entities. Obstacles to international funding continue the trend of 2012 provisions that require Russian NGOs to register as 'foreign agents' when they receive funds from abroad and implement 'political activities'. For example, the organization Nuori Karjala (Young Karelia), which promoted the languages and cultures of the Finno-Ugric indigenous communities of the

Republic of Karelia, was included by the Ministry of Justice in the register of 'foreign agents'. As a result the organization decided to cease activities in August 2015. The only non-Russian institution from which the organization had received funding was the UN, which had given a grant of US\$10,000 for an education project.

Russia's indigenous communities continue to be marginalized and remain vulnerable to land rights violations due to the state's failure to designate specific 'territories of traditional nature use' (as foreseen by Russian law). There was limited consultation with indigenous peoples on matters of interest to their communities during the year and insufficient access to effective remedies in case of rights violations. In some cases, the judiciary has seemingly persecuted indigenous human rights defenders. For example, Evenk leader Sergey Nikiforov, who opposed gold mining in Evenk ancestral territories, was sentenced in September 2015 to five years in a penal colony for allegedly accepting a bribe. He had led the protests of the reindeer-herding Evenk community against gold mining in the Amur region, denouncing its effect on environmental conditions and the health of the local population.

Indigenous sacred sites, such as lakes and mountains associated with religious practices, have been violated for activities such as resource extraction and construction. For example, one such case led to damage, through mining activities, to the mountain of Karagai-Nash (Russian: Lysaya Gora) – a place of worship of the indigenous Shor people, located near the village of Kazas, in Kemerovo Oblast, in south-west Siberia. The mining operations started in 2012 around the village, forcing most of the village's residents to relocate by 2014, leaving some missing or homeless. They were further denied access to a cemetery where their ancestors were buried, while the village was ultimately completely demolished.

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