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Contents

1. [Elections](#)
2. [Freedom of Expression and Assembly](#)
3. [Human Rights Defenders](#)
4. [Access to Justice and the Rule of Law](#)
5. [Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment](#)
6. [Conflict and Protection of Civilians](#)
7. [Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
8. [Women's Rights](#)
9. [Business and Human Rights](#)
10. [LGB&T Rights](#)
11. [Racism](#)
12. [Disability rights](#)
13. [Give your comments and questions about the report](#)

Following Russia's invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea in March, and fomenting of violence in eastern Ukraine, there has been a significant deterioration in the human rights situation in parts of Ukraine (see "Country Case Study: Crimea and Separatist-Occupied Areas of Ukraine" on page 102).

The human rights situation in Russia deteriorated further in 2014. The Ukraine crisis and worsening economic context accelerated the squeeze on civil liberties and created a ready environment for restrictive policies. The shrinking space for freedom of expression and increasing pressure on civil society were areas of pronounced decline and of principal concern. A series of hastily adopted and disproportionate laws limited the space for dissenting views, particularly in the media and online. The Kremlin's narrative of defending "traditional Russian values" was the basis on which they sought to justify extra layers of control. Human rights violations in the North Caucasus remained of grave concern.

Our human rights objectives in 2014 focused on civil society and democracy, equality and non-discrimination, rule of law, North Caucasus, and freedom of expression. UK-funded projects, run by Russian and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), totalling £1.1 million, successfully delivered human rights projects and contributed to capacity building at grassroots level. Russia refused to participate in the annual UK-Russia Human Rights Dialogue in 2014. Nevertheless, we continued to raise concerns about human rights in bilateral meetings at all levels. We also made regular public statements expressing concern about human rights and democracy issues, including the "foreign agents" NGO law and the sentencing of defendants in the Bolotnaya case (see "Freedom of Expression and Assembly" on page 154below). We engaged regularly with human rights activists, and worked with the EU and other like-minded partners to deliver our human rights objectives.

We expect the negative trend in the human rights situation in Russia to continue in 2015, as the worsening economic climate and continuing situation in Ukraine reinforce the Kremlin's instincts to control dissent. Freedom of expression, assembly and association are

likely to be particularly vulnerable. The five priority themes of our human rights work in 2015 will remain civil society and democracy, equality and non-discrimination, rule of law, North Caucasus, and freedom of expression. We will continue to put pressure on Russia on human rights bilaterally, and through multilateral bodies such as the EU, UN, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe. We stand ready to resume the annual UK-Russia Human Rights Dialogue, and hope that this will take place in 2015. We will continue to support civil society and monitor a number of ongoing court cases that have raised concerns about the fair application of the rule of law.

Elections

Regional and municipal elections in September were characterised by low turnout and a lack of genuine choice. Some opposition candidates were prevented from standing by the requirement for their candidacy to be endorsed by 5-10% of local lawmakers. A number of sitting governors stood down before the end of their mandates to trigger early re-election, depriving other candidates of time to mobilise. Local observers reported cases of ballot-stuffing, carousel voting, and observer intimidation.

Freedom of Expression and Assembly

Freedom of expression continued to be restricted by state-controlled attempts to manage messaging and limit the space for alternative views. A series of laws were criticised by human rights defenders (HRDs) for reducing the space for freedom of expression in the media and on the internet. Key examples were a law requiring bloggers with more than 3,000 daily visits to register with the authorities, and bear the same legal responsibilities as full media outlets; a law banning commercial advertising on paid cable and satellite television channels (due to come into force in January 2015), which will give national state-controlled channels a further advantage; and a law limiting foreign ownership of Russian media outlets to 20% (due to come into force in January 2016). At the same time, state-controlled media promoted a fear of internal and external enemies, creating an environment where HRDs themselves were portrayed as traitors.

Russia was ranked 148 out of 181 countries in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index for 2014, and categorised as “a difficult situation”. Independent media outlets came under increased pressure, and a number of journalists were dismissed or physically attacked after reporting alternative views. Russia registered the biggest annual drop in global internet freedom of the 65 countries surveyed by research and advocacy NGO, Freedom House.

Fifteen people were sentenced to up to four-and-a-half years in prison in 2014 in relation to protests that took place in Bolotnaya Square on 6 May 2012 (the eve of President Putin’s inauguration). In February, we reiterated concerns about the Bolotnaya case, highlighting restrictions on the freedom of assembly and expression in Russia. Human Rights Watch (HRW) called the Bolotnaya case a “mockery of justice”, noting that an international panel of experts on free assembly, including representatives of the OSCE, had found there were minor clashes with police, but not the major riots that the prosecution claimed.

The Moscow authorities denied permission for a Gay Pride march in May, as they have done for the last nine years. Increased penalties for violating the law governing public rallies and protests were introduced in July. Amnesty International reported that most protest actions in Russia had been either severely restricted or barred and dispersed.

The Foreign & Commonwealth (FCO) Minister for Europe, David Lidington, and the FCO Minister for Human Rights, Baroness Anelay, raised concerns about freedom of expression in Russia with the Russian Ambassador in October and November. Through our Human Rights and Democracy Programme, we funded a project to help protect and promote freedom of expression and freedom of the media, including online, by improving the digital, physical and legal safety, and protection of Russian journalists and bloggers.

Human Rights Defenders

The operating environment for HRDs and civil society activists became increasingly constrained in 2014. Many were subject to harassment and violence. As well as those working on human rights issues, those expressing alternative views on the conflict in Ukraine were at particular risk.

In August, Timur Kaushev, a 26-year-old journalist, blogger and HRD, was found dead in the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Despite claims that he was murdered because of his work, the Russian authorities refused to open an official investigation into his death. Impunity for past attacks on journalists in Russia remained a major problem in 2014. Investigations into the murders of Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev (2013) and Natalia Estemirova (2009) have not produced conclusive results. In June, five men were sentenced for plotting and killing Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October 2006. However, Politkovskaya’s family and human rights activists have expressed disappointment that those behind the killing have still not been held to account.

On 4 June, Russia passed an amendment to the “foreign agents” law allowing the Ministry of Justice to designate NGOs as “foreign agents” without a court order. By the end of 2014, 30 NGOs had been placed on the register. Once on the register, NGOs are subject to cumbersome reporting requirements and are obligated to mark all their materials with the words “foreign agent”. Non-compliance could result in large fines. We raised concerns about the “foreign agents” law bilaterally at a number of levels in 2014. Mr Lidington expressed our deep concern about the increasing pressure on NGOs, and urged the Russian authorities not to place advocacy groups under special scrutiny. We maintained regular contact with HRDs, and will continue to support projects to improve their situation in Russia.

With our support, Russian NGO, Memorial Human Rights Centre, provided legal assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, forced migrants, stateless persons and labour migrants.

Access to Justice and the Rule of Law

The rule of law in Russia remained inconsistent and arbitrarily applied. Concerns about the impartiality of courts, corruption and poor prison conditions were ongoing. Opposition figure, Alexei Navalny, was subject to a number of criminal investigations in 2014. On 30 December, Navalny and his brother Oleg were found guilty of defrauding cosmetics company, Yves Rocher Vostok, and both sentenced to three-and-a-half years' imprisonment. Alexei's sentence was suspended, but his house arrest, in force since February 2014, remained in place for legal reasons which remain unclear. Many independent observers believe that the charges against Navalny are politically motivated, and the decision to imprison his brother designed to deter him from political activity. Environmental activist, Evgeny Vitshko, remained in detention for damaging a fence in 2012, after an appeals court upheld the decision to enact a three-year custodial sentence against him in February. HRDs claim that the case against him is politically motivated, and linked to his work exposing the environmental impact of the Sochi Winter Olympics. The Netherlands-based Human Rights Initiative for the Former USSR recorded 114 political prisoners in Russia as of October, more than double the 52 they recorded in December 2013.

Several foreign nationals were illegally transferred across the border to face criminal charges in Russia in 2014. Estonian security officer Eston Kohver was abducted from Estonian territory by Russian Security Services in September; he has reportedly been denied regular access to lawyers and consular staff. Mr Lidington raised concerns about Kohver's illegal abduction with the Russian Ambassador, and called for his immediate release. Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko were both transferred into Russia from Ukraine. In an echo of Soviet practice, Savchenko was forced to undergo psychiatric assessment in October, and Sentsov alleges that he was tortured in custody. We raised concerns about these cases bilaterally and multilaterally, and urged Russia to ensure that due legal processes are followed.

In December, Transparency International published its annual "Perceptions of Corruption Index", which rates countries according to how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be. Russia was downgraded from 127th to 136th out of the 175 countries surveyed. At the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), Russia received 129 judgments in 2014, in which it was held to have violated convention rights; more than any other State Party to the European Convention on Human Rights.

Following the closure of the investigation into his death in 2013, there was still no justice in the case of late Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in pre-trial detention in 2009. FCO officials raised concerns about the Magnitsky case in a meeting with the Russian Embassy in November, urging Russia to strengthen the rule of law and prosecute those who abuse it. In 2014, we funded a number of practical projects focused on developing the rule of law in Russia, including a project that aimed to reduce the death rate of prisoners in Russia by improving prison healthcare.

Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment

Media and NGO reports of law enforcement personnel and prison staff engaging in torture, abuse or excessive violence are widespread, indicating that torture is a systemic and everyday practice in the Russian penal system. Poor training and a culture of impunity are key contributing factors. In 2014, we continued to support the Russian NGO, Committee Against Torture, who work to expose torture by law enforcement officials in the North Caucasus and ensure they are prosecuted.

Conflict and Protection of Civilians

The situation in the North Caucasus region remained unstable and tense, with ongoing violence, including terrorist attacks in Grozny, Chechnya, in October and December. According to the independent news agency, Caucasian Knot, 341 people were killed and 184 injured from January to November as a result of the conflict; 37 of those killed and 16 of those injured were civilians. There were also reports of grave human rights violations committed by state security forces, including allegations of extrajudicial killings, torture and disappearances. We continued to have significant concerns about the use of collective punishment in Chechnya, including the burning down of houses of the relatives of suspected militants. Threats to human rights groups remained; the offices of the human rights organisation, the Joint Mobile Group, were subject to an arson attack in December. We have called for Russia to implement fully key ECtHR judgments, and for action on individual cases through the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers.

In 2014, we supported a range of human rights and conflict prevention projects in the North Caucasus. They focused on educating communities on conflict prevention issues and monitoring human rights violations. With our support, Russian NGO, Genesis, worked to develop constructive public dialogue on the prevention of radicalism and extremism among young people, and promoted interaction between different parts of society in Chechnya and Ingushetia.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

Ties between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church remained close. Some other religious groups continued to face bureaucratic obstacles in a range of areas, including acquiring legal status, establishing places of worship, and distributing religious literature. At least 18 Jehovah's Witness groups were subject to criminal proceedings under Russia's extremism law in 2014.

There were widespread reports of harassment of Muslims, especially in the North Caucasus. In Moscow, a city with approximately two million Muslim citizens, there are no more than six official mosques. In certain parts of the country, plans to build additional mosques have been thwarted. In Kaliningrad, lawyers representing parts of the 100,000 strong Muslim population have indicated that they will now take a case to the ECtHR.

We raised concerns about freedom of religion in Russia through the EU. We will continue to monitor the impact of Russia's use of "extremism" legislation on religious minorities.

Women's Rights

Violence against women remained a cause of concern. According to official figures, 12,000 women are killed annually in Russia as a result of domestic violence (one woman every 40 minutes). In the North Caucasus, women continued to face threats, including marriage by abduction and so-called honour killings. Draft legislation on domestic violence has been under consideration for over two years and we hope to see this finally introduced in 2015.

With our support, Russian NGO, Ekaterina, developed a domestic violence forum to help women and children victims of domestic violence in Yekaterinburg.

Business and Human Rights

Illegal displacement of minority groups – including through arson – by companies engaged in resource extraction is an under-publicised issue in Russia. Hundreds of migrant workers at the Sochi Olympic Games, mainly from minority ethnic groups, reported not being paid, working excessive hours, poor living conditions and food, unlawful detentions and hasty deportations.

HRW estimated that around 2,000 families were displaced because of construction for the Sochi Winter Olympics. Many were not adequately compensated, and some were not compensated at all.

LGB&T Rights

The situation for LGB&T people continued to deteriorate in 2014. In September, Russia's Constitutional Court ruled that the law banning the promotion of "non-traditional" sexual relations among minors was not in breach of the Russian constitution. We had strong concerns about this law, particularly its potential to legitimise homophobia and encourage violence against LGB&T people. In December, HRW released a report documenting an increase in violence and harassment against LGB&T people in Russia since the law was introduced in June 2013. The report claimed that anti-LGB&T groups had used the law to justify campaigns of harassment and intimidation, including campaigns to get LGB&T teachers fired from their jobs. The report concluded that the "Russian authorities have failed in their obligation to prevent and prosecute homophobic violence."

The operating environment for LGB&T NGOs remained difficult in 2014. In January, Russian police detained at least 14 gay rights activists protesting in Moscow and St. Petersburg on the opening day of the Sochi Winter Olympics. Prominent Italian gay rights campaigner, Vladimir Luxuria, was detained while watching the Winter Olympics in Sochi with a banner reading "Gay Is OK". The Russian Open Games, a five-day international sporting event organised by the Russian LGB&T Sports Federation in February, was disrupted by smoke bombs and bomb threats. Games organisers experienced difficulties in securing sporting venues and accommodation for athletes, which they claimed were a result of pressure from the authorities. In September, the opening of the St Petersburg LGB&T film festival "Queer-Fest" was disrupted by anti-LGB&T protestors, and subsequent film screenings were disrupted by hoax bomb threats and last-minute venue cancellations. In November, the Side by Side LGB&T Film Festival in St Petersburg went ahead without major problems.

FCO officials raised concerns about the safety of participants at LGB&T events with the Russian authorities in November. In December, Mr Lidington raised concerns about the protection of LGB&T rights in Russia with the Russian Ambassador. We supported the operation of a counselling hotline for LGB&T people in Russia, as well as a capacity building project for Russian LGB&T activists. We also supported the Russian Open Games in February, along with the US Embassy and other EU Embassies in Moscow.

On 29 December, the Russian government passed a decree which could potentially prohibit certain groups from driving, including transgender people. We asked the Russian government for clarification on the application and implementation of this decree in order to understand its impact fully.

Racism

Preliminary data from Russian NGO Sova Centre shows that 19 people were killed and 103 injured in racist violence in Russia in 2014. A further two received death threats. Racist violence appeared to have reduced slightly from 2013, when it rose significantly for the first time since 2009. The annual nationalist “Russian Marches”, which often have a xenophobic tone, took place in 36 towns and cities across Russia on 4 November, but the number of participants was lower than it had been in recent years.

Other Issues

Disability rights

In March, Russia was praised for raising awareness of disability rights and transforming Sochi, the host city for the Winter Paralympic Games, into a barrier-free city. However, disabled people still faced serious challenges, including access to education and employment. Children with disabilities are particularly at risk. An estimated 80% of children born with Down’s Syndrome are abandoned by their parents. In September, HRW issued a report on the rights of children with disabilities in state orphanages. The report found that these children were often subject to serious abuses and neglect which severely impaired their development. The British Embassy in Moscow and Russian disability NGO, Perspektiva, supported the visit of two British Paralympic athletes to Moscow in March, as part of the Embassy’s ongoing work to promote disability rights in Russia. The Paralympians met school children at an “inclusive education” school and shared experiences with a group of Young Leaders with disabilities. With our support, Perspektiva worked to build a legal advocacy network of disability NGOs to support people with disabilities in eight Russian regions.

This publication is part of the [2014 Human Rights and Democracy Report](#).