

SUMMARY:

As the 2014 Sochi Olympics approach, the space for human rights in the Russian Federation is rapidly shrinking. Since President Vladimir Putin's return to office in May 2012 Russian authorities have intensified their assault on basic freedoms and undermined rule of law. New legislation restricts the operation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), criminalizes public actions "committed to insult the religious feelings of believers," outlaws free expression and activism by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals and their supporters, and increases sanctions for peaceful protest. In the North Caucasus insecurity and volatility persist. Security operations launched in response are marred by systematic human rights violations with near-total impunity for the perpetrators.

To see a comprehensive Amnesty International timeline of human rights abuses in Russia visit: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/russia/>

BRIEF:

NGOs Under Attack

In July 2012 President Putin signed a new law obligating NGOs receiving overseas funding and involved in undefined "political activities" to register as "foreign agents". As a result of this legislation, leading human rights NGOs, including Memorial, For Human Rights and Amnesty International itself have been subjected to unplanned inspections resulting in prosecutorial "warnings" and court cases. This particular brand of harassment can result in self-censorship, restriction of activities, or even flight. The conflation of NGOs with "foreign agents" or spies has also resulted in stigmatization and, in some cases, offices being vandalized. More than 200 Russian non-governmental organizations in 50 regions have already undergone inspections, often with devastating effects. The Association in Defense of Voters' Rights Golos (Voice) was first NGO to face charges under the foreign agents law. Both the organization and its director now face exorbitant fines and Golos has been forced to close.

A law passed in late 2012 also provides for sentences of up to 20 years for individuals who "provide consultative assistance to a "foreign organization" if that group was involved in "activities aimed against Russia's security." This catch-all phrase can be used to criminalize almost any activity the government deems hostile.

Freedom of Expression

Today most Russian media remains under effective state control, except for some outlets with limited circulation. Prime-time national television is regularly employed to smear government critics.

In mid-2012 libel was re-criminalized, eight months after its decriminalization under former President Dmitry Medvedev. Other legislation gives the government power to blacklist and block websites publishing so called "extremist" materials or anything considered harmful to public health, morals or safety.

New controls over the media are being used to smear government critics and bolster the government's policy line.

Although the Constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, changes to the Federal Law on assemblies were pushed through in 2012, significantly increasing sanctions for peaceful rallies, meetings, demonstrations and marches. Political protest is the primary target of this crackdown, but growing civic activism also suffers. Peaceful protests across Russia, including gatherings of small groups of people who presented no public threat or inconvenience, have been routinely dispersed by police, often with excessive force. The authorities regarded every such event, however peaceful and insignificant in number, as unlawful unless expressly sanctioned, although gatherings of pro-government or pro-Orthodox Church activists were often allowed to proceed uninterrupted even without authorization. There have been frequent reports of police brutality towards peaceful protesters and journalists.

LGBTI Rights

Amnesty International continues to express grave concern about Russian authorities' persistent and ongoing attacks on the rights of LGBTI people, which have worsened since 2012. LGBTI Russians are denied the right to equality and protection from discrimination, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Moreover, authorities often fail to prosecute perpetrators of hate crimes against LGBTI people.

Russian president Vladimir Putin further increased the pressure on the LGBTI community by signing a law outlawing "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" among children, effectively curtailing LGBTI activists' and individuals' right to free expression. Individuals found to have violated the law could face extortionate fines; organizations risk both fines and possible three-month suspension of activities and foreigners could end up spending fifteen days in jail followed by deportation.



Abuses in the North Caucasus

In the North Caucasus, a region in the Russian Federation comprised of the Stavropol region and the six republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and North Ossetia, human rights violations such as enforced disappearances, unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment are regularly committed by members of law enforcement agencies and almost never effectively investigated. These violations combined with Russian authorities' systematic failure to effectively investigate them, produces a circle of injustice that leads to further violations of fundamental human rights. In many cases, defendants are not able to access or even choose their lawyer.

Against this backdrop, lawyers have a vital role to play in representing victims of human rights abuses and ensuring fair trials for those accused of participating in armed groups, or other criminal activity. However, those lawyers who confront the circle of injustice in the North Caucasus often come under threat themselves. Lawyers are threatened, attacked, mistreated and, in some cases, even killed.

Prisoners of Conscience

Amnesty International coined the term "Prisoner of Conscience" to describe individuals who have been imprisoned for the peaceful expression of their beliefs or identity. These individual cases are often emblematic of systemic problems. The stories of Amnesty International Prisoners of Conscience currently held in Russian prisons illuminate a legacy of repression under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky & Platon Lebedev

Mikhail Khodorkovsky:

Russian businessman and former CEO of Yukos Oil Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested in 2003 after becoming an outspoken critic of corruption in Russia. Formerly the richest man in Russia, he has now faced two trials - for tax evasion and fraud, and for embezzlement and money laundering. His convictions have effectively kept him behind bars for both of Putin's campaigns for reelection. Amnesty International expresses concern about the timing of his charges, the harassment of his lawyers, and the procedural violations that possibly could have exonerated Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his associate Platon Lebedev.

Platon Lebedev:

Platon Lebedev was a close associate of oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the fourth largest shareholder in Yukos oil. There is speculation that his arrest, like Khodorkovsky's was politically motivated. Both men already spent nearly ten years in jail on barely distinguishable charges. Lebedev and Khodorkovsky are caught in a judicial vortex that either completely fails to, or is complicity unwilling to deliver justice.



Pussy Riot



Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina, and Ekaterina Samutsevich were sentenced to two years imprisonment for their participation in a February 2012 performance with the punk-rock group Pussy Riot. Members of the group—their faces covered in balaclavas—sang a protest song entitled, “Virgin Mary, Redeem Us of Putin,” in Moscow’s Christ the Savior Cathedral. In anticipation of Putin’s imminent reelection, the song called on the Virgin Mary to become a feminist and banish Vladimir Putin and criticized the dedication and support shown to Putin by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. Samutsevich was released on appeal in October 10, 2012 on the grounds that she did not actually perform the protest song before she was grabbed by Cathedral guards. Tolokonnikova is serving her sentence in Mordovia while Alekhina is serving her sentence in Perm, a Siberian region notorious for some of the Soviet Union’s harshest camps. After President Putin’s return to power, the crackdowns on human rights and free expression that Pussy Riot anticipated quickly materialized.

Bolotnaya Square Prisoners

***Possible Prisoners of Conscience*

On the eve of Vladimir Putin’s inauguration ceremony, tens of thousands gathered to march on Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square in protest of his reelection as President. While both the march and meeting were sanctioned by the authorities, police restricted the flow of people into the square, creating a bottleneck. Opposition leaders called for sit-down protests and several dozen people broke through a police line. Police began arresting the protesters and attempted to disperse the gathering, declaring it “cancelled.” The march soon escalated into a riot, with some protesters resorting to violence and police using excessive force to disperse the crowd. In total, between 400 - 650 individuals were detained. At least three of the men detained in connection with the protest - Vladimir Akimenkov, Artiom Saviolov and Mikhail Kosenko - are likely to be prisoners of conscience.



Vladimir Akimenkov:

Akimenkov is a left group opposition leader who was detained on May 6, 2012 after allegedly breaking a police line during a protest. Although police have since elaborated on a story of his violence during the protests in Bolotnaya Square, there is significant video evidence that suggests he is innocent and that his arrest was motivated by his political activism.

Artiom Saviolov:

The Bolotnaya square protest was Artiom Saviolov's first demonstration as a political activist. Authorities charge that Artiom broke through a police line, prevented the arrest of a fellow protestor, and was chanting "Down with the police state!" at the time of his arrest. This claim is only supported by a single police officer's testimony, and available video evidence seems to suggest the exact opposite. Artiom maintains that he was forcibly pushed through the police line, and has a severe speech impediment which makes it difficult for him to talk, let alone chant slogans.

Mikhail Kosenko:

Kosenko is accused of violently beating of a police officer during the Bolotnaya Square protest, despite video footage that clearly shows only pushed a police officer away when the officer fell on him, hoping to deter his fall. Kosenko suffers from a mental disability related to an injury sustained during military service. Prosecutors state that since his detention it has deteriorated considerably and have continually requested that Mr. Kosenko undergo under intense psychiatric evaluation. His family fears that they are using his mental condition as a guise for Kosenko's prolonged detention in a mental facility.



Human Rights Defenders

Reports of harassment of human rights defenders continue in Russia. In the North Caucasus and elsewhere, activists, journalists and lawyers representing victims of human rights violations continued to face physical threats, including from law enforcement officials. The North Caucasus region remains highly volatile and human rights violations in the context of security operations are widespread.



Sapiyat Magomedova:

Sapiyat Magomedova is a criminal defense lawyer from Dagestan. She is known for her work on cases involving human rights violations allegedly committed by members of law enforcement agencies. On June 17 2010, she tried to visit a recently detained client but was denied entry and brutally beaten by police officials. When she attempted to see her assailants prosecuted, she was accused of assaulting and publicly insulting police officials and charged with “the use of violence against a government official”, and “insulting a government official.” Both Sapiyat’s case against the officers and the case against her were later closed.



Anna Politkovskaya (deceased):

Journalist and human rights defender Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in Moscow on October 7, 2006. Politkovskaya’s brave and dedicated coverage of the human rights situation in Chechnya has been acknowledged through numerous awards. She also wrote extensively about abuses in other parts of Russia, such as violence in the army, corruption in state structures and police brutality. Prior to her death, Politkovskaya faced intimidation and harassment from the Russian federal and Chechen authorities due to her outspoken criticism of government policy and action. She was detained and threatened on several occasions.



Natalia Estemirova (deceased):

In July 2009 human rights activist Natalia Estemirova was abducted by armed men outside her apartment building in the Chechen capital Grozny. A few hours later, her body was found in the neighboring republic of Ingushetia. She has been shot at point blank range. Prior to her death, Natalia worked for the Memorial Human Rights Center in the North Caucasus, gathering eye witness accounts of crimes against humanity committed in the second Chechen conflict and monitoring human rights violations such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions and torture and ill-treatment of detainees. Her murder had a chilling effect on Chechen Civil Society. A full, impartial and independent investigation still has not taken place, and evidence of the involvement of authorities has been ignored.