



January 2008

country summary

Russia

As parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2007 and early 2008 approached, the administration headed by President Vladimir Putin cracked down on civil society and freedom of assembly. Reconstruction in Chechnya did not mask grave human rights abuses including torture, abductions, and unlawful detentions.

International criticism of Russia's human rights record remains muted, with the European Union failing to challenge Russia on its human rights record in a consistent and sustained manner.

Elections and Political Participation

In 2007 Russian authorities beat, detained, and harassed activists participating in and planning peaceful political protests. Authorities banned or severely restricted a series of opposition demonstrations known as "Dissenters' Marches," which were nonetheless held across Russia. In April riot police and special forces used excessive force to break up a Moscow Dissenters' March, beating numerous demonstrators and detaining hundreds. Authorities prevented activists and observers from traveling to Samara to participate in a May Dissenters' March, which coincided with the EU-Russia summit held there.

In November the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe cancelled its mission to observe Russia's December 2 parliamentary elections, citing operational concerns. The Russian government had imposed unprecedented restrictions on the size of the mission and did not issue visas to observers in a timely manner.

Also in November, riot police used excessive force to disperse Dissenters' Marches in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and made arrests. Among those detained were several march organizers and prominent opposition candidates including Garry

Kasparov, leader of the Other Russia coalition, who subsequently received a five-day prison sentence.

In late November Farid Babaev, a human rights activist and opposition parliamentary candidate from Dagestan, was shot dead by unidentified assailants.

Civil Society

The government is tightening controls over civil society through new legislation, interference with peaceful assembly, and harassment of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and government critics.

The 2006 NGO law increased government oversight and restrictions on NGOs. It requires NGOs to submit regular activity reports or face liquidation, and allows intrusive and punitive inspections that often result in warnings for minor, technical violations. Two warnings lead to liquidation even if the organization corrects the violation.

The Registration Service demanded the liquidation of several NGOs for failure to provide timely activity reports. For example, in June 2007 a court in Nizhni Novgorod ordered the liquidation of the Youth Human Rights Movement (YHRM) for this failure, even though the organization submitted the reports as prescribed by law. The YHRM is appealing the liquidation.

During a two-month inspection of the St. Petersburg rights organization Citizens' Watch, the Registration Service demanded all of the organization's outgoing correspondence, including that containing confidential information. In April police conducted an 11-hour search of the Educated Media Foundation (EMF) in Moscow, a prominent media training organization, seizing all financial documents and computers. Police linked the search to criminal proceedings against EMF's director for failing to declare excess cash on returning to Russia, a violation ordinarily treated as an administrative offense. In July, after a court refused to return the confiscated items, the organization could no longer function and was forced to liquidate. Similarly, in August Federal Security Service agents searched the Nizhni Novgorod Center for Assistance to Migrants in connection with criminal charges of document

forgery against the center's head. Agents confiscated financial documents, computer equipment, and archives, paralyzing the center's work.

In August new amendments to the Law on Extremism entered into force, prohibiting the media from mentioning any group found by a court to be extremist without referencing the court's designation. The amendments also allow any politically or ideologically-motivated crime to be designated extremist, raising concerns that the law will be used to silence critics of the government.

The Prosecutor General's Office arrested three suspects for the 2006 murder of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaia, but serious questions remain about the case, which officials claim was organized by "opponents abroad." The defendants' lawyers do not have access to the case materials.

On May 27 several dozen Russian lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and their supporters, tried to hold a peaceful demonstration outside Moscow's City Hall. Police arrested 21 demonstrators and observers as the event's organizers attempted to deliver a petition to the mayor's office protesting its ban on a gay pride parade, which Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov had declared "satanic." Dozens of anti-gay protesters, including skinheads, nationalists, and Russian Orthodox adherents, beat and kicked peaceful participants as riot police stood by.

Moscow city police announced that it would recruit volunteers from the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi (Ours) to patrol Moscow streets, including at demonstrations and opposition events. Members of Nashi have stated that they will mobilize Nashi patrols to prevent "destabilization" of the country from opposition groups. Federal Migration Service (FMS) officials also used members of a nationalist youth group called Mestnye (Locals) to find and detain migrants allegedly working illegally at a Moscow market. The head of the FMS announced that it would continue collaboration with Mestnye.

The North Caucasus

Ramzan Kadyrov, a former security chief, became president of Chechnya and is presiding over significant reconstruction of civilian infrastructure, changing the face

of Grozny, the capital. Russian federal and Chechen officials have claimed that the conflict in Chechnya is "solved," though sporadic armed clashes and counterinsurgency operations continue. These are carried out chiefly by forces under Kadyrov's command, known as "kadyrovtsy," who torture those suspected of ties to rebels and hold them in unlawful detention, including in secret detention centers.

Local human rights groups continued to report a decline in the number of enforced disappearances, documenting 25 abductions leading to five disappearances by August 2007. However, few efforts have been made to address the cases of as many as 5,000 people "disappeared" since 1999.

In November uniformed and masked men in Nazran, Ingushetia, robbed, kidnapped, and brutally beat Oleg Orlov, leader of prominent human rights organization Memorial, and three television journalists, before leaving them at the border with Chechnya.

Violence continued elsewhere in the North Caucasus, with armed clashes between rebels and police in Ingushetia and Dagestan. In October the trial of 59 alleged participants of the 2005 Nalchik uprising, in Kabardino-Balkaria, began. Many of the defendants have alleged torture and other abuses while in custody.

Entrenched Problems

Denial of food and other abuses against conscripts continue in the armed forces, with several horrific cases in 2007 underscoring the government's failure to sufficiently acknowledge or address the problem. After one conscript was severely beaten and not given timely medical care, later requiring multiple transplants, the minister of defense denied that the violence exemplified a broader problem. The rare prosecutions in such cases are not proportional to the scope of violent hazing, which results in the death of dozens of young soldiers every year and serious injuries to thousands more. Many conscripts commit or attempt suicide and thousands defect from their units to escape harm. In October the term of conscription was reduced from two years to 18 months.

While Russia continues to make progress in making antiretroviral treatment (ART) available to people living with HIV, a disproportionately low number of HIV-positive injection drug users receives such treatment. The ban on the use of substitution therapy in treating injection drug users and, more generally, the poor quality of drug dependence treatment at state clinics are key barriers to improving injection drug users' access to ART.

Key International Actors

While many global leaders expressed concern over developments in Russia, such as restrictions on civil society, human rights issues remain on the margins of Russia's bilateral and multilateral relations, with many key interlocutors failing to press Russia to reform or to challenge it on continuing problems, especially Chechnya.

The EU held two rounds of human rights consultations with Russia, meetings ultimately undermined by the lack of high-level Russian participation and adequate follow-up mechanisms. Human rights did not figure prominently in the broader EU-Russia agenda. Although the German EU presidency raised human rights issues at the May EU-Russia summit, particularly around freedom of assembly, this stance was compromised by subsequent statements made by the Portuguese presidency equating the raising of human rights issues with inappropriate "lecturing." Due to a standstill over concerns unrelated to human rights, the EU made no progress on strengthening the human rights component of its Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia, set to expire in December 2007.

The United States government issued several strong statements on human rights but lacked the leverage to challenge Russia meaningfully on its worsening human rights record.

Russia has served on the new United Nations Human Rights Council since its inception in May 2006. However, the government has not fulfilled its obligation to cooperate fully with UN human rights mechanisms, including the UN special rapporteur on torture, who has remained unable to visit the country due to the government's continued failure to allow a visit in accordance with the mandate's terms of reference.

In March 2007 the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) took the rare step of issuing a public statement on its 2006 visits to the North Caucasus, expressing concern about torture, unlawful detention, and a failure to investigate allegations of abuses, as well as lack of cooperation and improvements by Russia. Russia remains the only Council of Europe member state that regularly fails to voluntarily allow the publication of the CPT's reports. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe failed to reverse its misguided 2006 decision to discontinue the assembly's monitoring mandate on Chechnya.

2007 proved a landmark year for international justice on Chechnya. Unable to secure justice domestically, hundreds of victims of abuse have filed applications with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In 11 rulings to date, the ECtHR found Russia responsible for serious human rights abuses in Chechnya, including torture, extrajudicial executions, and enforced disappearances. In every ruling the court has found a failure by the Russian government to launch a meaningful investigation. Russia has taken insufficient steps to implement the general measures recommended by the ECtHR to remedy systemic problems and prevent the reoccurrence of abuses. Russia remains the only Council of Europe member not to have ratified Protocol 14 of the court's charter, which would streamline the court's procedures and reduce backlog.