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Russia: President Putin's witch hunt

The systematic undermining and violation of the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association have been the hallmark of Vladimir Putin's human rights record during the first year of his third mandate as Russian president, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

The wave of protest sparked by the Duma elections in December 2011 and the May 2012 Putin-Medvedev switch prompted a raft of restrictions on these rights. Two new laws have been introduced and 11 amended as part of a broad clampdown on dissent, criticism and protest.

Amnesty International's report, [*Freedom under threat: The clampdown on freedom of expression, assembly and association in Russia*](#) analyses the legislative developments and cases in which they have been applied in breach of Russia's international legal obligations.

"These recent legal initiatives have the declared aim of ensuring public order and the protection of the rights of citizens. Their effect has been the opposite: prominent government critics, opposition voices, watchdogs and ordinary individuals demonstrating on a wide range of issues have all seen their rights restricted over the course of the last year," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

Amendments made to the Federal Law on assemblies in June 2012 have introduced excessively burdensome approval procedures and sharply increased sentences for administrative offences. They have imposed additional responsibilities on organizers and increased their liability for the actions of participants. Demonstrations have routinely been banned or unlawfully dispersed.

The use of excessive force by police and arbitrary arrests have marred protests such as those on Pushkinskaya and Lubianskaya squares in March 2012 and the May protest on Bolotnaya square, as well as those organised by the Strategy 31 movement or the May 2012 peoples' walks.

"States are obliged to allow and safeguard peaceful assemblies, the default position of authorities in Russia today is that demonstrations they do not approve of, should not take place. The occasional exception only proves the rule," said John Dalhuisen.

In language deliberately reminiscent of the cold war, a law introduced in 2012 requires organizations in receipt of foreign funding to describe themselves as "foreign agents", if considered to be involved in undefined "political activities". This law and the recent "Dima Yakovlev law" restrict the funding of NGOs from the US and the ability of US nationals to work for organizations operating in Russia, imposing restrictions on the freedom of association that are inconsistent with international human rights standards.

A wave of inspections of NGOs – more than 200 since the start of the year in 50 regions of the country – has targeted all of the most prominent Russian human rights groups and appears to have set the wheels of this law's application in motion.

The first NGO to face legal proceedings for alleged breach of the “foreign agents” law is the Association In Defense of Voters’ Rights Golos (Voice), which played a prominent role in organising election monitoring and reporting allegations of electoral fraud in the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections.

A raft of new and amended legislation has been adopted putting the freedom of expression at risk. The broad scope and wording of the Federal Law on Treason and Espionage can easily be used to prosecute Russian human rights defenders and civil society activists cooperating with international organizations.

“The raft of new restrictions seeking to limit foreign funding for and foreign influence on NGOs in Russia has repeatedly been justified by the need to safeguard the country’s stability and protect it from hostile foreign interests. This rhetoric is familiar from repressive regimes the world over. It is not new in Russia. But while the discourse of stability might have had resonance in the early years of Putin’s rule, it is increasingly appearing a device to promote the interests of the few over the rights of the many,” said Dalhuisen.

The re-criminalization of defamation inhibits legitimate criticism of government or public officials while a draft “blasphemy” law – a response to the Pussy Riot case – would impose impermissible restrictions on the freedom of expression if adopted.

“Shortly after his inauguration, President Putin spoke in favour of the greater participation of citizens in public affairs. What he has in fact presided over looks very like a witch hunt against dissenting or critical voices, while civil society risks being suffocated and isolated not behind an iron curtain, but a legal one,” said Dalhuisen.

“Civic engagement is precious social capital and it is in Russia’s interest to invest in it. The current government is stifling it, however, through a wide range of violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. These need, urgently, to be reversed.”

Note to the editor:

Amnesty International is launching its report, *Freedom under threat: The clampdown on freedom of expression, assembly and association in Russia*, together with Human Rights Watch and their report *Laws of Attrition: The Crackdown on Russia’s Civil Society after Putin’s Return to the Presidency*. The two human rights organizations expose the ongoing assault on freedoms of expression, association and assembly which gathered strength under the watch of President Putin in the first year of his third presidential term.