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Russia escalating attacks on free expression a year on from Pussy Riot protest

A year after the punk band Pussy Riot performed a protest song in Moscow's main Orthodox cathedral, the situation for freedom of expression has only worsened in Russia, Amnesty International said.

Last year's arrest and criminal conviction of Pussy Riot members under the dubious charge of "hooliganism on the grounds of religious hatred" signalled a fresh and severe clampdown on human rights in the country.

Since then Russia's Parliament has adopted several new laws targeting activists and those critical of the authorities.

"New laws introduced since the Pussy Riot protest have given the authorities sweeping powers to clamp down on NGOs, human rights and political activists in Russia and go against the country's international human rights obligations," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"Meanwhile, two Pussy Riot band members are still languishing in a prison colony far from their families, including small children – and our call for their immediate release continues.

"Russia's government is failing to live up to promises made to its citizens 20 years ago after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It desperately needs to show a commitment to upholding human rights and must stop peddling the disingenuous line that civil liberties and social, economic and political stability are incompatible in Russia."

Fresh attacks on free speech

In June 2012, Russian authorities introduced further restrictive rules on conducting public protests, along with exceptionally high penalties of up to US\$32,000.

The same month libel – which had only a few months earlier been de-criminalized - made its way back into the Criminal Code, with heftier fines than before.

In November 2012, a new law was introduced which requires NGOs receiving overseas funding to register as 'foreign agents'. This not only puts additional administrative burden on them, but more importantly, may create negative perceptions of their activities due to the negative connotation 'foreign agent' in the Russian language.

That month a broad new legal definition of "treason" was also introduced, which could potentially criminalize human rights and political activism.

And in December, Russia's Parliament passed the so-called "Dima Yakovlev" law, imposing further

severe restrictions on NGOs and introducing discriminatory measures aimed at persons with dual US and Russian citizenship.

Harsh punishment for Pussy Riot

While these legislative changes were being rolled out, the Russian authorities tried, convicted and imposed harsh punishment on three Pussy Riot band members for their protest at Moscow's cathedral.

In August 2012, following several months of pre-trial detention and unfair court proceedings, Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina, Ekaterina Samutsevich were sentenced to two years imprisonment in a penal colony for their part in the protest.

Ekaterina Samutsevich was later granted conditional release on appeal.

Amnesty International has flagged the conditions in which Nadezhda Tolokonnikova Maria Alekhina are being held.

Maria Alekhina received threats and had to be placed in solitary confinement. The maximum period she can be held there – three months – is due to expire soon, so the penal colony authorities must look into other options.

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova has health conditions which apparently deteriorated while in custody. Even though some medical help is being provided, her health might deteriorate further.

Both women have young children who might be deprived of fully fledged contact with their mothers for yet another year.