

Amnesty International UK

MEDIA BRIEFING

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BEHIND THE SMOKESCREEN OF OLYMPIC CELEBRATIONS: KEY HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Spokesperson available on request

On 7 February 2014, the XXII Winter Olympiad will begin in the Russian city of Sochi. The Olympic torch has shone a spotlight on Russia and gives a unique chance for a close inspection of the country's human rights record. This briefing outlines some of Amnesty's concerns and details a few case studies.

"After London 2012, Russia signed a memorandum promising to respect human rights during the Winter Games in Sochi.

"However, a number of laws brought in by Putin's government in the last year do exactly the opposite. There has been a crackdown on freedom of speech and expression, gay rights are being trampled on and NGOs silenced.

"The recent amnesty in which 2,000 prisoners were freed, including high profile individuals like the two pussy Riot band members and oil tycoon Mikhail Khordokovsky, should be treated not as a benign act of clemency, but as a politically-expedient move in the run up to the Sochi Olympics. Many more people remain in jail on politically-motivated charges.

"London Games weren't perfect human rights-wise, with concern over sponsorship of the stadium. Beijing had its problems in 2008 and there are already concerns over Rio in 2016.

"With the world watching, now is Putin's chance to make himself a world leader worthy of the title and deliver on the human rights promises made after London 2012."

Kate Allen, Director of Amnesty International UK

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1, Human rights overview in Russia

Following mass protests in Moscow and across Russia at the end of 2011 and throughout 2012 against alleged fraud during parliamentary and presidential elections, President Vladimir Putin signed-off a raft of punitive laws cracking down on dissent, and freedom of expression and assembly in Russia.

In the last two years, nearly 5,000 people have been detained under these laws in and around Moscow, and over a hundred protests banned or dispersed by police.

Across Russia around 1,000 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been targeted with “inspections”. Many face the risk of fines and closure under the new “foreign agents law”. The law requires NGOs in receipt of foreign funding to register as “foreign agents” and describe themselves as such in all their public materials if the authorities consider that they are involved in “political activities”. The vague definition applies to, amongst many areas, human rights activism and Amnesty International’s Moscow offices were among those targeted by an unannounced inspection in early 2013.

Discriminatory legislation introduced within the last year has fuelled homophobia and prompted a wave of violence by vigilante groups country-wide. Xenophobic attitudes have also been on the rise and mass raids against migrant workers by the police have become more frequent.

Freedom of expression has come under particular attack. A new law criminalising blasphemy was introduced following the Pussy Riot protest in Moscow’s main Orthodox church. A museum has been shut down for exhibiting a satirical painting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and a number of other notorious male politicians in women's underwear.

Attacks by armed groups continue to occur across the North Caucasus, while the security response continues to be undermined by gross human rights violations, including enforced disappearances and torture, and alleged extra-judicial executions.

In December, President Putin released 2,000 prisoners in an amnesty widely considered to be a politically expedient move ahead of the Sochi Games. A number of them were individuals Amnesty considered prisoners of conscience, and despite their release, the politically motivated charges against them remain. Many more prisoners of conscience remain behind bars.

2, The Olympics and human rights

“The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.”

The Olympic Charter

“It is not about mixing sport and politics. Human rights aren’t political. They secure the basis for all human life, from health and shelter to freedom of expression and religion. Everyone is entitled to them.”

Kate Allen, Director of Amnesty International UK

On 29 August 2012, Russia issued a joint communiqué with the United Kingdom, Brazil and South Korea confirming its commitment to use the Olympic and Paralympic Games:

- To promote awareness, understanding and the application of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights among those watching and participating;
- As an opportunity to educate people on the values of respect, diversity, tolerance and fairness and as a means to combat all forms of discrimination, including racial discrimination, and promote an inclusive society.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/human-rights-and-the-olympic-and-paralympic-games>

Last August, a presidential decree in Russia came into force introducing special security measures including a ban on meetings, rallies, pickets and demonstrations on an extensive territory within the city of Sochi and its vicinities.

While restrictions on political protests around Olympic sites are required under the Olympic charter, there are concerns that these restrictions exceed those minimally required and will be used more broadly to limit protests across the city.

Last week, the Russian President Vladimir Putin promised changes in the decree that would allow protests in designated zones provided they are approved by the local administrations and security forces.

Two Norwegian journalists on their way to report on preparations in Sochi were repeatedly detained and threatened with imprisonment by Russian authorities between 31 October and 2 November. Russian officials questioned them about their plans in Sochi, their sources, their personal lives, educational backgrounds and religious beliefs. The journalists were denied contact with the Norwegian Embassy in Moscow.

3, Restrictions on the rights to freedom of assembly

In 2012, amendments to Russian Federal Law governing street protests introduced additional restrictions on public events and broadened the potential liability for organisers.

It is estimated that in 2012 nearly 4,000 people were detained following around 200 protests in and around Moscow. During the first half of 2013, more than 600 people were reportedly detained in the course of 81 events.

Opposition groups and other social movements critical of the authorities have been regularly and arbitrarily denied permission to hold events and to gather at the time and place of their choosing.

Subsequent “unauthorised” peaceful street gatherings, including small groups of protesters, have been routinely dispersed by police, often with the use of unnecessary or disproportionate force.

CASE: Prisoners of Bolotnaya

The use of excessive force by police and arbitrary arrests has marred protests across the country. Most prominently, police used excessive force against protestors during the Bolotnaya Square protest on 6 May last year. Hundreds of peaceful protesters were arrested. Criminal proceedings have subsequently been initiated against 28

individuals. In October, one peaceful protester, Mikhail Kosenko, was confined by a court, potentially indefinitely, to a mental institution for mandatory psychiatric treatment in a ruling reminiscent of the Soviet era use of punitive psychiatry.

Amnesty has recognised Mikhail Kosenko, and eight other detainees, Vladimir Akimenkov, Artiom Saviolov, Nikolay Kavkazsky, Stepan Zimin, Leonid Koviazin, Aleksey Polikhovich, Denis Lutskevich, Sergey Krivov and Yaroslav Belousov as prisoners of conscience.

Under the amnesty, four co-defendants in the Bolotnaya case were freed, three of the Prisoners of Conscience - Vladimir Akimenkov, Leonid Koviazin, Nikolay Kavkazsky); one had travel restrictions lifted (Maria Baronova), and another was released from pre-trial detention (Dmitry Rukavishnikov).

CASE: Academics detained

In an indication of how far the clampdown on public protest has extended, in late September 2013, members of Russian academic community protested peacefully in front of the State Duma in Moscow against a draft law on the reform of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Protesters were dispersed and arbitrarily detained by police.

CASE: Pride bans and homophobia

Municipal authorities routinely refuse to grant lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists permission to hold public events. On at least six occasions in 2013, LGBTI activists were violently attacked during peaceful protests by anti-gay activists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The police took no action against their attackers despite overwhelming video and photo evidence and witness testimonies. However, several LGBTI activists were detained and prosecuted for violating the rules on public assemblies.

The most recent public event organised by LGBTI activists to be “approved” was back in 2012. However, even this event had to be conducted on the outskirts of Moscow, far away from its intended target audience, and was organised under the broader slogan of fighting discrimination in Russia.

4, Crackdown on independent non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

In November 2012 the government introduced new legislation requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding and engaged in loosely defined “political activities” to register themselves as “foreign agents”. The move was designed to stigmatise and discredit NGOs engaged in human rights work, provide a pretext for fining and potentially closing organisations critical of the government and cutting vital funding streams.

Failure to comply with the new requirement attracts heavy fines of more than £9,000 for the organisation and £5,500 for its management. Organisations can be shut down and their leaders jailed for up to two years.

In July 2013, the Prosecutor General estimated that around a 1,000 organisations across Russia had been “inspected” since the introduction of the law.

More than 50 organisations were issued with official warnings that led to administrative cases against them and can potentially result in fines and closures.

At least ten organisations are currently embroiled in court hearings, including the leading human rights groups Memorial and Public Verdict. Further cases are expected.

Five NGOs have been fined to date, of which two have won on appeal. Of these two, one – Bok O Bok, an LGBTI film festival – had already dissolved itself.

CASE: Golos (Voice)

Golos played a prominent role in organising election monitoring and reporting allegations of electoral fraud in the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections. In April 2013 it became the first organisation to be prosecuted for allegedly violating the “foreign agents” law. It was fined RUB 300,000 (£5,500). A separate fine of RUB 100,000 (£1,700) was imposed on its leader Liliya Shibanova. After an unsuccessful appeal both fines were paid. Nonetheless, on 26 June, the Ministry of Justice suspended the work of the NGO and the organisation decided to disband.

The Russian authorities accused Golos of receiving prize money after it had been presented with the Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. Golos was prosecuted even though it instructed its bank to return the money.

“We are in the process of founding a new organisation which should be able to function throughout the country based on funding from individuals and businesses. In the meantime, after exhausting all possibilities here, we are appealing to the European Court of Human Rights, with the hope that it will help scrap this law.”
Grigory Melkonyants, Deputy Executive Director, Golos (Voice) Association

CASE: Public Verdict Foundation

The Public Verdict Foundation provides legal aid to victims of police abuses and rehabilitation to torture survivors. On several occasions, Director Natalia Taubina and other members of the organisation have been harassed by the authorities. The authorities have started proceedings against them in an attempt to try and make them register as “foreign agents”.

“The human rights situation in Russia is not getting better: torture by the police continues to be common practice. The new NGO laws make the work of human rights organisations harder. The case takes away energy and time to help victims of human rights violations. It’s not easy to operate in this hostile environment. We want the Russian authorities to create an environment in which NGOs can operate without fear; to respect our freedom of expression and follow their international obligations.”
Natalia Taubina, Director of the Public Verdict Foundation

CASE: For Human Rights

The “For Human Rights” movement is an independent organisation that monitors prison conditions in Russia.

“There are four court cases against me. The hearings get postponed and rescheduled all the time. Once security forces came to my office and threw me out. We are now starting to work in a new office but we don’t know if we will be kicked out from here too. All this is [affecting] our work.”
Lev Ponomaryov, Head of “For Human Rights”

5. Freedom of Expression

Homophobic legislation

LGBTI groups have fallen foul of the “foreign agents” law, and have repeatedly been denied their right to freedom of assembly. On top of this, new legislation was introduced in June 2103 banning "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors". This blatantly discriminatory law deliberately conflates the issues of sexual orientation and paedophilia by linking the sexual abuse of children with consensual, private sexual activity and personal gender expression of adults.

It restricts the rights to freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI individuals, and has given official sanction to growing homophobia in the country, prompting a wave of violence by vigilante groups across Russia.

On 3 November 2013 two masked men brandishing air guns and baseball bats attacked the office of LaSky, a non-governmental organisation that provides support to LGBTI people living with HIV. Two people were injured, including one who has been left blind in one eye. In spite of the seriousness of the attack the investigation opened by the prosecution is only on charges of “hooliganism”. The attack has sent shockwaves through the LGBTI community, both in St Petersburg and around Russia.

CASE: Vyhod (Coming Out)

Vyhod is an independent Russian organisation based in St Petersburg that works for the promotion and protection of the rights of LGBTI people in Russia. The organisation and its leader were fined under the so-called “foreign agents law”. The rulings were quashed on appeal but official harassment continues.

“The human rights situation in Russia has been deteriorating quite rapidly in the last few years, particularly after a series of laws were passed that threaten freedom of expression.”

“As a human rights activist in Russia, you work under constant risk. As an LGBTI organisation, anything we do can be considered propaganda: what we put on the web, the demonstrations we organise. We know that the authorities can come at any time and issue us with huge fines which we wouldn't be able to pay.

“Discrimination against LGBTI people in Russia has also grown rapidly, partly because of new homophobic laws but also because of hate campaigns promoted by politicians. Activists have also faced harassment and attacks, which have been on the rise. I would ask the authorities to properly investigate and punish homophobic violence and set up programmes to prevent it and to review recent laws that are discriminatory in nature.”

Polina Andrianova, Activist

CASE: Blasphemy law – Pussy Riot

According to a new law, purported to “protect religious feelings”, blasphemy is now a criminal offence. It was introduced in 2013 in direct response to the ‘Pussy Riot’ punk group performance in the main Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow in February 2012.

In March 2012, three performers were arrested and charged with “hooliganism” based on “religious hatred”. Yekaterina Samutsevich was released on appeal in October. Nadya Tolokinnokova and Maria Alyokhina were freed in December's amnesty. However, charges against them remain. On leaving prison both women dismissed the amnesty as a publicity stunt. Alyokhina told reporters the amnesty was

a 'profanation' and said if she was given a choice she "would have stayed in prison without a doubt".

Background to the case:

On 23 September, one of the imprisoned performers, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova declared a hunger strike in protest against "slave labour conditions" and degrading treatment of the inmates in the penal colony where she was serving her sentence.

On 22 October, she was put into a car, apparently to be transferred to another penal colony. Her whereabouts remained unknown for 26 days, until she was allowed to call her husband from a prison hospital in Krasnoyarsk, 4,000 kilometres east of Moscow where her husband and young daughter live.

Campaigners on behalf of Pussy Riot members in Russia also faced harassment by the authorities. On 9 September 2013, a court in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk ruled that the "Icon of Pussy Riot" - a poster depicting a woman in coloured balaclava similar to that of Pussy Riot members, with a halo, and holding a child - was an insult to religious feelings, and banned its dissemination. Its creator, artist Artyom Loskutov was fined RUB 1000 (£20). The Prosecutor's Office has issued a warning against a number of online sites that had reproduced an image of the poster. The popular online news agency Grani.ru was forced to remove this image from its website or face sanctions. It is currently challenging the ban in court.

CASE: 'Hooliganism' law – Greenpeace's Arctic 30

On 19 September armed Russian authorities boarded the Greenpeace ship the Arctic Sunrise in the Pechora Sea off Russia's northern coast and detained 30 activists.

The activists had been protesting against Arctic drilling near Prirazlomnaya in the Pechora Sea off Russia's northern coast.

The activists, who were rounded up at gunpoint, were initially charged with piracy. A charge which was later changed to 'hooliganism'.

The activists were bailed in November, and were given permission to return to their home countries under the December amnesty. Charges against them remain.

Under Russia's Criminal Code, hooliganism charges can only be brought against those using weapons to commit gross violations of public order on the grounds of hatred for a particular racial, ethnic, religious or social group.

Amnesty believes the provision is vague and open to abuse and in this case is being used to send a strong message that protests, however peaceful, won't be tolerated and any infringements, however minor, will be met with severe penalties.

6. Artistic freedom

In late August 2013 the Muzey Vlasti (Museum of Power) was shut down after police seized a painting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in women's underwear, saying the satirical display had broken unspecified laws. Other paintings ridiculing politicians, both past and present, were seized too.

CASE: Muzei Vlasti (Museum of Power)

“Because of restrictions on freedom of expression we cannot show works of art that we think are worth exhibiting and the public should see.

“While artists are forced to flee and seek asylum abroad, I don’t see any future for myself because of the pressure security services, the Prosecutor’s Office and the authorities in general are putting on us. Their actions are a clear signal to artists and curators that only art sanctioned by the authorities will be tolerated.”

Aleksandr Donskoy, owner, and Tatiana Titova, director of Muzei Vlasti

7, North Caucasus

In the neighbouring North Caucasus, numerous security operations have been marked by enforced disappearances, unlawful and incommunicado detention of individuals suspected of membership of armed groups, and alleged extra-judicial executions.

Torture and other ill-treatment have been very widely reported across Russia, but have been particularly common in the context of the prosecution of criminal suspects in the North Caucasus.

CASE: Inter-Regional Committee Against Torture

The Committee is one of Russia’s leading human rights organisations and one of the co-founders of the Joint Mobile Group – pulling together human rights defenders from across Russia – which investigate serious human rights violations in Chechnya.

In July 2012 Igor Kaliapin was threatened with criminal proceedings for allegedly disclosing confidential information relating to human rights violations by law enforcement officials in Chechnya. Igor claims he had revealed no secrets but exposed the lack of effective investigation into serious human rights violations and the lack of redress for the victims.

“Our first responsibility is to the people whose rights we are defending. The authorities must think twice before they apply legislation that is stifling civil society in Russia.”

Igor Kaliapin, Chair of the Inter-Regional Committee Against Torture

8, The Games

Key Dates

The 2014 XXII Olympic Winter Games, taking place 7-23 February 2014, and the Paralympics 7-16 March 2014, will be the first time that the Russian Federation will have hosted the Winter Games; the Soviet Union hosted the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow.

The Olympic sports

Bobsled (Two-man, Two woman and Four-man)

Luge

Skeleton

Ice Hockey

Figure Skating (Men's singles, Ladies' singles, Pairs, Team and Ice Dancing)

Speed Skating

Short Track Speed Skating (500m, 1,000m, 1,500 m and Relays)

Curling

Alpine Skiing (Downhill, Super G, Giant slalom, Slalom, Super Combined)

Freestyle Skiing (Aerials, Moguls, Ski Cross, Ski halfpipe and Ski slopestyle)

Snowboarding (Parallel Giant Slalom, Halfpipe and Snowboard Cross and Slopestyle)

Biathlon (combining cross-country skiing and target shooting: individual, sprint, pursuit, mass start & relay events)

Cross-Country Skiing (individual and team sprint, freestyle, pursuit, classical and relays)

Ski Jumping

Nordic Combined (ski jumping and cross country skiing)

The Paralympic sports

Alpine skiing

Ice sledge hockey

Nordic skiing

Para-snowboarding

Wheelchair curling

Sochi

The host city Sochi has a population of 400,000 and is situated in Krasnodar, Russia's third largest region. The Games will be organised in two clusters: a coastal cluster for ice events in Sochi, and a mountain cluster located in the town of Krasnaya Polyana.

The Krasnodar Krai region borders Russia's North Caucasus Federal District comprising six North Caucasus republics – Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and North Ossetia – as well as the region of Stavropol Krai. However, while administratively Sochi (and the Krasnodar Krai as a whole) is not part of the North Caucasus, geographic boundaries of the Caucasus mountains do extend to Sochi and beyond.

ENDS

To organise interviews with any of the case studies mentioned above please contact the Amnesty press office.

Amnesty International UK media information:

Niall Couper: 020 7033 1552, niall.couper@amnesty.org.uk

Naomi Westland: 020 7033 6414, naomi.westland@amnesty.org.uk

Out of hours: 07721 398984, www.amnesty.org.uk

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