

5.15 Russia

Introduction

The past 18 months have seen a shrinking of the democratic space in Russia, primarily through the recent non-governmental organisation (NGO) and anti-extremism laws and the restrictions imposed on opposition parties. We are concerned about allegations of electoral malpractice in relation to the December 2007 parliamentary elections, reflected in the statement on 4 December below. It is deeply disappointing that Russia prevented the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE's) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) from observing the elections, as this would have provided expert, independent election monitoring. We urged the Russian central election commission to investigate all allegations of electoral abuses fully and promptly.

On 4 December 2007, the EU issued a statement:

The European Union has taken note of the provisional results of the elections to the State Duma which were held on 2 December in Russia. The EU welcomes the fact that elections took place in an orderly and organised fashion.

The EU regrets, however, that there were many reports and allegations of media restrictions as well as harassment of opposition parties and NGOs in the run-up to the elections and on election day, and that procedures during the electoral campaign did not meet international standards and commitments voluntarily assumed by Moscow. The EU hopes that investigations will clarify the accuracy of these allegations.

The EU regrets that there was no long-term observation mission from ODIHR/OSCE to follow the election campaign and underlines that the presence of ODIHR would have constituted a reliable basis for a full assessment of the elections.

Other human rights concerns include:

- the restrictions on media freedom and increased risk to journalists' safety;
- the rise in attacks on ethnic, racial and religious minorities;

- the increasing use of forced psychiatric treatment and detention; and
- the ongoing reports of extra-judicial killings, torture, abduction and arbitrary detention in Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

Current concerns

Following the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, action taken by the UK was intended to uphold key individual rights and vital principles of independent judicial process and the rule of law. The UK is committed to pursuing the extradition of Andrei Lugovoy so that he might stand trial in the UK for Mr Litvinenko's murder. We have been encouraged by support for our actions from partners, including two EU statements (on 1 June and 18 July 2007), and we continue to look to the Russian authorities for their full co-operation.

Amendments to the electoral law, which raised thresholds on the number and geographical spread of the membership of political parties, have further eroded the diversity of political representation in Russia. In October 2006, the Federal Registration Service announced that 16 (of 35) political parties did not meet the requirements of the law in terms of membership numbers or the number of regional branches. Tighter registration requirements have caused difficulties for independent political parties. For example, the liberal party Yabloko was prevented from standing in local elections in St Petersburg in March 2007 because of complications over some of the 50,000 signatures required to register the party.

In July 2007, the Law on Extremist Activity was amended, expanding its scope. The increasingly wide definition of extremism is open to abuse and there have been reports that the law has been used to restrict critics and political opponents. Most recently, in September 2007, the *Saratovskiy Reporter* newspaper was threatened with closure by Russia's Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Mass Communications, Communications and Protected Heritage. This followed their publication of a satirical cartoon of President Vladimir Putin, which was labelled extremist.

Some NGOs have expressed concern that the requirements imposed by the new NGO law, including registration, have limited their activities, although most foreign NGOs have been able to

register. NGOs, and human rights defenders in particular, have found their operating environment further constrained by implementation of this legislation. There have been increased reports of threats and intrusion into the activities of human rights defenders, as well as acts of harassment against lawyers and journalists. Many of these organisations and individuals had received funding from international institutions or from foreign governments.

Increased risks to the security of journalists continue to undermine media freedom in Russia. The murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October 2006 brought renewed attention to the dangers faced by journalists in Russia. Other journalists have died in suspicious circumstances and received death threats during 2007. There are fears that the Law on Extremist Activity is being used to unfairly curtail criticism of the government's policy in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. National television channels continue to broadcast a narrow range of political views on sensitive issues and access to important media outlets is often difficult for opposition figures.

The authorities retain tight control on the timing and location of opposition demonstrations in most regions and there are regular reports of the detention and harassment of opposition activists.

Anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow, St Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod in April, May and November 2007 were met with legal obstruction and police brutality, attracting widespread condemnation.

Xenophobia is a growing concern. There has been a continuing trend of violent attacks on non-ethnic Russians. According to the Moscow Human Rights Bureau, in 2007 more than 230 xenophobia-related attacks and conflicts were registered in the Russian Federation, resulting in the deaths of 74 people. We have been particularly concerned about the public campaign and discriminatory measures against ethnic Georgians in Russia.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered rights groups continue to face difficulties in exercising their right to freedom of assembly in Russia. During a protest at the prohibition of a march in support of sexual minorities in Moscow on 27 May 2007, a number of activists were injured in violent incidents.

Current concerns: North Caucasus

The North Caucasus remains fragile and vulnerable to human rights violations. We remain deeply concerned about ongoing reports of extra-judicial killings, torture, abduction and arbitrary detention



A rally in Paris devoted to the Russian investigative journalist's memory on the first anniversary of her death.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER: ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

On Saturday 7 October 2006, Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya was found dead in the lift of her apartment block. She had been shot four times. She was a high-profile, hard-hitting investigative journalist, whose courage and single-mindedness was widely respected in the Russian media community and abroad, and who devoted her life's work to exposing and campaigning against the brutality of the federal and local security forces in Chechnya. The Russian authorities are continuing to investigate her murder and have announced the arrest of several suspects, but the investigation has been compromised by the political undertones in official statements about responsibility for the murder.

Statement by Rt Hon. Geoff Hoon MP, Minister for Europe, 9 October 2006

"I was saddened by the murder of Russian journalist and human rights defender, Anna Politkovskaya. I extend my deepest sympathies to her family and friends.

"This was a terrible and troubling crime. Anna Politkovskaya's forthright work in the field of human rights was internationally renowned. We welcome the fact that the criminal investigation will be led by the Russian Prosecutor-General. We stress the need for a full and thorough investigation, and hope that it will bring to justice those responsible for her murder."

in the region. Poverty, corruption and a lack of democratic accountability exacerbate human rights concerns. Social and economic conditions remain poor across the region.

Although some reconstruction work is now being undertaken, much of the Chechen Republic's urban and rural infrastructure was destroyed in fighting between separatist rebels and federal troops allied with local forces loyal to Moscow. While large-scale military action by federal troops has now ceased, low-intensity fighting involving local Chechen forces continues. There are frequent reports of explosions and shootings in the republic and elsewhere in southern Russia carried out by rebel groups. Long-term security in the region is undermined by poor social and economic conditions as well as credible reports of widespread human rights violations by all sides. Some indicators show a positive trend, particularly in Chechnya where Russian human rights group Memorial reports 25 enforced disappearances in the first eight months of 2007, a six-fold reduction on the corresponding period in 2006. However, in neighbouring Ingushetia and Dagestan the number of disappearances markedly increased over the same period, to 22 and 7 respectively.

The situation in Chechnya and the wider North Caucasus remains an issue of importance in our ongoing bilateral and EU discussions with Russia. With EU partners, we raised the latest developments in Chechnya with the Russian government at the EU-Russia human rights consultations on 3 October 2007.

UK action

We raise all human rights-related concerns regularly in both specific bilateral and EU human rights consultations. EU-Russia human rights consultations are held every six months, most recently on 3 October 2007. The next bilateral human rights dialogue with Russia is scheduled for the first half of 2008.

In addition to these consultations, we have taken specific action on the concerns detailed above. In October 2006, we held a seminar on the NGO law. This gave UK NGOs the opportunity to put questions to a senior official from the Federal Registration Service, the Russian government

department responsible for registering foreign NGOs under the amended law. Following the violence at the demonstration by groups representing sexual minorities on 27 May 2007, our Ambassador in Moscow raised specific concerns about the treatment of the demonstrators and the proportionality of the police response at this demonstration. There was also an EU démarche on the same issue.

We are assisting post-conflict reconstruction and development through our bilateral £1 million North Caucasus Education Initiative and the European Commission's €20 million Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) Special Programme for the North Caucasus, and by supporting individual projects through dedicated funds such as the Global Conflict Prevention Pool. FCO project funds provided over £700,000 for 18 projects working with NGOs to promote human rights, good governance and reform in Russia during the 2006/07 financial year. Over £440,000 was allocated for a further 16 projects starting in 2007/08. Some of the areas these projects will address are:

- improving and developing the torture prevention capacity of the judiciary and police in Nizhny Novgorod;
- strengthening the capacity of lawyers and NGOs to take human rights cases to the European Court of Human Rights;
- training in human rights of penitentiary service members in southern Russia; and
- strengthening state and civil society capacity to tackle xenophobia and extremism and to combat religious and ethnic discrimination.

Forward look

We will continue to monitor closely Russia's adherence to its human rights commitments and obligations during 2008, and will raise any concerns we have frankly with the Russian authorities, both bilaterally and in the EU, OSCE and Council of Europe, where appropriate. We look to the Russian authorities to ensure free and fair presidential elections in March 2008 and to allow international observation to ensure that this is the case.