

Russia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation of human rights and democracy in Russia has continued to degrade. There are unremitting limitations on fundamental freedoms, dwindling space for independent civil society and a clampdown on independent political voices. Persecution, provocation and discrediting campaigns are inherent part of the environment in which CSOs operate. Politically motivated judicial cases are meant to silence independent voices and set an example for critical voices (e.g. Yuri Dmitriev). High-profile murders of political figures remain under-investigated and the perpetrators remain unaccountable. Following Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the human rights situation there deteriorated significantly, including denial of: freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of religion or belief. Russian authorities persecute those who oppose the annexation including Crimea's ethnic and religious minorities, namely Crimean Tatars (e.g. raids on their homes in March 2019, illegal detentions, and prosecutions). There was a new wave of detentions and torture of gay people in Chechnya in January 2019, leading to the deaths of two of them. Investigations into earlier persecutions of gay men in Chechnya and other human rights abuses in the Republic have not materialised, thus accountability and justice for the victims has not been assured. The ban on Jehovah's Witnesses is a grave attack on religious freedom – currently there are nearly 250 criminal cases against followers. The scope of the existing legislation on 'foreign agents' was extended in 2019 to include individual journalists and bloggers, limiting further the space for free and independent access to information. The Russian parliament continues to be a legislative body without any real political opposition present. In the run up to the September 2019 local and regional elections, the use of measures against the opposition, as well as the mass detentions and excessive sentencing of peaceful protesters seriously undermined pluralistic democracy. In spite of negative trends, Russia's civil society remained pro-active, as demonstrated by the wide interest in EU calls for proposals in the areas of democracy, human rights and civil society.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Support to civil society and human rights defenders was provided by both political and financial means. At political level, this was ensured by means of a number of different tools. In the absence of EU–Russia human rights consultations since November 2013, there is no formal dialogue between the EU and Russia on human rights and civil society issues. In 2019, the EU's position continued to be expressed mainly through public statements or quiet diplomacy. Meetings of the HR/VP and senior EU officials, or the EU Ambassador in Moscow with Russian authorities served to convey the EU's positions on numerous developments, legislation and individual cases of concern. Trial observation by diplomats has been an important instrument in giving visibility to activists, human rights defenders (HRDs) and NGOs under pressure. NGOs and HRDs appreciate the attention generated by international presence. In some cases, they view it as the only meaningful leverage with the Russian authorities. The EU delegation has actively supported wider dialogue and contacts between Member State embassies, NGOs, civil society, experts and HRDs. An example is a successful workshop organised with Media4Democracy.eu on Freedom of Expression online. The EU delegation and EU Principal Advisor on Gender participated at the launch in Moscow in January 2019 of the EU-funded gender project to strengthen knowledge and expertise concerning violence against women, and women's participation in

public and political life. It is another example of how EU support can broaden the space for Russian civil society in their interaction with the authorities against all odds. Outreach to the Russian regions has also been a focus of the EU delegation's work.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The key success story in 2019 relates to the case of Oyub Titiev, head of Chechen branch of NGO Memorial. Titiev was detained in January 2018 on trumped-up charges of drug possession and faced up to 10 years of imprisonment. The EU and Member States' diplomats followed the case since its very inception, communicating on this via social media. Against the background of a challenging security environment, the EU delegation coordinated trial observation by EU and like-minded diplomats in the town of Shali (outside of regional capital of Chechnya, Grozny) until the court approved on 10 June his conditional release.

Another noteworthy case is the one of Pavlo Hryb, a Ukrainian national, convicted by the Russian authorities of promoting terrorism. The EU delegation and Member States' diplomats followed closely the case of Hryb and observed the court hearings both in Rostov-on-Don and in Moscow. The EU repeatedly raised the concerns of the health condition of Hryb in meetings and correspondence with the Russian authorities until his release as part of the prisoner exchange between Ukraine and Russia on 7 September. On several occasions, the EU raised concerns with Russian interlocutors at all levels regarding other illegally detained Ukrainian citizens in Russia, including the Ukrainian sailors, detained in the Kerch Strait in November 2018. It coordinated monitoring activities of a number of their trials.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU is currently the only big international donor for Russian civil society projects. Most other international donors have been either forced to leave or left voluntarily before they could have been declared undesirable. Some Member States continue bilateral programmes in this respect. Given pressure from the authorities, Russian NGOs need support now more than ever, including funding and capacity building. The assurance of continued EU funds for civil society in Russia over the coming years is increasingly important.

Many representatives of Russian civil society have noted that the EU's support is crucial to enable Russian CSOs to continue their work in an ever more restrictive environment. In addition, the EU programmes contribute to breaking down the self-imposed isolation of Russia. They help Russian civil society activists stay connected with their European colleagues and stay within the common European agenda based on universal values.

In this respect, important contributors in connecting Russian and EU civil societies include EU-funded organisations such as the 'EU-Russia Civil Society Forum', a platform of NGOs from EU countries and the Russian Federation (RF), which aims to strengthen co-operation between NGOs from Russia and the EU, and between Russian NGOs. The Forum has been actively involved in the questions of visa regulation, development of social, environmental and human rights standards, dealing with history, and civic participation among others. Likewise, the Prague Civil Society Centre which supports civil society across Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia, nurtures skills and knowledge of those working on civic and social initiatives. The Centre has brought together participants from all over the region e.g. on issues such as freedom of the media. The European Endowment for Democracy, an independent grant-making organisation established by the EU, to foster democracy in the European Neighbourhood including Russia, provides flexible support to

democracy advocates, civil society organisations, pro-democracy movements, civic and political activists, and media and journalists working towards a pluralistic, democratic political system.

5. Multilateral context

The human rights and democracy situation in Russia has been regularly discussed at the meetings in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna. Russia's stance remains challenging in multilateral fora. Following support from the Committee of Ministers at the Helsinki Ministerial, and efforts within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the Russian delegation returned to PACE last June. Nevertheless, tensions remain within the Parliamentary Assembly. In the Council conclusions on the EU Priorities in UN Human Rights Fora in 2019, concerns were expressed specifically about the human rights situations in Chechnya, in the illegally annexed Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol by the Russian Federation, and in areas of eastern Ukraine not under the control of the government. The conclusions also outlined the EU's concerns about the proper functioning of democratic institutions, the respect for the rule of law and the principles of good governance, freedom of expression, online and offline, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the independence of the judiciary in the Russian Federation.