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## Russia

### Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2005

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The Russian Federation has a weak multiparty political system with a strong presidency, a government headed by a prime minister, and a bicameral legislature (Federal Assembly) consisting of a lower house (State Duma) and an upper house (Federation Council). The pro-presidential United Russia party controlled more than two-thirds of the State Duma. The country had an estimated population of 143 million.

President Vladimir Putin was re-elected in March 2004 in an election process the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) determined did not adequately reflect principles necessary for a healthy democratic election, particularly in equal access to the media by all candidates and secrecy of the ballot. However, the voting itself was relatively free of manipulation, and the outcome was generally understood to have represented the will of the people. The government's human rights record in the continuing internal conflict in and around Chechnya remained poor. Both federal forces and their Chechen government allies generally acted with legal impunity. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces. Pro-Moscow Chechen paramilitaries at times appeared to act independently of the Russian command structure, and there were no indications that the federal authorities made any effort to rein in their extensive human rights abuses.

The most notable human rights development during the year was continued centralization of power in the executive branch, which was strengthened by changes in the parliamentary election laws and a move away from election of regional governors to their nomination by the president for confirmation by regional legislatures. This trend, taken together with continuing media restrictions and self-censorship, a compliant State Duma, continuing corruption and selectivity in enforcement of the law, political pressure on the judiciary, and harassment of some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) resulted in an erosion of the accountability of government leaders to the people. There were reports of the following additional significant human rights problems:

- alleged government involvement in politically motivated abductions, disappearances, and unlawful killing in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus
- hazing in the armed forces, resulting in several deaths
- harassment, and in some cases, abduction, of individuals who appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), reportedly to convince them to drop their cases
- torture, violence, and other brutal or humiliating treatment
- harsh and frequently life-threatening prison conditions
- corruption in law enforcement
- arbitrary arrest and detention
- alleged executive branch influence over judicial decisions in certain high-profile cases
- government pressure that continued to weaken freedom of expression and media independence, particularly of major national networks
- continued limitations, primarily by local authorities, on freedom of assembly and restrictions on some religious groups in some regions
- societal discrimination, harassment, and violence against members of some religious minorities
- restrictions on freedom of movement and migration
- negative official attitudes toward, and sometimes harassment of, certain NGOs involved in human rights monitoring
- violence against women and children
- trafficking in persons
- widespread governmental and societal discrimination as well as racially motivated attacks against ethnic minorities and persons from the Caucasus, Central Asia, Asia, and Africa
- instances of forced labor

There were also positive developments with regard to human rights. The judiciary demonstrated greater independence in a number of cases. Reforms initiated in previous years continued to produce improvements in the criminal justice system. The authorities sought to combat instances of racial and ethnic mistreatment through prosecutions of groups and individuals accused of engaging in this behavior. Progress was also made in combating trafficking in persons.

Anti-government forces committed numerous human rights abuses in the internal conflict in Chechnya. They continued killing and intimidating local heads of administration. There were also reports of Chechen rebel involvement in both terrorist bombings and politically motivated disappearances in Chechnya and Ingushetiya during the year. Some Chechen rebels were allegedly involved in kidnapping to raise funds.