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Human Rights in Russia and the Former Soviet Republics: Introduction

Abstract

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a state of political, economic, and social disarray was accompanied by a renewed hope for improved human rights conditions in Russia and the former Soviet Republics. However, transitions toward more democratic forms of governance and market economies have faced many obstacles, and have not necessarily facilitated the protection of such rights. As this eclectic compilation of essays and bibliographies in the current digest reveals, many legacies of Soviet rule persist and continue to plague the region today.

Keywords

Human rights, Russia, Soviet Union, Eastern Europe

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Human Rights in Russia and the Former Soviet Republics

Introduction by Arianna Nowakowski

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a state of political, economic, and social disarray was accompanied by a renewed hope for improved human rights conditions in Russia and the former Soviet Republics. However, transitions toward more democratic forms of governance and market economies have faced many obstacles, and have not necessarily facilitated the protection of such rights. As this eclectic compilation of essays and bibliographies in the current digest reveals, many legacies of Soviet rule persist and continue to plague the region today.

Although Russia has stabilized dramatically since 1991, progress toward a liberal democracy is frequently called into question. Political and legal corruption, lack of transparency, insufficient public participation, and increased governmental control of media enterprises have contributed to such doubt. Viewing a lack of democratic progress as a hindrance to the development of human rights in much of the post-Soviet region, the contributors to this digest evaluate the prospects for democracy by discussing many historical and political impediments for democratic development. As an important component of democracy, the current state of civil society in Russia is also addressed, focusing primarily on the hindered operation of NGOs and religious groups. Together, these works provide an image of Russia's apparent transition away from a liberal democracy, which many scholars argue is having a negative impact on significant human rights issues.

Acutely problematic during Soviet times, rights of women, sexual minorities, and disabled people, continue to be denied in post-Soviet Russia. Arguably, these problems are worsening as the operation of NGOs, freedom of speech, and representation in civil society become increasingly curtailed. An assemblage of topics such as changes in gender identity, employment issues, health care, and public and private violence present a comprehensive image of gender inequality as a larger social and political human rights problem. Regarding disability rights, issues of public discrimination and lack of access to health care, particularly for children and the elderly, are presented as central, yet insufficiently addressed issues in contemporary Russia.

Lack of access to quality health care is perhaps one of the most all-encompassing human rights issues facing the region today, as social discrimination, corruption, and poverty all come into play. In an extended overview of some of the main health problems afflicting Russians in particular, issues such as alcoholism, smoking, HIV/AIDS, and a number of preventable diseases are viewed in light of their contribution to Russia's rapidly declining population. Many of the sources in this section inform on the healthcare system in Russia, in addition to addressing political and economic contributions to the aforementioned problems. The inadequate health care and abuse faced by military personnel in particular is also discussed.

Although class, gender, and disability affect access to quality health care in contemporary Russia, an additional portion of the demographics that experiences widespread discrimination is that of the Roma. As the essay on the Roma reveals, lack of access to health care, education and social institutions are only a few of the problems afflicting them. Central to this piece is the legacy of

authoritarian rule, which in many ways continues to legitimate the unequal treatment of this segment of the population.

The legacy of authoritarian rule undoubtedly presents challenges for human rights reform in Russia and in much of Eastern Europe, but such political repression is more detrimental for human rights in regions still under this form of governance. Extending beyond Russia proper, research on authoritarianism in Turkmenistan brings many significant issues of political repression to the forefront. Following the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov on December 21, 2006, the current state of affairs in Turkmenistan remains uncertain. As the essay on this topic illustrates, the pervasiveness of control established by Niyazov's regime makes substantial change unlikely in the foreseeable future.

With respect to most areas of the former Soviet Republics and Russia, issues of religious freedom and the treatment of ethnic minorities are particularly germane to a discussion on human rights in the region. Research on the repression of Islam in Tajikistan, as well as hardships faced by repatriated ethnic groups in Russia and the CIS bring such issues to the light. Finally, a problem of immense proportion that extends well beyond Russia's borders is that of human trafficking. Addressing trafficking of women and children, as well as men, the research on this topic illuminates the ways in which economic perils, coupled with corruption in the political and legal systems, can lead to the trafficking of people worldwide.

The wide array of topics addressed in this digest is by no means all encompassing of the human rights issues plaguing Russia and the former Soviet Republics today, nor is each topic addressed in complete detail. Rather, the digest is intended to serve as a representation of many pertinent issues, and to provide useful sources for future research. We hope readers will find this installment informative, bringing to light many problems that must be addressed as the post-Soviet transformation in the region continues.

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