



FSU NEWS February 2018

News and action updates on the Former Soviet Union

Amnesty International UK

WELCOME to the latest issue of FSU News, the newsletter from the Country Coordinators Team at AIUK for the Former Soviet Union.

Yet again, it's been a few months since our last newsletter. We are delighted to welcome **Fuad Babayev**, newly appointed South Caucasus country coordinator. **Pauline Uyterwijk-Crosfield** is leaving us next month for another region so, if you know anyone interested in our region, or would like to have a chat, please get in touch (contact details at the end).

Pauline has edited all our newsletters until this one, so any errors or omissions aren't hers! We hope you find the newsletter useful. **Do use the links in your tweets, on the Facebook page or website of your group and pass it on to your members...** If you have any questions or suggestions, or would like to share a photo of any FSU actions you've taken part in with your group in the next issue, do let us know!

Don't forget we're on Facebook: [Amnesty International UK Former Soviet Union](#)

AZERBAIJAN

Presidential candidates announced

Ilham Aliyev will be running for a fourth term. There was little doubt that he would run, though there was some speculation that the country's first lady and vice-president Mehriban Aliyeva might be nominated as the ruling party's (New Azerbaijan) candidate. It is noteworthy that after the 2016 constitutional reforms Ilham Aliyev can shift powers to the first vice-president at any time.

With elections scheduled for 17 October, Azerbaijan's political arena is going to be on lockdown.

Attacks on Media

In January, the Berlin-based *Meydan TV* suffered a huge data loss and around 100,000 subscribers after it experienced a series of **Distributed Denial of Service** attacks carried out from India, Vietnam, Romania, Brazil, and Indonesia.

According to opposition politician **Jamil Hasanly**, the political, social and economic environment established in Azerbaijan is not equal. The opposition does not have access to television; civil society has been silenced; independent media is blocked and so is the

opposition media; while critical voices have been either arrested or forced out of the country.

Activist conscripted despite ill-health

Ulvi Hasanli has been conscripted for military service, despite ill-health, and sent to the disputed region around Nagorno-Karabakh. He'd been excused military service until 2019 after a medical in September 2017. That decision was reversed in October and he was taken to a military base to begin his military service. Amnesty International believes he is targeted because of his peaceful activism.

There is an [Urgent Action](#) on his case

ARMENIA

Media banned from government debate

This month, the Armenian government approved a bill on 'the structure and activity of the government', under which the current open format of government sessions will be replaced by a closed one. This means the media will no longer have access to government sessions. Political analysts believe that this will make it impossible to ensure oversight of government.

GEORGIA

Transgender woman brutally beaten

In January, **Miranda Pagava**, a 23-year-old transgender woman was brutally beaten in Tbilisi. According to her, as she got out of a taxi to exchange money, an unknown man who was sitting in a car in the vicinity spotted her, started complimenting her and insisted that she should go with him. After she refused, the man started yelling at her, asking about her biological sex. The Ministry of Interior has launched an investigation into the case under Article 126 of the Criminal Code of Georgia ('violence'). According to Pagava, her attacker has been arrested.

It's not the first time this has happened. Four transgender women were physically abused in the centre of Tbilisi in February 2017. The women were attacked by 10 men armed with batons, sticks and stabbing weapons.

LGBTI Rights in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan



'Affection is not propaganda' graffiti in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

A new Amnesty International report [Less Equal: LGBTI Human Rights Defenders in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan](#) published in December found that discrimination, homophobia and Russia's crusade against non-traditional sexual relationships have helped fuel a worrying rise in hostility towards LGBTI human rights groups in parts of the former Soviet Union. Social and political homophobia and transphobia in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan contribute to the marginalisation of LGBTI Human Rights Defenders (HRD) and activists.

State authorities are unwilling to protect them. Police fail to prevent and investigate homophobic and transphobic hate crimes against LGBTI HRDs, activists and community members so leaving them demoralised because other local civil society activists do not support LGBTI people's human rights in their own advocacy and programme work.

All four countries have begun to introduce homophobic 'propaganda' laws similar to Russia's own but only Belarus so far has done so.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Memorial's Head Detained



Oyub Titiev, the head of Memorial's office in Grozny, was stopped by police on 9 January who allegedly found drugs in his car.

The following week, two masked men set Memorial's office in neighbouring Ingushetia alight. A week later, Memorial's car in the adjacent republic of Dagestan was torched and a threatening text was sent to the office.

Oyub took over after **Natalia Estemirova** was killed in July 2009. Refused bail, he remains in detention.

Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to [free Oyub immediately, drop all charges](#), and end the coordinated assault carried out against **Memorial** and other human rights organizations across the country, and investigate the circumstances surrounding this saga of injustice.

Prisoner Transport



Because the country is so vast, prisoners can be transported thousands of miles in specially designed but overcrowded railway carriages from one place of detention to another. Journeys can take many days, sometimes months, and prisoners don't know where they're being taken until they reach their final destination,

possibly thousands of miles from their families making it near impossible for them to visit. Women prisoners are more likely to find themselves far from home because there are fewer places of detention.

While travelling, prisoners have limited access to toilets and none at all when carriages are held in sidings. Between trips, prisoners are kept in special transit cells which are even worse than pre-trial detention cells.

The conditions face by prisoners and the poor conditions are detailed in a recent report by Amnesty [PRISONER TRANSPORTATION IN RUSSIA: TRAVELLING INTO THE UNKNOWN](#)

FIFA World Cup

Russia will host the FIFA World Cup from **14 June to 15 July**. 32 national teams will play in 11 cities across the country. This gives Amnesty an opportunity to highlight and promote the work of **BRAVE human rights defenders** based in some of the cities where the tournament takes place and to express our solidarity with them.

The campaign kicks off on 14 May.

Remember, your letters matter!

The Russia campaigner at Amnesty's Research Department took part in a workshop with human rights defenders in Moscow in December.

Aleksei Sokolov, a human rights defender from Yekaterinburg in the Urals, who fights against ill-treatment in penal colonies, was there. He was jailed having been falsely accused of criminal offences.

When discussing support for HRDs, he remembered with great warmth all the letters he'd got in prison. He said: "I would go to the post room and return with an armful of letters. I received lots and lots of letters and beautiful postcards from different countries. The other inmates would ask me if I was carrying letters for the whole unit and I would reply: 'No, these are letters only for me!' You could clearly see how amazed the others were and how they wished they could receive the same amount of letters. Those letters helped me to survive in the most difficult circumstances and to keep hope."

Today Aleksei and his colleagues from NGO Legal Basis work tirelessly to defend prisoners' rights and prevent and combat torture in places of detention. Your support is one of the factors which helped this brave man to be released on parole in 2011 and to get back to his human rights work.

Contact Barrie Hay, Country Coordinator for the Russian Federation, for more details: barrie.hay@amnesty.org.uk.

UKRAINE

Crimea: Week of Action for HRD & Prisoner of Conscience Emir-Usein Kuku



On 11 February 2018, **Emir-Usein Kuku** will have been detained for two years since his arrest. Emir is a Crimean Tatar who faces up to 25 years in prison if convicted.

Starting on 11 February, there will be a week of action to launch a campaign calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

His first hearing will be on 14 February, with second and third hearings on 15 and 20 February respectively so this is therefore an opportune moment to support the case and take action!

BELARUS

As remarked before, the **death penalty** remains an ongoing concern. Despite continuing assurances from the Belarusian authorities that it is progressing towards establishing a moratorium, there is no supporting evidence.

Ihar Hershankou and **Siamion Berazhnoy**, whose case was mentioned in our last newsletter, had their death sentences upheld by the Supreme Court on 20 December. [Please take action asap.](#)

On 20 January, two men were sentenced to death after their sentences of life imprisonment were quashed on appeal. **Viachaslau Sukharko** and **Aliaksandr Zhylnikau** are the first two people to be sentenced to death in 2018, bringing the total number of people on death row in Belarus, according to the Belarusian authorities, to seven. [Urgent Action 17/18](#) was issued on 2 February.

Contact: Pauline Uyterwijk-Crosfield, Country Coordinator for Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova: pauline.uyterwijk@amnesty.org.uk.

KYRGYZSTAN

Sooronbay Jeenbekov became president of Kyrgyzstan on **1 December 2017**. **Jeenbekov** has been quoted saying that his goal is “to preserve what has been achieved [and] strengthen what has been started” while continuing the policies of his predecessor. *Human Rights Watch* has commented that **Jeenbekov** should work to address human rights abuses in Kyrgyzstan including: the country’s persistent domestic violence, deterioration of media freedom (especially the wrongful imprisonment of **Azimjon Askarov**) and ill-treatment by the law enforcement.

UZBEKISTAN

Positive steps towards human rights?



A recent article from *Human Rights Watch* <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/25/uzbekistan-year-new-presidency-cautious-hope-change> has reported positive steps being taken towards human rights in Uzbekistan in the first year of **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**’s Presidency. Since he became President, the Uzbek government has released at least 16 political prisoners, relaxed certain restrictions on free expression, removed citizens from the security services’ notorious “black list,” and increased the accountability of government institutions to citizens. It has also banned the forced mobilization of teachers, doctors, and college students to labour in fields for the annual cotton-picking season.

Human Rights Watch recommends that the Uzbek government should take steps for institutional change and sustainable improvements in order to fulfil its human rights obligations.

Tortured journalist must be released NOW!

You may remember the case of **Bobomurod Abdullayev** who was detained in September by the Security Services (SNB) allegedly for attempting to overthrow the constitutional order of the state.

He is held in a notorious pre-trial detention centre. He has been tortured and threatened that his family would be harmed if he didn’t ‘confess’.

The two lead SNB officers were suspended on 8 February, and the General Prosecutor’s Office has

begun an investigation into the allegations of torture and the fabrication of the criminal case against him.

Bobomurod Abdullayev remains in SNB detention. Please [take action](#) welcoming the initiative to investigate the allegations and to call for his immediate release.

OUR TEAM

If there is **anything you would like to ask** about Amnesty work and the human rights situation in any of the FSU countries, or if you would like any of us to come and **give a talk to your group**, let us know. Pick up the phone and give us a call, or send us an e-mail.

The current FSU Country Coordinators team is:

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