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## HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN RUSSIA

### ISSUE

Democratization in Russia is proceeding with the adoption of a new Constitution, but is threatened by ethnic conflict in the South, ultra-nationalism, and pervasive corruption.

### BACKGROUND

Russia's progress in 1993 toward democracy and the rule of law was considerable, though uneven and marked by repeated political crises. The adoption of a new Constitution entrenching basic human rights in accordance with international standards and obligations did not come without a struggle. Implementation remains a challenge.

Despite growing political confrontation, President Yeltsin and his government consistently worked to ensure the people's right to express their will in referenda and elections. The government's commitment to the protection of human and civil rights was tested by Yeltsin's extremist opponents, culminating in the armed insurrection of October 3-4.

The Constitutional Court, Russia's supreme arbiter of human and civil rights, was suspended after its chairman took the anti-government side in the October events. It is not yet clear what latitude for action it will have under the new Constitution. Politically-motivated allegations of corruption and other improprieties, launched by competing investigative and law-enforcement bodies, have undermined respect for the legal system. The Russian authorities will have to make great efforts to restore public trust in the honesty and effectiveness of governmental institutions.

Despite the pressures of a difficult transition, Russia has maintained its commitment to a free and open society. The increasingly independent media (especially print and radio) has fostered vigorous political debate. Some concern remains about the recentralization of state-owned news agencies and access for all view-points to state-controlled television.

Minority rights, which are officially guaranteed, are being challenged by extremist elements. The December 12 parliamentary elections demonstrated that Russian ultra-nationalists have managed to capitalize on economic discontent to spread xenophobia and anti-Semitism. In the North Caucasus, territorial conflicts between minority nationalities displaced during the Stalin era have led to mass violence and the imposition of martial law in affected areas.