

## International

# High-profile cases turn spotlight on domestic violence in Russia

## Russians are expecting the state to do more to protect victims

**MOSCOW:** Natalia Tunikova's partner pushed her towards the open balcony in their high-rise Moscow flat, before punching her to the floor. Fearing she would die, she reached for their kitchen table and "grabbed the nearest object". It was a knife. Tunikova, 47, said she was subjected to regular beatings, but in 2014 she was the one who spent a night in a prison cell facing a heavy sentence for stabbing her boyfriend. A Moscow court later ruled that her use of force in self-defense was not justified. She was given a custodial sentence but did not serve it thanks to a general amnesty. Cases like Tunikova's are ever more widely reported in Russia, leading to a public outcry in a country that has no specific law on domestic violence and where feminist movements like #MeToo had little impact.

This summer, a case against three teenage sisters who killed their father after what lawyers say was years of beatings and sexual abuse made national and global headlines. Campaigners say such reports have led to a breakthrough in awareness, and Russians are expecting the state to do more to protect victims. Tunikova told AFP her former partner would sometimes even call an ambulance for her after an attack. "The medics would scold him but they never called the police, despite seeing my injuries," she said.

She has since campaigned for Russia to adopt a domestic violence law and is one of a growing number of women appealing to the European Court of Human Rights for justice. In a landmark ruling in July, the European court ordered Russia to compensate Valeriya Volodina — who fled the country fearing her former partner — for failing to investigate and prosecute him. It also ruled that Russia's laws were failing to protect women and called for changes.

### 'Abusers feel their impunity'

Others say corruption is a factor in the lack of prosecutions against domestic abusers. Katya, who declined to give her last name, pursued her ex-part-

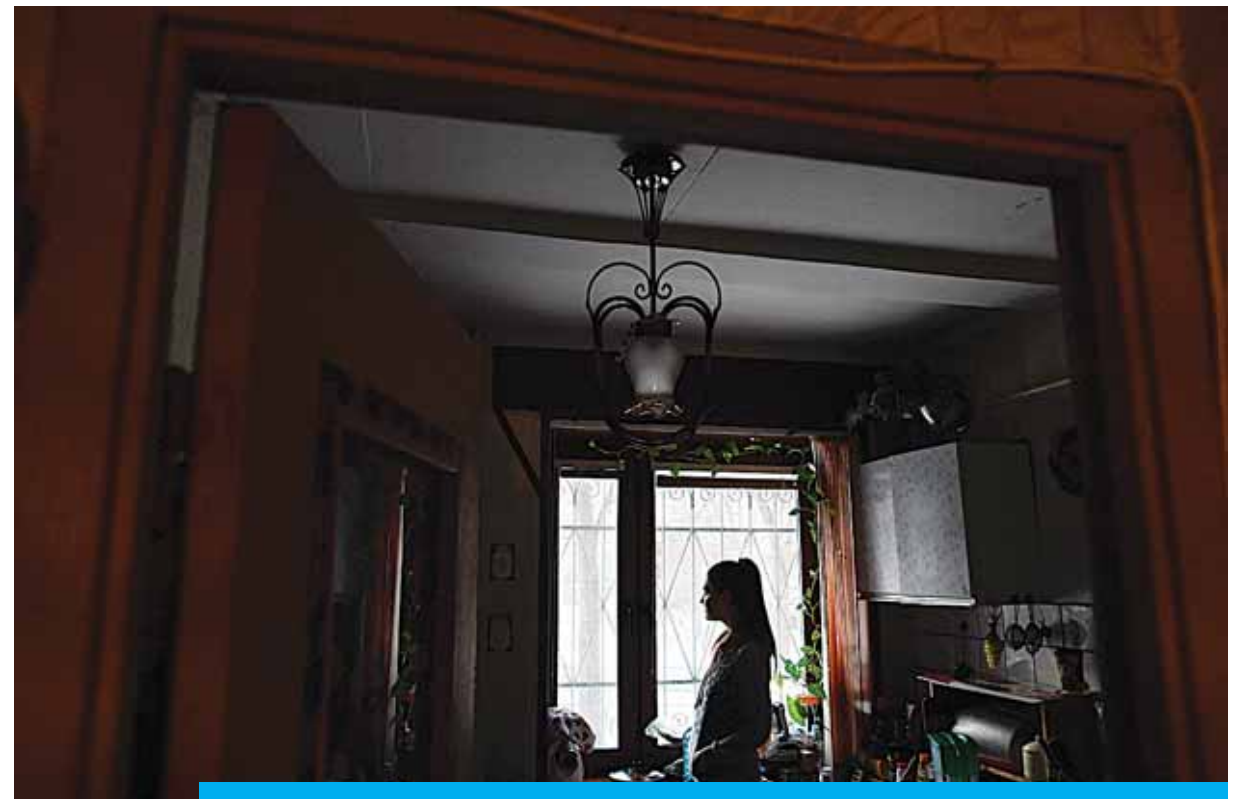
ner through the courts for two years after he not only beat her but also sexually abused their toddler son. After his arrest and a year in pre-trial detention, Katya was stunned when police eventually freed her ex citing a lack of evidence. "Abusers feel their impunity," she said.

Katya's partner first started beating her when their son was two weeks old. Later he started hacking her social media accounts to control her online activity. But before the sexual abuse of their son, police would not take Katya's complaints seriously. "They told me: 'Let your friends sort it out'." Since President Vladimir Putin signed a 2017 decree downgrading first-time battery from an offence punishable by jail time to a 5,000 ruble (\$77) fine, many women do not go to the police, Katya said, "because it leads nowhere". "Unless someone has died (the authorities) don't want to hear about it." Women's rights lawyer Mari Davtyan said Russian women are filing so many complaints to the European court that "the state will have to do something about it". A growing number of Russians, she said, have become aware that the situation with domestic violence is "catastrophic".

### 'Force is respected'

According to a September survey by the independent Levada pollster, 31 percent of Russians know of physical abuse within their own family, the family they grew up in or their friends' families. Almost 60 percent believe the cases should be reported to police. Among women that number is higher. "There is a social demand for justice," Davtyan said, adding that this changed the way local media cover the issue.

Yekaterina Schulmann, who sits on the presidential human rights council, believes that thanks to a social awakening there is more political will than ever for Russia to adopt a domestic violence law. "The situation has changed a lot in the last few months," she said. "There has been a social outburst." Schulmann is part of a commission working on a



MOSCOW: Alexandra, 26, a victim of domestic violence, poses for pictures in a kitchen. —AFP

draft bill that she hopes will be presented in the Russian parliament by the end of the year.

It proposes introducing restraining orders punishable by jail terms if broken as well as social housing for victims. Russia's upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, has its own commission working on the issue. Its speaker, Putin ally Valentina Matvienko, has said that addressing domestic violence will be a "priority" for senators this autumn.

"That was unthinkable just a few months ago,"

Schulmann said. But anti-violence campaigner Anna Rivina is skeptical. "Only a few MPs take it seriously," the 29-year-old said in a central Moscow loft where she recently opened a centre offering women free legal help. She welcomes that her generation of Russians are far more aware of what constitutes an abusive relationship than their peers. But the problem, she said, is that Russia's political system favors the physically strong. "Russia is a country where force is respected," Rivina said. —AFP

## LatAm's longest serving leader bids for 4th term

**LA PAZ:** Evo Morales, Latin America's longest-serving president who is bidding for a fourth term as Bolivia's president in elections today, is the country's first indigenous head of state. A member of the Aymara indigenous people, he grew up in poverty on Bolivia's high plains and was a llama herder, coca farmer and leftist union leader before rising to become president in January 2006.

Victory in today's elections would extend his mandate until 2025 and give him 19 consecutive years in power. At 59, he is now the longest-serving president in Latin America and one of the last of the wave of leftist leaders who swept to power in the region in the early 2000s. Those leftist governments have since fallen away, torn down by a conservative backlash in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Ecuador. But "Bolivia is different, we're doing well" Morales insisted at a recent rally of his Movement for Socialism (MAS) party.

More than 60 percent of the Bolivia's 11.3 million people are from 36 indigenous groups, including Morales' Aymara people. The president remains popular with Bolivians for landmark gains against hunger and poverty and for dragging his country into the 21st Century, building the world's highest cable car and launching the country's first satellite.

Sitting on the region's second-largest gas reserves, after Venezuela, and the world's largest reserves of lithium, Bolivia's economy has more than tripled in size during his 13 years in office. However, opponents accuse him of tolerating corruption and investing in flashy infrastructure projects at the expense of health and education. A case in point is his decision last year to move the government headquarters into a luxurious skyscraper in La Paz. —AFP

## Croatians protest over release of teenager's suspected rapists

**ZAGREB:** Thousands protested yesterday in major Croatian cities against the release of five men suspected of gang-raping a teenager, saying the judiciary had repeatedly failed to protect girls and women. Earlier this month, a judge released the suspects accused by police of repeatedly raping a 15-year-old for nearly a year in their village outlying the coastal town of Zadar.

They also allegedly filmed the abuse on smartphones and then blackmailed the girl, until she eventually told her school's psychologist, local media reported. Their release while the investigation is ongoing shocked many and after a week of public protests, the five were placed in custody on Thursday. Women's rights groups had called for protests yesterday under the banner of #pravdazadjevojke ("Justice for Girls" in Croatian).

The protesters numbered about 7,000 in the capital Zagreb yesterday, according to organizers. Demonstrations were held in 15 other cities. "Not punishing a crime is a crime" and "Women against system" were some of the banners carried by the Zagreb marchers. —AFP

## Chile president declares state of emergency

**SANTIAGO:** Chile's president declared a state of emergency in Santiago Friday night and gave the military responsibility for security after a day of violent protests over an increase in the price of metro tickets. Throughout Friday, protesters clashed with riot police in several parts of the capital and the subway system was shut after attacks on stations in some of the worst violence the city has seen in years.

At least 16 buses were torched and a dozen metro stations totally destroyed. Around midnight President Sebastian Pinerá declared a state of emergency and appointed Major General Javier Iturriaga del Campo as head of national defense. "The objective of this state of emergency is very simple but very profound: to ensure public order and peace for the inhabitants of Santiago," Pinerá said in a statement.

The state of emergency is initially for 15 days and restricts freedom of movement and assembly. Due to the emergency, the National Football Association has suspended matches this weekend. General Iturriaga said the military would patrol major trouble spots in the city of seven

million but would not impose a curfew at present. "We are not going to restrict any personal freedom for now," he said.

Violent clashes escalated as night fell and the headquarters of the ENEL Chile power company and a Banco Chile branch, both in the city center, were set on fire and several metro stations hit with Molotov cocktails. The ENEL tower blaze was put out with no one injured, firefighters said. Barricades were erected in several parts of the city and masked protestors armed with sticks and stones clashed with riot police, who repelled them with water cannon and tear gas. Residents in many districts of Santiago banged their pots in a show of support for the protestors.

### Attacks on metro stations

The unrest started as a fare-dodging protest mainly by students against the hike in metro ticket prices, which increased from 800 to 830 peso (\$1.13 to \$1.17) for peak-hour travel, following a 20 peso rise in January. The fare hike was blamed on rising oil prices and a weaker peso.

There had been several fare-dodging actions in recent days, organized on social media, but the protests escalated Friday, tapping into general discontent among many Chileans amid an economic slowdown and calls for reforms to labor and tax laws and the pension system. Attacks on metro stations forced the closure of the entire subway system —



SANTIAGO: Chilean soldiers patrol the streets of Santiago in the early hours of Saturday after a mass fare-dodging protest. —AFP

the key form of public transport in the congested and polluted city, carrying three million passengers a day.

"The entire network is closed due to riots and destruction that prevent the minimum security conditions for passengers and workers," the metro operator said on Twitter, after attacks against nearly all the 164 stations where many gates and turnstiles were destroyed. The Santiago Metro, at 140 kilometers (90 miles) the largest and most modern in South America, is expected to remain

closed this weekend and could reopen gradually next week.

Closure of the metro forced many Santiago residents to walk home, sometimes long distances, resulting in scenes of chaos. Pinerá slammed the protestors as criminals. "This desire to break everything is not a protest, it's criminal," he said in a radio interview. On Thursday, 133 people had been arrested for causing damage to metro stations, estimated at up to 500 million peso (\$700,000). —AFP

## Salvini flexes muscles with Rome rally

**ROME:** Italy's strongman Matteo Salvini holds a rally in Rome yesterday aimed at relaunching the Italian right and making a power grab for the capital. Eight special trains and 400 coaches are ferrying in supporters from across the country for the "Italian Pride" demonstration, with the crowds also set for a speech from billionaire former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Salvini, head of the far-right League party, pulled support from the previous populist government over the summer in a bid to spark elections he was convinced he could win to govern the eurozone's third-largest economy alone. That plan failed when his former coalition partner, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, sealed a deal with the centre-left Democratic Party to form a new government.

But after suffering a blip, the League's popularity has risen slightly again in opposition. Recent opinion polls put the anti-immigration party at between 30 to 33 percent of voter intentions, well ahead of the Five Star (M5S) and Democratic Party (PD), which have dropped slightly to between 18 and 20 percent each.

### 'Guests at someone else's house'

With the current left-leaning government seeking to change the electoral law to pre-

vent Salvini triumphing alone at the next elections, the 46-year-old hopes to unite parties on the right and centre-right under his leadership. That however will not be an easy task. Forza Italia head Berlusconi, 83, whose party has been in a lengthy slump, appears open to just such an alliance, along with the smaller, far-right Brothers of Italy.

But Brothers of Italy leader Giorgia Meloni complained ahead of the rally she is due to join that only League banners were visible on the podium. "It's like we're guests at someone else's house," Meloni said. "Another lost opportunity to show that we're united." Some Forza Italia members told Sturdy's La Stampa newspaper that they were not happy about the presence of neo-fascist party CasaPound at the rally.

CasaPound deputy leader Simone Di Stefano insisted that none of his party's members would make the right-armed fascist salute at the rally. A small counter-protest will be held in a nearby square. Salvini in August had refuted the idea of a tie-up with Forza Italia, saying the League "needs nothing and no-one".

### City needs love

Political analysts say Salvini has set his sights on taking Rome and hopes the right-wing alliance could carry him to victory in key upcoming regional elections, potentially setting him up for a win on a national level. He "is doing what he fundamentally does best: opposition on the ground. Among the people," said the Open news website.

The next general election is not due until 2023, but the current governing coalition of



ROME: Head of Italy's far-right League party, Matteo Salvini speaks during a rally against the government. —AFP

former foes is shaky and may not last. Salvini has waged war on Rome's mayor, M5S member Virginia Raggi, calling for her resignation, and will circulate a popular petition yesterday demanding she step down now, two years before her term is due to end. The League head took part in a sit-in against Raggi earlier this month. He then did Facebook live videos from places he says symbolize the city's decline, from an abandoned stadium to a residential area besieged by illegal dump sites. "We need a mayor capable of loving this city and cleaning it up," he said to Raggi, telling her to go back to being a mum.

Raggi, 41, has come under intense fire for the city's ongoing garbage crisis and beleaguered transport services, which have existed for decades. She has blamed the problems on organized crime and corruption in previous administrations. "Hands off Rome," she tersely replied to Salvini on Twitter. The League leader has found an unlikely ally in his battle against Raggi in former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Beyond that, the two Matteos profess to have little in common. As Salvini rallies, Renzi will be drumming up support for his new centrist Italia Viva party at a Florence convention. —AFP