

OVD-Info—an independent human rights media project aimed at monitoring cases of political persecution and violations of human rights in Russia and providing legal assistance to their victims. OVD-Info operates a 24-hour federal hotline to collect information on all types of political persecution, provides free legal assistance, researches different types of political persecution in Russia and engages in international advocacy.

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Violations of freedom of assembly and association

In the previous cycle, Russia accepted recommendations to bring legislation governing public assemblies and its enforcement into conformity with international human rights standards, refrain from detaining and using force against participants of peaceful demonstrations, protect and facilitate freedom of association.

None of the recommendations from the previous cycle regarding upholding Russian human rights obligations in this field were implemented and the situation gradually worsened. OVD-Info documented over 50,000 detentions of peaceful assembly participants between 2019 and 2022. Excessive force and torture is widely used by police during major rallies. 408 people have been criminally prosecuted for participation in rallies. Facial recognition technologies have been arbitrarily used 595 times to identify and prosecute protesters. Additionally, Russian authorities still use COVID-19 as a pretext to refuse approval for assemblies, with selective enforcement favoring pro-government rallies.

Russian authorities continue to use legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” to target civil society organizations. There are 656 “foreign agents” in the registry* and 106 “undesirable organizations” as of August 2023. More than 100 organizations had to self-dissolve due to exercise requirements and limitations associated with “foreign agent” status. Furthermore, the authorities use forcible liquidation to suppress civil society, dissolving several human rights NGOs, including Memorial, Moscow Helsinki Group, Sova and Sphere.

50,000

detentions of peaceful assembly participants between 2019 and 2022

656

“foreign agents” in the registry

Recommendations:

- Exclude the possibility of criminal and administrative liability for participation in peaceful assemblies;
- Avoid from using excessive force against protesters, effectively investigate the cases of police violence and torture of the protesters;
- Stop the practice of detentions of protesters with the use of facial recognition systems;
- Repeal or revise the legislation that hinders the freedom of association, including the laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations”.
- Repeal the decisions to liquidate prominent civil society organizations and ensure that they can operate independently without fear of harassment or interference from the authorities.

* This number includes those organizations for which a decision has been made to remove their listing. However, information about them remains in the register with a mark of exclusion.

Freedom of expression and anti-war persecutions

In the previous cycle, Russia accepted recommendations to guarantee everyone freedom of expression, particularly online, repeal the legislation used to target people exercising these rights, release all journalists detained on politically motivated charges, and refrain from such practices in the future.

Despite these recommendations, the situation gradually worsened. Any expression dissenting the government's actions is subject to various criminal or administrative charges. Technologies for monitoring, controlling and shutting down social networks have evolved and are widely used. The number of laws restricting the work of journalists also increased. The Russian government continued subjecting journalists to criminal prosecution on various charges, including incitement to extremism or terrorism, treason and espionage.

Since the start of full scale invasion of Ukraine, 19,786 detentions were documented for anti-war peaceful assemblies, solo demonstrations and online expressions. New laws were adopted to suppress the dissent about war with Ukraine, including provisions banning “discrediting” and spreading “fakes” about the use of Russian armed forces. 663 people are criminally prosecuted in the context of war, among them 192—for spreading “fakes” and 110—for “discrediting” the use of Russian armed forces. For example, prominent opposition politicians Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilia Yashin were sentenced to 25 and 8,5 years, respectively. 37 of those prosecuted are journalists, including Maria Ponomarenko, sentenced to 6 years.

At least 7430 administrative cases were initiated for “discrediting”. People are prosecuted for anti-war rallies and demonstrations, anti-war comments on social media, anti-war drawings and sermons, wearing anti-war symbols and blue and yellow clothes.

In addition, Russian authorities blocked almost all independent sources of information about the war with Ukraine, including websites of independent media, human rights projects and social media of activists. Overall, 12200 sources were blocked due to “military censorship”, including 316 media outlets, and most independent media outlets stopped their operation inside Russia.

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Recommendations:

- › Repeal the laws prohibiting “discrediting” and spreading “fakes” about the use of Russian armed forces and stop anti-war persecutions;
- › Ensure unrestricted access to alternative information and independent media for all people, including information on the armed conflict with Ukraine;
- › Refrain from arbitrary arrest, detention, and enforced disappearance of media workers.