

PUTIN'S WAR ON DISSIDENTS

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Starting in 2014, Russia has been intensifying its repression of political dissent through legal, administrative, and extralegal measures. This has occurred in concert with the implementation of an aggressive foreign policy that poses a threat to regional and international stability. State controlled mass media has become a powerful propaganda machine to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and subsequent annexation of Crimea, while vestiges of an independent press have been uprooted and banned. Broad legislation has criminalized antiwar speech, independent reporting, and peaceful demonstrations. Activists, journalists, or ordinary citizens are frequently charged with "extremism," "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces," or "spreading false information," often leading to heavy fines, imprisonment, or exile.

This atmosphere of intimidation is sustained by a legal system specifically engineered to suppress dissent and restrict civil society. Provisions such as Articles 207.3 and 280.3 of the Russian Criminal Code have been weaponized to punish any form of opposition to state policies or military actions. Meanwhile, human rights organizations have been shut down or branded as "undesirable," further dismantling prospects for institutional accountability. Such repression now extends to anyone perceived as disloyal to the regime, thus creating a landscape where even subtle acts of disapproval can result in criminal prosecution. These articles explore the instruments of state control and the far-reaching implications for civil society and the future of democratic principles in Russia.

Since March 2022, Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code has criminalized the "public dissemination of knowingly false information" concerning the Russian Armed Forces.

Originally punishable by fines or imprisonment of up to three years, the statute was significantly broadened in March 2023 to include all individuals affiliated with the military, raising the maximum sentence from five to seven years in prison. Such legislative shifts have further tightened the state's grip on public expression. By conflating criticism of military activity with criminal behavior, such as extremism or misinformation, the government has created a legal arsenal for silencing journalists, civil society members, and everyday citizens. The result has been widespread self-censorship, a surge in prosecutions, and the routine imposition of fines and prison terms on those who challenge the official narrative as in the case of prominent journalists like Evan Gershkovich and members of election-monitoring organizations, such as Golos, under vague pretexts like engaging in "fake news" and "extremism."

Authoritarian rule is enriched by eliminating independent scrutiny and undermining civil liberties in the name of safeguarding national security. Prosecution under Articles 207.3 and 280.3 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Article 207.3 criminalizes any public statement or publication that criticizes military operations, particularly those related to Ukraine. Sanctions may include fines of up to 5 million rubles, correctional labor, or prison sentences of up to 15 years in aggravated cases. Article 280.3, titled "Repeated Discrediting of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation," imposes penalties of up to 5 years of imprisonment and is routinely applied to stifle criticism of the military and the war in Ukraine. These laws have been extensively used to suppress antiwar expression and public dissent. Individuals have been prosecuted for remarks made during protests, online posts, or even private conversations later reported to authorities. It is frequently invoked against individuals who have previously been sanctioned under administrative law for similar expressions and is commonly used to punish those organizing or participating in unauthorized protests.

The Russian regime significantly relies on law enforcement agencies, and security services, which enjoy practically unrestrained powers, and often use bogus charges, physical abuse and torture to intimidate citizens. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the crackdown has resulted in the imprisonment of supposed "extremists," "traitors," and "terrorists," who often endure harsh conditions, including overcrowded facilities, inadequate medical care, and physical abuse. In 2025 alone, four journalists associated with Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, which was declared an "extremist organization" in August 2021, were sentenced to 5.5 years in prison each -- an emblematic example of this pattern. Another striking case is that of Nadezhda Rossinskaya, also known as Nadin Geisler, who received a 22-year sentence for assisting Ukrainian refugees.

These prosecutions illustrate a profound erosion of civil liberties and democratic principles in Russia whose security apparatus now holds sweeping powers to detain and silence individuals with view that challenge official doctrine. Reports of torture, inhumane conditions, and medical neglect in detention facilities, alongside the suspicious death of prominent opposition figures underscore the escalating severity of repression. With legal frameworks designed to criminalize dissent, those imprisoned for their beliefs face extended isolation, physical and psychological harm, and slim chances for release.

The regime continues to silence its international critics as well. On May 19, 2025, Russia designated Amnesty International an "undesirable organization" under its restrictive 2015 NGO legislation, marking a significant escalation in its efforts to dismantle independent human rights advocacy. This designation criminalizes any form of collaboration with Amnesty, including the distribution of its materials, and carries penalties of up to five years in prison. The Prosecutor General alleged that its activities endangered the country's political and economic stability by

promoting “Russophobic agendas” and exacerbating military tensions through its support for Ukraine. Since 2022, moreover, the government has expelled or blacklisted numerous high-profile NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, RFE/RL, Greenpeace, and Memorial. These organizations have been branded as either “undesirable” or “foreign agents,” with officials claiming they pose threats to national security. Such classifications have served as legal tools to shutter operations and restrict the presence of foreign-funded advocacy groups in Russia.

By removing legal protections and criminalizing the work of international human rights organizations, the Russian state has further expanded its capacity to silence dissent, diminished government accountability, weakened public oversight, and entrenched authoritarian rule. Russia’s government has, in short, ever more surely abandoned international human rights standards and tightened its grip on public discourse. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, further revealed the regime’s authoritarian character and its hostility toward democratic values. It now utilizes all available instruments, including the politicized use of Interpol, to pursue and punish perceived opponents. Russia has effectively transformed into something more than merely a repressive dictatorship insofar as *any* expression of dissent or dissatisfaction with the authorities is treated as a criminal offense.

Russia’s comprehensive repression of political dissent is turning it into a neo-Stalinist regime in line with, yet ideologically different than, its Soviet predecessor. By employing a combination of repressive legislation, arbitrary detentions, media suppression, and the systematic dismantling of independent organizations, the regime has fostered a climate in which critical thinking and transparency are vanishing entirely. The legal system is becoming little more than an instrument of state control while security forces act without restraint. The Russian regime’s

consolidation of power endangers not only individual rights but also any semblance of democratic governance. As its authoritarian grip tightens, opportunities for peaceful reform diminish, and the Russian landscape again becomes marked by fear, coercion, and the systematic dismantling of civil liberties.

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