

Civic Space in the Russian Federation: Legal Architecture, Restrictions and Human Rights

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Photo source: USSR. 1989 year. Moscow, Red Square © Dmitry Makeev / Wikimedia, 1989.



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Abbreviations	Full terms
ECHR	The European Convention on Human Rights
ICCPR	The International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights
ISP	Internet Service Providers
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual. Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and others
MSTU	Bauman Moscow State Technical University
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OHCHR	The Commissioner for Human Rights (Office of the High Commissioner)
OSCE	The Organisation for Security and Cooperation
RCC	The Russian Copper Company
UN	United Nations
VPN	Virtual Private Network

INTRODUCTION

Scoring 14 out of 100, the Russian Federation's civic space has been designated *closed* by CIVICUS – the watchdog organisation that monitors the state of civic space worldwide (CIVICUS, 2024). The downgrading from *repressed* to *closed* occurred in late March 2023, approximately one year after the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine. By that time, around 19,000 people had already been detained for anti-war protests; journalists had been attacked, independent media dismantled, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) liquidated, and new legislation punishing dissent had been introduced (CIVICUS, 2023).

Following recent disclosures by ombudsmen advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation, a number of looming human rights violations – primarily concentrated in 2025 – have come to light. The cases discussed below were identified in the following Republics: Bashkortostan (3); Sakha Yakutia (5); Chuvashia (1); Tatarstan (3); Karelia (2); Ingmanlandia (4); Buryatia (3); and Udmurtia (3). What clearly emerges is the continuing shrinking of civic space across these territories, suggesting a further – and potentially irreversible – deterioration in the enjoyment of fundamental rights (Free Ombudsman Association, 2025).

This report aims to bring together the multifaceted components of civic space under international law, offering an overview of the numerous legal mechanisms through which it is currently undermined and violated within the legislation of the Russian Federation. In particular, through the analysis of recent legal cases, it is possible to identify the laws, legal provisions and rhetorical framings most commonly used today to justify: (1) the criminalisation of pacifist speech; (2) the repression of activists, human rights defenders, and political prisoners; (3) the crackdown on freedom to assembly and association; (4) censorship and control of information; and (5) the silencing of symbolic and cultural expression.

The following cases do not constitute, and do not intend to constitute, an exhaustive list for the reporting period. Each has been selected as exemplary and particularly relevant to the discussion on civil space restrictions and the hurdles faced by civil society in the Russian Federation. They should therefore be viewed as part of a broader picture that is beyond the scope of this report.

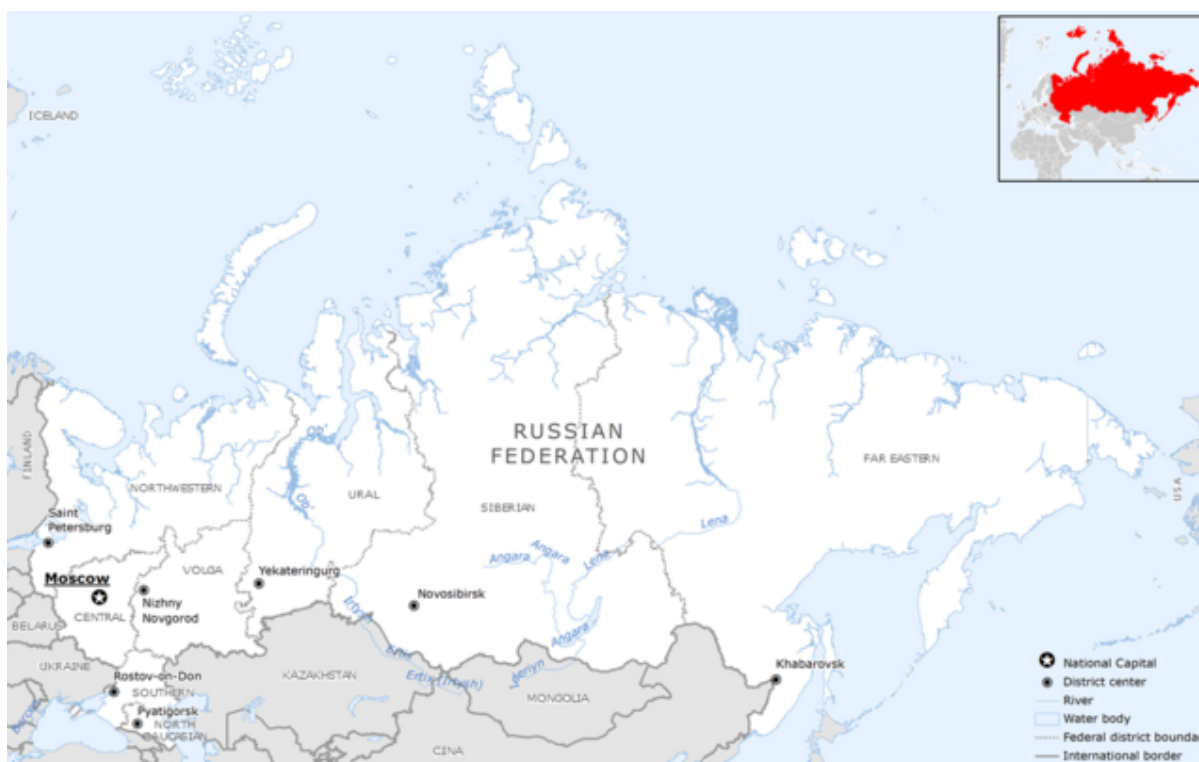


Photo source: Russian map © European Commission / Wikimedia, 2014.

1. CIVIC SPACE IN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW: INSTRUMENTS FOR THE SAFEGUARD

Civic space has been defined in various ways over the years. According to the United Nations (UN) Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), civic space may be understood as an environment that enables civil society – whether groups or individuals – to play a role in the political, economic and social life of the community, including, though not limited to, contributing to policymaking (OHCHR). More specifically, civic space rests on three fundamental bedrocks: the right to associate, the right to assemble peacefully, and the right to freely express views and ideas (OHCHR).

This definition is broadened by the interpretation provided by CIVICUS, which highlights the positive impact that individuals or groups can have through active participation, namely the potential to influence the organisation and functioning of political and social structures (CIVICUS, 2025). The central international legal backbone of civic space is provided by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Adopted in 1966 within the UN system, the ICCPR enshrines freedom of expression under Article 19, the right of peaceful assembly under Article 21, and freedom of association under Article 22. Article 19 of the ICCPR protects the right to seek, receive and impart information of any kind, whether orally, in writing, or through any media; Article 21 guarantees the right to peaceful assembly;

and Article 22 enshrines the right to freedom of association, including the freedom to form and join associations with others, which is key to the functioning of a multiparty system underpinning a democratic society. All three rights are subject to certain permissible restrictions. Any such limitation must be prescribed by law, pursue a legitimate aim – such as the protection of the rights and reputations of others, national security or public order – and meet the strict tests of necessity and proportionality. In the case of Articles 21 and 22, restrictions may also be imposed to protect public health or morals (ICCPR, 1966).

At the regional level, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) also provides protection for these rights, establishing the European Court of Human Rights as their judicial enforcement mechanism. Herein, Article 10 defines freedom of expression, requiring the absence of interference by public authorities and explicitly extending protection to the “regardless of frontiers” condition. Additionally, Article 11 brings together freedom of assembly and freedom of association within a single legal framework (ECHR, 1950), reflecting their shared purpose of enabling collective actions in the public sphere. In both cases, however, the Convention permits lawful restrictions on the exercise of these rights.

Although formally grounded in the protection of legitimate interests, these limitation clauses have, in practice, opened the door to broad and potentially abusive interpretations by States, who regularly resort to restrictions justified on grounds of public order or national security.

1.1. International Legal Obligations for the Russian Federation

Even after its withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights in 2022, the Russian Federation remains bound, before the international community, by multiple legally binding treaties, as well as obligations arising from both customary law and soft-law instruments. Firstly, regarding binding treaties, Russia has been a State Party to the ICCPR since 1973 and is therefore obliged to comply with the rights enshrined in Articles 19, 21, and 22, as well as all other legal clauses that herein might serve as a protection for civic space.

The Russian Federation is also a participating State of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and is therefore expected to align its domestic legislation with the so-called OSCE commitments. These commitments require participating States to recognise human rights as axiomatic to peace, security, and cooperation among states, and to integrate the human dimension of international security into their domestic and foreign policies. Although the OSCE commitments are not legally binding in a strict sense, as they are not enforceable before a judicial body, they nevertheless possess a politically binding nature, having been adopted by consensus and grounded in the principle of universality shared among participating states.

Among the human rights explicitly referenced are freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief (Article 3.1.8), freedom of association and the right of peaceful assembly (3.1.9), as well as freedom of expression, free media and access to information (3.1.10), which notably embraces a specific guarantee of freedom of cultural or artistic expression. These instruments

therefore provide the key international standards against which civic space in the Russian Federation will be assessed below.

2. DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CIVIC SPACE IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Civic space in the Russian Federation is regulated primarily by three instruments: the Constitution, which enshrines fundamental freedoms; the Code of Administrative Offences, which establishes administrative liability for related violations; and the Criminal Code, which provides for criminal liability. As for the supreme source of law, the Constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees freedom of thought and expression, freedom of association and the right to peaceful assembly, respectively pursuant to Articles 29, 30, and 31.

Regarding the actual suppression of civic space, there has been a systemic reliance on the Code of Administrative Offences – in particular Articles 20.2, 20.3.1, and 20.3.3, and notably, Articles 205.2, 207.3, 212, 275, 280, 280.3, 282, and 354.1 of the Criminal Code. In addition, a range of legal acts and individual-targeted measures – including presidential decrees, and governmental and ministerial regulations adopted since 2022 – have further restricted the exercise of these rights.

In this regard, it is essential to refer to the “foreign agents” legislation, which includes the law on “undesirable organisations”, the Law on Non-governmental Organisations (as amended in 2022), the Law on the Media (n.2124-1), and additional wartime amendments concerning the control of information.

2.1 Legislative Architecture and Complexity: A linguistic Analysis of Russian Legislative Corpus

The underlying problem of human rights violations lies in the lack of clarity of the legal corpus, whose wording allows for extended interpretation of the law, consequently leading to a systemic manipulation of fundamental freedoms.

The human rights state of play in the Russian Federation is extremely complex. In order to stifle dissent, the Kremlin does not confine itself to isolated legal provisions, but instead employs legislation systematically, resorting to provisions that belong to a coherent legal framework which has been carefully shaped and amended over the years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and later entrenched with the radicalisation of Putin’s power after the 2000s.

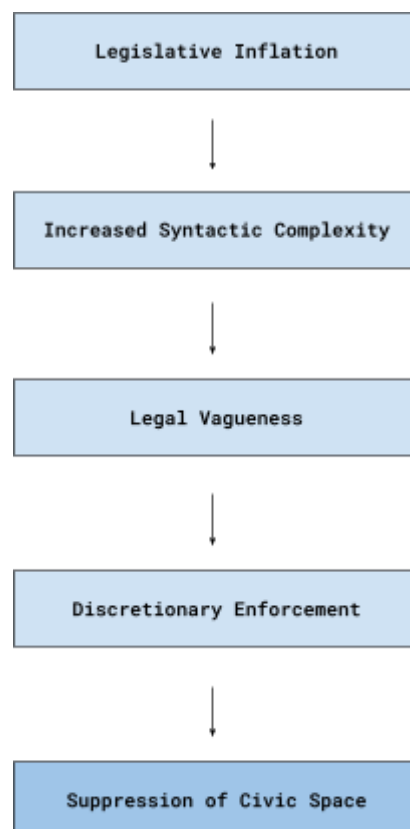
Researchers Denis Saveliev and Ruslan Kuchakov from the Rule of Law Centre at the European University at Saint Petersburg compiled a corpus including all relevant primary and secondary federal legislation from 1991 to 2023, subjecting it to a linguistic analysis in order

to identify recurring patterns (EUSP, 2024). In autumn 2025, their findings highlighted the complexity of the legislative framework, referring to both the sentence structure and syntax, and indicating that the total volume of legislation has been increasing annually by approximately 5 percent (Pravo, 2025). A natural nexus appears to exist between this steady expansion and the growing unreadability and vagueness of the law (Radio Svoboda, 2025).

The metrics employed were (1) the number of verbs in a sentence; (2) the number of words in noun phrases;¹ (3) the distance between dependent words; (4) paragraph length; (5) the number of active and passive participles; and (6) the total number of words per sentence – together forming the so-called index of syntactic complexity.

According to the results, the longest sentence in the corpus totalled 707 words – approximately one and a half pages. In some cases, a single paragraph extended over an entire page; sentences could contain up to 32 dependent elements positioned far apart, and up to 17 participial constructions linking complex and intertwined clauses (Pravo, 2020).

As a corollary to this legislative inflation, the vagueness of domestic law has increased, broadening the scope for discretionary interpretation, enabling systematic misuse of legislation, and resulting in a *de jure* – and not merely *de facto* – suppression of civic space.



¹ The number of words that surround a substantive.

3. PRACTICE AND PATTERNS OF CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTION IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

3.1 Individuals Prosecuted for Expressing Pacifist Ideas Contrasting the War in Ukraine

Particularly from the outset of the war in Ukraine, an increasing number of individuals were being administratively sanctioned or criminally prosecuted for declarations, online posts, artistic performances or public critique against the war; sometimes just for taking a pacifist stance against the acts of war and killings of civilians. Instruments used to stifle voices dissenting the Kremlin's operations on the battlefield are diversified and constantly evolving, with laws introduced in a brand-new form, sometimes amended, or tightened.

Notable are the developments in the area of military censorship that became the major tool to crush dissenting opinions for the war. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in fact, conduct related to the “discrediting” of the Russian Armed Forces was primarily sanctioned under administrative law, notably under Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences. Under this provision, public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces were punishable by administrative fines ranging from 30,000 to 50,000 rubles for individuals, 100,000 to 200,000 rubles for public officials, and 300,000 to 500,000 rubles for legal entities. Repeated offences were subject to higher administrative penalties (Russian Federation, 2001).



Photo source: Russian diaspora protests against war in Ukraine © Silar / Wikimedia, 2022.

On March 4th, 2022, there was a repressive turn that transformed similar wrongdoings into a felony, from now on, enforceable under the Articles 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code. This Article, in particular, criminalises the public dissemination of information deemed “knowingly false”, concerning both the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, as well as the activities of other Russian state bodies operating abroad. The provision applies to information presented as reliable and relating to actions officially framed as serving the defence of the Russian Federation’s interests and the maintenance of international peace and security. In its aggravated forms, the offence is punishable by substantial fines exceeding 5,000,000 rubles and where the conduct is deemed to have caused grave consequences, by imprisonment for up to 15 years.

A key legal issue arising from the wording of this provision, for example, is that it does not specify who is responsible for determining the veracity of the information, according to which criteria, or by reference to which sources. As a result, the information need not be objectively false; it is sufficient that an authority deems it as such.

An additional drawback is the legal safeguards dating back to March 18th, 2023, when Article 280.3 was also introduced into the Criminal Code as a specific criminal offence within the broader framework of Article 280 on incitement of extremist activities. The new provision established the legal basis for criminal liability in cases of repeated conduct, targeting individuals who re-engage in acts of allegedly discrediting the use of the Armed Forces that had previously been sanctioned administratively under Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The penalties include fines of up to 300,000 rubles, or fines equivalent to the individual income for up to 2 years, as well as short-term arrest or imprisonment of up to 5 years. Aggravated cases involving profit motives or serious harmful consequences carry penalties of up to 7 years’ imprisonment (Russian Federation, 1996).

Conversely, Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Code was introduced in 2006 to criminalise public incitement to terrorist activity, as well as the public justification and propaganda of terrorism. In its original form, the provision provided for fines of up to 500,000 rubles, or fines equivalent to up to 3 years of the individual’s income, with custodial sentences of up to 5 years for the basic offence. In 2016, an aggravated form of the offence was introduced where such conduct carried out through the media, social media, or the internet, entailed fines of up to 1,000,000 rubles and imprisonment of up to 7 years.

Although Article 205.2 cannot be characterised as a legislative by-product of the war having been drafted long before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, it has become an integral part of the legal arsenal currently used by the Kremlin, often in conjunction with other provisions to suppress the dissemination of online materials and expression.

Another legal lever that predates the war but still forms part of the legal arsenal is Article 20.3.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which sets rules on the incitement of hatred and enmity, as well as the humiliation of human dignity. In practice, the vague wording of this provision allows for broad discretionary interpretation and has been used to sanction individuals for social media posts or public statements, including content critical of the authorities or related to the war in Ukraine. As per this Article, those found responsible for such conduct, when it does not fall under Article 282 of the Criminal Code, may incur fines

of up to 20,000 rubles for individuals and up to 500,000 rubles for legal persons, while also providing, for individuals, alternative sanctions such as compulsory labour of up to 100 hours or administrative arrest of up to 15 days.

3.1.1 Recent Cases: Throttling Pacifist Views Against Ukraine War

In the summer of 2025, three people were prosecuted for declarations, online posts on social networks, or art performances critical of the war (Free Ombudsman Association, 2025).

At the end of July, human rights activist and journalist Olga Komleva, based in Ufa in the Republic of Bashkortostan, was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment on charges of spreading false information about the Russian Army and also for previously volunteering with the regional branch of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (The Moscow Times, 2025). Over the past several years, the journalist had worked for the independent news outlet RusNews and was arrested in March 2024. She was prosecuted under Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code for disseminating information deemed "knowingly false" about the Russian Army, as well as under Article 282.1 for participating in the activities of an organisation designated as extremist. In addition to the custodial sentence, the court imposed further restrictions, including a ban on organising public events and administering online resources (Novaja Gazeta, 2025). Her trial, held in late July, took place behind closed doors.

Alexandra Alexandrovna, another well-known journalist collaborating with multiple well-known news outlets, including Ykt.ru и в SakhaDay, was detained in March 2024 in the Republic of Yakutsk, with the accusation of public incitement to terrorism under Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Code (Meduza, 2025). In fact, after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Alexandra left the country and published critiques about the actions of the army, later returning to the Russian Federation (ibid, Meduza, 2025).

This form of state-suppression also targets artists and performers. On July 3rd, stand-up comedian Nurgun Atakov was tried and convicted *in absentia*. The host of the show *Torboznoye Radio* had posted a humorous video addressing discrimination by Russians against the Yakut people, in which he stated: "My native language is Yakut. I... (f*ck) the Russian language" (Zvetskaja chronika, 2025). The Tribunal held that his statements represented humiliating traits towards a national group, namely the Russian people, relying on Article 20.3.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences and therefore accusing him of incitement of hatred and enmity. He was subsequently convicted *in absentia* and fined 10,000 rubles. The comedian now lives in exile in Kazakhstan (Free Ombudsman Association, 2025, as above).

At the end of August, there was a further broadening of the scope of Article 280.3 on “discrediting” the Armed Forces. Usually appealed to in case of public statements or online posts, this provision was used in detention areas, hence signalling an indiscriminate use in the private and informal settings. The inmate, Sergei Chistyakov, serving a sentence in Colony n.8, received an additional charge for discrediting the army in a private conversation with his cellmates. Three of Sergey’s cellmates testified against him, accusing him of having stated that the Russian army invaded Ukraine with the aim of occupation, and that Russian soldiers are occupiers who mock Ukrainian civilians (Mediazona, 2025). The Court finally decided to fine him 30,000 rubles. Sergei has never pleaded guilty and repeatedly stated that he could not have been present in the educational activities room at the same time as the three convicted prisoners, thereby challenging their testimony (Novoe Vremja, 2025). The entire hearing took place via video link and was in the absence of a lawyer (Free Ombudsman Association, 2025 as above).

This pattern that infringes the right to privacy of detainees, has been, according to OVD-Info, outlined in 14 individuals implicated in criminal proceedings that face a second count for conversations with cellmates (Novoe Vremja, 2025, as above).

3.2 State Repression of Human Rights Defenders and Political Opponents

Political opponents and human rights defenders constitute another group disproportionately affected by state repression. The legal instruments most frequently employed include the “foreign agent” regime, significantly expanded under Federal Law No. 255-FZ (2020) and subsequent amendments, and the Law on Undesirable Activities of Foreign and International NGOs introduced through Federal Law No. 129-FZ (2021). In parallel, authorities continue to rely on, *inter alia*, Article 280 on “calls for extremist activity”, Article 280.3 on “discrediting” the Armed Forces, and Article 207.3 criminalising the dissemination of “knowingly false information” about the Russian military.

a) Foreign Agents Law

The Foreign Agents Law was first adopted in July 2012 through Federal Law No. 121-FZ on Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-Profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent. At that time, it required non-commercial organisations that received funding from abroad and engaged in political activities to register as foreign agents with the Ministry of Justice. Failure to comply with this provision entailed administrative and criminal sanctions.

Further obligations included clearly indicating foreign agent status on all published materials, ensuring transparency regarding online activities, and submitting financial accounting reports to the government (Global Freedom of Expression, 2023). From that point onward, while numerous NGOs were sanctioned for failing to register as foreign agents, others encountered legal hurdles for not labelling their material accordingly. Many organisations, for example,

Memorial Human Rights Centre, were also liquidated under the pretext of violating these requirements (Pravo, 2022).

Since 2017, a new category, foreign-agent media organisation, has applied to outlets directly or indirectly funded by foreign entities. This development effectively paved the way for the criminalisation of foreign-funded media. Among the first to be targeted were Voice of America, the Current Time TV, and RFE/RL (Meduza, 2017).

Two years later, the foreign-agent regime broadened its applicability to encompass all individuals who disseminated content originally produced by a foreign-agent organisation, or who otherwise contributed to the creation of foreign-funded material. From the outset, this reform allowed for the designation of independent journalists, human rights activists, and bloggers.

In 2022, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, an additional amendment initiated a process that risks the complete suppression of civic space. The requirement to demonstrate foreign funding dropped and was replaced with the far broader and vaguer concept of “foreign influence”, which may include technical assistance, communication, or any perceived external involvement (Global Freedom of Expression, 2023 as above). Combined with the removal of the “political activity” requirement, the introduction of heavier fines, stricter reporting obligations, and harsher bans, subsequently reinforced by additional amendments in 2024 and 2025, rapidly led to the prosecution of numerous individuals, NGOs, and media outlets based on suspicion rather than demonstrable evidence of foreign affiliation (National Endowment for Democracy, 2024).

b) Undesirable Organisations Law

Upon its adoption in 2015, the Federal Law No. 129-FZ (on Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation), commonly referred to as the Undesirable Organisations Law empowered the General Prosecutor’s Office to designate foreign or international organisations as “undesirable” on the bases that their activities allegedly threaten “the foundations of constitutional order, defence capabilities, or state security in the Russian Federation”. Individuals involved in the activities of such organisations may face criminal liability, including prison terms of up to five years.

In 2021, the scope of the law was further expanded. The amendments extended administrative liability to individuals for any form of involvement with organisations designated as undesirable — including direct participation, providing assistance, or disseminating their materials — even when such activities are conducted abroad or online.

As per this law, an organisation may be declared undesirable if authorities claim that it undermines national security or constitutional order, for example, by influencing electoral processes or providing financial or intermediary support to political activities. In practice, the designation process lacks genuine judicial oversight and is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to challenge in court. Once designated, the organisation must immediately cease its operations on Russian territory (Free Russia Foundation, 2021).

As of 2025, this provision has been widely used by Russian authorities to shut down more than 275 undesirable or critical organisations, independent media outlets, think tanks, and other entities deemed politically unwelcome by the Kremlin (AP News, 2025). One of the most recent developments occurred in December, when the German independent broadcaster Deutsche Welle was added to the official registry of undesirable organisations (Reuters, 2025).

Taken together, the undesirable organisations regime and foreign agent framework have produced what many observers may describe as a form of civic death, generating an overwhelming chilling effect on freedom of expression and civic participation in Russia.

3.2.1 Relevant Cases Implicating Human Rights Defenders and Opposition Figures

Alexander Gabyshev is a Yakut shaman and outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin, whose activism became widely known for its spiritual and political opposition to the Russian authorities. Through public statements and symbolic actions, he portrayed Putin as a force of evil and openly called for his removal.

Alexander Gabyshev, in early September 2025, was moved to another psychiatric hospital with less restrictive conditions. Called “shaman”, in March 2019, Alexander Gabyshev started his first march from Siberia, Yakutia, to Moscow, in the direction of the Kremlin, with the explicit aim to “purge the demon (Vladimir Putin)”. Facing a first brief detention in a psychiatric hospital, he was later released on bail after two days of medical examination (DW, 2025). Readmitted and discharged in 2020 for not submitting to a Covid-19 test, he was then definitely rehospitallised in 2021 when he announced another walk on the Kremlin, this time charged with making “calls for extremist activity” under Article 280 of the Criminal Code, as well as for using violence against police officers.

Aleksander soon became a symbol of grassroots resistance, exposing how the government continues to use punitive psychiatric confinement – a technique once employed in the Soviet Union – to punish and silence dissent within its borders (Reuters, 2025).

Elena Popova is a human rights activist and co-founder of the Movement of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service, an organisation supporting individuals who refuse conscription and oppose participation in the war in Ukraine. Through advocacy and public communication, she has actively promoted the right to conscientious objection and expressed solidarity with those persecuted for refusing to fight.

On August 6th, was searched at home and put in pre-trial detention, with an obligation not to leave the country and “behave properly” (Free Ombudsman Association, 2025 as above). The accusation contains allusion to a message posted on VKontakte, in which she allegedly invited people to write solidarity notes to compatriots persecuted for not participating in the fighting. The activist now has a pending criminal case for disseminating fake news about the

Russian Army, legally grounded on Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code. The site of her Movement was later obscured and her social media page deleted.

On August 27th, the sentence for nineteen-year-old Darya Kozyreva of two years and eight months in prison was confirmed. The girl was first accused of posting a critique of the war on a blog, affixing a leaflet containing a citation from the popular Ukrainian author Taras Shevchenko which recited: “When I die, bury me and then rise to your feet, break your heavy chains, and water with the blood of tyrants the freedom you have won.” Her case was later compounded by the interview that the girl gave to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty where she allegedly described the actions of the army in Ukraine as monstrous and criminal. She had already spent a year in pre-trial detention and was subject to psychiatric examination, but now she received a first-instance conviction for discrediting the army under Article 280.3 Part I (Amnesty International, 2025).

During August, the ethnographer and activist Radzhana Dugarova was inscribed into the list of foreign agents and onto a wanted list (Free Ombudsman Association, 2025 as above). Ms. Dugarova is widely known for her activism in support of the independence-aspiring Mongolic Indigenous population, Buryats, now inhabiting the Russian Southern Oblast of Buryatia (Jamestown, 2025). Having left Russia due to persecution, she is currently living abroad. As a result, in July of last year, she was sentenced *in absentia* to seven years in prison and her activities were stopped even abroad (RFE/RL, 2023).

3.3 The Crackdown on Freedom of Association and Peaceful Assembly

Participation in protests, even when peaceful, symbolic or individual, is constantly jeopardised. One of the principal mechanisms used to control civic space in Russia is the routine application of Article 20.2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which regulates violations of the rules governing public assemblies, and Article 212 of the Criminal Code on “mass riots”.

Article 20.2 of the Code of Administrative Offences (on the violation of the established procedure for organising or holding an assembly, meeting, demonstration, march, or picket) establishes severe administrative penalties for both organisers and participants of public events who fail to conform with the statutory rules governing such activities.

For organisers, prohibited conducts include, *inter alia*, holding a public event without duly notifying the competent authority, breaching the conditions set for an authorised event, or committing other violations such as exceeding venue capacity, obstructing infrastructure or access routes, or causing damage to individuals or property. Penalties include escalating fines, compulsory community work, and administrative arrest of up to 30 days in certain

cases, with significantly higher fines applicable to legal persons. Participants may likewise be subject to fines, compulsory work, or up to 15 days of administrative arrest, with enhanced penalties for repeat offences, including arrest of up to 30 days.



Photo source: Moscow, Russia © Valery Tenevoy / Unsplash, 2021.

Adversely, Article 212 of the Criminal Code establishes a ban on the organisation of “mass riots”, that is, large-scale disturbances accompanied by violence, looting, arson, destruction of property, the use of weapons or other dangerous objects, or armed resistance to law enforcement officials. Both the organisation of, and active participation in, such events, constitute criminal offences punishable by terms of imprisonment. The provision also penalises instigating or recruiting others to take part, as well as providing or receiving training for the purpose of organising or participating in such riots.

In practice, the concept of mass riots has been interpreted broadly, and its vague definition has given rise to concerns that police intervention or isolated acts of disorder may be relied upon as evidence of mass riots, thereby exposing peaceful assemblies and political demonstrations to the risk of criminal prosecution under Article 212.

Alongside the use of Articles 20.2 and 212, the authorities are also increasingly relying on other administrative and criminal provisions to target peaceful activists and critics. Recent cases demonstrate how these laws, specifically but not limited to 354.1 (rehabilitation of Nazism) and 207.3 (dissemination of “false information” about the armed forces), operate in practice to constrain civic activism and the exercise of fundamental freedoms.

3.3.1 Recent Cases Across Russia

In the Bashkortostan Republic, south of the Ural Mountains, Ural Baybulatov, a prominent environmental activist involved in the movement opposing mining activities on the Kyrktytau

ridge, has been charged with diffusing information deemed “knowingly false” under Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code relating to alleged circumstances posing a threat to the life and security of citizens (OVD-info, 2025).

However, there is credible evidence of mass searches and restrictions on the freedom of movement imposed on potential participants in the movement, compounded by an unlawful ban on organising peaceful rallies and protests. These measures amount to a criminalisation of environmental activists standing up for the protection of a sacred wildlife territory (Free Ombudsman Association, 2025).

Local residents oppose the industrial utilisation of copper deposits located at the foot of Kyrktytau crest by the Russian Copper Company (RCC), citing concerns over excessive soil degradation, contamination of water sources and aquifers, the destruction of local fauna and flora, and the broader collapse of the surrounding ecosystem (Centre pour les Droits Humains et les Entreprises, 2025).

The citizens of this territory have the inalienable right to express dissent against the industrialisation of their territory, and them being prevented from organising peaceful protests constitutes a clear breach of the right to peaceful assembly, whose restriction is justified by the Russian Government through Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code (relating to the dissemination of knowingly false information).

On August 5th, the Sixth Cassation Court completely overturned the decisions previously taken by the Vakhitovsky District Court and the Supreme Court of Tatarstan for further consideration in the “February case” of activist Zulfiya Sitdikova. The Kazan activist was first sentenced in 2024 to two years probation with a four-year probation period on charges of discrediting the army under Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code, as well as rehabilitation of nazism under Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code. The accusations were initially linked to peaceful acts of protest, including displaying posters that read “No to War” and “9 мая,”² the latter considered sabotage of national sacred symbols of the Russian Federation. In February 2025, she was arrested for 10 days under Article 20.2, Part 2, of the Code of Administrative Offences (accused of breaching the rules to hold a public event) for posing some flowers on the grave of murdered politician Boris Nemtsov.³ She was later charged with 80,000 sanction under Article 20.3.3 (OVD-info, 2025) for discrediting the army by taking some pictures. The Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia urged the Court to transform the suspended sentence into a definitive and true sentence (Telegram, 2025). The rejecting response from the Cassation Court might be pivotal in the course of this legal case, as it indicates the absurdity and absence of legal grounds to imprison activists.

² “9 Мая” (written in Latin letters, with the Cyrillic “я”) refers to the iconography surrounding the national holiday celebrated in the Russian Federation on 9 May, which commemorates the end of the Great Patriotic War against Nazism during the Second World War. Transliterating the first two letters into Latin script is used as a form of protest against the official narrative of ‘denazification’, while at the same time avoiding censorship.

³ Boris Nemtsov – after serving high-ranking roles in politics, including Deputy Prime Minister under Boris Yeltsin – became in the Nineties one of the most outspoken critics of the authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin.

3.4 Censorship and Informative Control: Legal Foundations

Beyond the single legal case of repression, what emerges is a broader and structural tendency to adopt preventive measures concocted to anticipate and neutralise potential dissent from the outset. The state of play of the digital space in the Russian Federation is a source of concern for all human rights experts, although conditions have worsened in recent years, this deterioration reflects longer-standing structural developments.

The Sovereign Internet Law passed in 2019 is the legal base and starting point for current online censorship as it introduced the concept of a Russian sovereign internet, that allegedly should be separable from the global net and centrally controlled by the State (Internet Society, 2023). With the stated aim of protecting the Russian Federation from a potential global internet disconnection, the law required all Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to install state-mandated technical equipment, thereby empowering Roskomnadzor to filter, rout and block the internet when deemed appropriate and necessary, *de facto* laying the foundations for today RuNet (Internet Society, 2023, same as above).

a) Recent Tightening of Preventive and Deterrent Legislation

Following comparable measures previously introduced in regions such as Orenburg, Kalmykia, Samara, North Ossetia-Alania, and the Republic of Barshkortostan, in late August 2025, Chuvashia, a federal republic in central Russia, placed bans on pictures and videos of drone attacks, including places of their falls, law enforcement, and “important objects” thereto connected, as well as the sharing and the spread of such delicate information on the internet (RIA Novosti, 2025). The stated objective that supports this decision is to avoid data breaches. Individuals found to be in contravention of this provision, may incur administrative liability, including fines of up to 300,000 rubles (TASS, 2025).

The Kremlin has recently further increased the already tight and concerning grip on information flows on the digital space. On August 13th, the Russian Federal Executive Agency, charged with monitoring and censoring information airing through mass media, announced a “partial” restriction on video and audio calls on both WhatsApp and Telegram, adducing them to be the main channels for frauds, extremist recruitment, and illegal activities (The Moscow Times, 2025). The official narratives are, however, contradicted by available data and the opinion of experts: as per the Russian Central Bank, based on 2024, 45 percent of scams come from regular mobile calls and messaging, and just a merely 15 percent come from messengers (Central Bank of the Russian Federation, 2025). The most credible and accredited conjecture is that this move is part of a broader scheme intended to take complete control over digital communications.

Ошибки 404 (страница не найдена)

Обычно ошибки 404 не влияют на эффективность сайта в Google Поиске. Вы можете смело игнорировать их, если они точно относятся к URL, которых не должно быть на вашем сайте. Важно, чтобы при переходе по всем недействительным URL возвращался верный [код ответа HTTP \(404\)](#) и чтобы доступ к ним не был заблокирован в файле [robots.txt](#).

Какие меры принимать при возникновении ошибок 404:

1. **Решите, нужно ли устранять выявленную проблему.** Большинство таких случаев можно проигнорировать: **они не влияют на индексирование и рейтинг сайта.**
 - Если вы сами отправили URL на проверку, то возникающую ошибку лучше исправить.
 - Если страница была удалена и вы не создали вместо нее никакой другой, возврат кода 404 ожидаем. Ошибка перестанет показываться в отчете примерно через месяц.
 - Если проблема в самом URL, которого никогда не было на вашем сайте, вы можете не обращать на нее внимания. Исправлять ничего не требуется, если причина не в том, что URL был введен с опечатками. Ошибки 404 перестанут появляться в отчете примерно через месяц.

Photo source: Example of restricted or inaccessible online content, illustrated by a 404 error page.

This is further evidenced by the imposition of state-aligned and state-controlled browsers, social networks, and services, which ultimately promote state-approved narratives and pre-set rhetoric.

Simultaneously, authorities have promoted state-endorsed messaging applications, including MAX – publicly praised for its call quality and, on this basis, added to the list of mandatory pre-installed apps on mobile devices as of 1 September (Reuters, 2025). This is an application that features advanced functions such as the transfer of money, public services, e-commerce, and digital identity, that has been presented as a national messenger with server and data storage localised within the homeland. The above allegedly aims at rendering digital sovereignty to the Russian Federation (RIA Novosti, 2025)

Close to the deadline for data migration, the head of the Udmurt Republic (1,200 km to the north-east of Moscow) Alexander Brechalov, urged all civil servants to promptly switch to MAX, dismissing citizens' concerns over the risk of total control on communication media (Ombudsman Association, 2025). At the end of November 2025, a pilot project was also launched in the area, with the goal to verify consumers age through the app starting from five grocery stores; a project that was immediately backed by Brechalov, who once again invited civil servants to give the “right example” to citizens (Interfacs, 2025).

As of September 23rd, 2025, the provision of house arrest against Evgenia Rogozina was commuted to pre-trial detention, as during the court's meeting it became known that she violated the house arrest regime (EAN News, 2025). The 38 year-old woman was initially indicted in February under Article 205.5, paragraph 2, of the Criminal Code (public calls to commit terrorist activities using the internet) for a commentary published on Vkontakte in response to a post of the Minister of Agriculture Oksana Lut who stated that butter prices are increasing due to rising household incomes. The commentary, reading “burn the witch”, was interpreted by the prosecutor as a statement that negatively characterised a state entity and

intended to incite the readers to violent actions (Nastoyashchee vremya, 2025). Although the sentence did not include imprisonment, the court initially imposed a fine of 500,000 rubles; however, after accounting for the time the defendant spent in pre-trial detention and under house arrest, the amount was reduced to 310,000 rubles (Memorial, 2025).

b) Suppressive Instruments: The Tentacles of Censorship

The full-invasion of Ukraine triggered an irreversible path towards total closure of information flow. Since 2022, access to mainstream foreign media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter is virtually impossible, without the use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN), which allows users to bypass censorship by routing their internet traffic through servers located in other countries. However, there is credible evidence that indicates continuous and unpredictable VPN failures due to state blocking, with companies such as Apple, Google, and Mozilla pressured to remove VPN services (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Additionally, other platforms that refuse to disclose the localisation of user data or to remove sensible content are heavily sanctioned (Freedom House, 2023).

Since the outset of the aggression against Ukraine, in June 2022, the Russian government imposed on all telecommunication operators the obligation to install the Technical Measures to Counter Threats application, handled by the state-backed media regulator Roskomnadzor (Free Russia Foundation, 2021). Later on, Putin signed a law to introduce specific sanctions on operators who failed to do so, a measure that was put into practice by Roskomnadzor starting from 2023. This censorship lately targeted the American gaming platform, Roblox, used by children in the Russian territory. The Government justified the measure by stating that it was rife with inappropriate content and spread extremist ideas, including LGBTQIA+ propaganda (Reuters, 2025).

The censorship of the government is particularly bitter against independent national news sites, with both most popular (e.i Meduza and TV Rain) and less known organisations, designated undesirable and hence non-compliant under Russia's restrictive online laws. Although the majority of these organisations felt constrained to outsource the activities in exile, users routinely encounter "page blocked" or "connection timeout" notes in everyday use (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

On the other hand, international human rights organisations, foreign LGBTQIA+ sites, and western media outlets such as Euronews, France 24, and the BBC were subjected to blockage, signalling a considerable stride towards a total centralisation of information in the hands of the Kremlin (ibid).

The massive and systemic website blocking put in place by Roskomnadzor, goes both outwards and inwards, as also sensible websites with state information, for example, are also blocked for foreigners users to better contain a leak of delicate information (Freedom House, 2025).

Another means to shrink the freedom of words is the aforementioned defamation and fake news law, used to suppress dissenting opinions against the Russian army operations in Ukraine.

Finally and notably in the context of peaceful protests, elections and politically sensitive events, internet shutdowns are used to undermine organisation and subsequent developments. One illustrative example is the incident relating to targeted connectivity disruption on mobiles around the most prominent political critic Aleksey Navalny in February 2024 (The Moscow Time, 2024), which was coupled with invasive attempts by the State to impede the unwinding of the farewell ceremony (RFE/RL, 2024).

3.4.1 Recent cases of censorship

On August 7th, Irina Igorevna Bystrova — according to her description — pacifist and humanist, was found guilty under paragraph (d) of Part 2 of Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code. This woman's legal troubles originated shortly after the invasion of Ukraine, when she posted on Russian platform VKontakte a portrayal of Putin with a caption that read “burn in hell”, together with an appeal to Russian soldiers to “turn round the weapons” (Memorial, 2025). Her legal proceeding was consequently initiated under Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Code and Article 207.3, respectively, on charges of inciting terrorism and spreading fake news, charges that cost her a fine of 600,000 rubles in December 2022.

In March 2024, she was fined again for 30,000 rubles under Article 20.3.3 (Part I) of the Code of Administrative Offences, and in December, for spreading fake news about the army (Article 207.3, Part 2). She was found guilty because she had spoken out against the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam and a missile strike on Kramatorsk (Memorial, 2025, same as above). In August, Igorevna Bystrova received five years and a half of a suspended sentence, alongside four years of probationary period and a two-year ban on administering internet pages.

Another legal instrument employed in the case of Irina Bystrova was adding her to the list of terrorist and extremists handled by the Federal Financial Monitoring Service, entailing total freezing of bank accounts and surveillance of financiers. This is often used to stifle dissenting opinions, as this proscription legally aggravates the accusations and justifies tougher precautionary measures.⁴

In April 2025, Artem Konstantinov, a 25-year-old Bauman Moscow State Technical University (MSTU) student convicted of “high treason” under Article 275 of the Russian Criminal Code, was transferred to a penal colony in Yakutsk. In October 2024, the regional Court of Murmansk handed down a 13-year sentence in a high-security penal colony for high treason, later detailed as follows:

⁴ Rosfinmonitoring was born in 2001 through a Presidential Decree as an institution to prevent and block the financing of terrorism and money laundering, and was initially charged with updating a List of Terrorist and Extremists with the names of people who receive a criminal sentence for extremism and terrorism. From 2023, the requirements to enter the list were broadened, extending to individuals without a definitive sentence, and only under investigation, and are applicable to people who inter alia, are charged with disseminating fake news about the army (п. «д» ч. 2 ст. 207.3 УК), calling to activities aimed against state security (sub-paragraph d, part 2, Article 280.4 of the Criminal Code), hooliganism (sub-paragraph b, part 1, Article 213 of the Criminal Code), ‘discrediting’ of the Russian army (Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code), as well as for repeated propaganda or display of prohibited symbols (Article 282.4 of the Criminal Code).

[...] establishing contact on Telegram with a representative of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, expressing availability to join one Ukrainian Unit on the battlefield in Ukraine, sending a compromising vocal note about the Russian Army, and forwarding photocopies of some documents, including regarding the activities of the military commissariat in the region of Murmansk (OVD-Info, 2025).

At the beginning, he was kidnapped and placed in a minivan, forced to unlock his phone, put on his knees, and repeatedly beaten on his head, urging him to confess to working with the Ukrainian Security Services.

Following the onset of the war in Ukraine, there were signals of a significant skyrocketing in the use of Article 275 as a trigger for criminal prosecution: some reliable sources indicate that the number of criminal cases increased from 16 in 2022 to 39 in 2023, disregarding other pending cases (Jurist News, 2023).

The following year, the State Duma, approved a bill that expanded the scope of high treason, making it encompass not only the actual adherence to the enemy armed forces, but also the affiliation to any organisation that undertakes activities against the security of the country (VOA News, 2024), which factually transforms this provision into a powerful means against the opposition and any individual with ties to civil society foreign organisations.

In the case of Artem Konstantinov, there is evidence of a breach of the freedom of expression as messages containing opinions on the Russian army were considered high treason (OVD-Info, 2025). Additionally, Artem's declarations about the bag over his head, baton strikes, obligation to kneel, threats to extort a confession, intimidatory searches, and repeated informal discussions clearly amount to acts of torture and grave mistreatment under international law.

3.5 Symbolic and Cultural Criminalisation

There is credible evidence that the Kremlin is also engaging in a symbolic and cultural criminalisation, hitting out-of-the-box and marginalised forms of art, religion, Indigenous culture, and symbolic language, substantially leveraging accusations of extremism, nazism, hatred and enmity.

One of the first legal levers typically invoked in these proceedings is Article 280 of the Russian Criminal Code on public calls to extremist activity. This ground, which has been amended on multiple occasions — most recently in November and December 2025 — both *de jure* and *de facto* criminalises public appeals to engage in activities that the authorities deem extremist. This offence carries heavy penalties, including fines of up to 300,000 rubles, compulsory labour, arrest for up to six months, and imprisonment for up to four years. In addition, courts may impose disqualification from holding certain positions or engaging in specified activities for the same period (Consultant Plus, 2025).

Adversely but equally levelled at political dissent is Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code, which penalises public actions aimed at “inciting hatred or enmity, or humiliating the dignity of an individual or a group of persons on the grounds of sex, race, nationality,

language, origin, attitude to religion, or membership of any social group”, including when such actions are carried out through the mass media or information and telecommunications networks, such as the internet. This provision applies both to individuals who have previously been subjected to administrative sanctions for the same conduct (or who have a prior conviction under Articles 282, 280, or 282.4 of the Criminal Code), and to cases considered aggravated, such as those involving violence or threats of violence, abuse of official position, or commission of the offence by a group of persons or an organised group acting in concert.

The sanctions available under Article 282 include fines ranging from 300,000 to 500,000 rubles for repeated offences, and up to 600,000 rubles for aggravated cases, as well as corrective work for up to four years for non-aggravated cases and up to five years for aggravated cases, which may be commuted to imprisonment for a term ranging from two to six years. The offence requires that the conduct be public; it does not apply to private speech, and the use of the Internet is explicitly considered a public act.

Finally, Article 354.1 is arguably one of the most powerful legal instruments used to suppress dissenting opinions about the war in Ukraine, as it provides a legal basis for the Kremlin’s justification of the war as a response to the so-called “rehabilitation of Nazism” (Meduza, 2024). The provision serves multiple purposes: it criminalises (1) the denial of facts established by the Nuremberg Tribunal; (2) the approval of Nazi crimes; (3) the dissemination of knowingly false information about the Soviet Union during the second World War; (4) insults to the memory or dignity of World War II veterans; (5) the desecration of symbols of military glory; and (6) statements showing “clear disrespect” toward Russia’s commemorative war dates. Conduct falling within this provision is punishable by fines up to 3,000,000 rubles for basic offences and between 2 and 5 million rubles in aggravated cases, as well as by compulsory labours and imprisonment for up to 5 years, and potential additional bans on engaging in specific activities for up to 5 years (Russian Federation, 1996, as above).

Interestingly, Article 354.1 dates back to 2014, coinciding with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula at the hands of the Russian Federation, and was later amended in 2021 and 2023. Notably, this article introduces criminal responsibility for acts that trivialise, downgrade, or distort the mainstream imagery of The Great Patriotic War against Nazis (WWII), more specifically for the abnegation of the crimes established by Nuremberg Tribunal, the justification or approval on the crimes thereof, any deliberate diffusion of fake information on both the role of Russia and veterans, and any sign of disrespect for commemorative dates and desecration of symbols (Russian Federation, 1996, as above).

This is part of a broader “memory policy” that the Kremlin initiated after the Soviet Union collapse, grounded on ideas such as a decadent past glory terminated because of the victory of a retaliation of Western nazi countries. The WWII or the Velikaja Voina (“The Great War”) is particularly relevant in the glorification of the Yalta order. The war against Nazis staged between 1941 and 1945 is one of the most important historical events in the collective memory of the Russian people, promoting the idea of united Soviets as the saviours of

humanity⁵ committed to a sacred and just war that is also worthy of the sacrifice of millions of people.

This idea is today supported and perpetuated by sacred monuments, text books, movies, and museums, journalism and academia, and it culminates in the national festivity of May 9th that marks the Victory Day. Over the years, Moscow utilised this patriotic imaginary to legitimise and justify the use of force in foreign policy within domestic public opinion, as well as its great-power ambitions among the international community (Center For Eastern Studies, 2019).

3.5.1 Recent Relevant Judiciary Cases

In January 2024, Fail Alsynov, one of the most prominent public figures of the Bashkir minority in the Republic of Bashkortostan - a region in the southern Ural Mountains near the border between Europe and Asia - was sentenced to four years in prison on charges of public incitement of ethnic hatred in accordance with Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code. This accusation is apparently grounded on one speech that he delivered at a rally in April 2023 intended to halt plans to mine for gold in the area. In particular, he was accused of using a term to refer to migrant workers that Russian authorities interpreted as a racial slur, although Bashkir speakers maintain that the expression carries a meaning closer to “simple folk” (RFE/RFL, 2024).

Mr. Alsynov is one of the most prominent human rights activists of Bashkirs, as well as the leader of Bashkort,⁶ in the past battling for the revitalisation and redevelopment of the Bashkir language as a powerful means for national identity (Cultural Survival, 2024). The decision from the Court sparked thousands of demonstrators taking to the streets in support of both his liberation and the present governor’s dismissal. In the wake of the rally, several testimonies of violent dispersion by the police emerged, notably, 22 people reported injuries sustained during the clashes while two other people were reportedly forced to go to the hospital: the accusations are for indiscriminate use of shields and batons against protesters and hindering to internet access during the organisational work of the demonstration (Meduza, 2024).

⁵ This redeeming idea of the Soviet Union is born in response to the Eastern Europe’s recounts of history, which adversely underscores the barbaric methods of repression and poor life-style imposed by the Communist regime, putting in the foreground the suffering to which their peoples were subjected in the Cold War years.

⁶ A political entity that for years advocated for the sovereignty of Bashkortostan and fought for equal rights for ethnic Bashkirs, finally declared extremist by the Russian authorities and dissolved in 2020.

On August 13th, 2025, Yanina Lenskaya was prosecuted by the Kirovsky District Court of Saint Petersburg for the alleged “rehabilitation of Nazism” and “desecration of a symbol of military glory” under Part 4 of Article 354.1 of the Russian Criminal Code (OVD-info, 2025). The charges stemmed from a post she published on VKontakte in October 2023, which included a photograph of a monument, “The Motherland Calls!” or the *Rodina-mat’ zovyot!* monument.



Photo source: The sculpture Motherland Calls
© Mamayev Kurgan / Wikimedia, 2025.

Located on Mamayev Kurgan in Volgograd, the monumental female statue depicts a woman raising a sword to the sky and symbolises the Soviet sacrifice during the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II.⁷ Lenskaya’s post began with the words “Look closely at this...”, while the remainder of the content has been withheld by investigators.

Pending trial, the Kirovsky District Court imposed a preventive measure against Lenskaya in the form of a ban on certain activities. These restrictions prohibit her from leaving Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad Region, using the internet or other means of communication, participating in public events, and sending or receiving mail (MR7.ru, 2025), testifying that the repression does not occur solely through final sentences.

4. LEGAL ANALYSIS: RESTRICTIONS OF CIVIC SPACE IN PRACTICE

4.1 Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, Association, and Freedom of Expression

In the Russian Federation, civic space is deteriorating at an alarming rate, with administrative and criminal laws frequently used to suppress views in conflict with mainstream governmental ideas.

⁷ The Battle of Stalingrad, fought between July 1942 and February 1943, is widely regarded as the turning point of the European theatre of World War II, as it forced Nazi forces to withdraw from Soviet territory and shifted the strategic advantage to the Eastern Front. Symbolically, the victory also marked a crucial moment for the Red Army, significantly boosting troop morale after a prolonged period of setbacks.

Articles 20.2 and 20.3.3 of the Administrative Code, together with Articles 212, 280.3, 207.3 of the Criminal Code, are among the provisions most commonly used against activists or individuals in protests.

Article 20.2 which concerns violations of the established procedure for organising or holding a meeting, and Article 212 which addressed the organisation of mass riots, regulate the procedural aspects of public assemblies. While the former penalises individuals for alleged violations in the organisation or conduct of assemblies (even when the gathering itself is peaceful), the latter criminalises situations in which the organisation of a public action results in a mass riot accompanied by violence, pogroms, arson, destruction of property, and the use of weapons.

By contrast, Articles 20.3.3, 207.3 and 280.3, introduce administrative or criminal liability for the content expressed during a public act. Article 20.3.3 introduces a ban on “public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for the purpose of protecting the interests of the Russian Federation...”, whereas Article 280.3 elevates this same category of conduct to the criminal level, imposing severe penalties for repeated or allegedly harmful forms of “discreditation”.

Finally, Article 207.3 penalises the “public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation”. However, the provision fails to clearly define either the criteria for determining “false information”, as well as the evidentiary threshold required to prove that the speaker acted “knowingly”. In practice, this grants the authorities wide discretion to categorise critical or dissenting expression as “false”, raising serious concerns with respect to the principles of legal certainty and foreseeability as required under international human rights law.

Moreover, given that the same conduct may be sanctioned administratively under Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences or prosecuted criminally under Article 207.3 and 280.3 of the Criminal Code, gives rise to well-founded risks of selective enforcement and legal uncertainty. In other words, individuals are left doubtful as to the potential repercussions of their actions, which, in turn, produces a chilling effect deterring people from expressing views around the war.

Taken together, this body of legislation forms a legal arsenal routinely employed to suppress peaceful dissent and silence public criticism of the state, producing a chilling effect on both current and future legitimate expressions of protest. Such practices stand in clear contradiction with international human rights standards.

Additionally, while the aforementioned provisions primarily target anti-war expression by prohibiting discreditation of the armed forces or the dissemination of allegedly false information about their activities, a similar repressive logic underpins Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code. This article, which criminalises speech and symbolic expression deemed to “rehabilitate Nazism”, is also broadly used to stifle the rights to peaceful assembly, association, and freedom of expression, particularly where individuals criticise the legitimacy of the war in Ukraine.

In a context where the denazification of current Ukrainian government was instrumentalised to vindicate the invasion, acts such as modifying symbols linked to the Victory Day, on May 9th, which annually marks the international celebration of the victory of Russia on Nazism, such as the capsizing of letters to elude the censorship and identification as in Zulfiya Sitdikova's case, are regarded and criminalised as contempt of the sacred past of the nation, and are consequently punished with disproportionate severity.

Other legislative provisions that emerged as being regularly used to block critiques of the government are all sets of laws that regulate appeal to the words such as extremism, terrorism, hatred or enmity, such as Article 20.3.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences, as well as Article 280, Article 282, and Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Code.

While Article 20.3.1 establishes a prohibition on “actions aimed at inciting hatred or enmity, as well as at humiliating the dignity of an individual or a group of persons” which fall under administrative liability and require no proof of actual harm, Article 282 is the corresponding provision at the level of criminal law, criminalising conducts articulated in terms of incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as humiliation of human dignity.

Additionally, although Articles 20.3.1 and Article 282 criminalise the incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as abasement of human dignity, they have been applied arbitrarily and disproportionately against political critics, satirists, and individuals whose discourses is considered “non-conventional” or non-conforming by the Government. This mainly happens because key legal terms such as “social group”, “humiliation”, and “enmity” are not clearly defined. As a result, these provisions are open to discretionary enforcement and serve as a vehicle for repressing peaceful criticism, including symbolic acts or online statements.

In the meantime, Article 280 on “Public Calls for the Commission of Extremist Activity” and Article 205.2 on “Public Calls for the Commission of Terrorist Activities, Public Justification of Terrorism, or Propaganda of Terrorism” also rely on weak and overly broad legal language. In particular, Article 205.2 does not define the notion of justification, while Article 280 fails to provide a clear and predictable definition of extremism. This legislative vagueness is completely at odds with the principles of legality, legal certainty and foreseeability required under Article 19 of the ICCPR and the jurisprudence of the UN Human Rights Committee.

Finally, this problem is compounded by the steadily expanding use of designation regimes such as the “foreign agent” status, the “undesirable organisations” register, and the growing list of so-called extremist organisations and individuals. As more actors are formally categorised as threats to the state, these provisions become increasingly easy to deploy against dissenting opinions, human rights defenders, independent activists and any form of protest that does not align with the government's official narrative; in clear tension with the state's obligation to ensure that restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are lawful, necessary and proportionate under Articles 19 and 21, ICCPR.

4.2 Violation of the Principle of Legal Certainty

The Russian legal framework also raises serious concerns with respect to the principle of legal certainty, according to which the law must be clear, unambiguous, and most importantly, foreseeable for those to whom it applies.

While both Articles 19(3) and 21 of the ICCPR allow for restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, such limitations are permissible only where they are provided by law, necessary and proportionate in a democratic society, and formulated with sufficient precision. In the Russian Federation, however, the limits imposed on civic space appear structural rather than exceptional, enabling systemic abuses.

For instance, Article 29 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation formally guarantees freedom of thought and speech. Yet the following paragraph already prohibits “propaganda” and “agitation” without providing any clear definition of these inherently elastic concepts. This ambiguity grants the authorities wide discretionary power to determine the boundaries of lawful expression.

Similarly, although paragraph 5 of Article 29 guarantees freedom of mass media and expressly prohibits censorship, the routine practice of website blocking by Roskomnadzor, coupled with arbitrary interference with independent journalism and the rise of preventive censorship since 2022, demonstrates that the state not only falls short of its international obligations, but also contravenes its own constitutional guarantees.

4.3 International Human Rights Standards

The Human Rights Committee’s General Comment No. 34 details the content of Article 19 on freedom of expression, clarifying its scope and limitations. The right to receive and impart information must be regarded for its broad scope, as it includes any type of information regardless of frontiers conveyed through any means, including spoken, written and sign language and such non-verbal expression as images and objects of art (Human Rights Committee, General Comment no.34, 2011). Additionally, the suppression or withholding of information by the state, when justified on grounds of public interest or national security in order to target or prosecute journalists, researchers, environmental activists, human rights defenders, or others, is unquestionably incompatible with paragraph 19 (3), as referenced in the Committee’s concluding observations on the Russian Federation.

The systemic use of this body of Russian provisions on civic space falls afoul of the human rights law standards, as they frequently criminalise forms of expression and assembly that are non-violent and purely symbolic, such as the displaying of posters or other peaceful acts of protest.

The scope of Article 21 ICCPR on the right of peaceful assembly expressly includes solitary actions (paragraph 13), expression-driven forms of assembly (paragraph 12), spontaneous non-coordinated protests (paragraph 14), as well as associated activities falling outside the

immediate context of the gathering (paragraph 33) (Human Rights Committee, General Comment no.37 on Article 21 ICCPR, 2020). Accordingly, actions such as laying flowers at a grave, holding “No to War” signs, or taking photographs as a form of political expression, must be considered as non-violent symbolic assemblies under international law.

Any restriction on Article 21 must be provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim (security, public order, health, morals, or the rights of others), and satisfy the cumulative tests of necessity and proportionality.

However, the application of Articles 20.2, 20.3.3, 207.3, 280.3, 354.1 and 212 routinely fails to meet these requirements. Rather than responding to genuine threats, these provisions are increasingly used to suppress peaceful dissent – a practice explicitly prohibited under General Comment No. 37 (para. 49).

CONCLUSIONS

Civic space in the Russian Federation has proven to be intentionally and structurally restricted. Over recent years, the national administrative and criminal laws have been progressively adopted and adapted to function in unison, enabling the authorities to suppress dissent - which is presumed suspicious by default - in toto. Military-related censorship provisions referring to “knowingly false information” or “discreditation of the army” are now closely linked to laws on protest and public assembly, which have been rendered effectively inaccessible under the broad justifications of combatting terrorism, extremism, hatred, or the so-called rehabilitation of Nazism.

This legal framework, which imposes sanctions on individuals and organisations, is reinforced by designation regimes engineered to weaken and silence human rights defenders, cultural groups, and minority movements. A clear example is the use of stigmatising labels such as “Undesirable Organisation” or “Foreign Agent,” which are frequently applied and do not allow for effective avenues of appeal or judicial review in respect of such legal status.

At the same time, censorship mechanisms continue to be expanded and strengthened by Roskomnadzor and other competent authorities across the Federation. Structural measures such as the 2019 Sovereign Internet Law lay the groundwork for systemic censorship and a project of “internet sovereignty”, which is accompanied by increasing restrictions on information dissemination. This framework gradually removes alternative viewpoints from the public sphere and slowly produces a kind of internal cleansing of the information space – whether the dissent is associated with the “collective West” or domestic critics.

Access to major foreign media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram is restricted, while foreign and national “undesirable” outlets are forced to exile. VPN failures, reportedly due to state pressures, further illustrate the narrowing space for access to independent information. At the same time, citizens are increasingly encouraged or required to install state-aligned applications presented as more reliable and secure, such as the MAX messaging platform and the Technical Measures to Counter Threats system.

This situation, reminiscent of Soviet-era closure, results in systemic violations of binding international obligations centred on, *inter alia*, Article 19 and 21 of the ICCPR. Many prosecutions rely on legislation that fails the tests of legality, necessity, and proportionality due to vague wording, the absence of a genuine threat, and the imposition of severe criminal sanctions for sole peaceful expression.

Moreover, the sheer volume and complexity of the relevant legislation – often overlapping across administrative and criminal tracks – give rise to vague offences and grants wide discretion to the judiciary. This contributes to dual liability, legal uncertainty for those prosecuted which ultimately creates an increasingly severe chilling effect, forcing individuals and organisations to resort to self-censorship even when expressing legitimate and factual opinions. Safeguarding civic space remains essential worldwide to ensuring that the rights to

freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly can continue to be meaningfully exercised. Unless the current restrictive trajectory in the Russian Federation is reversed, civic space risks instead becoming merely nominal, with profound consequences for democratic governance and the protection of fundamental rights.

Addressing these structural deficiencies would require narrowing vague and overly broad legal provisions, refraining from the criminalisation of peaceful dissent, and ensuring that civic space actors – including journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society organisations – can operate freely and safely within its territory.

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