

2. Legal developments

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2.1. Use of judicial system against government critics

Since February 2022, Russian authorities have increased their efforts to stifle dissent and opposition in the country.[118] Reporting on events of 2024, AI noted that the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association remained 'severely restricted', with dissenters facing 'arbitrary prosecutions, unfair trials, heavy fines and lengthy prison terms.'[119] The authorities have systematically criminalised peaceful civic activity, labelling political opponents, activists, journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, and people expressing dissent as 'existential security threats' and 'enemies of the State'.[120]

The use of the criminal justice system[121] and criminal prosecution is reportedly 'the most dynamic form of political pressure' in Russia and in the illegally annexed Crimea.[122] In an interview with the EUAA, a human rights lawyer noted that, by 2025, criminal prosecution has become the primary tool of repression, replacing administrative punishments such as fines and short-term arrest used before.[123] As summarised by researcher Aram Terzyan[124] in December 2024, the 'weaponization of justice' by the Russian state has three key patterns: selective prosecution, which can be used against prominent opposition figures as well as ordinary citizens; legal ambiguity, which enables arbitrary enforcement of laws; and performative repression, where trials of opposition figures are used to 'intimidate the population and legitimise state actions.'[125]

In July 2025, Alexander Verkhovsky, founder of the SOVA Research Centre[126], noted that the authorities mainly rely on laws specifically designed to prosecute actions perceived by the state – and often by the society – as politically or ideologically driven. These legal instruments range from anti-terrorism and anti-extremism laws to explicitly politicised laws on 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable organisations.'[127] Government critics also face prosecution on charges of spreading 'false' information about and 'discrediting' Russian military,[128] treason, espionage, and rehabilitation of Nazism.[129] People expressing anti-war positions have been prosecuted for social media posts and comments.[130] In an interview with the EUAA, a human rights lawyer highlighted two notable trends in criminal prosecutions. The first is the simplification and acceleration of proceedings from the initiation of a criminal case to the court decision. The second trend is the imposition of harsher punishments: with prison terms ranging from eight to nine years, and sometimes exceeding ten, compared to the two to five years in previous years.

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According to OVD-Info, 1 802 persons were imprisoned as a result of politically motivated criminal prosecution as of 1 November 2025: 1 185 of them were serving prison sentences and 617 were in pre-trial detention or in custody pending the court decision. When categorised by the type of violation of civil liberties, 623 cases concerned freedom of association, 534 were related to freedom of conscience, 484 to freedom of expression, and 112 to freedom of assembly. Another 623 cases did not fall into these specific categories.132

As noted by Alexander Verkhovsky, authorities view people who publicly support Ukraine as a 'fifth column' and take measures to suppress it.133 According to OVD-Info, as of 1 November 2025, over 1 288 individuals faced criminal prosecution for expressing an 'anti-war stance'. The largest number of charges was initiated for dissemination of 'false' information about Russian armed forces (440 persons), public incitement to terrorism or justification of terrorism (279 persons), discrediting the Russian armed forces (260 persons), vandalism (204 persons), public appeals for the performance of extremist activity (85 persons), rehabilitation of Nazism (53 persons), public calls for activities against state security (43 persons), organising an extremist community (40 persons).134

Sources also noted that citizens often report neighbours, acquaintances,135 or colleagues136 for expressing anti-war sentiments in private settings, leading to criminal prosecutions for those being reported.137

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