

2.3. War censorship laws

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The war censorship laws consisting of legislation to punish the spreading of ‘knowingly false information’ about the Russian armed forces and ‘discrediting’ the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine were first introduced in March 2022. 198 To punish any opinion or actions that contradict the official discourse,199 the legislation was repeatedly amended and toughened, remaining a key tool for suppressing criticism of the war in Ukraine.200

Public dissemination of ‘knowingly false information’ about Russian armed forces, state authorities, the National Guard, and volunteer formations (Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code) is punishable by up to five years in prison.201 Experts and media frequently refer to this legislation as ‘fake news’ law.202 The first-time offense under charges for discreditation of the above-mentioned institutions (Article 20.3.3. of the Code of Administrative Offences) is punishable with a fine from 30 000 to 50 000 rubles [307 - 512 euros] for individuals and from 300 000 to 500 000 rubles [3 075 – 5 125 euros] for legal entities.203 In case the offence is repeated within one year it is punishable by up to seven years in prison (Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code).204

As noted by Alexander Verkhovsky, the use of the administrative charge for ‘discreditation’ of the army, which surged in 2022, has declined from nearly 4 500 cases in 2022 to around 2 400 cases in 2023, and around 1 800 cases in 2024.205 From March 2022 to 24 July 2025, OVD-Info documented 11 591 administrative cases initiated under ‘discreditation’ charges. Of these, 931 cases were initiated from in the period from 1 January 2024 to 24 July 2025.206

As noted by a human rights lawyer, criminal prosecution for spreading ‘false’ information about or ‘discrediting’ the Russian military and the state has decreased, with ‘only a few dozen’ convictions under this legislation in the first half of 2025, compared to ‘hundreds’ of convictions for ‘justifying of terrorism’.207 According to AI, in 2024, at least 98 new criminal cases initiated under war censorship laws, with 171 persons being sentenced the same year.208 According to OVD-Info, in some cases, information about prosecution becomes available only long after the start of the proceedings.209

The use of war censorship legislation in criminal prosecution includes the following illustrative cases. In November 2024, a 68-year-old paediatrician was convicted for spreading ‘false’ information about the Russian army and sentenced to five years in prison after a patient’s mother accused her of making anti-war remarks during a medical appointment.210 In April 2025, a 19-year-old activist was sentenced to nearly three years in prison for ‘discrediting’ the

Russian army, after she glued a poem by Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko to a monument in St. Petersburg and gave an interview to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).211 The same month, a hairdresser from St. Petersburg was sentenced to five years and two months in prison for allegedly posting eight anti-war messages on social media after a neighbour reported her to the authorities.212

At the end of October 2025, a street musician was fined 30 000 rubles [307 euros] as a first-time administrative punishment for 'discrediting' the Russian army213 for performing 'an anti-war song' written by a 'foreign agent'.214 Immediately after the arrest, they and two other musicians of the band served 13-days of administrative detention215 for organising 'an unplanned gathering that blocked public access to the metro.'216 As noted by OVD-Info, with two members of the groups being arrested for the third time on 11 November 2025, the musicians faced so-called 'carousel arrests: release after the administrative arrest lapses and immediate re-arrest for other charges.'217

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