

3.5. Human rights defenders

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Russian authorities have continued exerting pressure on human rights defenders, 421 widening in 2024 the use of ‘foreign agent’, anti-extremism,422 and anti-terrorism legislation against them. 423 According to OVD-Info, in 2024, 22 human rights defenders faced politically motivated criminal prosecution.424 As of January 2025, 84 human rights groups and 107 individuals working on human rights were placed on the list of ‘foreign agents’. For lawyers, inclusion on the ‘foreign agents’ list usually results in disbarment. Additionally, 110 human rights organisations have been designated as ‘undesirable.’425

In November 2024, a former director of the Sakharov Center, closed down in 2023, was sentenced in absentia to eight years in prison for spreading ‘false’ information for five Facebook posts on war crimes in Ukraine.426 In June 2025, an 85-year-old human rights defender,427 who leads the Public Human Rights Center in the Sakhalin region,428 was found guilty429 on charges of ‘public calls for terrorism activities’ (Article 205.2 of the Criminal Code)430 and fined 500 000 rubles [5 125 euros].431 A criminal prosecution was initiated after he allegedly shared a draft article outlining scenarios for the development of Russia’s democratic institutions and the West’s supportive role with his team in January 2023.432

According to OVD-Info in January 2025, human rights defenders and lawyers have reported facing ‘physical violence or threats of violence,’ surveillance, and hacking of ‘their digital devices by secret service officers.’ In 2024, law enforcement increasingly employed tactics, such as ‘searches, interrogations and the seizure of equipment.’ Moreover, many human rights defenders felt an increase in hostility from law enforcement officers and ‘society as a whole,’ which they attributed to state propaganda efforts.433

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