



Inside Russia's War System: Repression, Civil Society Resilience, and EU Policy Options

A Collective Policy Paper by Platforma Alliance Member Organizations

Editor: Ivan Preobrazhensky

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Introduction: Domestic Repression as the Prerequisite for Aggression	2
1. Patterns of Repression and At-Risk Communities	3
1.1 Political Repression and Escalating Coercion	
1.2 Women’s Rights and Demographic Control	
1.3 LGBTIQ+ Rights and Systemic Criminalization	
1.4 Indigenous Peoples, Extraction, and Forced Assimilation	
1.5 Ukrainian Citizens in Russia: Detention and Protection Gaps	
2. Channels of State Influence: Platforms and Information Manipulation	6
2.1 Disinformation and Influence Operations	
2.2 Big Tech, Platform Compliance, and Wartime Censorship	
3. Resilience Actors: Civil Society and Refusal to Serve	8
3.1 Civil Society in Russia: Survival Through Reconfiguration	
3.2 Deserters and Conscientious Objectors: Humanitarian Protection and Strategic Attrition	
4. Recommendations for EU Action	10
→ Advancing Justice and Accountability for Crimes Attributable to the Russian State	
→ Humanitarian Protection and Support for Vulnerable Groups	
→ Ensuring Operational Resilience for Civil Society in Russia	
→ Strategic Partnerships and External Expertise	

Introduction: Domestic Repression as the Prerequisite for Aggression

This policy paper draws on the unique expertise and evidence of Platforma member organizations, such as Roskomsvoboda, OVD-Info, de_colonialanguage collective, indigenous-vision project, EQUAL PostOst e.V., Quarteera e.V., Russie-Libertés, CISR e.V., Center for Civil Liberties, School of Civic Education, Feminist Anti-war Resistance and feminist initiatives based in Russia, which remain anonymous, Get Lost!, Conscript School (netprizyv), Appeal to Conscience (agsnowar), Connection e.V., InTransit, Citizen. Army. Law., A Farewell to Arms. Based on direct work with victims of repression, legal case support, and long-term documentation of violations. The evidence shows how Russia weaponizes “extremism” and “foreign agent” legislation to suppress vulnerable communities, from LGBTIQ+ people to indigenous groups. It also documents the state’s use of mass surveillance, digital censorship, and institutionalized violence to eliminate domestic dissent. Particular attention is paid to the transnational dimension of repression and to Ukrainian citizens detained in Russia.

Russia’s domestic policy has entered a qualitatively new phase. Repression is no longer a situational response to protest; it has become a routine legal norm and a daily mode of governance. We are witnessing the systematic construction of a legal reality in which “otherness” — ethnic, gender-based, or ideological — is increasingly criminalized. External aggression did not emerge despite this domestic repression; it became possible because of it and now extends it outward.

This domestic subjugation directly feeds the war machine. By enforcing information isolation and crushing independent media, the Kremlin suppresses opposition and obscures the human costs of the invasion of Ukraine. Economically depressed ethno-national republics are exploited for resources, while indigenous and non-Slavic populations are disproportionately mobilized, shifting the burden of war away from wealthier urban centers. At the same time, the coercive apparatus has been repurposed to generate and retain manpower, including through systems of abuse and torture used against objectors and soldiers refusing deployment.

Despite severe operational barriers, Russian civil society, human rights defenders, and anti-war activists continue to operate—both underground inside Russia and in exile. Anti-war and democratic civil society has not been eliminated; it has been structurally transformed, decentralized, and pushed into the grey zone to preserve functionality. In a context where the state has abandoned social protection in favor of war, independent initiatives have become the last remaining support infrastructure for vulnerable groups.

Supporting this decentralized civic infrastructure is therefore not only a humanitarian imperative; it is a strategic investment in European security. The Kremlin’s ability to sustain prolonged, multi-domain aggression depends on its capacity to subjugate its own population. Preserving and strengthening Russian civil society helps challenge the regime’s information monopoly, disrupt coercive mobilization pathways, and retain the human capital needed for a future democratic transition.

The following chapters map key vulnerabilities in this system and present an actionable framework for European policymakers to counter repression, protect targeted communities, and reduce the Kremlin’s capacity to sustain war.

1. Patterns of Repression and At-Risk Communities

Repression in Russia has evolved into a consolidated governance system that links domestic control with wartime objectives. Since 2022, this system has become more punitive and more socially expansive: legal pressure, administrative sanctions, financial coercion, and ideological enforcement now operate in parallel. It no longer targets only visible political opposition; it disciplines broad social constituencies whose autonomy is treated as incompatible with state priorities.

Across issue areas, the same logic recurs. Rights restrictions are framed as legality, morality, or security; enforcement is selective but escalating; and legal ambiguity is used as an operational advantage for the state. At the same time, Russian civil society has not disappeared. Independent media, rights defenders, grassroots groups, and exile-based networks continue to document abuses, provide legal and humanitarian assistance, and maintain channels of support under conditions of sustained risk.

1.1 Political Repression and Escalating Coercion

Political repression now functions as an integrated legal-administrative architecture. Although the explosive growth phase in new cases has stabilized, punishment severity continues to rise. According to OVD-Info, more than 4,100 people are currently facing politically motivated prosecution, and over 1,800 are already imprisoned. Judicial patterns indicate a strong custodial bias: for politically coded charges, imprisonment rates are around two-thirds; in state-security cases initiated after the start of the full-scale war, rights groups report near-total custodial outcomes.

This trend is reinforced by legislative escalation. Authorities continuously amend laws to broaden prosecutorial discretion and increase penalties, including through expanded “foreign agent” and “undesirable organization” enforcement. Previously dormant provisions are now used systematically. In practice, administrative prosecution often serves as a staging mechanism: repeated “discrediting the army” violations become criminal cases, and high-volume administrative dockets create a pipeline from intimidation to incarceration. By mid-2025, courts had already received more than 11,500 such administrative cases.

A second shift is the fusion of penal and economic punishment. Since February 2024, asset confiscation has been enabled for those convicted under “fakes” and state-security-related provisions, widening coercion beyond personal liberty to household-level precarity. Retroactive application compounds this effect: individuals may be prosecuted for activities predating the legal framework now used against them.

The expansion of terrorism and treason practices marks a further escalation. Between 2022 and 2025, thousands of defendants were processed under terrorism-related articles, including broad use of “justification” provisions for online expression. Convictions in treason and espionage have risen dramatically compared with pre-war baselines, with life imprisonment now available for high treason.

Conditions of detention add an extra-judicial pressure layer. Repeated long-term solitary confinement, denial of treatment, and severe health deterioration among political prisoners are recurrently documented. The system also projects outward: Russia now ranks among major global perpetrators of transnational repression, using methods ranging from coercive legal cooperation and deportation pressure to abductions and targeted violence beyond its borders.

Despite this environment, independent Russian human rights NGOs and media continue to operate. They provide legal defense, family support, and case monitoring, and preserve evidentiary continuity in proceedings that are frequently closed or classified. Their continued functioning is central to preventing complete informational blackout around state abuse.

1.2 Women's Rights and Demographic Control

Women's rights in Russia are being narrowed through a combination of demographic coercion, reproductive control, and weak protection against violence. Women represent roughly 53.5% of the population, yet policy increasingly treats them as instruments of fertility management rather than rights-bearing citizens. The resulting model is internally contradictory: the state intensifies pressure on reproductive behavior while failing to provide credible protection from gender-based harm.

Independent monitoring underscores the severity of this gap. The Consortium of Women's NGOs verified 2,284 domestic-violence deaths in 2022–2023 alone, likely an undercount. In regions where patriarchal informal power is strong — especially in parts of the North Caucasus — impunity is amplified by weak legal enforcement and extra-legal practices, including abductions, coercive child-custody dynamics, and “honor”-based violence, including transnational cases.

Legal and administrative constraints on reproductive autonomy have expanded. The 2024 ban on promoting “childfree ideology” moved reproductive discourse into punitive territory, with severe fines and broad interpretive scope. Regional authorities have introduced anti-abortion penalty regimes and additional procedural burdens in healthcare pathways, while private clinics in many regions face pressure to exit abortion provision. State-aligned structures increasingly intervene in counseling environments, blurring institutional boundaries between policy, church, ideology, and personal medical decision-making. At the same time, pronatalist incentives target younger cohorts, including measures that normalize early childbearing and integrate “family values” messaging into education policy. In aggregate, these shifts reflect a governance strategy that combines moral regulation, economic signaling, and administrative friction to reshape women's life choices.

Civil society response remains substantial despite shrinking space. Feminist and women-led groups have transitioned from visible protest to resilience-oriented service provision: legal aid, emergency support, crisis counseling, shelter pathways, and assistance for survivors of domestic violence, including abuse linked to returning combatants. In high-pressure regions, these services are often the only functioning safety net. Operationally, organizations now rely on risk dispersion, low-visibility formats, and role-splitting between actors inside Russia and teams in exile. This adaptation preserves continuity but significantly raises organizational cost: constant self-censorship, security management, and burnout pressures reduce capacity even where commitment remains high.

1.3 LGBTIQ+ Rights and Systemic Criminalization

LGBTIQ+ repression in Russia has shifted from entrenched discrimination to broad legal criminalization. The extremist designation of the so-called “international LGBT movement,” combined with prior anti-LGBTIQ+ legal instruments and restrictions on gender-affirming care, has created a framework in which identity-linked expression, association, and visibility are treated as punishable risk.

The effects are both legal and social. Criminal cases and administrative penalties are now brought not only for speech but for symbolic acts, online interactions, and alleged affiliation. Raids on queer venues have dismantled public community infrastructure and normalized humiliating enforcement practices. Pressure extends into family and youth domains, including coercive interventions affecting minors and punitive impacts on parental rights.

Legal defense itself is increasingly constrained. Extremism-related proceedings are frequently classified, and participation in these cases can expose lawyers to professional and personal risk, including mobility restrictions. Outside formal prosecution, de-anonymization, blackmail, and anti-LGBTIQ+ violence are facilitated by localized impunity and weak protective response.

Yet the community's adaptive capacity remains significant. While many earlier public-facing organizations were suppressed, newer decentralized networks have emerged. These groups provide legal triage, psychological support, emergency referrals, and mutual aid through blended online/offline methods. Because domestic fundraising is nearly unworkable in the current legal environment, survival depends heavily on discreet transnational support and exile-linked regranteeing. The result is not disappearance, but forced reconfiguration into lower-visibility forms of organization.

1.4 Indigenous Peoples, Extraction, and Forced Assimilation

Indigenous peoples and ethno-national communities face structural repression rooted in centralization, extractive economics, and cultural assimilation. Russia's constitutional federalism has progressively hollowed out in practice, with municipal and regional autonomy increasingly subordinated to vertical state control. This institutional architecture weakens local capacity to defend land, language, and community interests.

Resource extraction illustrates the asymmetry. Regions rich in oil, gas, diamonds, gold, and other strategic resources absorb ecological and social costs while revenue control remains concentrated at the federal center. Where local consent mechanisms should operate, communities report persistent disregard for environmental standards and culturally significant territories. In effect, extractive governance produces economic dependency while limiting legal recourse.

Cultural policy reinforces this pressure. Reduced native-language instruction, rewritten historical narratives, and identity-standardizing state doctrine narrow the space for plural historical memory and collective self-definition. Recent strategic framing around a unified "common Russian" identity intensifies assimilation pressure, while in some regions — especially in the North Caucasus — "traditional values" discourse coexists with severe vulnerability for women, children, and LGBTIQ+ people under extra-legal patriarchal enforcement.

Legal repression of indigenous organizing has also accelerated. Extremism and terrorism designations targeting indigenous and ethnic organizations criminalize civic activity that previously functioned as cultural preservation and rights advocacy. The use of broad listings, including loosely substantiated entities, expands prosecutorial discretion and deepens deterrence.

These internal patterns connect directly to wartime mobilization. Economically marginalized national republics bear disproportionate recruitment pressure and casualty burdens, making domestic colonial inequality a functional input into Russia's external military aggression. In response, indigenous and decolonial actors continue to document harms, preserve community memory, and sustain advocacy through hybrid domestic-exile networks despite substantial legal risk.

1.5 Ukrainian Citizens in Russia: Detention and Protection Gaps

Ukrainian citizens under Russian control face one of the most complex protection environments in the broader repression landscape. Affected categories include civilians in occupied territories, abducted children, prisoners of war, civilian hostages, forcibly transferred civilians, and transferred prisoners originally sentenced by Ukrainian courts. These populations are managed through overlapping coercive systems that fragment legal status and reduce institutional visibility.

The most acute bottlenecks involve traceability and legal access. In many cases — particularly civilian hostages and some POW-related contexts — information channels are controlled by security structures rather than standard correctional or military registries, severely restricting access for families, lawyers, and humanitarian intermediaries. This opacity delays identification, prolongs incommunicado conditions, and hinders accountability.

Children remain the highest-priority concern. Large-scale deportation and forced displacement since 2022 has not been matched by meaningful return rates. Administrative procedures enabling institutional actors to process citizenship for children without prior guardian tracing increase long-term coercion risk and complicate eventual recovery pathways. For adolescents, especially boys, legal incorporation into Russian citizenship frameworks may later intersect with conscription exposure.

Civil society cooperation continues under these conditions and remains indispensable. Russian and Ukrainian human rights defenders, lawyers, and activists maintain practical channels for locating individuals, reconnecting families, supporting legal representation, and documenting crimes including torture, filtration, and forced deportation. Because this work is criminalized or politically sensitive, much of it cannot be public. Nevertheless, it is operationally central: without in-country participation by Russian rights actors, many assistance functions inside Russia are not feasible.

2. Channels of State Influence: Platforms and Information Manipulation

Russia's influence operations toward domestic and European audiences are increasingly organized as a dual system: narrative warfare and infrastructure control. The first seeks to shape perceptions, fracture trust, and polarize social groups; the second regulates what information can circulate, at what scale, and through which technical channels. These layers are mutually reinforcing. Disinformation campaigns are more effective when independent verification is degraded, and censorship is more effective when public trust in credible sources has already been weakened.

Since 2022, this combined model has become more durable, better funded, and more adaptive. State and para-state actors operate across legacy media, social platforms, pseudo-media domains, and influence networks, while platform governance choices by major technology companies have often amplified rather than mitigated the asymmetry. The result is not complete information closure, but controlled informational distortion: independent actors continue to exist, yet under persistent structural disadvantage.

2.1 Disinformation and Influence Operations

Russian information operations are no longer limited to classic state propaganda. They combine official messaging, state media distribution, aligned foreign voices, covert or semi-covert online assets, and synthetic content tactics. This includes “Doppelgänger” infrastructure (lookalike domains imitating trusted media), DeepFake-enabled personas, and coordinated influence networks such as “Matryoshka.” The strategic objective is broader than persuasion: it is to erode common standards of truth, normalize epistemic uncertainty, and increase social conflict in target societies.

The operational focus on the EU is clear. Campaigns are designed to polarize at least three overlapping audiences: EU citizens, Ukrainian refugees, and Russian-speaking migrant communities from post-Soviet countries. These audiences are approached through different narrative frames, but with a shared intent — weakening confidence in institutions, media, and policy consensus around Ukraine and democratic resilience.

Resource allocation indicates long-term state commitment. Publicly visible spending in Russia's “Mass Media” category has remained very high, supplemented by quasi-state and proxy channels connected to large media holdings, politically directed grant instruments, and government-linked communication structures. This architecture is diversified by design: it allows message continuity even when individual channels are sanctioned, blocked, or reputationally exposed.

Empirical indicators suggest measurable impact in local information environments. For example, a 2025 study in Finland found low trust in Finnish media among Russian-speaking residents (25% in a population of at least 100,000), illustrating how influence operations can produce durable trust asymmetries inside EU member states. These asymmetries are strategically valuable for hostile actors because they reduce the effectiveness of public-interest communication even where formal media freedom remains intact.

At the same time, independent Russian-language media in exile remain the primary countervailing force. Their ecosystem spans general political reporting, investigations, human-rights specialization, and video-first formats; some outlets publish in English and EU host-country languages through partnerships with European media. Their total audience is substantial and still heavily located inside Russia, which makes them strategically relevant not only for diaspora communities but for information access under authoritarian conditions.

However, this counter-space remains fragile. Distribution dependence on third-party platforms, unstable monetization, legal pressure on contributors, and security risks for editorial teams constrain long-term capacity. The competitive landscape is therefore asymmetric: state-linked influence ecosystems benefit from coercive and financial backing, while independent actors operate through fragmented funding and high operational risk.

2.2 Big Tech, Platform Compliance, and Wartime Censorship

If disinformation is the content layer, platform governance is the transmission layer. Since 2022, major Western technology companies have operated under sustained pressure from Russian censorship authorities, sanctions compliance concerns, and reputational risk. Across firms, compliance strategies differed, but the cumulative effect was similar: independent information channels were repeatedly restricted, while state censorship demands were often processed as routine legal requests.

Google's scale of interaction with Russian takedown machinery illustrates this pressure. In 2024, removal requests reportedly reached 784,000 items, alongside deindexing orders affecting roughly 1.4 million URLs, with a substantial share removed. Affected categories included anti-war reporting, mobilization and conscription information, draft-resistance legal guidance, and independent journalism labeled "extremist" or "foreign agent." Yet partial compliance did not secure continuity: YouTube was eventually throttled and blocked in 2024–2025.

Meta and X demonstrate a different path with a similar endpoint. Meta accepted some restrictions in early 2022 but resisted broader war-related demands, after which Facebook and Instagram were blocked and designated extremist. X showed lower compliance and was likewise throttled and effectively blocked. These cases show that resistance existed, but market access costs were high and largely unsupported by coordinated geopolitical protection.

Apple followed the most consistently compliant trajectory between 2023 and 2025 across App Store, Podcasts, and Music, including restrictions affecting major independent Russian-language media products. The most consequential divergence concerned circumvention tools: Apple removed large numbers of VPN apps in Russia, while Google retained most requested VPN apps after resisting many removals. This difference directly affected citizens' ability to bypass censorship.

Crucially, over-compliance did not reliably prevent blocking. Russian authorities appear to decide blocking based more on strategic substitutability and domestic-control logic than on cooperative behavior by platforms. In practical terms, this means compliance can normalize censorship while failing to deliver either user protection or stable operating conditions.

Algorithms further deepen the problem. When authorities block independent outlets, traffic falls; ranking and recommendation systems read this as declining relevance and push content further down. Search/discovery systems thereby reproduce censorship effects through ordinary optimization logic. Independent outlets report sudden reach collapse, opaque enforcement, and ineffective appeals, while aggregate transparency disclosures provide little insight into case-level harms in authoritarian contexts.

A parallel harm emerged through sanctions over-compliance and blanket service withdrawals. Monetization freezes, ad restrictions, and loss of critical software services disproportionately weakened independent media and civil society organizations rather than state propaganda structures. In many cases, pro-democracy actors lost infrastructure, workflow tools, and legal revenue channels simultaneously, reducing resilience exactly when repression intensified.

Civil-society adaptation has been significant but costly. Independent media and digital-rights communities shifted toward redundancy strategies: Telegram-heavy distribution, mirror infrastructures, VPN education, multilingual output, and cross-border editorial coordination. These adaptations preserved partial reach and continuity, but under escalating technical constraints. Local and regional shutdowns combined with whitelist-style controls in Russia increasingly undermine standard circumvention methods, making technical access itself a strategic battlefield.

Taken together, the interaction of platform compliance, algorithmic opacity, and infrastructure restrictions has enabled a partial privatization of wartime censorship. This is not simply a corporate governance issue; it directly affects democratic information security in Europe, the survival of independent Russian-language journalism, and the integrity of evidence flows from authoritarian contexts.

3. Resilience Actors: Civil Society and Refusal to Serve

Russia's repressive environment has not eliminated collective agency, but it has fundamentally changed the forms in which resistance can survive. As legal space for independent activity has been dismantled, resilience has shifted from visible institutional politics to distributed, risk-managed, and often transnational structures. Two actor groups are central in this landscape: civic networks that preserve social and informational continuity, and refusal-to-serve infrastructures supporting deserters and conscientious objectors. Together, they constitute a practical counterweight to coercive state capacity, even under severe constraints.

3.1 Civil Society in Russia: Survival Through Reconfiguration

Russian anti-war civil society has not disappeared amid state repression; it has adapted to new conditions. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government has dismantled the legal basis for independent civic activity through "foreign agent" laws, bans on "undesirable organizations," censorship, and criminal penalties for dissent, making public anti-war political action all but impossible. Yet, anti-war and pro-democracy initiatives persist, however, via discreet, anonymous networks that operate in a "grey zone" by framing activities as non-political volunteer, cultural, environmental, or community projects.

Civic engagement has shifted toward support for political prisoners, crowdfunding for legal defence, letter-writing campaigns, and the development of technical tools to circumvent censorship. Digital activism has grown critical. Independent media based in exile continue to reach millions inside Russia, maintaining access to democratic ideas despite isolation.

A transnational network has also taken shape in Europe and other regions, including media, advocacy groups, expert circles, legal aid, and resource centers. This network supports rather than replaces domestic efforts, enabling information exchange, coordination, and technical assistance. Even so, this ecosystem confronts serious challenges, including banking restrictions, funding shortfalls, prosecution risks, activist exhaustion, and legal obstacles.

Countering Kremlin attempts to disrupt cross-border ties requires bolstering these resources and sustaining contact with anti-war activists, journalists, experts, and researchers in Russia. Such measures preserve pro-democracy actors at home and secure reliable insights into domestic developments—key elements for any future political opening. In this context, support for Russian civil society serves Europe's long-term security: it resists authoritarian entrenchment, upholds democratic standards, assists victims of repression, challenges propaganda, and safeguards expertise for potential transition.

3.2 Deserters and Conscientious Objectors: Humanitarian Protection and Strategic Attrition

Refusal to serve in Russia has become both a humanitarian emergency and a politically relevant indicator of coercive stress inside the military system. While overall force size has expanded during wartime, losses and attrition have also been substantial, including a large and growing deserter cohort. A significant share of deserters remains trapped inside Russia in hiding; those who flee to transit states often face document loss, deportation exposure, or pressure from Russian security structures.

This pattern is inseparable from legal hardening since 2022. Mobilization rules and subsequent legal amendments have transformed military service into an effectively open-ended obligation for many, while refusal, unauthorized leave, or surrender carry severe criminal consequences. Formal law has therefore narrowed lawful exit pathways to near-zero in practice for broad categories of personnel.

Evidence from rights groups indicates that coercion extends beyond formal legal punishment into systematic violence: detention in improvised facilities, physical abuse, deprivation, and forced return to frontline duties. Reports also describe coercive contract-signing practices affecting conscripts and high-risk deployment patterns for those who resist combat participation. Under these conditions, individual desertion often becomes the only available refusal strategy, but one associated with extreme risk.

Assistance infrastructures have nonetheless expanded. Human rights coalitions and specialized initiatives process large volumes of requests, provide legal counseling, support escape and relocation routes, and document abuse patterns. This work has immediate humanitarian value — preventing torture, imprisonment, or forced redeployment — and a secondary strategic effect. When deserters reach safety and publicly testify, their accounts can undermine recruitment narratives, reduce combat legitimacy, and weaken morale within military ranks.

As with civil society more broadly, this field is resilient but fragile. Its effectiveness depends on the continuity of trusted assistance networks, legal navigation capacity across jurisdictions, and safe transnational channels for relocation and protection.

4. Recommendations for EU Action

While Russian civil society actors work on all the issues mentioned above, the targeted support of the European Union is essential. It would be very helpful if the European Union had a strategy towards Russia. This strategy could consist of the following main parts: achieving justice and accountability, providing humanitarian protection and support for vulnerable groups, ensuring operational resilience for civil society in Russia. The European Union can rely on strategic partnerships while executing the strategy.

4.1. Advancing Justice and Accountability for Crimes Attributable to the Russian State

To dismantle the architecture of impunity, European institutions should institutionalize and scale the recent precedent of sanctioning mid-level officials within the repressive apparatus. Building on recent EU sanctions targeting judges, investigators, prosecutors, and penal-colony leadership linked to the persecution of Alexei Gorinov and other political prisoners, this approach should be systematized under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. A broader and more consistent use of this regime should target direct perpetrators — judges, prosecutors, investigators, police officers, and prison officials — responsible for political persecution and human rights violations.

In parallel, the EU should examine targeted trade restrictions and strengthened due-diligence requirements for raw materials, including diamonds, gold, and coal, where extraction is linked to documented human rights abuses against Indigenous communities.

At the international level, EU Member States should coordinate support for inter-State litigation before the International Court of Justice wherever treaty-based jurisdiction is available, including under the Genocide Convention and other applicable instruments. To address regional accountability gaps, the EU should initiate a coordination meeting of States Parties bordering Russia to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, with a view to strengthening cross-border investigations and ensuring implementation of domestic jurisdiction obligations where suspects are present.

The European Parliament should adopt a resolution recognizing Russia's designation of Indigenous organizations and the so-called "international LGBT movement" as extremist or terrorist as acts of political repression. Finally, the mandate and resourcing of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Russian Federation should be renewed, and the Rapporteur's findings should be systematically integrated into evidence-based EU restrictive-measures processes.

4.2 Humanitarian Protection and Support for Vulnerable Groups

The EU Agency for Asylum should explicitly document the systemic persecution of LGBTIQ+ people in Russia and ensure that Russia is not treated as a safe country of origin in EU and national listing practices. Given the current legal and political context, accelerated procedures risk exposing applicants to harm.

To support arrivals, the European Commission should initiate research on the situation of queer migrants in temporary accommodation across Member States and develop practical recommendations to ensure safe conditions.

To prevent high-risk returns, the Commission should issue guidance clarifying that returns and extraditions to Russia engage serious non-refoulement concerns under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, including a strong presumption of Article 4 risk (prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment). Where systemic non-compliance persists, the Commission should

consider infringement proceedings before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in relation to the Asylum Procedures Directive and related EU asylum obligations, including in cases affecting refugees from the North Caucasus and Indigenous activists.

The Commission should also clarify the application of Article 9(2)(e) of the Qualification Directive to Russian deserters and conscientious objectors. The European Parliament may support this by calling for harmonized protection standards for these groups across Member States.

For at-risk individuals, the EU and Member States should expand emergency travel-document pathways and accelerate humanitarian visa processing for activists, deserters, and other vulnerable applicants lacking valid passports, subject to appropriate security screening and rights safeguards. Expanding long-term humanitarian multi-entry visas can provide a vital lifeline for civil society actors operating across borders.

Comprehensive relocation assistance for independent journalists — including visa support and language training — should be strengthened. Targeted legal aid for Ukrainians forced to accept Russian citizenship in occupied territories is also necessary to secure access to temporary protection and related rights.

4.3 Ensuring Operational Resilience for Civil Society in Russia

The survival of underground civil society highly depends on adapting financial compliance to the realities of severe repression. Acknowledging that standard grant reporting endangers activists in Russia is crucial, and European donors are strongly encouraged to transition to a "*trusted partnership*" model where EU intermediaries assume the bureaucratic burden.

To protect against data leaks, donors should *minimize data collection in reporting*, strictly avoiding the scanning of passports or receipts for activists operating inside the country. The Commission could consider supporting a *universal legal entity* to contract with grantors, distributing funds via micro-grants and cryptocurrencies that leave no banking trace. These secure financial channels are vital for prioritizing cross-border connectivity, funding secure communication channels, and facilitating regular offline coordination meetings on neutral territory.

Preserving digital access and physical infrastructure is equally critical. Creating a permanent *European Digital Rights Fund* to support anti-censorship solutions, VPNs, and privacy technologies would be a significant step in ensuring Russian citizens can bypass internet restrictions. This could be coupled with EU-level negotiations with satellite operators to allocate *additional bandwidth for independent Russian media* initiatives like the 'Svoboda' package.

Finally, highly specialized support must be sustained. Sustainable psychological support programs outside Russia are essential to preventing burnout among Russia-based activists. Equally important is providing funding and facilitating access to Schengen visas, enabling activists to participate in events abroad — countering isolation and building connections in an increasingly closed space.

4.4 Strategic Partnerships and External Expertise

To counter the Kremlin's information-control and surveillance ecosystem, EU institutions should address private-sector overcompliance that unintentionally restricts legitimate civic activity. The Commission should issue clear guidance confirming that European financial institutions may service vetted Russian civil society organizations in line with sanctions and AML/CFT rules.

EU sanctions implementation should also preserve clear humanitarian and civic-use carve-outs for essential digital services — including SaaS tools, VPNs, secure communications, and app distribution — paired with proportionate safeguards. Greater transparency from major technology companies

regarding takedown and data-access requests from authoritarian governments should be encouraged, alongside support for restoring monetization and discoverability for independent Russian media where unjustifiably restricted.

The EU should mainstream protection of anti-censorship and end-to-end encryption tools in cyber and digital diplomacy, including in the UN Global Digital Compact, WSIS+20, and related multilateral processes. Reinforcing the multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance through deeper cooperation with civil society, academia, the private sector, and technical communities — especially in forums such as the Freedom Online Coalition and the IGF — remains essential.

On the ground, increased support to NGOs in transit countries such as Armenia and Kazakhstan is needed for shelter, legal aid, and case support for people fleeing persecution. EU institutions should treat Russian civil society expertise as a strategic policy asset and establish a centralized EU monitoring mechanism for transnational repression incidents, with EEAS delegations in third countries instructed to raise protection concerns where activists face expulsion risks.

Platforma stands ready to serve as an operational partner for EU institutions in medium- and long-term Russia strategies, including expert support for political-refugee verification, evidence collection for justice mechanisms, monitoring of sanctions evasion and transnational repression, and policy design informed by field-based human rights, media, and digital-rights work.