

Repression Without Borders: Russia's War on Its Own Citizens and the EU's Role in Stopping It

Political repression in Russia is intensifying, continuing to create a climate of pervasive fear among the country's residents. Although the explosive growth of new criminal cases has stalled and stabilized, the severity of punishments continues to escalate. According to OVD-Info, more than 4,100 people are currently facing politically motivated prosecution, over 1,800 of whom are already behind bars. According to judicial statistics, for charges that can be classified as "political", the share of custodial sentences is approximately two-thirds, an unprecedentedly high figure. For cases involving crimes against state security initiated since the start of the war, this figure stands at 100%, according to the human rights organisation The First Department.

Legislation is constantly being amended to impose harsher penalties and make prosecutions easier, such as those strengthening control over "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations." Previously dormant norms are now applied with full force, e.g. 25 criminal cases were initiated in 2024 for the failure to comply with the duties of 'foreign agent', by March 2025 there were 62. Crucially, the repressive measures are frequently applied retroactively: the status is assigned for financial activity or public acts that occurred years before the legislation was in place. An economic aspect was added: a law introduced in February 2024 now allows for the confiscation of assets from those convicted of spreading 'fakes' or acting against state security.

Administrative prosecution is actively used as a precursor to criminal charges and as an intimidation method. By mid-2025, over 11,500 cases of "discrediting the army" had reached the courts of first instance; a repeated violation within one year becomes grounds for a criminal case. Since the invasion began, at least 1,306 individuals have faced criminal charges specifically for their anti-war position. In 2024 the share of the cases for anti-war stance in the total number of politically motivated persecutions has been going down, most likely due to a growing self-censorship of the population.

According to The Insider, in 2022-2025 there were 3,647 defendants in criminal cases under terrorism articles, approximately half of which were targeted under 'justification of terrorism' articles, mostly used for social media posts. Memorial has verified political motivation in one-third of these cases; however, this likely figure represents only a small fraction of the reality, which remains impossible to verify, as most proceedings are classified.

Another alarming trend has been the relentless conveyor belt of high treason and espionage cases. Convictions under these articles are handed down almost daily, and the total number of individuals convicted since the start of the war has exceeded 770, with 224 verdicts in the first half of 2025 alone. For comparison, before the war, yearly conviction rate typically did not exceed 20. In 2023, the maximum penalty for high treason was raised to life imprisonment.

Solitary confinement is increasingly used to put pressure on political prisoners with them repeatedly kept in solitary cells for months on end. The number of known cases of political prisoners suffering from health problems and are routinely denied necessary treatment is close to 200 placing them at imminent risk of death.

The Russian government now ranks among the top five global perpetrators of transnational repression, according to the Freedom House report. The methods range from abusing international legal cooperation mechanism and diplomatic blackmail (the attempt to force the deportation of the band Bi-2 from Thailand), to political assassinations even within EU borders (like the murder of defecting pilot Maksim Kuzminov in Spain) and forced renditions from neighboring countries (such as the abduction of Lev Skoryakin from Kyrgyzstan). The countries easiest for Russians to enter often turn out to be the least safe.

Despite this, independent Russian human rights NGOs continue to operate under extreme pressure, providing legal and humanitarian aid to victims and documenting abuses. Independent media outlets also keep informing the public and exposing violations, often at great personal risk.

To systematically counter these repressions, it is essential to expand financial and institutional assistance to Russian human rights organisations. This entails not only flexible funding but also addressing the issue of corporate overcompliance with sanctions. European banks routinely refuse to open accounts for Russian NGOs and human rights defenders (HRDs). It is suggested that the Commission issues explicit guidance to European financial institutions, clarifying that servicing vetted Russian human rights organizations and independent media is permitted and encouraged. Also, The Commission could coordinate a framework for willing Member States to expedite humanitarian visas for HDRs at risk, ensuring that procedural delays do not result in their extradition or imprisonment.

It is vital to intensify efforts to counter transnational repression. It is advisable to establish a centralized EU monitoring mechanism to track and prevent incidents of transnational repression on European soil. And while most Member States have de facto suspended cooperation with Russia, dangerous loopholes for high-risk deportations remain. For instance, in 2022-23, Alexander Stotsky, an activist, elections observer and Navalny supporter, was denied asylum in Bulgaria in all three instances, including by the Supreme Administrative Court (Offnews). The State Agency for Refugees argued that Russia “has clearly established democratic institutions” and “the situation there has not changed dramatically in a negative way in the past 20 years”. Following a massive media campaign, he was granted asylum in September 2023 (Bulgarian National Radio). This case illustrates a critical gap in protection. To close it, the European Commission could issue recommendations to Member States clarifying that, due to the systemic risk of torture and the lack of fair trials, extradition to Russia constitutes a violation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This would make protection in such cases a systemic norm, rather than a result of media pressure.

Impunity must be dismantled systematically, acknowledging that the regime's foreign aggression was enabled by years of unchecked domestic oppression. It is critically important to ensure the renewal and sufficient resourcing of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Russia. Furthermore, a broader application of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime could target not only high-ranking officials but also the direct perpetrators of repression and torture: judges, prosecutors, investigators, and prison wardens. Recognizing the Special Rapporteur's findings as a primary evidentiary basis would facilitate the automatic adoption of sanctions against these perpetrators.

This policy paper was developed with expert support from the OVD-Info.