

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	688
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Russia: Arrests, Harassment of Ukraine War Dissidents; Raids, Detentions, Prosecution of Anti-War Activist, Independent Journalists
Udgivet:	24. marts 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	28. april 2022

Document #2070461

HRW – Human Rights Watch

Russia: Arrests, Harassment of Ukraine War Dissidents; Raids, Detentions, Prosecution of Anti-War Activists, Independent Journalists

(Berlin) – [Russian](#) authorities have cracked down on journalists, human rights defenders, and activists in an effort to silence any criticism of the war in [Ukraine](#), Human Rights Watch said today.

The authorities have arbitrarily detained, judicially harassed, raided, and engaged in smear campaigns against critics. Unidentified assailants have physically attacked activists and damaged human rights organizations’ offices. In recent weeks, various high-level officials, including [President Vladimir Putin](#), labeled people critical of the war “national traitors.”

“Having already intensified a crackdown against critics in 2021, the authorities are escalating their witch-hunt even further to punish all anti-war sentiment,” said [Hugh Williamson](#), Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The government portrays independent journalists and activists as traitors and treats them as a threat to the state.”

On March 2, the head of the Investigative Committee, Russia’s criminal investigation service, [ordered](#) the establishment of interagency rapid response groups in connection with “the events in Ukraine.” The groups are to prevent “extremist and terrorist activities, unsanctioned protests and provocations,” and other “destabilizing” activities. He also stressed the need to control information.

In the four weeks since Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, hundreds of thousands of people across Russia have participated [in peaceful protests](#) to speak out against the war and express their discontent with the government. Police arbitrarily detained [thousands of peaceful protesters](#).

Russian authorities have also detained activists across the country and raided their homes, apparently in response to their participation in the peaceful anti-war movement. The raids and detentions, under the guise of dubious criminal cases, have taken place in cities across the country, including Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Pskov, Volgograd, [Krasnodar](#), [Novosibirsk](#), [Rostov-on-Don](#), [Arkhangelsk](#), as well as in the [Kaluga region](#).

Among those arbitrarily detained are Svetlana Prokopenko, a Pskov-based journalist, and Denis Kamaliagin, the editor of the local independent newspaper *Pskovskaya Guberniya*. On March 18, riot police raided their homes in response to an anonymous Telegram message that [criticized](#) how the Pskov regional governor had characterized the deaths in Ukraine of soldiers from Pskov. The police carried out the raids without a court order, [claiming](#) “urgency” in the case as the journalists could “destroy evidence.” Police had [searched](#) the office of *Pskovskaya Guberniya* the previous week. On March 5, the authorities [blocked](#) the newspaper’s website, adding to the long list of blocked independent outlets.

[Prokopenko](#), [prosecuted](#) in July 2020 on bogus terrorism charges, and [Kamaliagin](#), personally labeled a “foreign agent,” fled Russia fearing prosecution.

On March 17, the activist movement Vesna (Spring), which openly speaks out against the war, [reported](#) that unidentified assailants had attacked and kicked their coordinator in the face in Moscow.

Activists and [journalists](#) also reported that anonymous vandals had painted the letter “Z,” a symbol of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, on the doors of their apartments as well as the warning “[Don’t betray your motherland](#)” and the slur “[A traitor lives here](#).”

Police regularly detain independent journalists reporting on anti-war protests, and in some cases have [paid](#) them [visits](#) at home, apparently to harass and [threaten](#) them not to take part in protests.

The authorities also [opened criminal cases](#) for “spreading false information about the Russian army” against two journalists, Andrey Novashov and Aleksandr Nevzorov, and a blogger, Veronika Belotserkovskaya. The cases are being brought under [new amendments](#) to the criminal code adopted on March 4. An investigator told Novashov that

he should apologize to the Russian army, but he refused. All three published information about Russian forces' attacks on civilian objects in Ukraine. The authorities have also [filed](#) similar charges against at least three other people who are not journalists.

On March 10, parliament [adopted](#) amendments creating a uniform registry of people labeled “foreign agents” and those affiliated with them, which would include people already designated as “foreign agents” and individuals who have been, or continue to be staff, founders, or leaders of groups or media designated as “foreign agent.”

“The authorities intend to crush Russia’s civil society and the peaceful anti-war movement, and will intimidate, smear, and ostracize them in seeking to do so,” said Williamson. “They are apparently trying to pave a way toward a police state of absolute control and fear.”

For additional details about the crackdown, please see below.

House Raids, Dubious Criminal Cases

On March 5 and 6, Saint Petersburg police [raided](#) the homes of at least 23 activists, [reportedly](#) in connection with a criminal case on falsely reporting a bomb in a police station. Police seized some devices, and detained [12 people](#), at least nine of whom were later released on their own recognizance. On March 12, authorities briefly again [detained](#) at least two of the activists whose apartments had been searched.

On March 17, Kazan police [raided the homes](#) of at least nine activists in connection with a criminal investigation into “inciting mass riots,” and seized some of their personal devices. The investigation was [reportedly](#) triggered by a message from an anonymous user in a Telegram chat. Among them are three members of the opposition political party, Yabloko, which publicly [spoke out](#) against the war. Police [detained](#) three of the activists as suspects in the mass riot case. On March 19, a court ordered one of them, Andrey Boyarshinov, to be placed [under house arrest](#) and amended charges against him to “justification of terrorism.” The two others were released without charge.

On March 18, the police detained two activists in Volgograd and [searched](#) their apartments. On March 20, police [raided](#) the homes of five more anti-war activists in Volgograd and seized their personal devices. All seven have been designated as witnesses in a criminal case involving a false bomb threat. All seven had previously been detained for publicly protesting the war.

Also on March 18, police [raided](#) 10 homes in Pskov, including the head of the local Yabloko branch, Lev Shlosberg, and two other party members, and their parents. The authorities also searched Yabloko’s local headquarters for the [second time](#) in recent weeks. The searches were carried out in connection with a case involving alleged libel against the governor of Pskov region.

On March 12, the Pskov governor had [recorded](#) a video, referring to some of these activists as those who “hate our motherland.”

On March 7, assailants physically attacked Roman Taganov, an [activist](#) with the opposition movement Mayak (The Lighthouse), as he was coming home with his son, in the southern city of Maykop. They broke his nose and injured his neck, his [wife said](#).

The assailants, he later learned, were plain-clothes police officers. They [detained](#) Taganov, who was then fined for “discrediting the Russian army” in an anti-war post on Instagram and sentenced to 10 days detention for “disobeying the police.” On March 17, authorities charged Taganov with “violence against a police officer” and placed him under house arrest.

Detention of Journalists Covering Anti-War Protests

Police briefly detained at least [nine](#) journalists during mass anti-war protests on March 13. One week earlier, authorities briefly detained at least [13 journalists](#).

On March 16, the head of the Saint Petersburg police [announced](#) that law enforcement officers had detained people wearing press vests claiming the police were seeking to root out “provocateurs.” Earlier, Moscow’s mayor [implied](#) that anti-war protests were organized by “provocateurs.”

The authorities also apparently prevented independent journalists from covering the officially organized pro-government events on March 18 in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In Saint Petersburg, the police [detained](#) four journalists who were planning to report on the event just before it started. Officers questioned them for about an hour, then released them.

In Moscow, police [detained four](#) journalists before they arrived at Luzhniki stadium where the event took place. The police [charged](#) Pavel Ivanov, a reporter with the independent outlet *SOTA*, with “disobeying a police officer” for allegedly refusing to show his documents. A court sentenced him to three days detention. A *SOTA* photographer, Ruslan Terekhov, was [sentenced](#) to 10 days for refusing to show the contents of his camera bag. The Police [threatened](#) one of the detained journalists “not to report on protests or face detention.”

Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders

In March, unidentified assailants repeatedly harassed the Movement for Human Rights, one of the oldest rights organizations in Russia, which the authorities formally shut down in 2019 and its founder and leader, Lev Ponomarev whom authorities designated “foreign agent mass media.”

In February, Ponomarev had initiated a [petition](#), calling on the Russian military to withdraw from Ukraine, which gathered more than 1.2 million signatures.

On March 3, a woman attacked Ponomarev on the street throwing coins at him and then insulting and calling him a foreign agent. Journalists with the pro-Kremlin television channel NTV, known for such provocations, filmed the entire incident.

On March 16, four masked men and apparently the same woman [went](#) to the organization’s door, seemingly trying to enter. Before leaving they glued “get out traitor” and “enemy foreign agent” [stickers](#) to the nameplate and the walls.

On March 21, unidentified assailants [painted](#) “V” and “Z” – widely recognized symbols of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine – on Ponomarev’s office door.

On March 23, four unidentified men [interrupted](#) an event in the group’s office, spraying pepper spray and screaming insults. Staff recognized one of the men as a person who had followed Ponomarev when he submitted the anti-war petition to government.

On March 11, authorities [blocked](#) the website of the Movement for Human Rights.

On February 28, Russia’s Supreme Court [rejected](#) the appeal to pause the implementation of the decision to liquidate another prominent human rights organization, International Memorial. On March 22, the court [upheld](#) the ruling to shut down Memorial for allegedly violating the draconian “foreign agent” legislation.

On March 4, [police raided the offices](#) of Memorial and its partner organization, Civic Assistance Committee, in connection with an “extremism” case opened against one of Memorial’s members. Police prevented lawyers and employees of the organizations from entering their offices for 12 hours. When the search was complete, Memorial staff [found](#) the letters “Z” and “V” and “Memorial is finished” written on their office walls.

On March 14, unidentified assailants [splashed](#) a liquid reeking of gasoline and urine, on the entrance door of Memorial’s Moscow office. A [witness](#) said the stench made it “very hard to be inside the building.”

For years, the authorities have been harassing Memorial in retaliation for its human rights work, labeling the group a “foreign agent” and imposing hefty fines.

On March 15, a Moscow court [fined](#) Svetlana Gannushkina, the head of Civic Assistance, for participation in an anti-war protest on February 27 during which she “was walking in the crowd which was chanting slogans.” Police also briefly detained Gannushkina on March 3 after public CCTV cameras identified her and notified the police as she was leaving a metro station.

On March 12, police [raided](#) the informal office for Environmental Watch for Northern Caucasus (EWNC) in Krasnodar, [reportedly](#) in connection with a criminal case regarding a false bomb threat. Police [seized](#) two laptops and briefly detained four activists including the head of the organization, Andrey Rudomakha.

The authorities have frequently harassed the group’s staff over a period of years, including with early morning [raids](#) and have failed to investigate [violent attacks](#) on them.

ecoi.net summary:

Authorities have arbitrarily
detained war critics, journalists,
human rights defenders and activists

Country:

Russian Federation

Source:

[HRW – Human Rights Watch](#)

Original link:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/24/russia-arrests-harassment-ukraine-war-dissidents>

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Published:

24 March 2022

Document ID:

2070461

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

