

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	876
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	Jamestown Foundation
Titel:	Russia Ramping Up Authoritarian-Style Virtual Repression - Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 22, Issue: 109
Udgivet:	24. juli 2025
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	20. oktober 2025



Document #2128232

Jamestown Foundation (Author)

Russia Ramping Up Authoritarian-Style Virtual Repression; Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 22 Issue: 109

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Executive Summary:

- Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has aimed to stamp out any open criticism or opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin and his war.
- Russia has expanded its definition of those it considers "foreign agents" and "terrorists and extremists" to justify further repression, especially on internet usage, and criminal prosecution.
- Some of the repressive measures introduced in Russia since 2022 closely resemble tactics used in Belarus and the People's Republic of China—a sign that these authoritarian regimes closely monitor and learn from one another.

In recent years, Russians have been subjected to intense television propaganda supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin and his full-scale war against Ukraine (see EDM, [March 13](#), [May 13](#), September 10, 23, 2024). Disloyal statements in Russian public spaces are extremely rare. This lack of open disloyalty, however, does not accurately represent the true attitudes of Russian citizens toward Putin's regime. Russian officials have turned to ever more repressive measures since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 to stifle any form of independent anti-regime expression (see EDM, [November 13](#), 2024, [April 3](#), [June 10](#)).

These repressions are no longer directed exclusively against the political opposition, which is practically non-existent inside Russia, but also against regular citizens and Internet users. The status of "foreign agent" was

introduced in 2012 and initially assigned to public organizations. Since 2020, it has also been applied to individuals ([Meduza](#), July 20, 2022). In the original version of this law, one would be recognized as a “foreign agent” for receiving funding from abroad. It was later determined, however, that only “foreign influence” was sufficient—a term that is vague and can encompass nearly anything.

Today, several people every week are added to the list of “foreign agents,” and they are increasingly deprived of civil rights ([The Moscow Times](#), July 16). They not only cannot be elected as deputies at any level, but they also cannot engage in teaching, creative work, or other similar activities. Even in Leonid Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, such a status did not exist.

Even more dangerous than “foreign agents” are those considered “terrorists and extremists.” Criminal cases are immediately opened against those included on the list, and their bank accounts are blocked, effectively depriving them of their livelihood. In 2021, late Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny’s movement was recognized as “terrorist,” although it fundamentally focused on non-violent civil protest. It was precisely this status that destroyed the movement. In 2018, a network of “Navalny headquarters” operated in more than 80 of Russia’s regions, uniting young oppositionists who opposed official propaganda. Just a few years later, however, all the participants in these headquarters ended up in prison or forced to emigrate. Navalny himself died in a penal colony in 2024 (see [EDM](#), February 20, 2024).

In April, the author of this article, along with colleagues from different countries, was also added to the list of “terrorists and extremists” by Rosfinmonitoring ([Currenttime.tv](#), April 8). Inclusion in this list occurs at the whim of the security forces and is completely extrajudicial. It is impossible to revoke this status through legal processes because the current Russian courts have become part of the same repressive system (see [EDM](#), February 27). On July 14, two famous Russian writers, Boris Akunin and Dmitry Bykov, who critically assess the Kremlin’s policies, were also persecuted. The first was sentenced in absentia to 14 years in prison, while the second was added to the wanted list ([Radio Svoboda](#), July 16).

Ostensibly democratic Western organizations have sometimes, paradoxically, cooperated with Russia’s repressive authorities. For example, the international payment system PayPal—similar to Russian banks—has closed the accounts of those whom Russia has declared “terrorists and extremists” ([The Barents Observer](#), July 8).

Moscow is also further tightening this punitive system. The Russian State Duma recently approved the simplification of criminal prosecution of “foreign agents.” Previously, one needed to commit two administrative offenses to be at risk of criminal prosecution; however, now it is sufficient to fail to state “this material was produced by a foreign agent” in any

article or blog post once ([Radio Svoboda](#), July 15). The possibility of recognizing various public associations as “extremist” has also been significantly simplified. Labeling just one member an “extremist” is now sufficient cause for a complete ban of the entire organization ([The Moscow Times](#), July 16).

The remnants of the free Internet in Russia are subject to special suppression. The Internet remains a threat to the dictatorship, as it allows many to create diverse information content, making it an actual democratic space—unlike Russian State television, on which only a handful of propagandists are permitted to speak. In 2024 alone, almost half a million websites were blocked in Russia ([Radio Svoboda](#), January 28). Global platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are furthermore generally banned and have been declared “extremist” ([RBC](#), March 21, 2022). Access to them from Russia was previously possible only with the help of virtual private networks (VPN), but now the authorities have cracked down on those as well ([Interfax](#), July 21).

The Russian State Duma has approved the imposition of fines for searching for “extremist materials” on the Internet ([The Moscow Times](#), July 17). The use of VPN technology, moreover, is considered an “aggravating circumstance”—those who distribute these services are subject to fines under the new law ([The Moscow Times](#), July 17). This marks the first instance of criminalizing information consumption in Russia. The authorities’ previous efforts were focused on punishing the creators of “extremist” content. Now, even their readers, viewers, and listeners are becoming the object of punishment and persecution.

Putin’s Russia appears to take inspiration from Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s Belarus, where people have long been punished, and even imprisoned, for simply subscribing to opposition websites and channels on messenger apps. The Belarusian authorities have not stopped there. There have been thousands of cases in Belarus of people being tried for screenshots, likes, and even for just being in a “wrong” chat ([Meduza](#), July 16).

Russia is attempting to create a “sovereign” information world, separate from democratic countries it considers “unfriendly” (see EDM, [September 3](#), [November 25](#), 2024). Putin signed a law on the creation of a “single national messenger” is one part of this ([RBC](#), June 24). This messenger aims to integrate various functions, including an identity card, a means of communication, and a digital wallet. Russian special services, however, will have complete access to it.

In using such a single national messenger, Russians will have to forgo any privacy of communication, not to mention access to “forbidden” sites and channels. Putin also recently ordered restrictions on the use of foreign messengers in Russia ([The Moscow Times](#), July 17). The State Duma has already called for “preparing to shut down WhatsApp” ([The Moscow](#)

[Times](#), July 18). Russia appears to be taking lessons from the People's Republic of China, whose authorities, with the help of the Great Firewall system, have established a system that dynamically blocks access to the external Internet ([RBC](#), September 3, 2024).

Such a sharp surge in state repression in Russia reflects the Kremlin's growing uncertainty about the loyalty of the population. The Russian economy is weakening due to the protracted war, and officials are concerned about protests. They want to "prohibit" any civil activity in advance (see [EDM](#), July 7). Russian historical experience demonstrates, however, that "tightening the screws" to the limit often leads to exactly the opposite effect—a revolutionary "stripping of the threads."

ecoi.net description:

Article on the surge of repressive state measures against any form anti-regime expression

Country:

Russian Federation

Source:

[Jamestown Foundation](#) (Author)

Published:

24 July 2025

Original link:

<https://jamestown.org/program/russia-ramping-up-authoritarian-style-virtual-repression/>

Document type:

Special or Analytical Report

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

11 August 2025

Document ID:

2128232

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Documentation
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