

POLICY BRIEF



The Peace Deal's Blind Spot: Human Rights Repression in Russia

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With the new American administration in place, peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia have returned to the [agenda](#). These discussions primarily focus on territorial control, security guarantees for Ukraine, and the lifting of economic sanctions on Russia. However, they leave little room to address the increasingly repressive measures implemented by the Kremlin since February 2022. Amid the shifting priorities of the U.S. administration, critical issues such as human rights—freedom of the press, association, and dissent—have been mostly sidelined.

This policy memo examines the impact of the post-2022 amendments to the Foreign Agent Law, the new criminal code amendment introduced in March 2022 and 2023 to target anti-war support, and the increased use of anti-terrorist laws to target activists, which have collectively created an environment of severe repression in Russia. The new laws have cast a wider net than previous ones, targeting not only journalists and human rights workers but also ethnic and indigenous activists, well as anti-war protesters, resulting in a significant chilling effect on dissent and activism. The changes made to the Foreign Agent Law after 2022, in connection with the new laws enacted in March 2022 and 2023 amending Russia's Criminal Code, drastically extended the repressive power of the Kremlin and regional elites.

In this context, Russian exiles have emerged as vocal critics of the Kremlin. However, their advocacy often fails to resonate with the realities faced by grassroots organizations still operating under oppressive conditions within Russia. The memo underlines how local grassroots activists in Russia currently bear an important cost of the forthcoming peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia in a trade-off between geopolitics and human rights. Although current peace negotiations must be centered on Ukraine's most

immediate issues including territorial integrity, reparations, and international justice, it might also be the only opportunity to extract political concessions from the Kremlin to address the human rights situation in Russia.

A New Toolkit to Repress Civil Society in Russia After February 2022

Implemented in 2012 after the Bolotnaya protests and Vladimir Putin's return to the Presidential office, the Russian foreign agent [law](#) has evolved through the years. It was first designed to target non-governmental organizations engaged in political activities on Russian territory and prevent the so-called coloured revolutions in the country. In 2019, the law was subsequently extended to provide the Kremlin with a broader and more effective repressive tool to curb investigative journalism in the country. The amendments to the [law](#) focused on media organizations, independent journalism, and bloggers more generally. [Collaboration](#) between foreign editorial offices and journalists based in Russia creating a list of foreign media agents.

International [organizations](#) have for years widely condemned these various components of the Foreign Agent [Law](#), asserting that they violate fundamental freedoms of [expression](#) and [association](#). They argue that these measures have had devastating consequences on independent and investigative journalism as well as political activism more broadly in Russia, further consolidating the Kremlin's authoritarian control over the flow of information.

After [2022](#), the Foreign Agent Law was extended to anyone receiving foreign support or under suspicion of foreign influence without a clear definition of the latter, drastically increased the reach of the law. It allowed authorities to scrutinize and penalize entities receiving foreign funding, effectively branding them as enemies of the state. The Ministry of Justice has strengthened enforcement of mandatory disclosure for anyone receiving foreign funding or engaging in activities deemed influenced by foreign interference. The new amendment sought to crush the perceived Western influence in the country rather than simply target investigative journalism and political activism. The [list](#) of foreign agents doubled in the first two years of the war, extending to Western citizens, ethnic and indigenous activists, and politicians.

The Kremlin has designated hundreds of journalists as foreign [agents](#), forcing many into exile while harassing and repressing those who remain in the country. Dozens have been fined, arrested, and sentenced to prison terms. The new amendments to the various existing laws are a way to target almost anyone opposing the regime's broad narratives in a context of a perceived war against the West and its influence in Eurasia. Western [citizens](#) were arrested for failing to register as foreign agents or simply accused of [spying](#) on Russia.

In 2015, in parallel with the Foreign Agent Law, the Kremlin extended its repressive reach by providing Russian prosecutors with the power to declare domestic and foreign non-governmental organizations as undesirable organizations threatening Russia's constitutional orders, defense capability, and its security. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, several media [outlets](#) across the country have also been labeled "[undesirable organizations](#)," as individuals found collaborating with them risk facing heavy fines and prison sentences.

In July 2024, the Kremlin expanded the [scope](#) of existing legislation to classify a broad range of domestic and foreign organizations as "undesirable," effectively criminalizing any form of collaboration with them. This law has been increasingly weaponized—not only against media outlets but also as a means to suppress both domestic and international dissent.

Within Russia, more than [50 organizations](#) advocating for ethnic and Indigenous rights have been designated as part of the so-called “Anti-Russian Separatist Movement.” The Russian Ministry of Justice has accused these groups of attempting to “destroy the multinational unity and territorial integrity” of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, abroad, media organizations such as [Radio Free Europe \[KN1\]](#) and Meduza, have also been labeled as undesirable.

These amendments have effectively transformed the “undesirable organization” designation into a sweeping instrument to silence opposition and criminalize international affiliations. As a result, freedom of expression in Russia has been severely curtailed. While the early years of the war primarily saw repression directed at domestic activists and independent journalists, recent legal changes have granted the Federal Security Service (FSB) expanded authority. Under the new framework, collaboration with human rights investigators, international tribunals, or even foreign diplomats can now be construed as cooperation with an “undesirable organization.” This development significantly undermines efforts to document war crimes and crimes against humanity from within Russia.

The 2022 War Censorship Law: an added layer of repression

[In March 2022](#), Russia enacted yet another law criminalizing anti-war protests and criticism of their invasion of Ukraine, along with criticism of Russian armed forces as they continue their invasion. Under this new legislation, individuals participating in anti-war activities, “discrediting” the Russian army (Article 280.3 of Russia’s Criminal Code) or disseminating “unreliable” information about the Russian state activities (Article 207.3) may face up to 15 years of imprisonment and hefty fines. Additional amendments introduced in March 2023 extended the reach of the law to all participants in Russia’s war in Ukraine, de facto targeting soldiers and bloggers commenting on the war and its shortcomings. The new legislation forced most media to stop covering the war itself or for mobilized soldiers to offer a genuine assessment of the war. Although mostly geared toward direct opposition to the war, the changes in the Russian criminal code also offered a new pathway to target human rights activists across Russia under the pretext of the discreditation of the Russian Army and the Russian state.

The crackdown extends from social media activities to conventional political protests against the war or mobilization efforts. Over 20,000 individuals have already been arrested in Russia, subjected to unfair trials, and deprived of due process. [Amnesty International](#) classifies many of these individuals as prisoners of conscience, punished for solely exercising their freedom of expression. It forced journalists to flee abroad to continue their coverage of the war.

Since 2023, the Kremlin has also increasingly used [anti-terrorist](#) and anti-extremist laws to further crush dissent in Russia. Protesters and political activists are targeted under the false pretense of protecting national security, particularly activists opposing the federal partial mobilization. Combined with increasing citizens’ [denunciations](#) targeting anti-war sentiments and alternative political views, Russia’s civil society is being crushed to such a level where it could take a decade to recover from Russia’s war in Ukraine.

The Gap between Activists in Exile and Civil Society in Russia

As the space for political activism and investigative journalism in Russia becomes almost nonexistent, many journalists and activists have gone into exile and continued their activities abroad. Their coverage of the war, the violation of human rights in Ukraine and Russia, and the Kremlin's repressive machine have remained alive through exile networks and their collaboration with domestic actors. However, the Kremlin has increasingly used the Foreign Agent Law combined with articles 207.3 and 280.3 of the Criminal Code to also target activists outside of Russia engaging in transnational repression, branding many of them as foreign agents and undesirable organizations. Their activities have put their family members and relatives at risk as the Kremlin extended its repressive actions based on collective responsibility. Family members are regularly branded as foreign agents in an attempt to further silence activists.

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At the same time, nationalist groups like the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and coalition movements like the Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum or the Civic Council have intensified their diplomatic and political efforts, seeking greater engagement with Western governments and policy circles. Some of those groups put forward political programs that advocate for the dissolution of Russia and openly challenge the Kremlin's authority. When labelled as undesirable organizations and foreign agents, exiles wear such targeting as a badge of honour underlying the success of their political agenda. They bear almost no cost for their political activities, feeding into a cycle of maximalist demands to increase their political capital in the West and band together with the Ukrainian fight against Russia and its repressive and imperial agenda.

At the other end of the spectrum, grassroots activists in Russia face an increasingly dire situation, as the Foreign Agent Law has severed their connections to Western policy circles and funding, while the activities of political exiles further intensify state scrutiny and repression against them. They are viewed by the Kremlin as aligned with exile movements and branded as a fifth column working against the state. Within this narrative, Moscow exploits the notion of foreign influence as a pretext to escalate repression, framing genuine political activism as a product of external meddling. By doing so, Moscow has succeeded in amalgamating a series of different actors in what it has branded as foreign agents using political activists' rhetoric in the West to crackdown heavily on grassroots activists, human rights workers, and investigative journalists.

In the context of peace negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv, the influence of political exiles within Western policy circles and the funding of independent media activities in Russia—particularly by the United States—may wane to ease pressure on Moscow. However, the Kremlin's narrative will remain unchallenged, leaving local activists in an increasingly precarious position. While exiles' calls for Russia's disintegration may be dismissed in the West, Moscow will continue to treat them as a serious threat, using them to justify its repressive policies at home against any forms of political activism.

Repressive Legacies: Will Moscow Dismantle Its Wartime Toolkit?

Preliminary talks between Russia and the United States have marginalized Ukraine, prioritizing geopolitical interests over a genuine resolution to the conflict. With [Russia](#) in a stronger bargaining position, aiming to retain occupied territories and negotiate a partial lifting of sanctions, Ukraine is being pushed into unfavorable negotiations.

The U.S. administration has also pressured Ukraine to grant access to its natural resources, including rare earth minerals, in exchange for security [aid](#). This arrangement could have placed a heavier burden on Ukraine than the reparations imposed on Germany after World War I under the Treaty of Versailles. Such an unprecedented approach—monetizing past military aid and shifting the financial burden of security onto the non-aggressor—raises serious concerns about the peace process and the future of European security.

In this context, human rights and Russia's repressive domestic environment remain entirely absent from the negotiating table. Notably, there is more discussion about the need for wartime elections in Ukraine than about reforming Russia's internal repressive apparatus. Furthermore, even human rights violations in Ukraine and transitional justice including war crimes, crime against humanity, and genocidal actions appear to have been evacuated from the negotiations between the USA and Russia.

As a result, broader human rights concerns risk becoming collateral damage in the urgency to end the war. Western negotiators, seemingly willing to compromise on international law, including the prohibition of aggressive war and illegal territorial acquisition, risk legitimizing these violations and undermining the global legal order. While the United States appears willing to negotiate with Moscow without prioritizing human rights, European countries and Canada still have an opportunity to push for transitional justice and human rights protections as part of any broader normalization with Russia.

The Future of Human Rights in Eurasia

While historical precedents show that human rights are often sacrificed for geopolitical imperatives, it is crucial to assess the long-term regional impact of such decisions. If the war between Russia and Ukraine is resolved without addressing Russia's dire human rights situation, it will set a dangerous precedent that reshapes the political landscape across Eurasia. Russia's repressive tools—such as its Foreign Agent Law—will remain intact after the war and could serve as a model for like-minded states seeking to suppress civil society. Ongoing debates in [Georgia](#) and Central Asia highlight the urgency of confronting human rights violations in Russia to prevent the spread of these authoritarian tactics to neighboring countries.

Russia's repressive blueprint has already influenced authoritarian regimes looking to balance relationships with the West while escalating crackdowns on democratic and human rights groups. Despite warnings from human rights organizations and international courts about Russia's restrictive laws and their amendments, Western diplomats and policymakers have failed to address these issues in the context of the war in Ukraine. Instead, they have tacitly condoned Moscow's illegal actions by agreeing to [prisoner exchanges](#) that free spies, operatives, and political assassins in return for Russian human rights activists, Western citizens, and journalists. As non-democratic states in Eurasia observe how the Kremlin has

tightened its grip while maintaining political leverage over the West with minimal consequences, some may be tempted to follow suit, particularly by adopting Russia's repressive legal framework.

The Kremlin's new repressive laws and the potential collapse of Russia's civil society will severely limit domestic investigations into international crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine. The lack of funding and cooperation between investigative journalists, Western institutions, and human rights organizations will further hamper the ability to conduct in-depth, Russia-based investigations. As a result, efforts to support the prosecution of international criminals before the International Criminal Court and other tribunals will face significant obstacles.