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## Restriction on protests and opposition's activities during the 2024 elections in Russia

ENGLISH

*Input to the report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association on «Super election» year and its global impact on the protection of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association and for ensuring effective and inclusive public participation, provided by OVD-Info.*

**31 January 2025**

### INTRODUCTION

**OVD-Info** monitors political persecution in Russia and provides legal assistance to victims of such persecution. OVD-Info was founded during the mass protests of December 2011 as a volunteer initiative to publicise information on arrests of protesters. Today, OVD-Info operates a 24-hour federal hotline to collect information

on all forms of political persecution and coordinate legal and other assistance for its victims. It also provides legal education to activists, researches political persecution in Russia, conducts advocacy and strategic litigation campaigns.

This input is prepared by the independent human rights group OVD-Info for the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. It highlights the situation in Russia during the «super election year». In 2024, Russia experienced two major electoral events. First, the presidential elections took place from 15 to 17 March 2024. Second, on the so-called «Single Voting Day» on 8 September 2024, various elections were held, including by-elections to the State Duma, elections for the heads of 25 constituent subjects of the Federation, legislative elections in 13 regions, and numerous municipal-level elections.

## **1. KEY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION**

*What have been the key trends, challenges and restrictions related to the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association which you have experienced/monitored in the context of the general elections in your country in the period 2023-2025 (before, during and after the elections) — taking into account the intersectional implications (with regards to the rights to people belonging to minorities, marginalised groups, and concerning sexual and gender diversity)?*

In 2023–2024, the government pursued a policy of suppressing freedom of association early in the electoral process, effectively preventing civil society representatives from both running as candidates and monitoring elections. Authorities impose absurdly harsh requirements for

candidate nomination. Under Russian **law**, independent candidates must be nominated by at least 500 supporters and also collect 300,000 signatures, with no more than 7,500 signatures allowed from any single Russian region. Signature sheets must meet strict formal **requirements**, and the collection period lasts just over a month. Refusals are typically based on technicalities.

In November 2023, Yekaterina Duntsova, a journalist and local politician from Tver Region, announced her 2024 presidential bid as an independent candidate. Opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine was a key point of her campaign. The assembly of her initiative group was significant for Russian civil society. However, in December, the Central Election Commission **rejected** her nomination documents, citing errors in the paperwork, including spelling mistakes.

Later in December, Boris Nadezhdin, a former member of the State Duma, became the first 2024 presidential candidate backed by a registered political party. He also employed anti-war rhetoric. After Duntsova's registration was denied, he became the main opposition candidate. When the signature collection process began, people queued for hours to sign in support of his candidacy, both in Russia and abroad. However, the election commission also **rejected** his bid citing «invalid» signatures.

On 14 January 2024, Yekaterina Duntsova announced the creation of the political party *Rassvet* («The Dawn»). On 18 January 2024, the initiative group notified the Ministry of Justice of their intention to establish the party and submitted all the necessary documents for registration. However, shortly after the party's organizing committee meeting, the police arrested Ms. Duntsova and took her to a substance abuse institution for a drug test. She was later released without any charges. In November 2024, the Ministry of Justice **denied** her party's registration.

Since Vladimir Putin ran as an independent in 2024, he was also required to collect at least 300,000 signatures from Russian citizens to be included on the ballot. Putin's campaign headquarters **claimed** 500,000 signatures in just one week. Yet no large queues were observed at signature collection points, despite the extremely short timeframe and the extraordinary number of reported signatures. State administrative resources were **used** to facilitate this process. The electoral commission **identified** only a few dozen minor mistakes out of the 300,000 signatures, indicating a remarkably lenient review process by the electoral commission compared to that of opposition candidates.

In March 2024, on voting days, some citizens were unable to exercise their rights to vote, peaceful assembly and expression, due to preventive actions by the police. Several people were **detained** at home, on their way out, and as they approached the polling station. These actions have a chilling effect, particularly on those opposing the incumbent president.

## **a. Restrictions on Political Freedoms: Examples of Measures Affecting Opposition and Dissent During Elections**

*Please provide some concrete examples of measures or actions which you observed/experienced that have directly aimed at, or indirectly restricted the exercise of these rights during the general elections in this period, especially with relation to opposition parties/candidates, political and election rallies, those expressing dissent, voicing concerns about electoral irregularities, or promoting human rights and inclusivity?*

Over the years, Russian authorities have systematically blocked independent candidates from elections and intensified restrictions on independent observers, while curtailing freedom of assembly and expression during

elections. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has repeatedly **expressed concern** about such violations, but these have been ignored. In 2024, OSCE observers were **not invited** at all.

Russian observers face increasing pressure from the authorities. Russian legislation allows authorities to label people and organisations as «foreign agents», a stigmatising and discriminatory status. «Foreign agents» are barred from any election-related activities and face large fines and criminal prosecution for failing to comply with extensive and burdensome requirements. Federal law adopted on 6 May 2024, three months before the «Single Voting Day», **prohibited** individuals with «foreign agent» status from running in any elections. Additionally, incumbent elected officials lose their positions if they fail to have their «foreign agent» designation revoked within 180 days. The grounds for receiving a «foreign agent» designation are extremely broad, and the status is assigned through an executive body's decision without court oversight. Reasons for designation included criticism of the government's policies. Judicial appeals have proven ineffective.

The Golos («Voice» or «Vote») Association is one of Russia's most prominent election observer groups and a founding member of the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO). Authorities designated Golos as a «foreign agent» in 2014, fined it repeatedly and forcibly liquidated it in 2016. Golos continued to operate as an unregistered organisation. Entities established by its former members faced similar measures.

In total, 10 legal entities and 21 individuals associated with the election observer community were added to the «foreign agents» register. Three Golos coordinators are facing **criminal prosecution** because of their status. For example, on 7 February 2023, the first criminal case under article 330.1 of the Criminal Code was opened in Tver against Artem

Vazhenkov, a former Golos coordinator, for repeated evasion of his duties as a «foreign agent». He was arrested in absentia. In January and June 2022, the activist was fined twice under [article 19.34](#) of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation (violation of «foreign agent» obligations).

Another law empowered the prosecutor's office to arbitrarily label foreign organisations as «undesirable», outlawing them in Russia under threat of administrative and criminal prosecution for any cooperation with them. In 2021, Russian authorities declared ENEMO an «undesirable organization».

On 17 August 2023, shortly before the federal and local elections held on the same day, and ahead of the 2024 presidential campaign, Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of Golos, was arrested. He was charged with «organising the activities of an undesirable organisation» (part 3 of article 284.1 of the Criminal Code) for Golos' alleged connection to ENEMO — despite Golos severing ties after ENEMO was designated «undesirable». If found guilty, Mr. Melkonyants [would face](#) up to six years' imprisonment.

In January 2024, Net Freedoms reported that another criminal case under article 330.1 of the Criminal Code was brought against Vladimir Zhilinsky, a former Golos coordinator in Pskov. On 30 January 2025, a court in Kemerovo [sentenced](#) former Golos coordinator Sergei Piskunov to four years and one month of imprisonment, including under article 330.1 of the Criminal Code for a repeated failure to label his online posts with a «foreign agent» disclaimer.

Russian authorities use «foreign agent» and «undesirable organisation» designations and other tools to restrict access to independent media that critically cover issues of public interest and thus considered to be in opposition to the current regime. Many individuals and legal entities labelled «foreign agents» are connected to the media (59). There

is now a well-established practice of designating journalists working in media (which, in turn, are often already designated «foreign agents» or «undesirable») as «foreign agents» in their personal capacity, further limiting the exposure of their social media pages to the Russian audience.

Print media are completely inaccessible to the opposition — critical outlets with print editions have been banned in Russia (for example, Novaya Gazeta, previously published in print, has been liquidated by court order in 2022). Meanwhile, Russian authorities block the websites of independent media outlets, especially those labelled as a «foreign agent» or an «undesirable» organisation.

According to **research** by RKS Global and the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), at least 279 websites of media outlets are blocked in Russia. Additionally, the status of «foreign agent» or «undesirable organisation» discourages many authors and sources from cooperating with these outlets, which limits their ability to cover events in Russia. Independent media outlets struggle with access to information and adapting to a rapidly changing digital environment.

During the elections, these media outlets covered issues of public interest. Moreover, previously during mass protest, independent media, such as Meduza and TV Rain (now blocked in Russia and labelled «undesirable») would **broadcast** these **protests** live, which would help coordinate the participants and inform them about potential points of emergence of violence. The blocking of these websites makes it harder for protestors to organise and share their opinions, and has long-term consequences for freedom of assembly in Russia.

## **b. Unequal Treatment: Comparing Restrictions on Opposition vs. Pro-Government Election Rallies**

*In comparison with election rallies organized by or in support of the ruling political party in the same period — how do you assess these restrictions? Please provide concrete examples of comparison.*

The death of jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny a few weeks before the elections further intensified civil society's interest in them. Long subjected to extremely harsh conditions in prison and prolonged detention in punishment cells, in one of his final messages before his sudden death, he urged supporters to go to the polling stations on 17 March 2024 at noon. In response, the Moscow Prosecutor's Office **stated** that potential queues at noon could be considered an obstruction of the work of election commissions, punishable under article 141 of the Criminal Code.

According to OVD-Info, police **arrested** 135 people over three days of the elections. Among them were at least five women with children under the age of 14, four journalists, three election commission members and three independent observers. Police beat at least one detainee, took away six people's phones, and detained ten people in police stations overnight. While many detainees were eventually released without charges, some were **sentenced** to fines between 2,000 (US\$22) and 30,000 (\$325) rubles, and two people to short-term detention over protesting the election.

Moreover, although the threat of COVID-19 has long subsided, authorities still use the previously imposed blanket restrictions to prevent opposition assemblies while no other restrictions remain. In February 2024, Moscow authorities **denied** opposition presidential candidate Yekaterina Duntsova permission to hold a rally in memory of Alexei Navalny and Boris Nemtsov, citing COVID restrictions. Meanwhile, on 18 March 2024, immediately after president Putin's victory, a large concert rally **took place**, featuring a personal appearance by Putin and government-approved candidates, without any COVID restrictions.

## 2. PUBLIC AND CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION POLICY: MECHANISMS, EFFECTIVENESS, AND IMPACT

*What measures for public and CSOs collaboration and participation in decision-making and policies development exist in your country, including with regards to devising or implementing election-related law and policies? If so, how effective these have been? Please provide some key examples.*

*— If these mechanisms have not been effective, why not?*

*— How do you think the existence or absence of such participatory mechanisms relate to any electoral violence your country may have experienced? Please provide examples.*

Election monitoring at various levels, until recently, has been the only remaining mechanism for civic participation in the electoral process or policy. However, by 2024, the powers of election observers had been severely restricted, preventing them from being effective. Only political parties, candidates and civic chambers — not independent NGOs — can appoint election observers. «Foreign agents» and foreign citizens are barred from any activities «that contribute to or hinder the preparation and conduct of elections», nomination, registration and elections and other forms of participation in election campaigns. Therefore «foreign agents» are not even allowed to observe elections. A separate provision bars «foreign agents» from serving on election commissions and contributing to election funds. The prohibition **applies** to legal entities established by «foreign agents».

In the 2012 presidential election, 91% of Russian polling stations were equipped with video cameras, providing open access to anyone who wished to observe the process. Despite the generally limited opportunities provided by such

monitoring, activists were still able to record some of the most egregious **violations**. In recent years, authorities refused to provide public access to video recordings; and **observation** is now only possible in person. Moreover, in-person recording is now only allowed from a designated spot determined by the chairperson of the election commission.

Finally, the government is actively promoting electronic voting, which, by its very nature, makes election monitoring practically **impossible**.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Ensure that regulation of assemblies is non-discriminatory and allows for organising political rallies without undue restrictions. States should allow the opposition and opposition parties to have access to public spaces for campaigning, and refrain from persecuting peaceful protesters;
- Ensure public access to websites and social media accounts of independent media and opposition;
- Guarantee unhindered access of independent election observers and civil society organisations to the polling stations. Ensure that election monitors have access to independent and effective complaint mechanisms in case of violations. Ensure the protection of election observers from potential violence;
- Prevent reprisals for running in the elections and for other forms of electoral participation;
- Take measures that would allow civil society organisations in the area of election monitoring to receive adequate funding. Repeal the laws on «foreign agents» that reduce access of CSOs to resources and funding, including through foreign grants.

## More to read

16.04.2026 [Moscow](#)

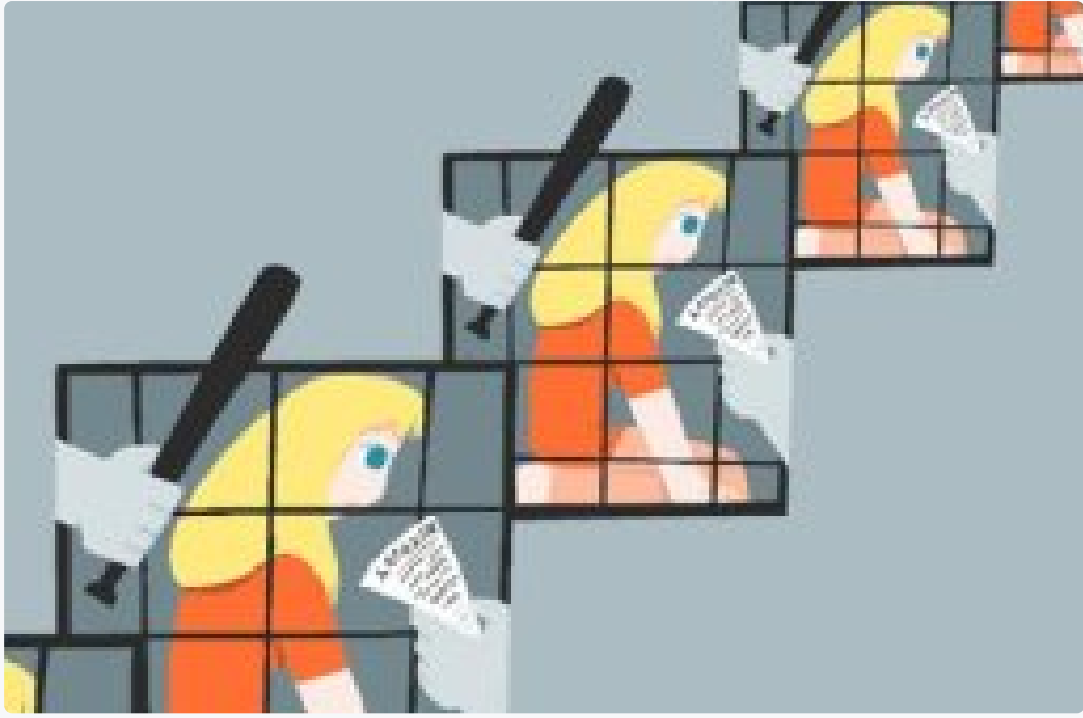
A protocol has been drawn up against OVD-Info's press secretary for participation in an "undesirable organisation."

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