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Corporations and Solidarity: How Civil Society Mobilises Against Corporate Abuses

ENGLISH ▼

Input for the report on Corporations and International Solidarity submitted to UN Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity by OVD-Info

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1. CORPORATE SOLIDARITY WITH REPRESSION

Corporations often comply with Russian authorities' demands to remove the content of independent media and organisations, contributing to disproportionate restrictions on the right to freedom of expression. At the same time, corporations often fail to engage in dialogue with Russian civil

society, provide no reasoning explaining the necessity of their actions, and remain largely unaccountable.

In August 2023, Apple removed the podcasts of independent media outlets *Holod* and *Meduza* from the App Store in Russia following a request from Roskomnadzor, Russia's communications agency. Roskomnadzor's **explanation** was that the content violated the "rules of information dissemination". Two days later, it reinstated the podcasts.

In March 2024, Apple removed the *Photon-2024* ("Фотон-2024") app developed by the team of late opposition leader Alexei Navalny from the App Store. The app served as a randomiser to select candidates for the Russian presidential elections. Photon-2024 was a part of the Smart Voting strategy put forward by Alexei Navalny's team to mobilise and channel protest votes in Russian elections. The corporations and Russian authorities have repeatedly blocked information about Smart Voting. For example, Apple and Google removed another app named *Navalny* ("Навальный") in September 2021. Apple **took down** the app based on Roskomnadzor's claim that it violated the Law on Information.

In September 2024, Apple Music **blocked** the song *This Will Pass* ("Это пройдет") by *Pornofilmy* for Russian users. A year earlier, the Russian Ministry of Justice added the song to the list of extremist materials.

In October 2024, Apple **removed** the apps of media outlets *Current Time* and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* from the App Store. Russian authorities designated RFE/RL an "undesirable" organisation. Additionally, Russian users **lost access** to some podcasts, including *What Was That?* ("Что это было?") by the BBC Russian Service and podcasts by Russian independent media, *Echo of Moscow* and *The Insider*.

In May 2025, a prominent Russian digital rights group, Roskomsvoboda, **reported** that eight tracks by musicians *Noize MC* and *Monetochka* disappeared from Apple Music in Russia. Among the removed tracks were *Land of Rain* (“Страна дождей”), *Not Everyone Is at Home* (“Не все дома”), *Cooperative “Swan Lake”* (“Кооператив ‘Лебединое озеро’”), and *Cryochambers* (“Криокамеры”), most of which had been previously banned by Roskomnadzor.

Due to censorship in Russia, VPNs and native apps have become crucial for Russians to access independent information, allowing them to bypass blockings. In July 2023, the Russian parliament **adopted** a law prohibiting the sharing of information on how to access banned information, including VPN services. Corporations, following Russian law, started to remove VPN services or information about them from marketplaces and platforms.

In July 2024, Apple **removed** 25 VPN services from the Russian App Store, including *Red Shield VPN*, *Le VPN*, *Proton VPN* and *NordVPN*. Apple said in the notification it sent to Red Shield VPN that the app was removed at the request of Roskomnadzor because it contained content prohibited in Russia. Anton Gorelkin, deputy head of the State Duma’s Information Policy Committee, **approved** of Apple’s actions, adding that it is “one of the few US companies that seek to comply with Russian law and maintain a dialogue with the regulator”.

The App Censorship Project **reported** the removal of nearly 60 VPN apps from the Russian App Store between July and September 2024. It said that “Apple continues to remove VPN apps from the Russia App Store without public acknowledgement, affecting more than 20% of identified VPN apps”.

Mozilla was also found **removing** the VPN and proxy-server technology, which helps circumvent Russian censorship. Mozilla attributed this to the requirements of Roskomnadzor

and the potential risk to its community and staff. After public scrutiny, however, it restored access to them.

Google is another example of a corporation complying with Russian authorities' demands to remove content. In 2023, Google **complied** with 54% of content removal requests from Russian authorities, primarily Roskomnadzor. However, the proportion of politically sensitive content among these requests remains unclear. 41% of the requests were motivated by national security issues.

In May 2024, YouTube (owned by Google) **blocked** videos about draft evasion in Russia. These videos, posted by *Conscript's School* ("Школа призывника"), *Watch in Volgograd* ("Дозор в Волгограде"), and another independent regional outlet, were removed following accusations of violating the Law on Information.

That same month, YouTube **sent** notices of potential blockings to human rights groups OVD-Info and Roskomsvoboda, and independent journalists Ekaterina Kotrikadze and Tikhon Dzyadko. In its notice to OVD-Info, YouTube stated that the *How Now?* ("Как теперь?") channel violates the Law on Information and warned that if the content is not removed by the user, Google "may be required to block it". YouTube did not specify how such a blocking decision could be appealed, nor provided information about available grievance mechanisms. However, following an international advocacy campaign, which we describe in section "Mechanisms for Engagement with Corporations", the blockings were not executed.

New cases of potential blockings have come to light in the same year. In August 2024, YouTube, citing a request from Roskomnadzor, **demanding** the removal of "Ingria Without Borders", a channel about Ingermanland (a historical region in northwestern Russia). Russian authorities claim that the resource contains "calls to carry out extremist activities". On 11 June 2025, Roskomnadzor **requested** YouTube

to remove the video of the independent media *DOXA*, claiming that the outlet “promotes sex change”. Nothing is yet known about YouTube’s reaction to that request.

In this way, corporations are contributing to human rights abuses. They consider compliance with Russian laws as sufficient grounds to fulfil authorities’ requests without providing independent justifications or motivations. The companies also neglect to offer information on how such decisions can be appealed, and in many cases, there is no communication with the affected parties.

2. NON-COOPERATION WITH CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Corporations stop engaging with CSOs if these CSOs have a “toxic” legal status. One example of such status is the “foreign agent” one. Introduced into Russian legislation in 2012, this stigmatising and burdensome designation has been used to target government critics, political opponents, independent media and rights groups.

Restrictions associated with such a status have been expanding over the years. Under threat of a 500,000-rouble fine (\$6400), it is **forbidden** to place advertisements in media resources of “foreign agents” and to advertise their projects. December 2024 law **mandated** freezing income or compensation received by “foreign agents” from intellectual activities, real estate, vehicles, interest on deposits, and other types of income. The “foreign agent” can only access these funds after their “foreign agent” status is terminated. Media outlets distributing materials of «foreign agents» must indicate their status. The law also prohibits, under threat of fines, any assistance to foreign agents in circumventing the law. Foreign agent legislation is constantly changing, and its law enforcement practice has been shown to be arbitrary, discriminatory and unpredictable.

As a result, companies are discouraged from engaging with “foreign agents”, driven by fear of potential risks even in the absence of explicit legal prohibitions.

On 26 May 2025, Nasiliu.net, an organisation working on domestic violence in Russia, including support to survivors, **reported** problems with receiving messages from victims via Wahelp. Within a week, **Nasiliu.net reported** that its telecom operator also abruptly terminated service, effectively inactivating the SOS button in its app — a key emergency tool for domestic violence survivors. Without these services, communication between survivors and the organisation was severely hindered.

Additionally, the organisation started experiencing **difficulties** receiving donations, particularly recurring monthly contributions that are essential for long-term planning. As a result, on 17 June 2025, the organisation **announced** that it had to suspend some of its key programs, scale back its support services and lay off staff.

The organisation linked these disruptions to its designation as a “foreign agent” in December 2020: the telecom operator explicitly cited the status when terminating its cooperation with the organisation.

Financial platforms are also suspending operations for individuals labelled as “foreign agents” in Russia, limiting their ability to engage in public and human rights work and threatening their access to essential services. As of April 2025, the monetisation platform Boosty, which allows creators to stay connected with patrons and receive donations from abroad, had blocked at least 26 out of 53 “foreign agents”. According to investigative media outlet *Verstka*, those affected **included** the accounts of journalists Tatyana Felgengauer, Maria Borzunova, Alexander Shmurnov, Yulia Latynina, TV host and comedian Mikhail Shats, activist Darya Heikinen, and film critic Anton Dolin. The independent media *Astra* **reported** that its account on the platform had

also been blocked. According to Boosty, “foreign agents” are no longer allowed to offer exclusive content to their sponsors — effectively silencing them and cutting off a key source of financial support, with direct consequences for freedom of expression.

Those included in the Rosfinmonitoring list of terrorists and extremists also face problems engaging with corporations. Persecution under any of the terrorist or extremist articles, including any charge aggravated by a motive of political, ideological hatred or hatred against a social group, serves as a ground for inclusion on the list. Given the systemic misuse of extremist and terrorist legislation, this leads to the listing of people persecuted for legitimate use of the right to freedom of expression, such as for criticising the government or the war in Ukraine. The consequences of inclusion on the list are often referred to as “civil death” due to the severity of the restrictions imposed. People on the register are only allowed to receive and spend wage income, currently up to 10,000 rubles (\$100) per family member. It also leads to freezing of all assets, including real estate and property, and restrictions on travel abroad. Additionally, the stigmatisation of those listed makes employment virtually impossible for them.

On 16 June 2025, Revolut bank **blocked** the accounts of Alexei Navalny’s colleagues, Ruslan Shaveddinov, Dmitry Nizovtsev and Nina Volokhonskaya. Revolut also blocked the account of activist Konstantin Kotov, who fled Russia amid a criminal case related to financing ACF (the Anti-Corruption Foundation), an organisation launched by Alexei Navalny to investigate corruption in Russia. After a while, the bank **restored access** to the accounts and apologised, noted Ruslan Shaveddinov.

International experts have already developed a large body of international assessments of repressive Russian legislation, including laws on “foreign agents” and extremism

legislation. International human rights bodies such as the Human Rights Committee (CCPR/C/RUS/CO/8), the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/RES/51/25), the UN Special Procedures (A/HRC/57/59), [the ECtHR](#), the Venice Commission (CDL (2016)025), and [the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights](#) universally condemned and called on the Russian authorities to repeal or amend them. According to Principle 13(a) of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (HR/PUB/11/04), business enterprises should avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through their own activities, and address such impacts when they occur. Therefore, the corporations should have avoided complying with the Russian legislative requirements.

3. MECHANISMS FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH CORPORATIONS

No specific mechanisms are available for Russian CSOs to present solidarity complaints to corporations. In their absence, civil society organisations are looking for any options to solidarise around issues of human rights violations. Prominent among them are petition platforms.

In December 2021, OVD-Info [initiated a petition](#) on Change.org addressed to Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, messenger app Telegram, Russian social media platform VK, and Russian search and tech giant Yandex, urging them not to become tools of censorship and to refrain from blocking the accounts of public organisations. This was prompted by the growing pressure on OVD-Info from Russian authorities. In 2021, Russian authorities designated OVD-Info as a “foreign agent”. Roskomnadzor [ordered](#) telecommunications providers and social media platforms to block its website and social media accounts for alleged propaganda of terrorism and extremism based on the decision of the Lukhovitsky District Court of the Moscow

Region dated 20 December 2021. Since publicising information about human rights violations and rights education in Russia is one of OVD-Info's core activities, blocking its media resources is almost equivalent to its forced liquidation. The petition has garnered more than 71,000 signatures. However, it has had no discernible impact on corporations.

In general, petition platforms have significant disadvantages. Signatures cannot be verified; a petition can be overlooked among many other petitions on the platform. Lastly, it is impossible to guarantee that the message reaches the intended recipient.

On 28 May 2024, Russian independent media and human rights organisations sent an [open letter](#) to Google, protesting YouTube's removal of independently produced content. YouTube had blocked several videos about evasion of military service and issued notices of channel blockings to independent journalists and several organisations, which we have outlined in the section "Corporate Solidarity with Repression". Following the public campaign, some of the videos were unblocked, but they were "unlisted", that is, inaccessible through the platform's search function.

Another example of solidarity campaigns is an [open letter](#) to Apple by a coalition of 28 CSOs and 16 individuals, urging it to stop deleting VPN services at the request of Russian authorities and restore the blocked ones, as well as to assess the validity of the blocking in the light of international human rights standards.

Apple, in response to an inquiry by Human Rights Watch, [justified](#) its actions by the need to comply with local laws in order to continue operating in Russia. It denied actively removing VPN apps: "Failure to comply with lawful orders could mean that Apple would no longer be able to operate an App Store or distribute content in the country. The United States government has encouraged companies to continue

to make communications services available to the Russian people because democratic principles are best aided through the availability of these services”.

In addition, the Anti-Corruption Foundation (AFC) has appealed to the Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG) of Norway, one of Apple’s largest investors. Anti-Corruption activists **asked** the GPFG to influence company policy and raise the issue at the annual shareholder meeting. Subsequent communication and decisions of the Fund were not further reported.

Due to their reliance on public support and substantial resources, such solidarity campaigns may be unsuitable for local issues and smaller organisations. Another communication option is direct and non-public appeals. However, the practice demonstrates that even in cases of direct appeals, companies often fail to communicate with CSOs.

OVD-Info appealed to Google after being notified that its YouTube channel was marked for blocking. However, OVD-Info did not receive any substantive response from the corporation, remaining in suspense as to whether the channel would be removed or not.

Corporations severely impact human rights in Russia, often acting in response to state demands, repressive Russian laws, or overcomplying with authorities’ requests due to arbitrary and unpredictable laws. This lack of solidarity from corporations had a profound impact on Russian civil society. Their actions resulted in the blocking of resources of independent media, journalists, opposition figures, human rights organisations, and tools for bypassing censorship, accessing and sharing independent information.

By doing so, these companies fail to engage constructively with civil society. They often provide little to no justification for their actions, offer limited opportunities to influence their

decisions, are not transparent regarding grievance mechanisms, and in some cases, avoid communication with CSOs altogether.

While public attention can sometimes prompt corporations to reverse their decisions or issue apologies, in certain cases, influencing corporate policies requires large-scale campaigns that demand significant resources and the collaboration of multiple participants, with no guarantee of success. Even after such campaigns, corporations may remain unaccountable for their human rights impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CORPORATIONS:

- 1 Refuse to comply with authorities' requests when they clearly violate human rights;**
- 2 Implement effective human rights due diligence, including analysis of repressive legislation, especially if operating in countries with high risks of human rights impact;**
- 3 Develop platforms for presenting complaints from civil society organisations and individuals;**
- 4 Ensure transparency in all their actions affecting human rights;**
- 5 Communicate decisions and actions to users whose rights are directly affected;**
- 6 Provide substantiated explanations for the decisions impacting human rights, including when a corporation's risks are at stake;**
- 7 Take an active role in engaging with CSOs at all stages of their operation;**
- 8 Provide meaningful support to civil society in combating human rights abuses.**