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Russia Opens Record Number of Treason Cases in 2023 – Holod

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Andrei Lyubimov / Moskva News Agency

Russia is on track to open more criminal cases for treason in 2023 than over the past 20 years combined, Russia's independent news website Kholod reported Monday.

Authorities launched 82 treason investigations between January and July — a fourfold increase from the 20 cases investigated in all of 2022 — Kholod said, citing publicly available media reports.

The actual number of ongoing treason cases is much larger given that some investigations are not made public, according to Russia's Perviy Otdel human rights project, which specializes in cases under investigation by the Federal Security Service (FSB).

"The FSB has picked up its pace [in 2023] — we get 20 criminal cases a month on average," Perviy Otdel attorney Yevgeny Smirnov told Kholod. "This means one [treason] case is initiated every work day."

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"At this rate, there will have about 250 [treason cases] by the end of December, one for every work day per year," Smirnov said.

For comparison, Russian authorities launched 101 treason cases over the 20-year period between 1997-2017, Kholod writes, citing a 2018 report by the now-disbanded legal group Team 29.

Kholod's analysis of the existing 82 treason cases says 59 of the defendants are accused of acting in the interests of Ukraine, followed by three accused of working for China, two for the United States and one each for the United Kingdom and Germany.

At the same time, Perviy Otdel says defendants in treason cases are increasingly subjected to torture.

"They tortured the young, the old and the sick. We even have information on the torture of witnesses," Smirnov told Kholod.

The geography of treason cases has also expanded, Kholod reports. For 2023, its analysis lists 17 investigations launched in Moscow — which previously accounted for 90% of all such cases — 51 in 28 other regions, as well as 11 in annexed Crimea and Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories.

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Treason and espionage cases are held behind closed doors in Russia as they deal with what authorities consider classified information.

Espionage charges carry a maximum prison sentence of 20 years. Amendments that President Vladimir Putin signed into law in April increased the maximum penalty for "high treason" from 20 years to life imprisonment.

UN experts on human rights and freedom of expression last month voiced alarm over the growing number of treason and espionage arrests in Russia since it invaded Ukraine in early 2022.

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