

Russia's Civil Society in 2023: Beleaguered But Not Beaten

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A member of the National Guard (Rosgvardiya) on Manezhnaya Ploshchad in Moscow. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

As the year draws to a close, Russia's motley landscape of civil rights defenders, election monitors, environmental campaigners, anti-war activists and others is more beleaguered than ever before.

Confronted with the increasingly oppressive machinery of the Russian state, scores of activists and the organizations to which they belong have gone into survival mode, with many forced into exile abroad, where they strive to continue their work.

The first year of Russia's invasion saw an explosion of new activist organizations and civic campaigns, from the Feminist Anti-War Resistance movement and the emigre support network Kovcheg to myriad decolonial initiatives and projects created to help Russian men evade military service.

For much of Russian civil society — whether at home or abroad — 2023 has been a year of

continuous adaptation, developing new ways to persist despite the Kremlin's relentless efforts to stamp them out completely.

Down but not out

Amid unprecedented political persecution following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, most independent activist organizations were forced out of Russia last year. A few have managed to sustain operations within the country. However, 2023 revealed more than ever the heightened level of intolerance from Russian authorities toward dissenting voices — even those once considered allies. It is increasingly difficult for organizations to carry out their work while being targeted by the authorities.

Take, for example, Transparency International's Russian branch, which earlier this year was [forced to dissolve](#) after being blacklisted by the Russian government. In October, the anti-corruption organization [relaunched](#) from abroad, vowing to “bring about civil engagement against corruption in Russia and uphold the principles of transparency, accountability, integrity and honesty.”

Agents, agents everywhere

First introduced in 2012 to crack down on NGOs receiving support from abroad, Russia's “foreign agent” law continued to be relentlessly deployed over the past year. Not only was this very publication designated a “foreign agent” last month, but by the end of December, so too were 22 other individuals and entities — bringing the Justice Ministry's list to 740 entries overall.

Meanwhile, the number of fines and criminal charges against “foreign agents” has exploded since the summer, according to a [report](#) by Mediazona. This signals that, beyond being merely a stigmatizing label, the authorities are further leveraging this designation as grounds for criminal persecution.

Undesirables

As the Russian government expanded its list of foreign agents, it also added to the number of “undesirable” organizations it says undermine the country's security or constitutional order — a total of 55 for 2023. This designation prohibits entities from operating within Russia, putting their staff members at risk of jail time and criminalizing any engagement with them, including sharing their content online.

Notable organizations blacklisted this year included the war monitor [Conflict Intelligence Team](#), the anti-war group [For a Free Russia](#), the [EU-Russia Civil Society Forum](#) and many others. Agora, an association of lawyers providing legal advocacy to journalists, activists and other victims of rights abuses, was also [added](#) to the list in June.

The past year's string of “undesirable” designations dealt an especially hard blow to organizations committed to environmental protection. Russia's branch of Greenpeace was [banned](#) in May, while the World Wildlife Fund was [labeled](#) “undesirable” in June. Perhaps most unexpected of all was the [blacklisting](#) of the U.S.-based Wild Salmon Center, which works to safeguard wild salmon populations and their habitats. Russian authorities accused

the organization of using its work as “a cover for the implementation of projects aimed at restraining Russia's economic development.”

Anti-war protests

By the end of 2023, human rights watchdog OVD-Info had [reported](#) just under 20,000 detentions of Russians opposing the war since Putin ordered troops into Ukraine last year. New censorship laws targeting war “fakes” or anything seen as “discrediting” the Russian Armed Forces were swiftly introduced in the early days of the conflict, and they continue to be broadly employed to suppress dissent within the country.

While these measures effectively quelled the large-scale street protests that erupted immediately after Russia launched its February 2022 invasion, they have not silenced opposition entirely. Instead, dissent is taking on a subtler form, and anti-war Russians are getting more creative in expressing their disapproval.

Solo picketing, where lone protesters stand in public spaces and display coded anti-war symbols, such as eight asterisks denoting the censored phrase in Russian for “No to war,” pacifist quotes and poems, has become more common.

Others are using art to speak out against the invasion of Ukraine, like street artist Filipp Kozlov (also known as Philippenzo), who was [forced to flee](#) Russia in the fall, or Dmitry Skurikhin, a grocery store owner outside St. Petersburg who was [jailed](#) for 1.5 years in August for covering his store in anti-war messages.

Soldiers' families

New to Russia's civil society landscape is the grassroots collective Put' Domoj (Way Home). Made up mostly of wives and mothers of mobilized Russian soldiers, the group was launched in September after authorities announced that there would be no rotation for troops in Ukraine and they would return only once the war was over. Since then, Put' Domoj has demanded the return of their loved ones from the front, more than a year after Putin announced a “partial” mobilization.

In recent weeks, these relatives have [intensified their calls](#) for action, as they are now demanding Russia's leadership end the war entirely. For some, their organizing evokes the spirit of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, which campaigned for their sons' return home during the Chechen wars of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The grassroots movement of soldiers' mothers and wives is not part of the urban liberal civil society scene many associate with anti-Kremlin politics. Members of Put' Domoj are not necessarily anti-government but come from Putin's support base, meaning the Kremlin must tread carefully when dealing with them to avoid provoking backlash from a public sympathetic to soldiers' families.

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