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Could a New Bill Allow Moscow to Hunt Down Anti-War Exiles?

By Kateryna Shenheliia

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A girl at a rally against the war in Ukraine in Italy. **Edoardo Ceriani / unsplash**

A bill submitted to the Russian parliament has raised fears that the thousands of Russian dissidents seeking political refuge in post-Soviet and other non-Western states could soon be at risk of arrest and extradition back to Russia.

The bill, recently introduced to the lower-house State Duma by the ruling United Russia party, would allow prosecutors to send investigative materials to foreign states to seek the arrest of Russian citizens evading prosecution abroad.

The Kremlin has ruthlessly cracked down on all dissent since it invaded Ukraine in February 2022, with nearly 20,000 people detained for anti-war protests and at least 768 political prisoners. Many prominent anti-war Russians who fled the country have since been declared wanted or sentenced to prison in absentia.

The invasion also sparked the exodus of over half a million Russians who opposed the war, feared its economic consequences or refused to take part in the fighting.

While the Kremlin has recently sought to downplay the impact of their departures and encourage them to return, reports indicate that Moscow increasingly views all wartime emigres — not just the most vocal opposition figures — as political targets.

In July, the investigative news outlet Agentsvo reported that a provider of stolen personal data sold on the black market had compiled a list of Russians who left the country following the full-scale invasion. The database, while not confirmed as an official government document, contained personal details such as names, birthdates, reasons for leaving and destination countries.

Shortly after, the outlet IStories reported that the Russian Interior Ministry had advised Putin to create an official database of Russians who had left the country as part of a its new anti-extremism strategy, fueling concerns among emigres that they could be targeted for their decision to leave.

Sergei Smirnov, a lawyer from the Perviy Otdel human rights project, told IStories that many Russian laws aimed at suppressing dissent have no equivalents outside Russia. While individuals in Russia can face fines or imprisonment for "discrediting" the Russian army, law enforcement in both Western and non-Western countries lacks the legal framework to prosecute similar cases.

Despite its isolation from the West due to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia continues to cooperate with international policing bodies like Interpol, though primarily on serious crimes. A recent example is the arrest in Turkey of a Russian man suspected of planting a car bomb that injured a GRU intelligence officer and his wife in Moscow.

An Interpol spokesperson told The Moscow Times that the organization's constitution prohibits involvement in politically motivated arrests, and any such requests would be rejected outright. The Moscow Times contacted the British Foreign Office to ask how a Western government would respond to such requests, but it did not comment.

Western governments are unlikely to arrest Russian nationals for violating wartime censorship laws, Smirnov said. However, Moscow may try to overwhelm Western law enforcement agencies with requests they cannot fulfill or push for arrests in countries “friendly” to the Kremlin.

It remains unclear how effectively the bill will serve the Russian government’s intentions, whatever they are — whether it will be used to target Russians with baseless accusations or if it will be employed to try and extradite individuals to force them into military service.

While authorities have used coercive tactics to force men to sign military contracts, Russia has not yet launched a full-scale mobilization. Instead, recruitment centers summon individuals for “check-ups,” during which coercion and manipulation are often used to compel them to sign six-month contracts.

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This ambiguity offers solace to some emigres.

Alex, a food service manager turned crypto-trader who left Russia for Uzbekistan because of the war more than two years ago, told The Moscow Times that he does not expect much to change for himself or his emigre friends if the law is passed.

"Of my friends who left, none of them are afraid of extradition, because you still have to try hard to get a criminal case, especially when you haven't lived in Russia for about two years," said Alex.

"I am not worried about myself, because I have no reason to fear criminal prosecution. Because who needs me in Russia? Maybe at the front, but there is no criminal prosecution for evading conscription [by failing to show up for a 'check-up'] at this time," he said, declining to share his surname.

In Georgia, once seen as a refuge for Russian dissidents, Moscow's imperialist rhetoric and Georgia's domestic politics have become a serious cause of concern among Russians and locals alike. Its politicians, who increasingly invoke anti-Western sentiment, this year passed a "foreign influence" law that was seen as mimicking Russia's repressive legislation.

Zaza Bibilashvili, a Georgian lawyer and the founder of the Chavchavadze Center for European Studies and Civic Education, told The Moscow Times that Tbilisi is likely to comply with Moscow's requests for arrests, deportations or convictions.

Georgian authorities have previously extradited Russian citizens with minority backgrounds and refused entry to Russian opposition figures at what are seen as the Kremlin's requests.

"There have been cases when people have simply disappeared from Georgia and have re-appeared in prisons outside of the country, which could not have happened without the active involvement of Georgian special services," he said.

In 2017, exiled Azeri journalist Afgan Mukhtarli disappeared from Tbilisi and reappeared the next day in Azerbaijan in the custody of the country's border authorities. He claimed he had been abducted by Georgian-speaking men in civilian clothes and had been under surveillance prior to his kidnapping.

And in October 2023, Russian left-wing activist Rafail Shepelev vanished in Tbilisi and was found over a month later in a Russian detention center in North Ossetia. According to the Perviy Otdel human rights project, he had no plans to return to Russia and was not even in possession of his passport at the time of his disappearance.

Not all experts believe the amendments will have a significant impact.

"To me, this looks like internal PR aimed at gaining approval from the leadership," said Ilya Novikov, a Russian lawyer based in Kyiv. "Instead of reporting 'we can't do anything about those who have left,' they will report 'we have requested international assistance.'"

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Novikov, who was designated a "foreign agent" in 2022, said that Western governments and international bodies such as Interpol are likely to ignore such criminal requests. He noted that requests for arrests may happen, and so Russian citizens should still take precautions, but that they are unlikely to be in the thousands.

"If someone has fled from Putin to a country sympathetic to Russia, and remains there, then they have only themselves to blame. If they needed an extra reason not to wait for Putin's downfall in Kyrgyzstan — then yes, this is it."

Ivan Chuvilaev, spokesperson for Idite Lesom ("Get Lost"), a group that assists Russian military deserters, told The Moscow Times that they had no knowledge of Russians being extradited to Russia for political reasons. He noted that detentions in countries like Kazakhstan usually result in temporary arrests or questioning rather than extradition.

Anastasia Burakova, founder of The Ark, the largest initiative dedicated to assisting Russian anti-war emigres, shared a similar skepticism.

"Even if the amendment is adopted, I do not expect any changes; rather, this is another PR move and a campaign to intimidate emigrants," Burakova told The Moscow Times.

She added that lawmakers largely craft this kind of legislation in reaction to the Russian military's successes or failures on the front line.

She noted that although nothing prevents the Russian authorities from abusing their powers and violating the sovereignty of other states by kidnapping and intimidating emigres, foreign governments are unlikely to follow through on Russia's requests.

"Perhaps Belarus or Kyrgyzstan can follow the lead as part of a one-time loyalty display, but countries with a stable legal system will not even take such requests into account: at least because the case is not under their jurisdiction," Burakova said. "All other countries are still somehow following the procedures established by their legislation, which does not provide for work by Russian investigators."

Burakova nonetheless advised emigres to stay aware of local laws, especially in non-Western or post-Soviet countries.

"If you have a criminal case or face a reasonable risk of prosecution, it's better to seek a humanitarian visa in a safe country," she said.

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