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As Russia Strips Rights from Exiled Regime Opponents, Many Don't Know if They Should Worry

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A rally against the war in Ukraine in Paris. **Mathias Reding / pexels**

If living in forced exile outside of your home country isn't hard enough, imagine not being able to withdraw money from your bank accounts or renew your passport.

With the stroke of a pen, President Vladimir Putin approved a law imposing sweeping restrictions on thousands of exiled regime critics last week, cutting them off from basic consular services and impeding their ability to manage personal affairs back home.

The list of prohibited activities includes managing one's finances, properties and legal matters. Bank accounts will be frozen, embassies will refuse most appointments, and people to whom the law applies won't even be able to use the government's digital services portal or do something as simple as register a marriage.

Human rights organizations have decried the new measures as an attempt to further hamstring Russian political exiles, many of whom fled Russia due to increased wartime repression. Their shorthand for the bill, the "civic death law," underscores its severity.

In the days since its adoption, Russians told The Moscow Times that they are concerned about how the law could impact them but have yet to see the full picture of how it will be implemented.

"This law hasn't directly affected me yet," said one Russian man living with a humanitarian visa in Germany. "But I have been a member of some organizations that fall under this law — and in some cases, I still am — so sooner or later it might affect me as well."

The man requested anonymity due to the risks of reprisal from Russian authorities for speaking out about a sensitive topic.

"It will be difficult or impossible to grant power of attorney, even to relatives, or to obtain a passport," he said, adding that the measures amount to "a near-total ban on any activity in Russia."

The new law is the latest in a series of wartime measures designed to put pressure on exiled regime critics, something human rights advocates generally refer to as "transnational repression." Under the law, people convicted of a crime or certain administrative offenses residing abroad will be added to a publicly available register and subject to the restrictions.

The inclusion of administrative offenses means that authorities can cast a wide net, expanding punishment to people branded "foreign agents," those who have worked with "undesirable organizations" and those who have "discredited" the military. Authorities have extensively used such wartime censorship laws to silence critics of the invasion of Ukraine.

State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin cast the law as a form of necessary justice for enemies of the state living abroad.

"They must understand that punishment will catch up with them in any case," he said in late July.

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Even for Russia, this new development appears to represent a serious escalation in the crackdown on anti-war voices. For years, activists, journalists and political figures have been able to avoid prison by taking their activities — and their lives — overseas. But now human rights advocates and experts say their basic rights are being infringed upon.

"The authors of the law sought to include as many restrictions as possible that could negatively affect Russians who have left the country," said Yevgeny Smirnov, a lawyer for Perviy Otdel (First Department), a legal aid organization.

Some Russians will hardly notice a change, having long ago adapted to living in legal limbo. Those with an active criminal case are already barred from renewing their passport, for instance.

For others who still maintain connections to Russia, the restrictions can create some serious headaches.

“For some, the freezing of assets in Russia will cause very serious difficulties,” Smirnov said. “For others, it will be the ban on receiving consular services, and some will not even notice these restrictions.”

The biggest difficulties, he added, could come from the obstruction of basic services, things like not being able to grant power of attorney, obtain certificates related to one’s affairs in Russia or finalize a divorce.

Marika Semenenko, an activist who left Russia in March 2022, is outspoken about her opposition to the war in Ukraine. But she also still appears on the ownership documents of businesses she used to run in Moscow and is co-owner of an apartment. Severing ties with her home country has been hard.

“I really worry about all those businesses, and maybe in the future I will have to leave them officially,” said Semenenko, who now lives in Armenia.

While she doesn’t fall under the law’s provisions right now — to her knowledge, she has not been convicted of a crime since leaving Russia — she nevertheless worries that the law will someday affect her, whether because authorities bring a case against her or because they expand its scope.

“My strategy is to make the distance between me and Russia as long as possible,” she said. That strategy has worked up to now.

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Alexander Sofeyev, an activist and member of the protest group Pussy Riot, told The Moscow Times that he doesn’t think the law will change all that much for him. Pussy Riot was declared an “extremist” organization in December 2025, meaning members of the collective once known for staging audacious anti-government performances could be subject to harsh legal punishment.

“I haven’t had Russian bank accounts since 2021, when I left Russia,” said Sofeyev, who now lives in Poland. He added that he also doesn’t own property back home or use government and consular services. “Most of the levers Russia uses to influence those who have left are simply nonexistent in my case.”

In looking for analogs, many advocates have pointed to the example of Belarus, where similar legislation has enabled Minsk to impose punishing restrictions on thousands of regime critics residing outside the country.

Long ago, Sofeyev saw “that Russia was moving in a similar direction.” Now, he believes people should use this as an opportunity to evaluate the material connections they have to Russia — property, bank accounts, legal matters.

And not go back to Russia under any circumstances.

“The logic of this law is that people, even abroad, continue to feel the influence of Russia, the presence of the state, and fear it,” Sofeyev said. “I’d like to remind the people who have left that emigration should give us freedom, not become some kind of hostage situation.”

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