

RUSSIA

CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS
TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 24th February 2022, Ukrainians woke up to a [military operation](#) launched by Russia, with explosions heard across the country and Ukraine's foreign minister warning a "[full-scale invasion](#)" was under way. In the days that followed, Russian forces embarked on a full on [offensive](#) in Ukrainian cities, in what Putin said was intended to topple the Ukrainian government.

Meanwhile, as the war ensued in Ukraine, Russia experienced a [severe crackdown](#) on civic freedoms after authorities embarked on a brutal crackdown on nationwide anti-war protests, threatened media outlets to get them to delete publications about the war in Ukraine, interfered with access to social media and blocked access to media websites.

These violations are happening in the context of a wider crackdown on civic space over the last few years, as the government brutally [represses protests](#) and adopts severely [restrictive laws](#) which stifle CSOs and media outlets.

BRUTAL REPRESSION OF NATIONWIDE ANTI-WAR PROTESTS

In a remarkable show of solidarity with Ukraine, and despite the great personal risk involved, thousands of protesters across cities in Russia [gathered](#) to denounce the invasion in Ukraine. From 24th February, the first day of the invasion and in the days that followed, people from over 130 Russian cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Krasnodar, Ekaterinburg, Saratov, Nizhny Novgorod and Voronezh took to the streets, carrying hand-written placards with peace signs and anti-war slogans in Russian and Ukrainian. Law enforcement officers however met the protesters with [force](#), as they brutally and arbitrarily arrested, detained and [assaulted](#) protesters.

According to OVD-Info, on 24th February, at least 1,977 protesters were [detained](#) in 67 cities. By 1st March 2022, a total of 6,481 [detentions](#) of protesters had been documented across the country, and by 7th March 2022, a total of 13389 protesters had been detained. Reports also emerged of injured protesters being [denied](#) medical assistance and access to their lawyers, while [others](#) were beaten, mocked and assaulted using stun guns.

In a statement responding to the mass protests, Russia's Investigative Committee warned against organising unsanctioned gatherings and threatened "harsh punishment" for those who organise "mass riots."

MEDIA OUTLETS THREATENED & SHUT DOWN, NEW LAW CRIMINALISES REPORTING

As the Russian invasion in Ukraine escalated, on 24th February 2022, the Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor (RKN) [published](#) a warning to media outlets on publishing "unverified" and "false" information. According to the regulator, the outlets were only allowed to publish information from official sources when reporting on what the government calls a "special operation" in Ukraine. On failure to obey this, all "false" information would be instantly blocked, and the outlets fined for disseminating "fake" news.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Russia as "[Repressed](#)".

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN



On the same day, RKN threatened to block Prospekt Mira, an outlet in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, if it did not delete publications about the shelling of Ukrainian cities, which [included](#) a compilation of videos from CNN, Russian State News Agency “RIA Novosti” and from Russian channels on the Telegram messaging app.

Two days later, on 26th February 2022, RKN [said](#) it would be opening investigations against several Russian media outlets for allegedly “spreading false information of public interest”. This came after the outlets published about the shelling of cities in Ukraine and the deaths of civilians as a result of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. RKN also criticised the outlets’ use of words such as ‘war’, ‘invasion’ and ‘attack’ to refer to Russia’s brutal invasion.

Among the outlets that received threats of retaliation by RKN was “Zhurnalist” after they published a speech by Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief and Nobel Peace Prize winner Dmitry Muratov in which he calls the war a war. Similarly, journalist Elena Chernenko from the “Kommersant” daily newspaper was excluded from the pool of journalists accredited to the Russian Foreign Ministry after she published [an open letter](#) opposing the war, which was signed by more than 200 Russian journalists.

Other outlets which were [threatened](#) with sanctions were Echo of Moscow, InoSMI, Media Zona, New Times, Dozhd, Svobodnay Pressa, Krym.Realii, Novaya Gazeta, Journalist and Lenizdat. In response to the threat, Echo of Moscow took down the post in question.

On the day the RKN issued the warning, the Defence Ministry accused Novaya Gazeta of “promoting fake information.” The outlet’s deputy editor, Kirill Martynov, was also threatened with criminal prosecution for reporting that Russian forces had killed civilians in Ukraine.

A day after, Current Time’s website was [blocked](#) by RKN for containing “false information” about Russian military casualties and prisoners of war. RKN said it would consider restoring access if the offending information was taken down. On 2nd March 2022, it was [reported](#) that Echo of Moscow and [Dozhd TV](#) were also taken off air and access to their websites was blocked. The outlet’s board of directors of Echo of Moscow thereafter made a decision to liquidate the radio channel and shut down its website.

Parliament has helped take censorship to new heights by [approving](#) a law that imposes jail sentences up to 15 years for people spreading “fake information” about the military. As a result a number of international media outlets including the BBC and CNN temporarily suspended the work of all its journalists in Russia.

ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITES OBSTRUCTED AND BLOCKED

Censorship was also felt online. On 25th February 2021, RKN [announced](#) that it would partially restrict access to Facebook in Russia after the company blocked four Russian state media accounts. Earlier, RKN had ordered Facebook to stop independent fact-checking and labelling of content posted on the Facebook accounts. A similar development was seen on Twitter after authorities [restricted](#) access in the country, with some users reporting interruptions.

JOURNALISTS ASSAULTED AND DETAINED

Journalists reporting on the anti-war protests were not spared from police brutality. According to reports, at least 50 cases of journalists being obstructed were [reported](#). Across different cities, and despite showing their press cards to the police, journalists were assaulted and detained, with St. Petersburg recording at least 16 journalist detentions. Among those assaulted were journalists Elizaveta Kirpanova of Novaya Gazeta and Vera Ryabitskaya of The Insider, who were pushed to the ground and hit with truncheons while reporting from Moscow and St. Petersburg respectively.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Russian government:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arbitrarily detained for exercising their right to peacefully protest and drop all the spurious charges made against peaceful protesters.
- Refrain from the use of excessive force, physical violence and detention of protesters and journalists.
- Security officials who have used excessive force towards protesters must be immediately and effectively investigated and held accountable.
- Stop the unwarranted targeting, intimidation and shutting down of media outlets and reporting on the war in Ukraine.
- Stop the obstruction of access to social media websites.
- Respect and implement the 2018 ruling of the European Court which called on the Russian authorities to take appropriate legislative measures to put in place mechanisms to ensure the respect of the right to peaceful assembly.

To the International Community:

- Call for urgent and immediate action to address fundamental rights violations of the right to peaceful assembly and expression.
- Hold Russia accountable for its human rights violations and ensure that Russia follows through on past rulings by the European Court and respects its national and international human rights obligations.