

Russia: The Kremlin strips political exiles of their civil rights

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On 22–24 July, the Russian parliament unanimously adopted a package of laws that drastically curtails the civil rights of Russian citizens living abroad. The measures target those who have been convicted in criminal or administrative cases and are deemed to be ‘evading punishment’. According to the text of the legislation and statements by government officials, the measures are aimed primarily at those who have fled abroad to escape political repression. Those affected will be entered into a special register maintained by Russia’s Ministry of Justice. The new provisions will enter into force immediately after they are signed by Vladimir Putin.

The restrictions apply to several categories of political exiles. These include people convicted of serious offences, including extremism, terrorism and treason. Such charges are increasingly used to punish political activity. The measures also cover so-called ‘foreign agents’ (individuals and legal entities designated by the Russian authorities as being ‘under foreign influence’; more than 1,200 entities currently hold this status) and people convicted of involvement in the activities of an ‘undesirable organisation’ (a designation applied to more than 380 foreign organisations deemed to threaten Russia’s security). In addition, the legislation targets people accused of ‘calling for violations of Russia’s territorial integrity’ (in practice, most often by condemning the annexation of Ukrainian territories), ‘discrediting the Russian armed forces’ (including by publicising Russian war crimes in Ukraine) or calling for sanctions against Russia.

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People placed on the register will lose access to the government's online public services portal and Russian consular services. They will also be deprived of the right to manage property left in Russia or access their bank accounts. Their assets will be frozen and used by the authorities to enforce court-imposed financial penalties. They will also lose the right to inherit property. In addition, the legislation prohibits any civil law transactions from being carried out in Russia on their behalf under a power of attorney.

The adopted legislation directly violates several provisions of Russia's Constitution. It marks another step in the Kremlin's efforts to build a neo-totalitarian system. The new laws also present a challenge for EU member states. The expected increase in the number of Russians without valid identity documents means that procedures for legalising the stay of people in need of international protection will have to be revised. Within the next few years, the problem could affect several thousand people.

Commentary

- **The measures effectively deprive Kremlin critics living outside Russia of their civil rights and are intended to intimidate anti-regime groups and discourage Russians from emigrating.** The authorities are signalling that there is no alternative to unconditional loyalty to the regime. They also make clear that opponents of the Kremlin's policies will face severe punishment regardless of where they live.
- **The new legislation marks another step in the Kremlin's escalating repression of independent and opposition groups in exile. It also reflects its efforts to exclude them from Russian society.** The expanding body of repressive legislation, combined with opaque enforcement practices, means that in practice almost any form of independent activity can be declared illegal through the arbitrary initiation of criminal or administrative proceedings. At the same time, the authorities have intensified their rhetoric against opposition activists, human rights defenders and independent journalists. They portray them as enemies of the nation in an effort to further discredit and dehumanise them in the eyes of Russian society. State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin branded political exiles as traitors to the motherland, while Deputy Speaker Pyotr Tolstoy called them saboteurs. He also openly admitted that depriving them of their property rights was intended to silence Kremlin critics.
- **The legislative changes were introduced as Russia faces mounting challenges ahead of the parliamentary "elections" scheduled for September.** These include increasingly frequent Ukrainian strikes on military, energy and commercial infrastructure, as well as the expansion of international sanctions. The consequences are a growing risk of economic recession, a widening budget deficit and declining public support for both Putin and the war against Ukraine. At the same time, the authorities have failed to establish full control over the information space. Against this backdrop, the Kremlin regards the activities of the political emigration, supported by European states and institutions, as particularly undesirable. These include the activities of the Russian Anti-

War Committee and the Platform of Anti-War Initiatives, as well as the initiative to establish a platform for dialogue with Russia's democratic forces launched in January 2026 by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

- **The new legislation deprives Russian émigrés of access to consular services, creating a challenge for EU member states.** The measures will prevent those affected from renewing documents required to legalise their stay abroad, including passports. As a result, EU member states will need to substantially revise their procedures for assisting people persecuted in Russia. Russian émigré organisations already called in 2022–2023 for the introduction of alternative identity documents for Russian citizens. They proposed that these should be modelled on the Nansen passports issued by countries of residence to refugees and stateless people during the interwar period.