

**UN Human Rights Council
should strongly denounce
widespread and on-going
actions by Russia to attack
independent civil society,
severely limit civic space,
and silence dissenting voices**



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We, the undersigned human rights organisations, call on the

United Nations Human Rights Council to respond robustly to the recent crackdown by the Russian authorities on independent civil society and dissenting voices in the country. Russian authorities are systematically using the tools of the state to arbitrarily deprive citizens of liberty and curtail the exercise of the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. The alarming trends the international community has observed in Russia for more than a decade have been drastically increasing since the end of 2020 and require urgent international action.

At the beginning of 2021, Russia took a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. As a member of the international body charged with the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe, Russia's active efforts to attack human rights domestically is particularly cynical. Members of the Council must use the 46th Session – Russia's first session under its current membership – to strongly denounce these actions to use the tools of the state to attack independent civil society, severely limit civic space and silence dissenting voices.

Most recently, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens have taken to the streets in protest of attacks on human rights and dissenting opinion, according to independent monitors. Protests erupted on 23 January following the arrest and detention of opposition leader Alexey Navalny. Information collected by the monitoring organisation OVD-Info reported more than 4,000 protesters arrested on that day alone. International and local media showed footage of riot police brutally attacking peaceful protesters, including the elderly, women, and children. A week later, on 31 January, people in Russia repeated their calls for human rights and political plurality with hundreds of thousands participating in actions across the vast country. Once again, the authorities responded with violence and arrested more than 7,500 according to OVD-Info. Finally, following the sentencing of Navalny on 2 February, Russians once again took to the streets in protest

and faced excessive violence from riot police who detained a further 1,400 people. This brings the total number of arrests since late January to more than 12,000.

While international attention has been understandably focused on the arrest of opposition figure Alexey Navalny on 17 January 2021, this action must be considered in light of recent legislation which, according to local Russian human rights organisations, will lead to “a significant increase in total government control over Russian society and a growth in persecution of dissent”^[1]. It is imperative that the Council take immediate action at the 46th Council session to condemn these actions and call on the Russian state to adhere to its international human rights obligations.

In 2012, Russia approved a novel “Foreign Agents” Law. This law required any organisation receiving minimal amounts of funding from private or public foreign entities and engaging in “political activities” to register as a “foreign agent”. For registering organisations, the law established reporting requirements as well as the requirement to identify as foreign agents on any publications. The law defined political activity unusually broadly and vaguely which allowed authorities to label any human rights or advocacy activities as political. The following year, Russia’s then-ombudsman challenged the law in Russian Constitutional Court but the case was dismissed. Two years later, the Russian parliament amended the law to allow the Justice Ministry to register organisations as foreign agents without their consent. In late 2019, legislation on mass media was amended to target media, individual journalists and bloggers as foreign agents.

At the end of 2020, the Russian government introduced and passed four pieces of legislation capping their decade-long attack on civic space, independent civil society, and dissenting opinion. Among other things, these pieces of legislation:

- Further expand the list of actors who can be designated “foreign agents” to include unregistered NGOs and individuals regardless of nationality and require founders, members, participants, and employees of such organisations to mark accordingly their affiliation on any materials they publish and any official communications with the authorities; and, requires the media to identify them as foreign agents in any information published about, or citing, so-called foreign agents (Federal Law No. [481-FZ](#))
- Restrict ability to organize rallies, demonstrations, marches, and pickets, including new measures restricting how such activities are financed and links those restrictions to foreign agents designations (Federal Law No. [541-FZ](#))
- Introduce a five year jail sentence for libel (libel was criminalized in 2012) (Federal Law No. [538-FC](#))
- Criminalize acts of individuals who can be designated as individual foreign agents according to recent legislative amendments and introduce a five year jail sentence (Federal Law No. [525-FZ](#))

Unfortunately, Russian authorities’ work to systematically pre-emptively limit the ability of the Russian people to exercise their human rights has not stopped. Currently, the State Duma is considering a number of bills to continue these dangerous and alarming trends. Once approved, these pieces of legislation will:

- Require so-called foreign agent NGOs to pre-notify the Ministry of Justice about planned activities and gives the Ministry of Justice the authority to ban any activities preemptively but does not specify the grounds by which the Ministry of Justice may take such action. In the case of non-compliance, the Ministry of Justice will have the authority to ask a court to liquidate the non-compliant organisation

(<https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1052523-7>).

- Expand government ability to regulate public awareness raising activities and sharply restricts the freedom of expression (<https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1057895-7>).
- Introduce penalties for non-compliance with these other pieces of legislation and imposes these penalties on organisations and their officers, and individuals.

We urge the members of the Human Rights Council to take immediate action to protect and promote human rights and strongly condemn the actions of the Russian authorities. Attacks by Council member states on independent civil society, civic space, and dissenting voices must not go unaddressed. The Council must act.

^[1]https://www.mhg.ru/sites/default/files/inline/files/urgent_appeal_to_the_coe_on_new_repressive_laws_in_russia_24_january_2021.pdf