



Illustration: Ilya Martynov for OVD-Info

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Persecution of «disloyal» individuals in culture industry in Russia: 41 people imprisoned, 176 facing pressure

Русская версия

*Recently the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced the Oscar winners. Russian actor Yura Borisov was among the nominees (he **lost** to Kieran Culkin and didn't get the Oscar). Just a week prior, in Russia, cinema critic Ekaterina Barabash was **placed** under house arrest on accusations of spreading «fake news» motivated by hate (Part 2, Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code). We have analysed how during the war the regime has been persecuting individuals in the film industry and other cultural sectors. Additionally, we have depicted the repression faced by people in the arts through graphs.*

In February 2022, many individuals from the culture industry publicly denounced the invasion of Ukraine. Actors, musicians, comedians, and painters signed an open **letter** about the destruction of multinational cultural connections. Additionally, many people posted the slogan 'No to war!' on their social media profiles.

Later, members of the creative industry who opposed the war began to face both direct and indirect pressure from security forces and pro-government individuals.

Artists such as the band Mashina Vremeni, Valery Meladze, and rapper Noize MC had their concerts **canceled**.

At a performance by stand-up comedian Dan The Stranger (Denis Chuzhoy) in Vologda, someone **brought** a wreath that read, 'To the traitor of Russia'. Additionally, Telegram channels associated with the Federal Security Service **shared** sensitive information about theatre artists deemed «disloyal».

Artists had faced pressure even before the war. For instance, in the summer of 2021, several shows by the music band AloeVera were **canceled**. Additionally, in autumn 2018, **reports** from The Bell indicated that young musicians like IC3PEAK, Face, and Eldzhey had a total of 40 shows canceled.

In 2023, several actors and musicians who had previously condemned the war decided to make a deal with the Russian authorities. According to **information** from Meduza and Important Stories, some artists began performing in occupied territories after meetings with representatives from the presidential administration. In return, they were granted the opportunity to continue their work in Russia.

Other musicians who left the country due to safety reasons continue to make music in exile, including Monetochka, Noize MC, AIGEL, Yuri Shevchuk, Boris Grebenshchikov, and others.

Unfortunately, even after emigrating, individuals continue to **face** the consequences of persecution. For example, since receiving the «foreign agent» status, Maksim Pokrovsky, the leader of Nogu Svelo, reported experiencing financial losses, and comedian Tatiana Lazareva revealed that some people have refused to collaborate with her.

CRIMINAL CASES

In addition to unofficial pressure, creative workers face direct criminal persecution for their professional activities. These cases are not always directly related to the war.

One of the best known cases is the persecution of stage director **Evgenia Berkovich** and playwright **Svetlana Petriychuk**, based on allegations of justifying terrorism under Part 2, Article 205.2 of the Russian criminal code.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE BERKOVICH-PETRIYCHUK CASE



The formal reason for opening a criminal case was the play «Finist, the Brave Falcon», which Berkovich staged based on a script by Petriychuk. The plot of this documentary play sheds light on the criminal cases involving women who have linked their lives with radical Islamists and moved to Syria with them.

An expert assessment conducted by «destructologist» Roman Silantyev stated that the play «glorified» ISIS militants and promoted «the ideology of radical feminism». In June 2023, the Ministry of Justice recognized that this assessment could not be used as evidence in court, since it had no scientific basis, and acknowledged that «destructology» itself was not a science.

In 2022, the play received the Golden Mask theatre award, and the production itself **was shown** in a women's penal colony in Tomsk region, where it received praise from representatives of the Federal Penitentiary Service.

In July 2024, the 2nd Western District Military Court in Moscow **sentenced** Berkovich and Petriychuk to six years

in a general regime penal colony. In February 2025, it became known that Evgenia and Svetlana were being transferred to the colonies.

In addition to Berkovich and Petriychuk, 39 other creative workers are currently in custody. Most have already been transferred to prison colonies, while 18 are awaiting sentencing.

41 individuals from the culture industry are currently in detention



✳ A Flourish data visualization

Persecution of «anti-war» individuals in culture

Creative workers who spoke out against the invasion may face further threats beyond concert cancellations and hostility from activists loyal to the Russian authorities.

The state initiates criminal cases against them. Some cultural figures, like writer **Dmitry Glukhovsky**, become defendants

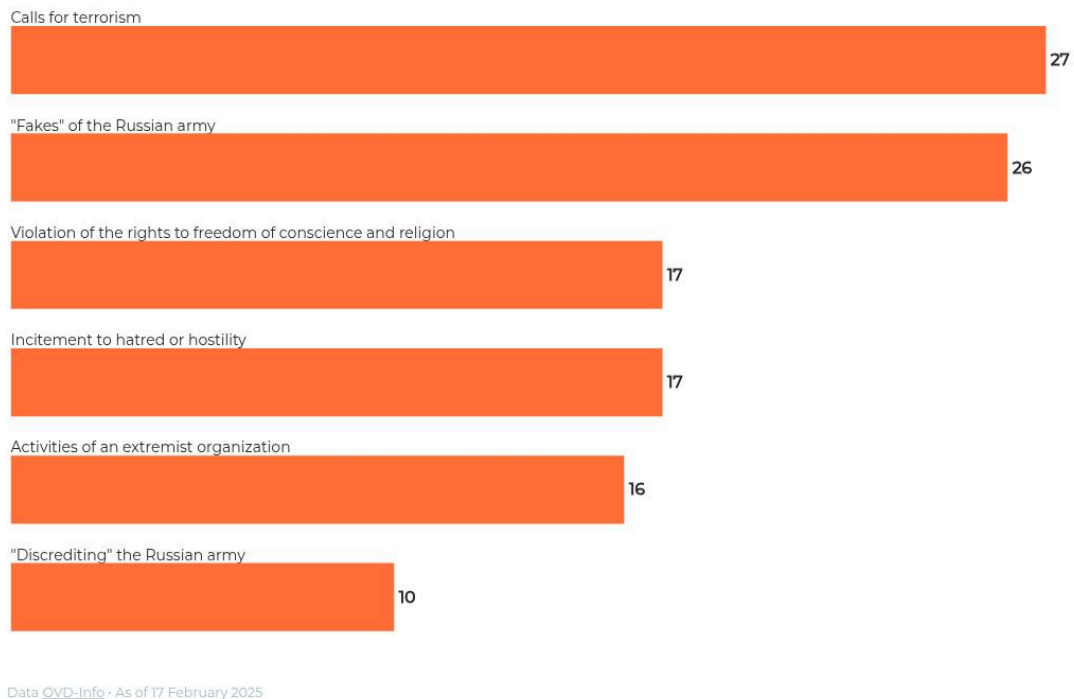
in criminal cases under the law on «fake facts». Others, like the musician **Monetochka**, are designated as «foreign agents» and later prosecuted for «failure to comply with the law».

A total of 56 creative workers are involved in the «anti-war» case. Along with journalists, politicians and bloggers, they represent one of the most frequently prosecuted groups.

According to an OVD-Info legal aid coordinator (who wished to remain anonymous), repression against creative workers is targeted, just like all political repression in Russia. It serves to intimidate society. The lawyer believes that the persecution of disloyal creative intelligentsia is due to its ability to broadcast its political views to a wide audience.

«It is important to ensure that cultural figures align with the regime by actively supporting it or, at the very least, by refraining from public criticism of it. How can this be achieved? Through the carrot — offering positions, roles, contracts in exchange for the support, or the stick — persecuting dissenters,» explains the project's legal aid coordinator. «The formal grounds for persecution are secondary to the defendant's perceived ability to influence public opinion.»

Most common charges brought against cultural figures



* A Flourish data visualization

Persecuted individuals also face difficulties and restrictions abroad. Feminist activist Daria Serenko, who was charged with evading obligations as a «foreign agent», told OVD-Info that the Russian embassy refused to issue her a new passport because she was on the wanted list.

«[By that time — OVD-Info note] my old passport was about to expire, and now I find myself in a situation where I am chained to one place, which prevents me from engaging in activism, fundraising, and other work. For example, I used to be able to go on book tours, the proceeds from which I gave to political prisoners and Ukrainian organisations,» Darya told OVD-Info.

Musicians and art activists are among the most frequently persecuted

The highest number of politically motivated cases involves musicians, with 40 individuals affected. This is likely due to their greater media exposure and professional

independence compared to theatre artists or film industry workers, according to the OVD-Info legal aid coordinator.

Many persecuted individuals are art activists. Unlike other cultural figures, their work is often directly focused on criticising the Russian authorities. In total, security forces have initiated criminal cases against 30 art activists, including musicians, artists, photographers, directors, and one writer. (The graph shows the intersections of these communities.)

Persecution of individuals working in the culture industry



Data OVD-Info · As of 17 February
*OVD-Info has been closely monitoring politically motivated prosecutions since 2011, but we know of earlier cases

* A Flourish data visualization

One third of persecution cases involving art activists are directly related to political actions. In 2022, the police opened a criminal case against **Sasha Skochilenko**, an artist from St. Petersburg, for posting price tags with anti-war slogans in the chain supermarket Perekrestok.

Another example is the criminal case against poets Artem Kamardin, Yegor Shtovba, and Nikolay Dayneko. The case was started because of **the poem with critics of mobilisation**, which Kamardin had recited near the Vladimir Mayakovsky monument on Triumfalnaya Square in Moscow.

Art activists Lolja Nordic and Polina B. **became** defendants in the criminal case for a knowingly false report about an impending explosion (Article 207 of the Russian Criminal Code).

Among the most well-known persecuted art activists are members of the Voina and Pussy Riot art groups, and coordinators of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAWR).

According to Daria Serenko, people who make art that differs from the mainstream political course are perceived by the police as irritating attention seekers.

«They don't want any counterculture. After all, it can inspire and organise people, which is viewed as a threat to the established norms in Russia,» Serenko says. «I think the authorities recognise that many people often perceive art in a non-political manner. This is why art can act as an accessible entry point into political discourse. Therefore, they preemptively block these pathways.»

Serenko assumes that security forces target her and other FAWR activists not because of their art, but because of their activism.

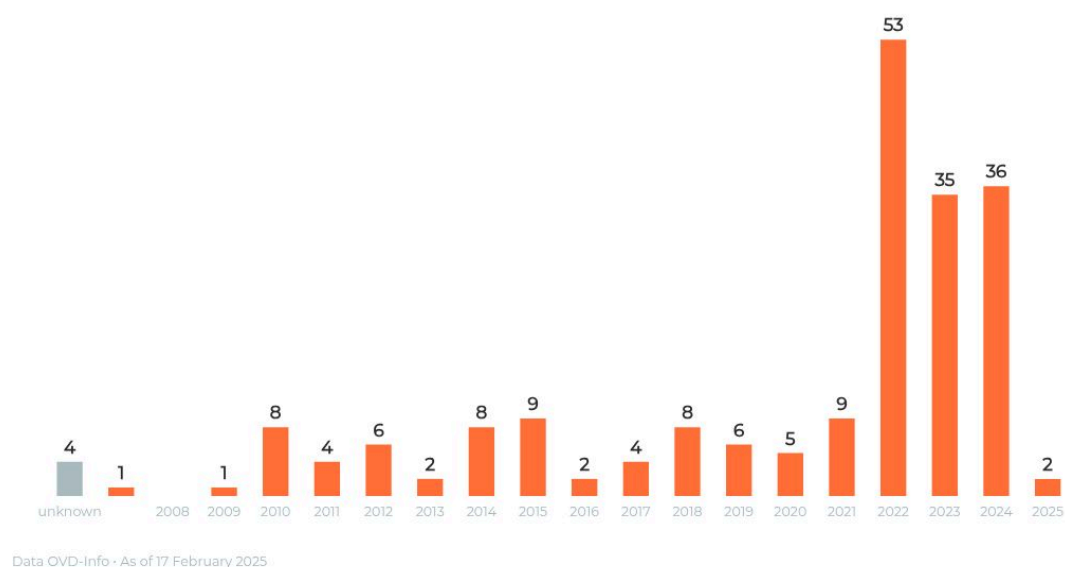
SINCE THE FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE, THE NUMBER OF REPRESSIONS AGAINST INDIVIDUALS IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR HAS INCREASED ALMOST 6 TIMES

The count of politically motivated criminal prosecutions against creative workers in 2022 was 5.8 times higher than in 2021. In the subsequent years, the number of new cases decreased to 35-36, which is still significantly higher than

the levels seen before the invasion. It is important to note that the state has been persecuting creative workers for political reasons for at least the past 16 years.

The first politically motivated criminal case against a creative worker known to OVD-Info in modern Russian history is the case against artist **Aleksandr Nikolaenko** who had spoken at a rally near the Federal Security Service building in 2007. The artist was accused of a public insult of state officials (Article 319 of the Russian Criminal Code) for his calls to «deal with Putin, Deripaska, and Abramovich, this bunch of extremists».

Since the invasion of Ukraine, security forces persecute cultural figures much more frequently



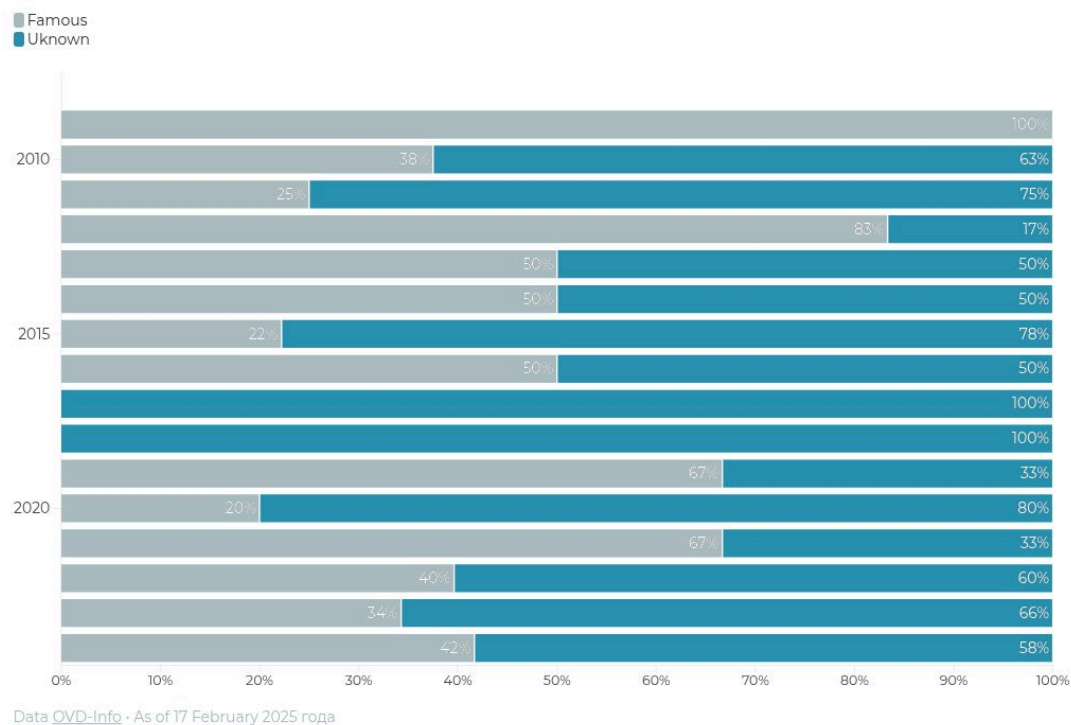
* A Flourish data visualization

98 persecuted artists are not widely known and the only mentions of them in the media are the news reports on their persecution.

Some of them, such as spouses Anastasiya Dyudyaeva and Aleksandr Dotsenko, both artists, **became** defendants in criminal cases for their art. Some others were imprisoned based on accusations of involvement in banned groups, such

as Hizb ut-Tahrir, as in the case of musician Azat Adiev, who was sentenced to 19 years in prison.

The majority of the persecution cases in the cultural sector affect lesser-known individuals



* A Flourish data visualization

The story of pianist and anti-war activist Pavel Kushnir became widely known only after his **death** after a dry hunger strike in a pre-trial detention centre in July 2024. The case against the 39-year-old musician was opened under the article on public incitement to terrorist activities in relation to his anti-war videos published on a YouTube channel with five subscribers.

Timur Khairutdinov