

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED PROSECUTIONS OF LAWYERS IN RUSSIA

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CONTEXT

Lawyers¹ in Russia, particularly those acting in politically motivated criminal cases, are one of the social and professional groups on which the state's repressive apparatus focuses its attention. This is largely because of the nature of the legal profession, which offers one of the few remaining opportunities in Russia to lawfully oppose the state, provide legal defence to critics of the authorities, and publicise human rights violations. Lawyers are subjected to various forms of prosecution and obstruction in relation to their lawful professional activities. They are often, in effect, equated with their clients, which is expressly prohibited by international law.

As stated in the [Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers](#), adopted by the UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders:



Governments shall ensure that lawyers (a) are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; [...] and (c) shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards and ethics. [...] Lawyers shall not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes as a result of discharging their functions.

As early as 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, following a visit to the Russian Federation, [noted](#) a tendency to equate lawyers with the interests and activities of their clients, who were subjected to external pressure or intimidation by state officials, as a result of which lawyers' ability to practise their profession was constrained. Particular attention was drawn at the time to the cases of lawyers representing the interests of the Yukos company and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, as well as the case of the murder of the lawyer Stanislav Markelov.

Following a visit to the Russian Federation in 2013, the Special Rapporteur [expressed concern](#) about the vast number of obstacles faced by lawyers, as well as the scale of threats and attacks to which some lawyers were subjected simply for carrying out their professional duties and representing their clients' interests.

1 This translation uses the English term 'lawyer' to refer to *advokat*, a qualified legal professional in Russia whose distinctive role is defined by an exclusive right to represent clients in criminal cases in court.



In subsequent reports by the Special Rapporteurs, covering [2018](#) and [2024](#), the findings regarding the suppression of the independence of the legal profession in Russia were reiterated. Disciplinary measures (including the revocation of a lawyer's licence) or administrative, criminal or other sanctions have been widely applied to lawyers for actions carried out in accordance with their professional duties, standards and ethics. Cases of arbitrary arrests, detentions and criminal prosecutions of lawyers have become more frequent.

These assessments of the situation about the status of lawyers in Russia are also confirmed by the conclusions of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katsarova. According to the findings of her [2023 report](#),



lawyers who have voiced dissenting views and/or represented human rights defenders, journalists, opposition activists, anti-war protesters or victims of human rights violations in the Russian Federation have come under severe pressure themselves. This pressure includes disciplinary, administrative and criminal harassment and prosecution, and physical violence amounting to torture and ill-treatment.

The 2024 report [noted](#):



Russian authorities have increased their attacks on the legal profession and lawyers, in particular those representing clients in cases of political persecution or national security. [...] Lawyers have been prosecuted, disbarred and intimidated for providing legal services to persecuted groups and dissenters.

Similar conclusions are also contained in the [2025 report](#).

Statements on the prosecution of lawyers in Russia for conducting their professional activities have also been made by many international bar associations (for example, [IBAHRI in conjunction with Lawyers for Lawyers](#), [IBAHRI](#) at the 60th session of the UN in October 2025, and in statements by the International Commission of Jurists on the [situation](#) in Russia with regard to human rights and [attacks](#) on the independence of lawyers).



The situation regarding the prosecution of lawyers has deteriorated significantly since the start of the **full-scale invasion** of Ukraine, and particularly sharply over the past year.

According to our data, in 2025 politically motivated criminal cases were brought against at least 13 lawyers (six of whom were prosecuted in absentia).

By comparison, in 2023 and 2024, 3 – 4 such cases were initiated each year (excluding cases of prosecution in absentia). Criminal cases are initiated under a wide variety of articles of the Criminal Code, ranging from ‘economic offences’ to treason and terrorism.

To this must be added other forms of pressure on lawyers, including the conduct of unlawful searches and investigative operations, designation as foreign agents, prosecution for administrative-law offences, disciplinary proceedings aimed at revoking their status, and restrictions on travel abroad.

In our review, we cite the most characteristic examples of such persecution.



POLITICALLY MOTIVATED PROSECUTIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

The case of Maria Bontsler and other lawyers in Kaliningrad



On 21 June 2022, the lawyer Maria Bontsler was convicted of an [administrative-law offence](#) under Article 20.3.3, Part 1, of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation [CAO RF] for ‘discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation’ for statements she made during a court hearing in March of that year. In that case, Bontsler was defending Kaliningrad activists prosecuted under administrative law for the same offence of ‘discrediting the Russian armed forces.’ Almost three years later, on 28 May 2025, FSB officers raided [Maria Bontsler’s](#) home, after which she was arrested on criminal charges and remanded in custody. Initially, Maria Bontsler was accused of *‘passing information to a security service officer of a hostile state about law enforcement personnel, which had come to her knowledge in the course of her work as a lawyer,’* charging her under Article 275.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation [CC RF] (‘Collusion with a foreign state, with the aim of assisting in activities knowingly directed against the security of the Russian Federation’). However, towards the end of the pre-trial investigation, the same actions by the lawyer were [reclassified](#) under Article 275 CC RF as treason. Even though the UN Human Rights Committee [called on](#) the Russian authorities to urgently ensure that Bontsler, who suffers from numerous chronic illnesses, has *‘access to adequate medical care and assistance, [...] and to consider alternatives to her being held in custody,’* she remains on remand. According to available information, Bontsler is accused of providing information to an employee of the Ukrainian security services.

In connection with the criminal prosecution of Maria Bontsler, several other Kaliningrad lawyers have been subjected to various forms of harassment. On the day of her arrest, searches were carried out under the guise of an operational-investigative measure known as a ‘premises inspection’ at the offices of lawyers Roman Morozov and Ekaterina Selizarova, as FSB operatives believed they were aware of ‘Maria Bontsler’s criminal activities.’ The equipment seized from Roman Morozov during the ‘premises inspection’ was never returned to him. Ekaterina Selizarova, fearing for her safety, was forced to leave Russia.

In November 2025, the Ministry of Justice’s Kaliningrad regional office submitted a complaint to the region’s Bar Association, demanding that Bontsler’s defence counsel, Aleksandr Chauzov, be held disciplinarily liable for refusing to sign a non-disclosure agreement about information constituting a state secret.

Chauzov argued that, in agreement with his client (Maria Bontsler), he had not familiarised himself with the materials containing state secrets and therefore had no obligation to sign such an undertaking. The Bar Association supported the defence lawyer and terminated the disciplinary proceedings. The Bontsler case illustrates the various forms of pressure applied by the Russian state against independent lawyers, including searches, unlawful investigative measures, disciplinary measures and criminal prosecution, and ill-treatment in custody.



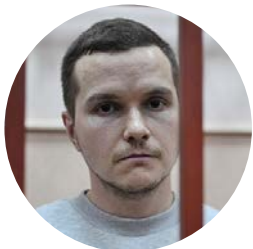
The case of Aleksei Navalny's defence lawyers



[Vadim Kobzev](#), [Aleksei Liptser](#) and [Aleksei Sergunin](#) (the latter has since been released in April 2026 after serving his sentence) were arrested on 13 October 2023.

On 17 January 2025, they were found guilty of 'participation in an extremist group' (Article 282.1, Part 2, CC RF) and sentenced to terms of imprisonment:

- Vadim Kobzev to **five years and six months**
- Aleksei Liptser to **five years**
- Aleksei Sergunin to **three years**



In addition, the three lawyers were banned from practising for three years upon release.



According to the prosecution, their participation in an extremist group, allegedly created by their client, the politician [Aleksei Navalny](#), involved the lawyers passing information that Navalny gave them while in prison to his associates on the outside. Among the key pieces of evidence for the prosecution were audio recordings of conversations between Navalny and his defence lawyers, obtained during covert investigative operations, which constitutes a breach of the confidential nature of communications between lawyer and client and the protection of legal professional privilege.



During his imprisonment, Aleksei Liptser was [diagnosed with chronic illnesses](#), and in April 2025 he was admitted to a prison hospital. In September 2025, [the court denied](#) his request to attend the funeral of his mother, Elena Liptser, also a lawyer.



Two other defence lawyers for Aleksei Navalny, [Olga Mikhailova](#) and [Aleksandr Fedulov](#), avoided arrest and are currently outside Russia. They have been remanded in custody in absentia, placed on a wanted list and charged with the same offence of 'participation in an extremist group' for their **professional** activities.



The case of Timur Rzaev



On 18 April 2025, the lawyer Timur Rzaev was arrested in St Petersburg. According to [the investigative authorities](#), Rzaev took part in the removal of Easter decorations installed at the entrance of a residential building. A resident who had put up the decorations filed a complaint with the police, claiming Rzaev's actions had 'offended the feelings of believers.' Rzaev argued that the installation of the decorations had not been agreed with the management company, whose interests he represented, and violated fire safety regulations.

Timur Rzaev was charged with 'offending the feelings of believers' (Article 148, Part 1, CC RF) and 'inciting hatred and enmity with threat of violence' (Article 282, Part 2, CC RF).

However, he was not remanded in custody.

The case of Marat Ashimov



According to the investigative authorities, in March 2024 [Marat Ashimov](#), a lawyer from the Republic of Mordovia, offered to 'assist' in securing early release on parole a person who had been convicted of fraud and had approached him for legal assistance.

As a result, a criminal case on charges of fraud was brought against the lawyer himself (Article 159 CC RF). Ashimov then spent more than six months under house arrest. He maintained his innocence of the charge and claimed the criminal prosecution had been initiated on the basis of a provocation aimed at obstructing his professional activities.

In December 2025, Ashimov was found guilty of an offence under Article 30, Part 3, CC RF in conjunction with Article 159, Part 2, CC RF ('Attempted fraud causing significant damage to a citizen') and sentenced to **two years of compulsory labor** in a correctional facility (with 10% of his earnings withheld as revenue for the state and a two-year ban on practising as a lawyer).

Marat Ashimov had frequently defended the interests of Muslims in court and described himself as an 'Islamic human rights defender.' Given the lawyer's active civic stance and the fact that he handled cases deemed 'sensitive' by the authorities, there are grounds to believe the charges against him were **fabricated** to put an end to his professional activities.



The case of Igor Popovsky



On 21 May 2026, the lawyer [Igor Popovsky](#) was arrested in Moscow on suspicion of fraud. According to the investigative authorities, Popovsky allegedly persuaded a client to hand over money to bribe officials in the prosecutor's office and in court.

Popovsky has for many years specialised in politically motivated criminal cases, having defended [Oleg Arkhipenkov](#), a defendant in the Bolotnaya case, the anti-fascist [Yuri Mikheev](#), the nationalists [Dmitry Demushkin](#) and [Alexander Belov \(Potkin\)](#), the human rights defender [Ivan Astashin](#), the anarchist partisan [Ruslan Sidiki](#) and many other activists.

Igor Popovsky was detained several days after Ruslan Sidiki's case reached the Military Court of Appeal. The lawyer had been actively seeking a criminal investigation into allegations that Sidiki had been tortured.

There are grounds to believe that the prosecution of Igor Popovsky is **politically motivated** and aimed at putting an end to his professional and human rights activities.



The case of Roman Kachanov



On 16 December, the lawyer [Roman Kachanov](#) was arrested in Yekaterinburg and his home and workplace were searched. Roman Kachanov, along with two other human rights defenders, Aleksei Sokolov and Larisa Zakharova, was charged with ‘organising the activities of an undesirable organisation’ (Article 284.1, Part 3, CC RF). The pro-government Telegram channel Ural Live, citing a ‘law enforcement source,’ [reported](#) that the criminal case had been opened following a complaint from a ‘Sverdlovsk public figure,’ namely Ekaterina Saprykina (Ipatova), head of the pro-government group Volunteer Company of the Combat Brotherhood.

In her statement to the Investigative Committee, Saprykina claimed Kachanov and Zakharova, as part of the Ural Human Rights Defenders project, and Aleksei Sokolov, representing the organisation Legal Basis, allegedly received funds from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the National Endowment for Democracy, organisations designated ‘undesirable’ in the Russian Federation, and



under the guise of defending prisoners’ rights, systematically created and disseminated a distorted picture of events in Russian penal colonies,’ ‘carried out work aimed at destabilising the situation and discrediting state institutions.

On 17 December 2025, Kachanov was remanded in custody in a closed court hearing.

He remained on remand until 12 February 2026, after which his pre-trial conditions were relaxed, first to house arrest and then to a **prohibition on certain activities**.



Cases involving charges of divulging state secrets



The Investigative Committee [charged](#) Ivan Pavlov, founder of the First Department human rights project, and project lawyer, Evgeny Smirnov, who both reside outside Russia, with the ‘joint and concerted’ transfer of information constituting a state secret (Article 283, Part 1, CC RF) to a linguistic expert in 2020 in the course of defending former Inter RAO top manager [Karina Tsurkan](#), recognised by our project as a political prisoner.

Ivan Pavlov stated he did indeed pass certain materials from the criminal case to the linguistic expert, but with all information constituting a state secret removed, a fact confirmed by the verdict in Tsurkan’s trial.



The Ministry of Internal Affairs issued arrest warrants for Evgeny Smirnov and Ivan Pavlov, and Basmany district court in Moscow ruled that they be remanded in **custody in absentia**.



Another criminal case under Article 283, Part 1, CC RF was initiated against the Chelyabinsk lawyer Igor Morozov. He was alleged to have [disclosed to ‘third parties’](#) state secrets which came to his knowledge during an administrative-law case challenging a decision to revoke the residence permit in the Russian Federation of a foreign citizen, whose interests Morozov represented as a defence lawyer.

Morozov was placed under a **travel ban**.



PROSECUTION FOR EXERCISING THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ON OTHER POLITICAL GROUNDS

The case of Dmitry Talantov



Grounds for the criminal prosecution of [Dmitry Talantov](#), then president of the Udmurtia Bar Association, were comments he made on Facebook in 2022 regarding the killings of Ukrainian civilians in Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol and Kharkiv, as well as critical remarks he made about Vladimir Putin for unleashing the war of aggression against Ukraine.

Talantov was detained on 28 June 2022 and remanded in custody.

On 28 November 2024, Talantov was found guilty of an offence under Article 207.3, Part 2, CC RF ('Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the armed forces of the Russian Federation') and Article 282, Part 2 [b], CC RF ('Incitement of hatred or enmity by a person using their official position') and sentenced to seven years in a general regime penal colony. On 31 October 2025, the term of imprisonment was marginally reduced on appeal to **six years and 10 months**.

The case of Vladislav Zavgorodny



A lawyer from Kaliningrad Oblast, [Vladislav Zavgorodny](#), was remanded in custody in March 2025 on a charge of 'publicly calling for people to engage in terrorist activities on the internet' (Article 205.2, Part 2, CC RF) for a comment in which he



expressed regret that a Ukrainian drone had not struck members of the country's top leadership during a strike against Russian territory.

A military court found Zavgorodny guilty but imposed a fine of **390,000 roubles** rather than a term of imprisonment. The prosecutor appealed, seeking a sentence of five years and six months' imprisonment. However, the sentence was upheld.



The case of Nikolai Polozov



The lawyer Nikolai Polozov was sentenced in absentia to **eight years and six months**’ imprisonment.

He was [found guilty](#) of ‘discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation’ on grounds of political hatred (Article 207.3, Part 2 [e], CC RF) for an interview in which he spoke out about the killings of civilians in Bucha.

The case Vladimir Sorokin



On 6 September 2025, the lawyer and member of the regional bureau of the Yabloko party, [Vladimir Sorokin](#), was arrested in Kaliningrad.

He was charged with ‘financing extremist activities’ (Article 282.3 CC RF) for an alleged donation of 500 roubles to the Anti-Corruption Foundation.

The pre-trial conditions imposed on Sorokin were a **prohibition of certain actions**.



PROSECUTION ON CHARGES OF TERRORIST ACTIVITY FOR SUPPORTING UKRAINE

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, criminal cases have been regularly brought against lawyers in Russia for supporting Ukraine. In addition to the above-mentioned criminal cases against Maria Bontsler and Dmitry Talantov, there are several known instances of lawyers being prosecuted on charges of committing terrorist offences.

Given the delay in information about cases of this kind becoming publicly available, there is reason to believe the number of such cases is higher than we know at present.

The case of Vladislav Radchenko



On 22 October 2025, a court in Izhevsk remanded the local lawyer [Vladislav Radchenko](#), a former deputy prosecutor in the Balezinsky district of the Republic of Udmurtia, in custody.

He had been arrested in September 2025 and charged with participating in the activities of a terrorist organisation (Article 205.5, Part 2, CC RF).

[According to the investigative authorities](#), Vladislav Radchenko



in 2025 assisted a terrorist organisation banned in Russia by providing information of interest regarding the activities of law enforcement agencies and the Ministry of Defence on the territory of the Udmurt Republic,' 'held a negative view of Russia's political leadership and the conduct of the special military operation' and 'expressed support for the armed formations, the policy and the current authorities of Ukraine.

FSB reports also claimed Radchenko held a negative view of the Russian political leadership and the war, justified acts of sabotage at defence industry facilities and expressed support for Ukraine.



The case of Oleg Stepanov



A lawyer from the city of Chebarkul in Chelyabinsk Oblast, [Oleg Stepanov](#), was convicted under administrative law of ‘discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation’ and fined for holding a [single-person anti-war picket](#) following the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By his protest, he had hoped to persuade his colleagues to speak out publicly against the war.

For his civic stance, Stepanov was forced to [emigrate](#) from Russia.

However, on 30 January 2026 he returned to the country for family reasons and was arrested at Sochi airport and jailed on trumped-up administrative-law charges. Having served his jail term, he was arrested on criminal charges and on 13 February was remanded in custody.

Oleg Stepanov has been [charged](#) with ‘participating in the activities of a terrorist organisation’ (Article 205.5, Part 2, CC RF).

■ His criminal prosecution is likely linked to his **support for Ukraine**.



The criminal cases of Ilya Novikov and Dmitry Zakhvatov in absentia



A criminal case was brought against Ilya Novikov, who resides in Ukraine, for ‘discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation’ (Article 207.3, Part 2, CC RF) because he spoke out about the killings of civilians in Bucha in an interview. Novikov was [sentenced in absentia](#) to **eight years and six months**’ imprisonment, with a four-year ban on practising as a lawyer on release.

In addition, Ilya Novikov is under investigation on criminal charges of ‘[treason](#) in the form of defecting to the enemy’ (Article 275 CC RF) and ‘aiding terrorist activities’ (Article 205.1, Part 1, CC RF).

He has been remanded in custody in absentia.



The lawyer Dmitry Zakhvatov has also been remanded in custody in absentia and placed on a wanted list on charges of ‘terrorism’.

Together with former Moscow municipal deputy Maria Solyonova, [Zakhvatov has been charged](#) under Article 205.1, Part 4, CC RF (‘Facilitation of terrorist activities’), Article 280.4, Part 2 [a, c], CC RF (‘Public calls to carry out activities directed against state security’) and Article 205. 2, Part 2, CC RF (‘Public calls to engage in terrorism and its justification’) in connection with the activities of the Action 4 Life charitable foundation, which supports Ukraine and of which Zakhvatov is a co-founder.

The lawyers Dmitry Zakhvatov and Ilya Novikov have been prosecuted for their anti-war civic stance and activities in **support of Ukraine**.



OTHER FORMS OF POLITICALLY MOTIVATED PERSECUTION OF LAWYERS

There are currently 12 lawyers on the ‘foreign agent’ register (including those whose status was revoked because of one or another form of prosecution).

■ All of them were **forced to leave** Russia.

Another frequently used form of pressure against lawyers is revocation of their right to practice on the basis of the ‘Law on the Legal Profession’ that came into force in 2024. This provides for termination of a lawyer’s status if they leave the Russian Federation for a period exceeding one year ‘without valid reason.’ This allows for the revocation of the right to practice in cases where lawyers have been forced to leave Russia because of persecution by the authorities.

Examples of the repressive application of this provision include the revocation of the status of lawyers [Irina Gak](#) and [Olga Gnezdilova](#). Irina Gak left Russia in 2023 after her home was searched in connection with the case of activist [Anatoly Berezikov](#), for whom she was acting as defence counsel. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Berezikov committed suicide in a remand prison, but Gak claimed Berezikov’s body showed signs of having been subjected to a stun gun and torture. Olga Gnezdilova was also involved in human rights work, including after she left Russia, representing Ukrainian citizens in the occupied territories and Ukrainian children abducted to Russia before the European Court of Human Rights.

A [ruling](#) by Khamovniki district court in Moscow in April 2026 set a worrying precedent in revoking the status of lawyers Aleksei Basistov, Dmitry Provodin and Yuli Tay because of their residence abroad.

When the Moscow Bar Association refused to comply with the Ministry of Justice’s request to strip these lawyers of their status, the Ministry appealed this decision in court. Even though under the Law on the Legal Profession termination of a lawyer’s status falls within the exclusive competence of bar associations, the court considered itself entitled to intervene in these legal relations.

Another new provision of the Law on the Legal Profession restricts travel outside the Russian Federation for lawyers with access to classified information in the ‘top secret’ and ‘especially important’ categories. [According to the First Department human rights project](#), since October 2024 such travel restrictions have been imposed on more than 200 lawyers working on cases involving state secrets, and this number is constantly increasing. In practice, this means many lawyers have been forced to withdraw from cases involving state secrets, which encompasses virtually all cases of treason and related offences.

On 13 May 2026, the Ministry of Justice [added the International Association of Russian Lawyers](#), registered in France, to its register of ‘undesirable organisations.’ The main aim of the Association is to protect the rights of Russian lawyers and to promote the implementation of international standards in the legal profession. The association’s leaders include the prominent Russian lawyers Karina Moskalenko, Andrei Ragulin, Vadim Prokhorov, Larisa Move and Leonid Krikun.



CONCLUSION

The independent legal profession in Russia, like other civil society institutions, is under increasing pressure from the Russian state.

Lawyers who continue to work in such difficult conditions and provide legal assistance in politically motivated criminal cases are subject to various forms of pressure and persecution for their professional activities and civic stance.

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