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Still holding on amidst growing digital repression?

Conditions for civic engagement in Russia

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Executive summary

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many civic initiatives within Russia have remained active, though they have become increasingly fragmented and less visible. They have sought to navigate the boundaries set by the authorities while holding on to some hope of limited political engagement. Over the past two years, however, the situation has deteriorated significantly, compelling independent civic activity to operate in an environment defined by expanding digital surveillance, increasingly unpredictable repression, and a deepening climate of fear.

It is not only the scale of repression that has changed, but also its nature. The legal framework has become more punitive: sentences are harsher, detention without trial is used more frequently, and existing laws are being applied in new ways. Selective, and in some cases retrospective, enforcement makes it more difficult for civic actors to assess risk and to distinguish between what is formally prohibited and what may subsequently become punishable.

Digital repression is also being fundamentally reshaped. Rather than simply blocking content and applications, the system is moving towards a model that may ultimately permit only state-controlled apps that are fully transparent to the authorities. The growing reliance on VPNs and encryption has pushed communication into a legal grey area and raised the technical barrier to participation. Pressure on Telegram is particularly significant, as the platform serves not only as a messaging service but also as a key channel for independent information. A complete blockage now appears likely.

Taken together, these developments represent a decisive tightening of control, shrinking the reach of independent messaging, deepening the isolation of civic initiatives, and increasing the visibility of both networks and content to the authorities.

These changes have reshaped civic behaviour. Many activists organise their lives around anticipated repression. Engagement has shifted towards local, issue-based and less sensitive areas. Local protests continue, channelling discontent but not directly challenging the system. Under current conditions, the priority for many independent actors is not political transformation, but the preservation of relationships, practices and capacities for a future window of opportunity. This new level of repression and digital surveillance requires a revised set of approaches and support strategies, as outlined in this report.

Consolidating digital control

Since 2025, the Russian state has significantly tightened its control over the internet and digital communications. This reflects a structural shift towards a more state-controlled model of the internet, in which the authorities seek not only to block content but also to monitor individual users.

The authorities have combined domain, IP and URL blocking with more sophisticated techniques such as deep packet inspection (DPI), protocol blocking and traffic throttling. Mobile internet shutdowns are now common not only in the regions of Russia, but also in Moscow and St Petersburg. The state justifies these measures on national security grounds, often citing protection against Ukrainian drone attacks, although the technical basis for such claims is unclear. During shutdowns, selected applications on so-called whitelists continue to function, steering users towards state-controlled channels.

Pressure on foreign messaging platforms has also intensified markedly. WhatsApp, previously the most widely used messaging application, with up to 100 million users, was fully blocked in February this year following months of sustained restrictions. There are reports that it has since functioned intermittently, likely reflecting the limited capacity of existing blocking tools to handle an expanding number of targeted applications. Many expect a period of irregular disruption and partial restoration until the system can operate at full capacity.

Telegram, widely used by the public, journalists and the military, has been periodically throttled and restricted, and there are growing indications that a full block may be imminent. Other major platforms, including YouTube, also face persistent throttling and intermittent disruption. Access to these foreign services now largely depends on VPNs, which millions of users continue to rely on despite tightening restrictions on their use and the growing political stigma associated with having them installed. These measures coincide with the promotion of MAX, a state-backed messaging platform, and continued efforts to encourage a shift to domestic alternatives such as VK Video and RuTube.

According to consulted experts, digital surveillance has already been more extensive than many civil society activists, independent journalists, or their sources have realised. The introduction of whitelisted applications now enables a new level of monitoring, tracking communication, internet behaviour, and content consumption. In addition to blocking communication platforms and restricting mobile internet access, digital repression is increasingly targeting individual users.

New regulations expand identification requirements, reduce anonymity, and facilitate profiling. Biometric monitoring systems are rapidly being deployed across the country and are already used to identify participants in protests. In the Moscow region, migrant workers are required to use biometric geolocation tags, allowing authorities to track their movements with ease. These systems also simplify the pursuit of administrative or criminal cases, whether related to physical presence at protests or meetings, or to accessing content labelled as “extremist” or linked to organisations designated as “undesirable.”

In addition to increased digital surveillance, law enforcement agencies routinely seize and examine electronic devices during detentions, border checks and other security procedures, contributing to a chilling effect around the visible use of encryption or circumvention tools. New legal provisions allow the authorities to disconnect individual users from the internet entirely.

The next likely step in this trajectory is the introduction of a more permanent whitelist model, in which access is determined by what is explicitly permitted rather than what is prohibited. Such a system would entail blanket restrictions on foreign platforms and tighter controls on VPNs and other circumvention tools, effectively reversing the existing logic of internet governance.

Targeting Telegram

Recent restrictions on Telegram have heightened concern among civic activists, journalists and those who rely on independent information channels, particularly at the regional level. Yet Telegram is not only a key platform for opposition and anti-war communication; it also serves as a major vehicle for state propaganda and hosts an extensive network of channels supporting the war effort. Any serious disruption would therefore affect not only regime critics but also state-aligned media and pro-war bloggers, reducing their audiences and potentially weakening the broader pro-war volunteer ecosystem. This, in turn, raises questions about the timing of these measures and the rationale for introducing them now.

One possible explanation for a future shutdown of Telegram is linked to the prospect of forced mobilisation. In such a scenario, the effects of expanded digital controls would be immediately visible. Compared with the "partial" mobilisation of 2022, a more tightly controlled digital environment would make it significantly harder to circulate practical information on draft avoidance, routes out of the country or which border crossings remain open. Targeted disruptions would also constrain the rapid, large-scale sharing of legal and logistical guidance, while state-controlled platforms would not provide secure channels for such communication.

Restrictions on Telegram ahead of the parliamentary elections in September raise questions about the political logic of tightening control over large-scale information flows at a time when the authorities would normally prioritise stability and predictability. Because Telegram also serves as a key channel for state propaganda, such a move risks alienating not only opposition-minded users, but also pro-regime audiences, content producers and pro-war volunteer networks. It is already evident that these measures are unpopular with different Telegram audiences.

In Russia's electoral cycle, repression is often moderated ahead of presidential elections, while parliamentary elections can function as a testing ground for new mechanisms of control. From this perspective, pre-emptive restrictions, including tighter digital controls or even a platform ban, might be viewed as acceptable instruments of risk management. Some civic activists within the country also point to broader fears of social instability, including tensions that could arise if large numbers of demobilised veterans return from the war. In such circumstances, a widely used communication tool that enables rapid mobilisation and information sharing may be viewed by the authorities less as an asset than as a potential threat.

Escalating repression

Alongside expanding technical restrictions on communication and information flows, the authorities are increasingly relying on law enforcement and prosecutorial tools to deter and punish independent initiatives. One notable change has been a sharp increase in the severity of punishments. Early speech-related cases following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine were often prosecuted under provisions on "fake news" or "discrediting" the armed forces. These typically resulted in fines or shorter prison terms. Since 2024, similar statements have increasingly been prosecuted under broader and more severe charges, such as extremism, participation in "undesirable organisations" and, in some cases, treason. Sentences in such cases now frequently reach six to eight years or more.

The use of pre-trial detention has become a central mechanism of coercion in political cases. Human rights defenders report that suspects are increasingly being held in custody rather than placed under house arrest, often for extended periods before a verdict is reached. In practice, this places additional pressure on defendants regardless of the eventual outcome. It has also reshaped the profile of political prisoners in Russia today, as many remain in detention for long periods without trial and, in some cases, are subjected to repeated short-term detentions described by activists and independent media as "carousel detentions".

One important shift is linked not to new legislation, but to the broader use of existing legal provisions. Provisions in the administrative code related to public events alleged to obstruct transport have been used to justify repeated detentions, including in widely publicised cases involving street musicians in St Petersburg and other gatherings with no obvious political character. This development reflects not so much the adoption of new laws as a more expansive and punitive use of existing legislation.

State pressure is also increasingly being exercised beyond legal codes using commercial and civil law mechanisms. The regulatory changes introduced in response to foreign sanctions have weakened many domestic safeguards, including environmental protections, giving business greater leverage and narrowing the space for local watchdog and advocacy work. At the same time, private complaints can trigger official investigations, turning what appear to be private disputes into matters of state enforcement.

Economic pressure has become another important channel of repression applied through civil lawsuits, including claims of defamation and reputational damage. Even if dismissed, such cases can impose substantial financial and psychological costs on activists and organisations. A particularly severe form of pressure is visible in areas affected by natural resource extraction, where state and private sector companies are implicated in environmental damage and the intimidation of local populations.

Human rights reporting indicates a further weakening of procedural safeguards in political cases. Even the limited protections previously observed in many proceedings, such as predictable court procedures, public hearings or consistent access to legal counsel, are often bypassed or restricted. As a result, legal proceedings increasingly prioritise rapid punitive outcomes over maintaining even a minimal appearance of legality.

Informal intimidation has become an equally important element of the repressive toolkit. The Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Centre for Combating Extremism, a specialised unit within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, routinely summon individuals for so-called "informal talks", during which they are warned, intimidated or questioned. While these bodies conduct operational and investigative activities, and formal criminal cases are nominally overseen and prosecuted by the General Prosecutor's Office, such practices frequently take place outside established legal procedures. This reflects the broader trend in which even the appearance of legality is eroding. Such encounters reinforce the perception that civic actors are under constant observation.

Repressive measures are applied unevenly and unpredictably. Some activists remain active for years before suddenly facing prosecution, while others are targeted immediately. This pattern may partly reflect the fragmented and imperfect nature of Russia's administrative system, but the effect is clear. Vague rules combined with selective enforcement make it difficult to assess risk.

Taken together, these developments indicate a broader shift in enforcement practices, in which the system has increasingly abandoned the pretense of legality and blurred the boundaries of what is permissible. The result is an environment marked by uncertainty and fear.

Effect on independent civil society

First, the tightening of digital controls affects civil society by narrowing access to independent information. In an already deteriorating digital environment, pressure on Telegram is particularly consequential because the platform functions not only as a private messaging service, but also as a key distribution channel through which information can rapidly reach large audiences. As access to independent information becomes more unstable and increasingly dependent on VPNs, audiences will shrink to those willing and able to overcome technical barriers. In regions without independent media, Telegram channels have become central to the dissemination of independent news and quality journalism.

Second, digital repression makes everyday communication more technically demanding and more legally uncertain. Everyday communication increasingly takes place in a legal grey zone because it depends on circumvention tools such as VPNs. As people come to rely more heavily on VPNs, encryption tools and alternative platforms, the costs in time and effort steadily increase, undermining everyday communication as many grow tired of constant platform changes and unreliable VPNs. As a result, civic actors face a growing tension between maintaining secure communication and preserving broad outreach.

This pressure forces civic actors to choose between security and outreach. In response, organisations and individuals adopt different precautionary strategies. Some reduce communication, withdraw from less secure platforms and accept diminished outreach as the price of staying under the radar. Security protocols are introduced to minimise digital traces in anticipation of possible contact with state authorities. However, even when the core members of an initiative use secure tools, networks are weakened if their audiences and supporters cannot do the same and continue to rely on non-secure communication channels. As a result, communication is pushed into smaller and harder-to-access networks, reducing visibility and weakening connections with established audiences.

At the same time, these developments produce a number of unintended consequences. Over time, widespread familiarity with such practices can strengthen society's capacity for discreet information sharing and coordination. When necessary, activists may turn to public Wi-Fi to send encrypted or coded messages or even revert to analogue forms of communication if internet access becomes unavailable.

As digital restrictions intensify, maintaining secure communication requires increasing technical knowledge and constant adaptation. Guidance that once worked at scale is no longer sufficient, and activists often require individualised support to navigate VPNs, encryption tools and platform restrictions. This creates a widening capacity gap. A small group with strong digital skills can adapt, while others gradually lose access to secure communication channels and fall silent. In effect, repression raises the technical threshold for civic participation.

A more consequential effect of repression is growing uncertainty about what is punishable. Many civic actors struggle to distinguish between what is formally prohibited and what is simply politically stigmatised or considered dangerous by authorities playing catch-up. This uncertainty is reinforced by the way in which certain legal categories appear to operate retroactively in practice, even though the Russian Constitution formally prohibits retrospective criminal law. When organisations are later designated "extremist" or "undesirable", past donations, and social media posts or expressions of support made before the designation have in some cases been used as grounds for administrative or criminal proceedings. As a result, activists cannot reliably predict how actions considered routine today might be judged in the future.

One important driver of this anxiety is the expanding use of legal designations such as extremist or terrorist. Entire areas of civic engagement are now subject to heightened scrutiny. Work on reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and Indigenous or non-Russian ethnic advocacy has become particularly vulnerable as such movements have been designated extremist. As a result, activities that appear lawful at the time can later become grounds for prosecution under newly applied legal categories. Liability could arise not only from a specific action, but also from involvement in fields of activity that are subsequently politically targeted.

The variety of legal labels, with their differing definitions and consequences, can also create confusion. Terms such as foreign agent, extremist or terrorist, although distinct in a legal sense, increasingly merge in public perception into a single category associated with danger and stigma. For many activists and journalists, designation as a foreign agent, once burdensome but manageable, now often leads to professional exclusion and social isolation, in addition to the far more serious risks of persecution and imprisonment. This confusion, and the caution it engenders, reflects both genuine legal risks and the broader informational environment in which those risks are interpreted. Activists are also exposed to disinformation, rumour and emotionally charged messaging that amplify perceptions of danger. Some propaganda narratives explicitly portray independent initiatives as extremist or unpatriotic, reinforcing a sense of risk, while others operate more subtly by fostering mistrust and encouraging activists to self-censor and internalise official interpretations of political events.

The shift in repressive mechanisms described above has significantly altered how activists assess risk. Many describe preparing for the possibility of detention or imprisonment by arranging family contingencies, packing emergency bags and mentally preparing for incarceration. The climate of caution is further reinforced by increased scrutiny of financial transactions and surveillance of both online and offline activity. Donations and money transfers are widely seen as risky, and activists increasingly avoid submitting information or complaints through official digital platforms. Many fear that traceable identities could later become liabilities if stored data is used in investigations or reclassified cases.

As a result, many civic actors avoid actions that only two years ago were considered routine. Submitting formal complaints, requesting information from the authorities or publicly raising concerns about the environmental or social consequences of government decisions are increasingly viewed as risky. Even where formal legal consequences appear limited, many prefer to avoid attracting attention. In practice, activists often refrain from actions that are still technically legal but might later be reinterpreted as violations. Under these conditions, uncertainty and perceived risk increasingly shape patterns of civic action and individual behaviour.

Taken together, legal pressure and information manipulation reinforce defensive behaviour and discourage engagement. As a result, many civic actors believe that the space for independent activity will continue to shrink. Current conditions invite comparison with aspects of the Soviet period, when fear of repression shaped everyday life. These continue to inform perceptions of what the state is capable of, but this is not simply a return to the past. After several decades over which such dynamics had receded, accounts collected in recent years highlight the emergence of a new form of fear not previously experienced in post-Soviet Russia. This points to a broader shift to a more coercive system of governance, where perceived risks go beyond what the law formally allows at any given moment. In such conditions, organising collective action, advocating for change, even in less sensitive policy areas, or simply addressing local problems become increasingly difficult.

Effect on protest and political engagement

Everyday practical concerns reinforce the climate of caution described above. This winter, for example, Russia has seen a noticeable increase in infrastructure and service breakdowns in several regions, including Moscow, where disruption to local train and bus services has caused long queues, and inadequate snow clearance has led to a collapse in waste collection in large residential complexes. The country remains heavily dependent on Soviet-era heating systems, electricity grids, water networks, housing, railways and bridges. Although this infrastructure has proved more durable than many expected, much of it is steadily deteriorating.

Rising prices, reduced public spending in the civilian sector and widening inequalities between regions and social groups affected differently by wartime spending are contributing to growing unease among the population. Concerns about demobilised veterans returning from the war with untreated trauma and a perceived sense of impunity further reinforce this sense of instability.

These pressures rarely translate into overt political protest. Localised protests continue across towns and regions, often triggered by the failure of utilities or other infrastructure, or by the closure of local medical facilities. Where protests do emerge, participants typically direct their appeals to Vladimir Putin while placing blame on local or regional authorities, rather than on the political system as a whole or the decision to invade Ukraine. Nonetheless, an increasing number of citizens do implicitly link deteriorating public services and infrastructure to the financial burden of the war.

What political engagement remains has become cautious, localised and pragmatic. Most of the civic activists interviewed for this report express a deep scepticism about electoral politics. Expectations surrounding the upcoming parliamentary elections are correspondingly low, as federal politics is widely seen as tightly controlled. This marks a clear shift from the mobilisation around Boris Nadezhdin's anti-war presidential bid in 2024 and earlier initiatives such as Ekaterina Duntsova's campaign, which briefly generated visible public engagement through queues and signature collection drives.

Confidence in exiled political figures is low. Many activists inside Russia doubt that opposition leaders abroad can meaningfully understand or influence domestic developments. Calls from abroad for political mobilisation, confrontational protest or strategic participation in elections are often seen as disconnected from realities on the ground, and as increasing the risks for those who remain in Russia. Civil society actors inside the country see large-scale mobilisation as constrained less by a lack of discontent than by the widespread perception that mass political protest is both futile and dangerous. Activists with experience of earlier protest waves see little point in calling people on to the streets, as the most likely outcome would be more political prisoners and intensified repression rather than meaningful political change.

In this context, moral condemnation from exile communities of those involved in or supporting the war is often met with growing ambivalence, frequently expressed in phrases such as “it’s not that simple”. This response reflects not only the effects of propaganda, which blurs responsibility and weakens clear moral judgement, but also growing scepticism about those living in exile. Even actors with explicitly anti-regime and anti-war views sometimes reproduce anti-western clichés promoted by Kremlin propaganda, such as claims about externally imposed agendas and donor dependency among civil society actors or independent media. These narratives resonate not simply because of ideological convergence, but because they intersect with real experiences of organisational dependency and rupture following the loss of foreign funding in 2022. At the same time, many civic actors inside Russia remain focused on preserving ties with people who hold opposing views on the war and the regime, seeing these relationships as necessary in order to address deeper structural problems rather than further fragment society.

Some activists express cautious hope that parts of the political or economic elite in Moscow might push for adjustments to current policies. This is not primarily seen as a path to systemic change, but rather as a limited recalibration of the existing system, potentially including pressure to end the war. These expectations are often tied to concerns about economic strain, the need to reinvest in civilian sectors and the mounting financial costs of the war.

Under current repressive conditions, political expectations are limited and pragmatic. Rather than anticipating major change, many civic actors focus on managing risks, addressing local problems where possible and navigating an increasingly uncertain political landscape.

Effect on media consumption

Patterns of media consumption reflect a similarly pragmatic approach. Independent media operating from abroad are still valued, but in an increasingly selective manner. Some activists continue to rely on outlets such as Meduza, Mediazona or the SOTA Project for factual reporting on international developments and repression inside Russia. However, many now follow them less regularly than before. Content produced abroad is often seen as too narrowly focused on war and repression, and as increasingly disconnected from everyday life inside the country.

As a result, many citizens have diversified their media use. Independent media outlets from abroad are combined with state-controlled outlets and domestically based, relatively neutral Telegram channels that share lifestyle content, local news and everyday information. Many consult multiple sources to compare narratives, reduce information gaps and maintain a broader sense of ordinary life under conditions of prolonged crisis. In this sense, diversification reflects not only scepticism towards any single source of information but also fatigue with media agendas that feel emotionally exhausting or too narrow.

This shift does not amount to a complete rejection of exile-produced content. Several interviewees noted that they remain interested in analysis produced by those who have left Russia but are far less receptive to political messaging or appeals directed at people inside the country, telling them what they should do or feel about the war in Ukraine. Exiled voices therefore appear to retain value primarily as interpreters rather than as moral or political guides to action. Figures such as Ekaterina Shulman and interviewers like Yuri Dud remain influential because they provide analysis or elicit reflections that audiences continue to find meaningful.

This selective use of exiled media also reflects a broader rupture between domestic civic actors and expatriate environments. The turn to local and lifestyle media sources reflects more than changing media preferences. As with civic engagement more broadly, regionally focused outlets, particularly small Telegram channels and Instagram accounts run by local initiatives, are often seen as the most relevant and useful under conditions of polarising messaging and digital repression.

Changes in how Russian civil society actors consume media are not just about censorship or access. They also reflect shifts in attention, trust and what people see as relevant. In this new political environment, using a wider range of media is not simply a sign of openness, but a practical way of coping with uncertainty, disillusionment and emotional fatigue.

Reconfigured civic engagement

Two years ago, many observers believed that civil society inside Russia would continue to adapt, albeit at significant cost and in a weakened form, and ultimately survive. While the determination to persist remains, awareness of the risks has grown. As a result, independent activity has been pushed into less visible and safer forms.

One important consequence has been a further shift into areas still regarded as less politically sensitive. To reduce their exposure to repression, many activists have resorted to self-censorship and redirected their work towards fields such as animal welfare, environmental protection, cultural heritage, local history and artistic initiatives. These areas can, at times, allow civic engagement to continue while avoiding direct confrontation with the authorities. This does not mean that such work is entirely apolitical. However, civic activity is increasingly presented as such and channelled into domains where it can still survive with less immediate risk.

At the same time, independent groups working on humanitarian issues, including domestic violence prevention, support for people with disabilities and responses to environmental emergencies, continue to operate but face growing administrative and legal pressures. Their independence alone attracts scrutiny, requiring careful framing of activities and cautious interaction with state institutions. In this sense, the narrowing of civic space affects not only overtly political actors, but also organisations engaged in practical forms of social support.

This pressure has also reshaped the organisational and financial basis of civic work. Foreign funding has become particularly risky, as even limited contact with international organisations designated as “undesirable” can have serious legal repercussions. Most civil society initiatives now rely on domestic funding sources, businesses or informal support networks. For a growing number of activists, civic engagement is no longer a full-time profession, but an activity pursued alongside other employment or small-scale commercial work to remain financially viable. This demonstrates a broader de-professionalisation of independent civic activity and a growing dependence on personal commitment.

Independent cultural spaces have acquired growing importance as some of the few remaining arenas in which sensitive social and political themes can be addressed in public. Cultural actors and artists active in these spaces are among the few able to sustain such discussions. Literature and small cultural festivals, independent bookshops and other autonomous venues provide opportunities for open dialogue and critical reflection. These spaces function as meeting points for like-minded individuals but their visibility makes them vulnerable to surveillance by the state authorities.

In these arenas, political expression increasingly relies on meanings conveyed between the lines, echoing practices from the Soviet period. To minimise legal risks, discussions often turn to allegory, fantasy and science fiction as a way of exploring moral dilemmas and possible futures without explicit reference to contemporary political realities. As participants often note, "those who understand, understand". Small-format publications, including samizdat-style, self-published zines, have also regained popularity as lower-visibility formats that tend to attract readers actively seeking alternative perspectives.

The findings of this report show that the civic sphere within Russia has once again been reshaped under a new type and intensity of pressure. Independent initiatives now operate in an environment characterised by extensive digital surveillance and an increasingly unpredictable repressive legal system that is steadily abandoning even the facade of legality. The push towards a "sovereign internet" appears to be accelerating and could once again fundamentally reshape the conditions for independent engagement. Civic actors today prioritise the preservation of networks, skills and civic practices. Their efforts focus less on immediate political change than on maintaining relationships and forms of cooperation that might prove crucial in the future.

Policy recommendations

Independent civic actors and journalists inside Russia are operating under sustained and intensifying pressure. At the same time, they remain among the few sources of reliable insight into political, social, and security-related developments within the country. For European governments and institutions, supporting them is not merely a matter of values; it also has direct implications for European security, the quality of policymaking, and the longer-term prospects for stability in Europe.

Engagement, however, carries real risks. Even limited or symbolic contact can expose partners inside Russia to legal repercussions or physical danger. European institutions, national authorities, and funding bodies should adopt a "do no harm" approach as their starting point. Any cooperation must be carefully risk-assessed, grounded in a realistic understanding of conditions on the ground, and designed to minimise visibility. Support should also remain flexible and capable of adapting quickly as circumstances evolve.

- **Prioritise digital resilience**

  Digital pressure is now central to how control is exercised in Russia. Access is restricted, communication is monitored, and the technical and legal thresholds for participation are steadily increasing. Supporting digital resilience is therefore not a technical add-on but a core requirement.

  European institutions and national digital rights initiatives in the EU member states should focus on ensuring that secure communication tools are not just available, but usable in practice. This should involve supporting safe content distribution, providing hands-on guidance and assisting users with varying levels of digital competence. Investment in circumvention tools is important, but its value depends on reliable, practical use by targeted communities.

  Rather than merely a domestic policy shift, the push for a sovereign internet in Russia should be seen as a development with significant implications for European security. These implications require urgent analysis and clearer definition and warrant close monitoring by EU and member state authorities.

- **Maintain and strengthen legal capacity**

  Legal pressure on civic activity in Russia has become more widespread and severe, and less predictable. In this environment, independent human rights lawyers remain one of the few lines of defence.

  European and like-minded support should focus on strengthening what is already proving effective: legal defence, case monitoring, strategic litigation and documentation. These are not abstract priorities but practical, day-to-day tools that make a tangible difference in individual cases.

  Attention should be paid to Ukrainian civilians unlawfully detained on Russian territory, as well as to other groups facing heightened risk such as non-Russian journalists and activists. Sustaining legal expertise will be crucial beyond the immediate context, as it will be essential if opportunities for accountability or future transitional justice processes arise.

- **Strengthen independent journalism and the flow of information**

  Access to reliable information in Russia is narrowing. Audiences are fragmenting, platforms are restricted and independent distribution is becoming as important as independent content. European and like-minded support for independent journalism must reflect this reality. It is not enough to fund reporting and exiled media platforms; it will also be necessary to ensure that these can reach audiences. This will require new creative approaches to supporting – directly or indirectly – the survival of smaller, decentralised and regional channels that currently mainly operate on Telegram, as well as the tools and formats that allow content to circulate under increased digital censorship.

  The safety and security of the journalists and sources in Russia who contribute to independent media platforms is paramount. Reliable information from within Russia is essential for countering disinformation about the war in Ukraine, and for understanding developments on the ground as they unfold. It also directly contributes to European resilience against hybrid threats and to the quality of policymaking on sanctions and other areas of European security.

- **Avoid high-visibility formats**

  Established formats for international dialogue are ineffective and, in most cases, counterproductive as they involve incorporating Kremlin perspectives on global issues such as health or climate change. They are instrumentalised by the Russian state for legitimacy-building and the dissemination of disinformation.

  Where it is important to maintain engagement with Russian civil society, this should be discreet, selective and grounded in trust. This involves working through intermediaries with established relationships and a clear understanding of the risks, rather than relying on formal platforms. Such engagement can provide European and international actors with access to information and data from independent Russian sources, helping to counter Russian state narratives. It also helps to mitigate the growing isolation of independent civic actors in Russia.

- **Don't isolate independent civic actors**

  The increased isolation of independent civic actors in Russia is not merely a side-effect of repression; it is a fundamental feature of how the system operates. Under current circumstances, civic activity is becoming increasingly localised and fragmented. Supporting connections between actors is important but must be approached carefully. This means strengthening risk-aware links between regions, particularly beyond larger population centres where isolation is often most pronounced. Where feasible and safe, in-person contact between actors from different regions can play a crucial role in sustaining civic activity across the country. This low-visibility, trust-based networking is essential. Such connections help to preserve knowledge, skills and working practices that would otherwise be lost.

- **Support independent research**

  Reliable data from inside Russia is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, which makes independent research both necessary and more challenging. National research councils in Europe, EU funding programmes, state agencies and private foundations should prioritise research that can operate under severe constraints. This means developing risk-aware and methodologically robust ways of working in highly restricted environments, as well as providing institutional and financial support to sustain research capacity. This is not just a matter of knowledge production. It is about preserving the ability to track and understand long-term developments in Russian society, from public attitudes to regional inequalities and governance trends, and ensuring that European policy responses remain grounded in credible evidence.

This report is a follow-up to Ingvarsson & Kalinina (2024), which argued that independent civic initiatives inside Russia persisted after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but had become more fragmented and harder to map. It provides an updated picture based on recent analysis, based on the observations and interviews conducted within the framework of a larger research project financed by the Baltic Sea Foundation between December 2025 and January 2026. The focus is on the changing mechanisms for repression, which narrow the repertoire for action and have a negative effect on civil society's capacity to resist. We would like to thank and acknowledge the work of two independent social researchers working under the pseudonyms Elisa Marin and Oliver Skye, who shared some of their preliminary fundings with us. We are also grateful to Östgruppen for its generous cooperation, as well as to all the experts and colleagues we consulted during this process.

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