

Environmental activists in Russia are under increasing pressure

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Vyacheslav Egorov, aged 44, was sentenced on 14 October 2021 in the first instance by the Kolomna municipal court to 15 months in prison. This sentence was confirmed on appeal on 17 February 2022. His crime: to have organised, in 2018, several peaceful demonstrations in this town in the Moscow region, to protest against the extension of a rubbish dump next to his home.

On appeal, the prosecution asked for the sentence to be increased to three years. "Do not rejoice that the court didn't increase his sentence as the prosecutors had asked," his lawyer Maria Eismont commented on Facebook after the verdict. "Because an innocent man is in prison, simply for wanting his city to breathe fresh air instead of the stink of rubbish."

Placed under house arrest in February 2019, without leave, this environmental activist, local entrepreneur and father-of-three was released six months later. But the charges against him had not been dropped. He was convicted under Article 212.1 of the Russian Criminal Code, which provides for criminal prosecution in the event of at least three violations of the law on public gatherings within six months. [Human rights defenders](#) say this is illegal and unconstitutional.

Being an environmental activist in Russia has never been easy. Industrial pollution, environmental degradation and health problems are truths that the Russian government has always tried to hide. Recently, however, the repression of activists has become increasingly unbridled.

"The most active eco-activists can be confronted with a frightening series of criminal cases," laments Natalia Zviagina, director of Amnesty International's Moscow office.

In April 2021, Andrei Borovikov was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for "disseminating pornographic material". The case concerned a video clip of the German metal band Rammstein that he had posted – seven years earlier – on his account on the Russian social network VKontakte. Human rights groups have denounced the persecution of the environmental activist from Arkhangelsk, who is also the former head of 'Navalny HQ', one of the regional offices of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Andrei Borovikov, 33, had been very active in the protest movement, which began in 2018, against a project to build a huge landfill in Shies in Russia's far north, to store the capital's waste. This was a decision by the Moscow authorities, negotiated with the local governor. In order to prevent its construction, residents and environmental activists built a tent camp near the site, which they occupied day and night for over a year. Anna Chekalova was one of them. This shopkeeper from a nearby village became over the months one of the best-known figures of this popular struggle. Despite her arrest (followed by 15 days in prison) and several arrests of activists, the local mobilisation never wavered and [the authorities finally backed down](#).

Activism in Russia is "dangerous and scary"

"Most environmental disputes in Russia have a common cause. Local authorities do not organise discussions on dangerous projects in a proper and appropriate way. Public debates often take place in a quasi-secret and informal process. Mayors' and governors' offices negotiate with companies without telling anyone," says Amnesty's Zviagina. "Yet, according to the Russian Constitution, nature protection is the duty of citizens. And Russia has recently made the fight against global warming [one of its priorities](#)."

"Achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement is impossible without respect for basic human rights. And without Russia too," climate activist Arshak Makichyan [recalled on Twitter](#) on the day of Vyacheslav Egorov's sentencing. A representative of the Fridays for Future movement in Russia, the former music student, who was destined for a career as a violinist, abandoned his vocation in 2019 to devote himself to the fight against global warming.

Every other Friday, he stands alone with a placard – the only form of spontaneous protest tolerated in Russia – in a central square in Moscow. "Before the pandemic, we had five to seven cities participating in the climate strike every week. Now I am the only climate activist in all of Russia. Again." When he started, Makichyan was alone for weeks before others joined the Fridays for Future movement.

"Doing any kind of activism in Russia is dangerous and scary, especially in these difficult days. It is a kind of torture: 'They' are watching you. They can do anything. To you, your family or your friends," says the 27-year-old, referring to the constant surveillance and pressure from the authorities.

"Pushkin said that poets in Russia are more than poets. It's the same with activists, but the price you pay is terrible."

Environmental activists are also sometimes victims of physical violence. "In the Kemerovo region of Siberia, unidentified people beat up a man who opposed the expansion of coal mines. In St Petersburg, the car of an activist who was protesting against the cutting of trees was burned," says Zviagina, adding that in such cases "the police never look for the criminals".

Pressure and threats force some activists to flee abroad. Also in the Kemerovo region, journalist Natalia Zubkova was reporting on the dangers of open-cast coal mining for a local news website. Last April, she had to flee to Georgia with her family after an attack and threats against her children.

Alexandra Koroleva left Russia in 2019 to avoid arrest. The head of the Kaliningrad office of Ecodefense, one of Russia's oldest environmental organisations, was granted political refugee status in Germany. In her home country, she was the target of five criminal proceedings related to fines imposed on Ecodefense.

Many NGOs classified as 'foreign agents'

Another means used by the authorities to muzzle any dissenting voice is the 'foreign agent' status. Over the past ten years, more than 30 environmental NGOs have received this infamous label, as a result of which two-thirds have suspended their activities. This law subjects 'agents' to a certain number of heavy constraints, such as specifying the words 'foreign agent' in every publication, including the smallest publication on social networks, on pain of substantial fines, which can reach 500,000 roubles (about €5,700).

The organisation Planet of Hope was targeted in 2015 and closed in 2018. Its leader Nadezhda Kutepova, a lawyer by profession, fought tirelessly for years to have the victims of the 1957 nuclear accident in Mayak, not far from Chelyabinsk, and the contamination from radioactive waste dumped

directly into the Tetcha River, recognised. She won more than 70 cases in the Russian courts, but was harassed and then accused of industrial espionage. She fled to France in 2015, where she was granted political refugee status in 2016.

Since 2014, the Russian authorities have continued to extend the scope of application of the legislation on foreign agents while making this status ever more restrictive.

In 2017, it only concerned foreign-funded NGOs, then it was extended to the media and then to individuals. In recent months, two eco-activists have been declared 'foreign agents': Yevgeny Simonov, founder of the international coalition Rivers without Boundaries, and Elena Soloviova, a freelance journalist from the Arkhangelsk region who has written extensively about the Shies protest in the far north.

Despite the crackdown, Russian activists continue to fight. "I've been part of a lot of strikes in the streets of different Russian cities," says Liubov Samilova, a climate activist from St Petersburg. At 22, Liubov has been an activist for three years. "I joined the movement because I started to lead an ecological lifestyle, but I realised that it wasn't enough. Humanity needs systemic changes from local and federal governments and business structures. Climate change is tangible in Russia, people are already suffering from it and the effects will intensify," says the young woman. "However, today the situation has changed. Our political freedoms are extremely restricted, both in our actions and in our freedom of expression. I could not have imagined that we would reach such a level of repression."

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This article has been translated from French by Sara Hammerton

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