

# How Russian authorities are using facial recognition technology to suppress protests

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**In every security manual for partisan rallies, we write about the need to hide your face and learn the locations of city surveillance cameras beforehand. But how can the police identify people instantly from CCTV footage - and is it even legal?**

The sandbox for the introduction of facial recognition in the Russian Federation was Moscow - the first large-scale test of the technology took place at the 2018 FIFA World Cup. City cameras in Moscow were connected to a common base, the Unified Data Storage and Processing Centre. The facial recognition system works in the centre's subsystem, PARSIV, although it is by no means the only facial recognition system used by law enforcement agencies. For example, during detentions of activists and opposition politicians in the metro, it is possible to find references in protocols that they were recognised by the SFERA system. By 2021, the facial recognition system has been implemented in video surveillance not only in Moscow, but also in other major Russian cities - so it is not only activists from the capital that need to be aware of it. After the April protests last year, at least 17 cities reported to the human rights project OVD-info about post-facto detentions based on facial recognition videos from the protests.

<https://reports.ovdinfo.org/kak-vlasti-ispolzuyut-kamery-i-raspoznavanie-lic-protiv-protestuyushchih#1>

1 Of course, new repressive laws are constantly being passed in the Russian Federation, but even under current legislation facial recognition is the processing of biometric personal data, and such processing requires the consent of the individual except in a list of situations where it can be dispensed with. The use of facial recognition technology to search for people in administrative (not criminal) cases is not legal, and the police themselves understand this. That is why they try to avoid any reference to the use of the system in their reports, although they sometimes print in them two images with a percentage of similarity between them indicated. Facial recognition technology is improving all the time - for example with the start of the pandemic the accuracy of recognition has dropped because of masks, but last year there were already cases of activists being detained on camera who were wearing medical masks and were still recognised by the camera. So, unfortunately, the advice to wear a mask at an action can hardly save from the cameras now. Also facial recognition is only one of the recognition technologies being developed in the world: similar technologies make it possible to identify a person by, for example, their gait. Admittedly, this requires at least two videos of a person walking, whereas the database for identifying our faces we ourselves add to on a daily basis by uploading photos to social media.

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