

# Political violence as a norm. No right of opinion

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## Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of cases involving assaults on civil-society activists, politicians and journalists during the past four years. The report covers the period September 2014–early September 2018 and builds on a previous Agora study on the same issue (‘Thugs for hire in Russia: new trends in the hunt for civil-society activists’<sup>1</sup>). The study, authored by lawyer Vitaly Cherkassov, was completed in September 2014. It was then followed by detailed reports produced by OVD-Info (‘Political repression in Russia 2011–2014: extra-judicial persecution’<sup>2</sup>) and by the Centre for Economic and Political Reform (Political violence in modern Russia: assaults on opposition in 2012–2016’<sup>3</sup>). The latter study provides a sufficiently detailed analysis of the key facts during the period 2015–2016, and since the authors are convinced that events in recent years have been shaped by new trends in a quickly changing environment, in the present report we will try to use examples from the period 2016–2018 and where necessary will refer to events from previous years which support the identified trends.

Overall, for the purposes of this report the authors have analysed more than **200** cases in which activists, journalists or politicians have been assaulted or intimidated in **54** Russian regions<sup>4</sup> and in Crimea between September 2014 and September 2018. Moscow, Sankt Petersburg and Krasnodar province (*krai*) emerged as the absolute leaders with 52, 23 and 15 cases, respectively. Five or more cases were registered in each of the following districts (*oblast*): Voronezh, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Chelyabinsk, Sverdlovsk and Kemerovo, and in Stavropol province. Our monitoring revealed that these

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1 [https://republic.ru/russia/izbitye\\_aktivisty-1157725.xhtml](https://republic.ru/russia/izbitye_aktivisty-1157725.xhtml)

2 <http://reports.ovdinfo.org/2014/ej-report/>

3 [goo.gl/ciWw6u](http://goo.gl/ciWw6u)

4 Moscow, Sankt Petersburg; Adygea, Altai, Buryatia, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Karelia, Mordovia, Tatarstan, Chechnya, Yakutia; districts (*oblast*): Astrakhan, Briansk, Vladimir, Volgograd, Vologod, Voronezh, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Kaluga, Kemerovo, Kirovsk, Kostroma, Kurgan, Leningrad, Lipetsk, Magadan, Moscow, Murmansk, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Penza, Omsk, Orenburg, Rostov, Ryazan, Samara, Saratov, Sakhalin, Sverdlovsk, Tomsk, Tyumen, Chelyabinsk, Yaroslavl; provinces (*krai*): Altai, Zabaikalsk, Krasnodar, Krasnoyarsk, Perm, Primorsk, Stavropol, Khabarovsk.

10 regions are the most dangerous ones for civic activities.

**21** assaults and intimidations we reported in 2015. **35** in 2016. **77** in 2017. More than **80** such cases were registered in the first eight and a half months of 2018, including beatings at two massive protest rallies in several Russian cities.

The evidence was obtained from open sources, in particular Mediazona<sup>5</sup> and OVD-Info<sup>6</sup>, which provide detailed accounts of similar occurrences, and social networks, messenger services or attorneys and lawyers who cooperate with human rights organisations.

### License to use violence

On 11 September 2018, army general Victor Zolotov recorded a video address<sup>7</sup> to Alexey Navalny. In his address the general said, inter alia: ‘You **never received a ‘counterpunch’**... Nobody ever gave you a **hit in your buttocks so that you felt it in your liver**... In the officers’ community **it is not acceptable to forgive such things** just like that. From time immemorial scums have been **beaten on the face** and summoned to duels...Simply said, I challenge you to come to an one-on-one fight, ... where I **promise** to make a **nice juicy steak out of you** in the matter of minutes... **Should you dare one more time** to use offending and disgraceful language on me or members of my family, I **promise to you** that before **I stride over you I will rub my feet in you**, and I will make this show in front of all personnel of Rosgvardiya... I **do deliver on my promises so do not trouble trouble until trouble troubles you.**’

In his comments on that video Vladimir Putin’s press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, noted that ‘unscrupulous slander can be fought by any means’<sup>8</sup>. In passing, already in 2012, after the Millions March, which evolved in the long-lasting Bolotnaya case, this very Peskov has said that ‘the payback for just one injured

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5 <https://zona.media/>

6 <https://ovdinfo.org/>

7 <http://rosgvard.ru/ru/news/article/obrashhenie-direktora-rosgvardii-v-otvet-na-zayavlenie-liderov-fbk-porochashhix-chest-i-dostoinstvo-oficerov>

8 [https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/09/2018/5b979d079a79475a5adc2cbe?utm\\_source=yxnews&utm\\_medium=desktop](https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/09/2018/5b979d079a79475a5adc2cbe?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop)

OMON officer must be the protesters' livers spread on the asphalt'<sup>9</sup>. Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of Chechnya, supported Zolotov's words on that very day<sup>10</sup>.

The unrelenting and straightforward position of the army general (former bodyguard of Putin) and the equally unequivocal response from Kremlin amount to *de facto* legitimization of the use of violence against opposition activists. The fact that since 6 May 2012 police have been stepping up the use of force with each next rally is increasingly discussed in public, including by high-ranking administrators and politicians. Violence on political opponents in Russia is becoming a norm, withal an acceptable and permitted norm.

## **The use of violence at protest rallies**

### *Law enforcers (siloviki)*

In the aftermath of the last two rallies only (of 5 May and 9 September 2018), the legal service Apologia of Protest and the human rights organisation Law Zone have 15 pending cases of protesters beaten by police.

### *The rally of 5 May*

On 5 May 2018 Alexey Navalny organised a rally under the logo 'He is Not Our Czar'. Nearly 1 600 persons, including minors, were detained at the rally. Already at that time, four months before the video of the Rosgvardiya commander Victor Zolotov, journalists and public activists drew attention to the overly violent response on the part of law enforcement authorities. Protesters were beaten with truncheons and handcuffs. 12 persons were injured during the protests in Moscow, Sankt Petersburg, Krasnoyarsk, Chelyabinsk and Krasnodar, but only two of them (in Moscow, including a 17-year old girl) were targeted by Cossacks. All others were beaten by police officers. Human rights activists are in possession of photographs and video footage taken by mass media and protesters.

All victims had their bodily injuries certified by medical professionals and requested assistance from lawyers, who in turn submitted to the Investigative Committee of Russia applications (complaints) concerning the use of violence.

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9 <http://www.forbes.ru/news/82112-dmitrii-peskov-vyskazalsya-po-povodu-pecheni-mitinguyushchih-razmazannoi-po-asfaltu>

10 [https://t.me/RKadyrov\\_95](https://t.me/RKadyrov_95)

The applications included detailed accounts of the accidents, including testimonials from eyewitnesses. Normally, all the 10 applications should have led to the initiation of criminal procedures for exceeding the officers' legitimate powers by the use of violence (Article 286(3) of the Russian Criminal Code in conjunction with Article 140(2) of the Russian Criminal Procedure Code).

However, three cases (in Krasnodar and Krasnoyarsk) ended with rulings by which the Investigative Committee refused to initiate criminal procedures. All other applications submitted in may are being processed according to a 'Ping-Pong' policy where the case files endlessly circulate from the Investigative Committee to the prosecutors, then to police and vice versa.

Thus, during a police operation in Sankt Petersburg, a police officer pressed with his knee the chest of the elderly citizen Alexandr Silaev who was lying on the ground. Mr. Silaev's application, dated 8 May 2018, was forwarded by the Investigative Committee to the Prosecution Office on 14 May. On 4 June the Prosecution Office forwarded the application to the Police Directorate of Sankt Petersburg and Leningrad district. According to a notification letter received on 9 July, from police unit 78 in the central region of Petersburg the case file was sent to police unit 28 in the same region.

Artem Radygin, a victim of the events in Moscow, submitted an application to the Investigative Committee on 11 May 2018. On 7 June he received a notification letter from the Police Department of the Central Administrative Circuit of Moscow. The letter said that the Committee had examined a submission made to a hospital regarding injuries caused by blows from police, after which the case file was transferred to the Chief Investigative Directorate of Moscow. On 3 September the applicant was notified that the Chief Investigative Directorate of Moscow had forwarded his application to a police department.

As the legal service Apologia of Protest notes, 'There were no interrogations of victims or witnesses, forensic or medical examinations, or formal inquiries. By the hands of the Investigative Committee, the authorities do their best to hold the examination of applications related to physical torture, and then procrastinate the procedures by circulating the applications among various agencies. The purpose of this red-tape strategy is *inter alia* to exhaust the victims so they lose the stamina to seek criminal liability against the persons responsible'<sup>11</sup>.

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11 <https://t.me/apologia/34>

## *The rally of 9 September*

At the time of drafting this report, the legal service Apologia of Protest, which specialises in the legal protection of the right to peaceful assemblies, is working on 10 complaints concerning violence and injuries during the peaceful rallies against the pension reform which took place in many Russian regions on 9 September 2018 and led to the detention of more than 1 000 persons. Six of these 10 cases relate to police violence. The victims were found to have bruises on their heads, backs or arms, some of them were in plaster.

What distinguished these rallies from the earlier ones was the very frequent and excessive use of violence by police against journalists and even lawyers. Mass media reports confirm that the journalists Georgi Markov, David Frenkel and Alexandr Polukeev in Sankt Petersburg and Maria Borzunova in Moscow did suffer police violence on 9 September. An explanation may be found in the words of Valery Gorelykh from the Police Directorate of Sverdlovsk district: ‘We do not make a distinction between participants in a rally and journalists’<sup>12</sup>. Later on the Chief of the Police Directorate of Sverdlovsk district Mikhail Borodin had to apologise to three local correspondents in Yekaterinburg<sup>13</sup>, while Gorelykh explained that his words had been misinterpreted<sup>14</sup>.

In Krasnodar, unidentified police officers detained and applied violence to lawyer Mikhail Benyash<sup>15</sup>. On the day of the nationwide protest against the pension reform the lawyer was on his way to the venue of a peaceful assembly in Krasnodar in order to provide assistance to one of his clients. Mr. Benyash was detained in the centre of the city without any explanations why. He and activist Irina Barhatova were ushered in a van where they were beaten and their phones and personal belongings were taken away. For seven hours police did not allow the lawyers of Mr. Benyash see their client, so the lawyers had to wait at the doors of the police precinct. At the time of writing more than 350 practicing lawyers from 50 regions have subscribed to an appeal which calls on the Federal Bar Association to defend their colleague. In the meantime the

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12 [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here\\_and\\_now/politsija\\_ne\\_vidit\\_raznitsy\\_kak\\_zaderzhivali-471199/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/politsija_ne_vidit_raznitsy_kak_zaderzhivali-471199/)

13 <https://ria.ru/society/20180910/1528233759.html>

14 [https://tvrain.ru/news/predstavitel\\_sverdlovskogo\\_mvд-471203/](https://tvrain.ru/news/predstavitel_sverdlovskogo_mvд-471203/)

15 <https://pravo.ru/news/205179/>

court has put Mikhail Benyash under arrest for 14 days on the grounds of non-compliance with legitimate police orders (Article 19.3 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses, CoAO) and sentenced him to 40 hours of community work for organising a protest rally (Article 20.2(2) CoOA)<sup>16</sup>. The international human rights organisation Amnesty International declared lawyer Mikhail Benyash ‘prisoner of conscience’ and called for his immediate release and for an efficient inquiry into his aversions of police beatings<sup>17</sup>.

### *Vulnerable groups*

Paradoxically, rank-and-file protesters beaten by police end up in a double jeopardy situation. It has become very plausible that the authorities respond to a mass media publication about beatings by initiating a criminal procedure for use of violence against police officers (Article 318 of the Russian Criminal Code) or, in ‘best-case scenario’, a procedure for non-compliance with legitimate police orders (Article 19.3 CoAO) or for organising/taking part in an unauthorised rally (Article 20.2 CoAO).

Thus, after the Millions March of 2012 both Russian and global media showed overwhelming photographs of activists Denis Lutskevich and Alexey Gaskarov who were beaten during the rally in Moscow. Later the two of them were sentenced to real imprisonment for *inter alia* using violence against representatives of the authorities. On 1 July 2016 police in Kemerovo beat blogger and activist Stanislav Kalinichenko who had published in his blog photographs and accounts of bodily injuries and an application to the Investigative Committee<sup>18</sup>. However, in the end of the day Stanislav became a defendant in a case where he was charged with using violence against a police officer. Now in 2018, he has been held for four months in a pre-trial detention centre (SIZO) where he went on a hunger strike. The case was closed and Kalinichenko was released from custody after the police officer who was constituted as a victim in that case declared that he had received compensation for the damage and does not have further claims against the activist<sup>19</sup>.

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16 <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/09/12/77798-bilsya-golovoy-o-steklo-avtomobilya-i-nanosil-sebe-telesnye-povrezhdeniya>

17 <https://freemedia.io/2018/09/amnesty-ben>

18 <https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2016/07/01/v-kemerovo-policeyskie-izbili-oppozicionera>

19 <https://echo.msk.ru/news/2252534-echo.html>

Even elderly protesters can become victims of police violence in Russia. For example, 72-year old retiree Turana Varzhabetyan attended an anti-corruption rally in Moscow on 26 March 2017. Police sprained her arm when they detained her. In the end of the day Mrs. Varzhabetyan was ordered to pay 10 000 Rubles in fine for breaching the order at public rallies (Article 20.2(5) CoOA).

In the summer of 2017 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) enquired about the use of police violence to disperse protest rallies. The ECHR joined three cases – those of Erken Sarsembaev from Kazan, beaten on 18 October 2007; Oleg Silvestrov, who suffered bodily injuries as police dispersed a protest rally on 10 March 2012, Dmitry Monakhov, who was beaten by police on 18 July 2013 at Tverskaya Street during and after detention. The ECHR asked the Russian authorities whether the use of physical force was justified in principle and whether the applicants were posing any particular threat<sup>20</sup>.

### *The privatisation of violence*

Russian protesters, including elderly people, suffer violence not only at the hands of police at protest rallies. It can be asserted that violence has been privatised by various groups, including NOD (National Liberation Movement), SERB, security firms and even the Wagner Group (ChVK Wagner), who exercise violence, including politically motivated violence, either on direct orders from the authorities or with the tacit approval of the authorities. This tradition was laid down by the movements Nashi ('Ours!') and MGER.

On 24 October 2015 SERB activists attacked 75-year old Vladimir Ionov who was standing in solitary picketing vigilance near the Museum of History in Moscow. The assailants poured some 'green liquid' (*zelyonka*) and flour on Ionov, took away and tore his poster which read 'We need no brains, we have Putin'<sup>21</sup>. Five days later, on 29 September 2015, unidentified assailants attacked the LGBT activist Raid Lynne who was standing at Barikadnaya metro station in Moscow with a similar poster<sup>22</sup>.

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20 <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-175718>

21 <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-175718>

On 13 February 2016 NOD strikers in Moscow attacked activist Maria Ryabkova<sup>23</sup> during her solitary picketing vigilance at Manezhnaya Square where she was holding a poster criticizing Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov. The NOD activists snatched away Ryabkova's poster and hit her.

It is noteworthy that the most recent reports on the use of violence at protest rallies by persons who are not members of the law enforcement authorities relate exactly to the rally held on 5 May 2018. Severe beatings by Cossacks were reported. It emerged later that the Cossacks who took part in the beating of participants at the 'He Is Not Our Czar' rally were punished and whipped with *nagayka* lashes<sup>24</sup>. A Moscow court ordered the Cossack Evgeny Fedorchenko to pay 1 000 Rubles in fine for petit hooliganism<sup>25</sup>.

However, violence by Cossacks, NOD, SERB and the like informal organisations was not reported in relation to the rally of 9 September.

It can be assumed that the Russian authorities have felt more comfortable after giving more powers to law enforcement authorities to use force (license to use violence) and, perhaps, have issued a message for everyone else to calm down and stay away under threat of punishment. Moreover, assailants from informal associations are increasingly persecuted by law enforcement and therefore they are not always willing to 'endorse' the government. Their impunity for illegitimate acts is gradually vanishing.

Thus, already on 22 March 2016 in the central area of in Yekaterinburg police arrested and fined the Ural Cossack Maxim Mitchin, deputy chair of Sverdlovsk Fund of Special Forces Veterans, after he attacked a picket supporting Nadezhda Savchenko and broke the pole of the Ukrainian flag.

On 17 May 2016 at Anapa airport persons dressed in Cossack uniforms assaulted a group of activists led by Alexey Navalny. The assailants also poured milk on the activists. Two assailants incurred administrative penalties.

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22 <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1692231167678301&set=a.1551284261772993.1073741827.100006743010661&type=3>

23 <https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2016/02/13/na-manezhnoy-zaderzhana-oppozicioner-i-dva-nodovca>

24 <https://zona.media/news/2018/05/16/kazaki>

25 <https://zona.media/news/2018/05/14/cossac>

One year later, Nikolay Nesterenko, an activist of the Cossack movement in Kuban who also took part in that attack, was sentenced to 6.5 years in a colony in a fraud case<sup>26</sup>.

## **The use of violence outside protest rallies**

### ***Law enforcers (siloviki)***

Law enforcers use violence against activists not only at protest rallies. Withal, similar to the victims at protest rallies, the ones who end up punished are the victims themselves.

Thus, on 16 December 2017 several activists arrived at a police precinct in Kazan in order to sort out complaints from local citizens against law enforcement authorities. They wanted the chief of the precinct to come out so they could draw his attention to the irregularities. The chief told them to stop videotaping the event. The activists refused and two of them were taken to a room in which no cameras were installed. According to what the activists said, they were beaten there. After several court trials, on 4 April 2018 the Supreme Court of Tatarstan confirmed the 800 Rubles fine imposed on one of the activists for making a video at the police precinct during their visit<sup>27</sup>.

### ***The privatisation of violence***

After the assassination of Boris Nemtsov on 27 February 2015, activists of NOD and SERB have mounted several attacks on Nemtsov memorials in several cities.

Thus, on 25 March and 9 May 2015 in Moscow, activists of ‘Russian Liberation Movement SERB’ attacked a memorial set up at Bolshoi Moscow River Bridge where Nemtsov was assassinated. The last attack included some scuffle among the activists.

On 12 February 2016 in Nizhny Novgorod, around 15 activists of NOD assaulted Alexandr Sygotin and Arcady Galker, who were standing on duty at an improvised memorial of Boris Nemtsov. It was documented that Sygotin

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26 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-39704522>

27 <https://www.idelreal.org/a/29145082.html>

had been injured. Having torn the portraits, the ‘NODists’ practically destroyed the whole memorial<sup>28</sup>.

Furthermore, on 11 February 2016 NOD activists in Vladimir<sup>29</sup> threw eggs at the local politician Mikhail Kasyanov, and on 7 December 2017 the NOD activist Sergey Voronchinkhin stormed the office of Navalny supporters in Chelyabinsk<sup>30</sup>.

The last attack before the date of this report occurred in the early hours of 8 September 2018 when SERB activists attacked a Boris Nemtsov memorial. Three activists were injured<sup>31</sup>.

## Killings

The assassination of Boris Nemtsov appears to be a stark exception from the general trend during the period under consideration. Many theories have been tabled about the possible involvement of high-ranking government officials in this crime<sup>32</sup>. At present the court has found guilty and has sentenced Zaur Dadaev to 20 years in prison, and his accomplices Anzor Gubashev (19 years in prison), Shadid Gubashev (16 years in a colony), Temirlan Eskerkhanov (14 years in colony), and Khamzat Bakhaev (11 years in a colony)<sup>33</sup>. Thus, the perpetrators are from Northern Caucasus. The one who ordered the assassination remains unknown.

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28 <https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2016/02/12/v-nizhnem-novgorode-na-dezhurnyh-u-memoriala-borisa-nemcova-soversheno>

29 <https://meduza.io/news/2016/02/11/aktivisty-nod-zakidali-kasyanova-yaytsami-vo-vladimire>

30 [https://www.znak.com/2018-02-05/aktivist\\_noda\\_razgromivshiy\\_chelyabinskiy\\_shtab\\_navalnogo\\_ushel\\_ot\\_otvetstvennosti](https://www.znak.com/2018-02-05/aktivist_noda_razgromivshiy_chelyabinskiy_shtab_navalnogo_ushel_ot_otvetstvennosti)

31 <https://zona.media/news/2018/09/08/snova-serb>

32 <https://t.me/nevzlin/4>

33 <https://zona.media/online/2017/07/13/nemtsov-82>

The vast majority of political assassinations during the past 10–15 years which are believed to be motivated by the civic or political activity of the victim relate mainly to Northern Caucasus or to neo-Nazi groups. The latter were dismantled after the assassinations of lawyer Stanislav Kerkelov and journalist Anastasiya Baburova, following which this type of killings stopped. Although killings remained unresolved for a long time, after Politkovskaya the authorities tend to be discovering the perpetrators more often. The assassination of the National-Bolshevik Yuri Chervochkin<sup>34</sup> and the attack on journalist Oleg Kashin have remained unresolved although in the latter case it has been *de facto* established that the perpetrators belong to a group close to Andrei Turchak, who was at that time governor of Pskov district<sup>35</sup>.

As concerns Northern Caucasus, the assassination of Boris Nemtsov continues the saddening tradition which began before the period covered in this report with the deaths of Anna Politkovskaya, Natalia Estemirova, Maksharip Aushev, Magomed Evloev and other activists and journalists.

In recent years the international community has on multiple occasions blamed the Russian authorities for their involvement in politically motivated killings or attempted killings, but outside Russian borders – from Alexandr Litvinenko in 2006 to Sergey and Yulia Scripal in 2018. The targets are mainly former members of the secret services. The assassination on 31 July 2018 of journalist Orhan Dzermal, film director Alexandr Rastorguev and cameraman Kiril Radchenko, who were making a film about Wagner Group, also took place outside Russia<sup>36</sup>.

In general terms it can be asserted that intentional killings of opponents are not absolutely unacceptable for the Russian authorities. However, the analysis and monitoring of the domestic situation indicates that nowadays politically motivated killings are not among the tools of repression employed by the authorities. This is also confirmed by the long-term monitoring of crackdowns on the Internet<sup>37</sup>.

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34 <https://zona.media/number/2015/10/12/chervochkin>

35 <https://zona.media/article/2018/07/10/gorbunov>

36 <https://zona.media/chronicle/pogibli>

37 [goo.gl/ru1wqY](https://goo.gl/ru1wqY)

## Who is being targeted?

The analysis of more than **200** individual assaults and intimidations demonstrates that civic and environmental activists, human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, vloggers and advocates of historical heritage are all in the risk zone and can one day become victims of attacks.

If we were to point out which persons stand out, Alexey Navalny and Mikhail Kasyanov, and their supporters, have been the most frequent targets of violence during the period covered by this report. Thus, 6 February 2016 unidentified individuals spread pepper gas at the office of PARNAS in Sankt Petersburg during a meeting attended by Kasyanov. Three days later a cake was thrown at Kasyanov in Moscow. The same politician was targeted with eggs in Vladimir on 11 February, and on 9 April in Perm somebody tried to don on him a jacket with a print which read ‘Misha is a thief’. He was attacked in Stavropol on 10 August 2016, and on 26 February 2017 green liquid (*zelyonka*) was splashed on him in Moscow before the beginning of a march commemorating Boris Nemtsov.

On 17 July 2015 NOD activists in Novosibirsk threw eggs at Alexey Navalny. This case stands out among all others, because in the aftermath of the events the authorities did raise criminal charges, but not against the assailants. The indicted person was Leonid Volkov, a Navalny aide, who was held liable for damaging the microphone of a Lifenews journalist. The case ended with a verdict and fine of 30 000 Rubles<sup>38</sup>. On 25 February 2016 a cake was thrown on Navalny in Moscow. On 26 March we has targeted with *piroshki* buns in Novosibirsk. On 28 April 2016 they splashed some sour and odorous liquid on him. On 17 May 2016 Cossacks attacked Navalny and his supporters in Anapa. On 25 May 2016 in Novosibirsk he had *piroshki* buns again plus condoms full of some white fluid. Again in Novosibirsk, eggs were shot at Navalny on 19 March 2017. On 27 April 2017 an attack on Navalny burned his ocular corneal. This attack, which was the most injurious to the politician compared to the previous ones, was the last one in the chain of similar events. All things considered, after that event, in view of the clear escalation of consequences, a tacit embargo on new attacks was put in place until the emotional video of army general Zolotov of 11 September 2018. This period of no-go can hardly be attributed to beef up security around the Navalny.

The ceasefire on Navalny himself did not put an end to the crimes against his supporters. Office premises of Navalny’s headquarters in various regions have

38 <https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2016/08/31/obvinyaemogo-po-mikrofonnomu-delu-politika-prigovorili-k-shtrafu>

been put on fire, decorated in balloons or targeted with eggs. Other damages include a bottle full of unknown liquid thrown in the window of an office, and breaking of furniture. Navalny's supporters were assaulted in Petrozavodsk with a traumatizing gun and with an axe in Khabarovsk. Attacks against supporters took place in Omsk, Gatchina, Krasnoyarsk, Voronezh. Other attacks on supporters include teeth knocked out in Magadan, unknown liquid which causes loss of conscience being rubbed in the leg<sup>39</sup>, face punches in Sochi and beatings on the head with a metal pipe in Moscow. In the last case, the perpetrator who on 17 August 2018 attacked Nikolay Lyaskin, head of Navalny's electioneering HQ in Moscow, received from the Magistrate Court of Meschansk region in Moscow a very lenient sentence of 11 months of correctional work<sup>40</sup>.

According to earlier calculations of OVD-Info, between 13 December 2016 (the day on which Navalny announced his decision to run in the presidential elections) and March 2018 Navalny and his supporters suffered 50 attacks and 45 intimidations across Russia<sup>41</sup>.

In the meantime, the last known attack on a Navalny supporter at the time of drafting this report took place on 8 September 2018 at night. Xenia Serechkina, coordinator of Navalny's HQ in Eisk (Krasnodar province) was beaten by two unidentified individuals<sup>42</sup>. The perception of impunity in similar cases obviously encourages new attacks.

Another prominent group of targets are civil-society activists in Sankt Petersburg. They have been the victims of multiple assaults in recent years, which are disconcerting mainly because a trends seems to be shaping up.

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39 <https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/06/15/sud-priznal-nezakonnym-bezdeystvie-policii-posle-napadeniya-na-muzha-yurista>

40 <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2018/08/17/pravosudie-v-trube-napadavshemu-na-lyaskina-vynesennom-maksimalno-myagkiy-prigovor.html>

41 <https://ovdinfo.org/articles/2018/03/23/kazhdyy-den-navalnyy#%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5>

42 <https://golos-kubani.ru/xochu-uvidet-kak-tresnet-eyo-cherp-v-ejske-izbili-koordinatora-shtaba-navalnogo/>

In the morning of 25 October 2017, Vladimir Shipitzin from the Solidarity movement was attacked with a knuckles duster in the entrance lobby of the apartment building in which he lives<sup>43</sup>.

In the morning of 27 December 2017, two persons armed with a knife and with an electrical stunning baton mounted an assault on Vladimir Ivanyutenko, a supporter of the extremist movement *Artpodgotovka*, which is banned in Russia. Ivanyutenko was taken to an intensive care ward with multiple injuries caused by stabbings in the liver, spine, the intercostal artery near the heart, and multiple cuts and bruises<sup>44</sup>. The authorities opened a criminal case for ‘severe damage to health caused deliberately with the use of a weapon’ (Article 111 of the Russian Criminal Code).

On 28 January 2018, during daytime, unidentified persons mounted a violent attack on activist Dinar Idrisov in the entrance lobby of an apartment building. A medical examination found that the victim had a fractured arm and cheek bone, intracranial trauma, concussion of the brain and multiple bruises.

On 19 February 2018, Oleg Maxakov, an activist of Open Russia, was assaulted when he exiting a lift and beaten until he lost consciousness.

One common feature of these four attacks is that the victims’ personal data appeared in ‘Group of Unique People’ – a social media forum which used to collect names, contacts details, main addresses and residential addresses of opposition activists in Sankt Petersburg. In another attack in Sankt Petersburg, which took place on 26 January 2018, activist Konstantin Sinitzyn was beaten to death in the entrance lobby of his apartment building. The authorities are investigating what they describe as a household-related murder – a storeroom keeper has been arrested<sup>45</sup>.

### **Who are the assailants and what are they motivated by?**

In earlier years, intimidations of liberal activists were inspired by persons known as *nashists* (after the bygone movement ‘Nashi’ (Ours!)), and orthodox activists. In recent years however leadership in this sector has been firmly shared between Cossacks, NOD and SERB.

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43 [https://www.facebook.com/SPBSOLIDARNOST/photos/a.1491403344496844.1073741828.1490551234582055/175\\_4912888145887/?type=3&theater](https://www.facebook.com/SPBSOLIDARNOST/photos/a.1491403344496844.1073741828.1490551234582055/175_4912888145887/?type=3&theater)

44 <https://mbk.media/region/nas-vsex-obedinyayut/>

45 <http://m.rosbalt.ru/piter/2018/02/03/1679506.html>

These are pro-government patriotic and nationalist groups. Until recently, the role of these groups was to give, mostly on a systemic basis, a ‘counterpunch’ to the opposition as mentioned by Rosgvardiya commander Victor Zolotov. These activists felt free to overtly commit acts which the official authorities were prohibited to do by law, much as they were willing to. As noted above, in 2018 informal ‘counterpunchers’ are not always able to escape liability. While in 2014–2015 they could often get away with injuring activists against the background of the very painful and tense situation with Crimea, from early 2016 individual representatives of these groups are being prosecuted by law enforcers.

As law enforcement authorities become tougher in their actions, the ‘core business’ of informal groups such as SERB, NOD and Cossacks may wind down to null. Law enforcers with a clearance to use violence will increasingly come to the forestage, as has already been the case with the beatings of participants in mass protest rallies. By the words of Sergey Smirnov, editor-in-chief of Media Zone: ‘It’s going from bad to worse’. With such an ‘allocation of responsibilities’, the role of NOD, SERB and similar formations in future, whatever their names may be, will be reduced to disrupting rallies by non-violent means, facilitating the initiation of proceedings against civil-society activists and testifying in courts in case these activists are charged with administrative and sometimes criminal offenses.

During the period covered by this report, the activity of ‘God’s Will’ and of other aggressive orthodox groups wound down to null. On 14 August 2015 members of the ‘God’s Will’ movement led by Dmitry Tsorionov (Enteo) damaged four sculptures of Vadim Sidur which were exhibited at the Manezh<sup>46</sup>. The members of the group claimed that these works were frustrating the religious feelings of believers. The authorities initiated a criminal case for destruction of cultural artefacts. The case was closed on 23 September 2016 on the grounds that *corpus delicti* was lacking. New cases of orthodoxy-motivated violence have not been observed since then.

Another group of actors which needs attention are non-systemic assailants, including imbalanced, emotionally unstable and/or mentally disordered individuals. Clearly, their behaviour is largely influenced by the agendas of government or pro-government mass media. One person that can be assigned to this group is Boris Grits, who attacked host Tatyana Felgengauer on the premises of Echo of Moscow on 23 October 2017. Subsequently, Grits was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. The murder of Denis Suворov, a

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[https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2015/08/14/a\\_7688416.shtml#](https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2015/08/14/a_7688416.shtml#)

journalist in the state TV and radio channel ‘Nizhny Novogorod’, can also be assigned to this category. On 22 July 2018 Suvorov’s head was smashed with a piece of rock and a sock was plugged in his mouth. The authorities have arrested the suspect, Dmitry Pancratov, a mentally troubled blogger. Pancratov met the victim accidentally at Kazanskaya Naberezhnaya and was seized with fear that the journalist will denounce him to the enforcers for supporting the opposition in his speeches<sup>47</sup>.

The main triggers of attacks on civil-society and political activists in the past four years have been the events in the Ukraine in 2014, various elections and election campaigns of politicians as well local agendas such as local citizens opposing various projects. Staff of private security firms (PSFs) are increasingly involved in such local conflicts in the role of assailants causing harm to the health of activists.

Thus, on 2 April 2018 PSF personnel in Yekaterinburg stormed Boris Zolotarevsky and Mikhail Urvantzev, activists from ‘Stop GOK’ (a group which opposes the construction of Tominsky mining and ore processing plant) with the words ‘Get out of here, you ugly creatures!’<sup>48</sup>. On 18 April 2018 in Gatchina PSF personnel attacked in a shopping mall Anton Gratchev, a volunteer in Navalny’s HQ, and Evgenia Novikova, administrator of the group ‘Evil Gatchina’, telling them to ‘get lost from here’<sup>49</sup>.

Beside PSF staff, police officers also use physical violence at a regional level in similar cases. Thus, on 8 April 2016, the authorities arrested Dmitry Boynov<sup>50</sup>, a defender of the Dubki Park. Upon his arrest Boynov complained that a police officer attacked him and broke his leg. However, his attempts to bring the officer to a criminal court were unsuccessful. But, one month later charges were brought on Boynov himself, who was at that time walking on crutches because of the broken leg. Boynov was charged with hooliganism and for beating a PSF guard and a foreman working on a construction site in the abovementioned Dubki Park. The court convicted him to three and half years of suspended imprisonment<sup>51</sup>.

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<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3712140>

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/04/02/v-ekaterinburge-izbili-aktivistov-stop-gok>

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/04/18/v-gatchine-zaderzhali-volontera-shtaba-navalnogo-i-administratora-gruppy>

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## Where and when do the attacks take place?

Although our hypothesis was that most attacks would take place at night and in desolate environments, our monitoring did not establish any periods of the day or night with particularly high concentrations of attacks. Beatings can occur in early mornings, in broad daylight or in darkness, and at places with dense concentrations of people. Places of elevated risk are the entrance lobbies of apartment buildings (especially in Petersburg) and various public events ranging from massive assemblies to single pickets. Solitary picketers are typically targeted by aggressive groups who do not share the protester's beliefs or support a particular informal association. A protester trying to enter a particular site or to disrupt some activity which he or she believes to be unlawful faces greater risk of physical violence. There is a long series of such attacks which come under the common denominator 'get out of here'.

Civil-society activists get beaten not only in the streets, but also in prisoner vehicles (*avtozak*) or in court houses. For example, on 19 July 2017 two convoy officers targeted Alexey Nazimov, editor-in-chief of 'Your Gazette', when he was reading his criminal case file at the city court of Alushta<sup>52</sup>. Beatings in Crimea have been reported by activists Ismail Ramazanov<sup>53</sup>, Vladimir Balukh<sup>54</sup> and by other activists who were arrested and then placed in a pretrial detention facility.

Generally, the use of violence against activists held in custody is a trend on its own merit. Particularly, acts of torture have been reported by the antifascist members of a group known as 'Network'<sup>55</sup> who were defendants in the so-

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<https://zona.media/news/2017/05/30/boynov>

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[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1067291490067479&id=100003599154365](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1067291490067479&id=100003599154365)

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/01/24/arestovannyi-krymskiy-tatarin-zayavil-ob-izbilenii>

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[https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/04/02/ukrainskogo-aktivista-vladimira-baluha-izbili-v-sizo-popal-v-medchast?utm\\_source=tw&utm\\_medium=social](https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/04/02/ukrainskogo-aktivista-vladimira-baluha-izbili-v-sizo-popal-v-medchast?utm_source=tw&utm_medium=social)

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<https://zona.media/theme/penza-spb>

called ‘Penza case’ (Victor Filinkov<sup>56</sup>, Igor Shishkin<sup>57</sup>, Arman Sagynbaev<sup>58</sup>, Dmitry Pchelintsev<sup>59</sup>, Ilya Shakursky<sup>60</sup>, Ilya Kapustin<sup>61</sup>) and the group of film director Oleg Sentsov (violence in May 2014 was reported, including to the ECHR, by Alexandr Kolchenko, by Sentsov himself, and by Genady Afanasiev<sup>62</sup>). The clear objective of violence in this case was to extract specific testimony – either confession of one’s guilt or evidence that can be used against another culprit. The violence was applied in the first days after detention.

According to reports of 14 December 2017, civil-society activist Igor Nagavkin was beaten before a court hearing of a theft case<sup>63</sup>. Publications of 28 January 2018 said that Konstantin Saltykov, a university student arrested at an event titled ‘Voters on strike’, was beaten in an *avtozak*<sup>64</sup>. Later on Saltykov was charged of ‘hitting at least once a police officer in the hip’ (Article 318 of the Russian Criminal Code). At the time of writing his case is pending at Tversky Regional Court in Moscow<sup>65</sup>. Saltykov has been held in custody since January.

## What tools/materials are employed in the attacks?

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<https://zona.media/news/2018/01/26/fil-fsb>

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<https://zona.media/news/2018/04/25/shishkin>

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<https://zona.media/news/2018/09/06/sagynbaev>

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<https://zona.media/article/2018/05/21/pchelintsev>

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<https://zona.media/article/2018/02/09/penza-tortures>

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<https://zona.media/article/2018/01/27/kapustin>

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<https://zona.media/news/2015/03/08/afanasiev-davlenie>

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2017/12/15/sud-prodlil-arest-pravozashchitniku-igoryu-nagavkinu-pered-zasedaniem-ego>

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/05/14/sud-otklonil-zhalobu-na-arest-uchastnika-zabastovki-izbirateley- konstantina>

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<https://www.newsrussia.com/russia/03sep2018/saltykov.html>

Both the arsenals and the imagination of assailants have developed significantly since the study ‘Thugs for hire in Russia: new trends in the hunt for civil-society activists’. Inconvenient activists have been targeted with:

- firearms;
- cold weapons;
- knuckle dusters;
- clubs;
- green liquid (*zelyonka*);
- paint;
- foam used in construction<sup>66</sup>;
- pepper gas;
- eggs;
- condoms;
- flour;
- cakes or *piroshki* buns;
- milk;
- building blocks;
- water;
- iodine;
- sheared heads of hens or pigs;
- faeces;
- chemicals, various unidentified mixtures of diverse colour, and sour odorous liquids.

Thus, SERB activists used faeces at the Nemtsov memorial in Moscow on 8 September 2018 and at the anti-war picket ‘Solidarity’ on 8 February 2015<sup>67</sup>. In Voronezh, sheared hen heads were employed against Natalia Zvyagina, coordinator of ‘Golos’ (Voice) in September 2014<sup>68</sup>. Unidentified individuals hung a sheared pig head on the door of an entrepreneur from Irkutsk who had made his compound available for an assembly organised by Alexey Navalny<sup>69</sup>.

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2017/03/06/v-nizhegorodskom-shtabe-navalnogo-zalili-penoy-vse-zamki-v-dome>

67

<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2015/02/08/policiya-obvinila-mihaila-krigera-v-huliganstve>

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<https://lenta.ru/news/2015/01/23/zvyagina/>

On 28 December 2017 individuals disguised in medical masks stormed Andrei Rudomakh and Victor Chirikov, activists of ‘Environmental Watch for Northern Caucasus’<sup>70</sup>. They were attacked near a building by three males who used pepper balloons. Chirikov, who is the leader of ‘Environmental Watch’, was heavily beaten with knuckle dusters.

The assailants perform their attacks not only with open faces but also disguised in scarves, masks (including medical ones), and hoods.

### **What intimidation methods are used?**

Our monitoring identified a wide variety of methods used to intimidate civil-society activists in Russia. While the throwing of faeces and heads of hens or pigs is a clearly exotic method, the other means of intimidation are very much standard ones.

Activists are being intimidated by the following means:

- verbally or in writing (e.g. by phone calls or by disconcerting messages, including in social media);
- paintings drawn in entrances of apartment buildings, on vehicles or on the front doors of apartments...;
- shots fired at windows of apartments or houses;
- conflagration of vehicles, apartments, houses, villas...;
- rampage of vehicles, offices...;
- cutting off cables for internet services to the apartment<sup>71</sup>.

Thus, the methods used for the intimidation of activists can be divided in verbal threats and infliction of damage to property. One example is the abovementioned human rights activist Natalia Zvyagina. Four months after the throwing of hen heads, the door of her apartment was painted in the colours of the US national flag. In late December 2017, in addition to the above-described beatings of activists in Sankt Petersburg, Diana Retinskaya, a supporter of the

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<https://meduza.io/news/2017/10/31/v-irkutske-biznesmenu-podbrozili-svinuyu-golovu-on-predostavil-ploschadku-dlya-mitinga-navalnogo>

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<https://zona.media/news/2017/12/28/rudomakha>

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2017/07/28/lipeckomu-koordinatoru-shtaba-navalnogo-pererezali-provod-interneta-i>

banned *Artpodgotovka*, received a message in VKontakt saying that she is about to ‘experience the things that happened to Vladimir Ivanyutenko’. On 5 February 2018 Alexei Kuznetsov, author of the YouTube channel ‘Prison Life’, found at his doorbell a note which read: ‘You [ugly words], remove that video, mind your own business. You also have kinds, take care of your family and daughter’<sup>72</sup>. Sometimes they leave letters in postboxes as was the case in Kemerovo where Boris Pavlov, an assistant at Navalny’s HQ, received the following note on 7 February 2018: ‘You are a biologist, a ‘botanic’ [scientist], so remember how they split the carcasses of young boars. What shall we do, Borya, you are screaming, let’s share, we will feed you with scourges, homeless. Go chomp and that will be the last time’<sup>73</sup>. On 10 May 2018 in Sochi, Vladislav Zdolnikov and Georgi Alburov, collaborators of Anti-Corruption Foundation, were verbally intimidated with physical payback and a ‘trip in the mountains’<sup>74</sup>.

A noteworthy method for the intimidation of activists are conflagrations, as they are the most financially stressful means of exerting pressure without resorting to violence. A whole series of fires was registered only in this current year 2018 (not less than eight instances). In Ingushetia, the office of ‘Memorial’ was put on fire<sup>75</sup>. In Altai they put on fire the home of Vladimir Shevtsov, an activist who opposes the felling of forests<sup>76</sup> and in Adygea – the home of Krasnodar blogger Evgeny Shirmanov<sup>77</sup>. In Moscow they tried to set on fire the car of Sergey Alsanyan, an observer at Echo of Moscow<sup>78</sup>, in

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[https://www.znak.com/2018-02-05/pravozachitnik\\_snyavshiy\\_shok\\_kontent\\_pro\\_putina\\_i\\_kadyrova\\_poluchil\\_zapisku\\_s\\_ugrozami](https://www.znak.com/2018-02-05/pravozachitnik_snyavshiy_shok_kontent_pro_putina_i_kadyrova_poluchil_zapisku_s_ugrozami)

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<https://zona.media/news/2018/02/07/pavlov-ugrozy>

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<https://www.newsru.com/russia/10may2018/kazachki.html>

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/01/17/v-ingushetii-podozhgli-ofis-memoriala>

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<https://mbk.media/news/u-protivnika-vyrubki-lesa/>

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<https://zona.media/news/2018/06/25/shirmanov-dom>

78

<https://echo.msk.ru/news/2182772-echo.html>

Saratov – the Lada Granta vehicle of blogger Sergey Sinicyn<sup>79</sup>, and Rybinsk – the car of PARNAS candidate Dmitry Bondarev<sup>80</sup>.

In addition to conflagrations, causing other damage to cars of civil-society and political activists has become quite widespread in Russia. This can be described as a new trend. A number of vehicles were broken or smashed only in the three months after July 2018:

- In Balashiva, the car of vlogger Sergey Urvanov<sup>81</sup> who makes videos exposing the lack of professionalism among traffic police officers;
- In Samara, the car of vblogger Mr Rissso who made a video about firefighting departments<sup>82</sup>;
- In Rostov on Don, the car of Elena Hatlamadzhiyan from NGO ‘Urban Patrols’, an activist who stands for the preservation of coppices<sup>83</sup>;
- In Moscow, the vehicle of opposition MP Vitaly Tretyukhin. The assailants put a pig head inside the vehicle<sup>84</sup>.

Thus, eight instances of car damage were registered only in 2018.

Sometimes activists experience escalating intimidations as threats less stressful in terms the potential impacts on life, health and property are followed by more serious ones. In Ufa for example, Alexandr Vesselov, chair of an environment protection association, initially received a message from somebody who described himself as ‘inquisitor’: ‘You suck blood in South Bashkiria, and we will punish you’, after which he was beaten. Eight days after the home of Krasnodar blogger Evgeny Shirmanov was put on fire, the blogger himself was beaten by unidentified individuals near his home in Adygea on 17 June 2018<sup>85</sup>.

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<https://fn-volga.ru/news/view/id/87942>

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<https://twitter.com/parnasparty/status/1036875181921382400>

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<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/07/23/v-balashihe-neizvestnye-isportili-mashinu-avtora-youtube-kanala-o>

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[https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/07/30/samarskiy-bloger-mrrisso-snimaet-video-pro-dps-segodnya-emu-razbili-mashinu?utm\\_source=tw&utm\\_medium=social](https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2018/07/30/samarskiy-bloger-mrrisso-snimaet-video-pro-dps-segodnya-emu-razbili-mashinu?utm_source=tw&utm_medium=social)

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<http://www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2018/08/16/1725238.html>

84

<https://twitter.com/IlyaYashin/status/1039421284982112256>

## How do the authorities respond?

The range of law enforcement responses to the assaults on, and intimidations of, activists, journalists and politicians, has indeed been impressively diversified – from ‘no comment’ and ‘no complaints have been filed with police’ to ‘promptly resolved while the leads were still hot’. Withal, quickly resolved are not only resonating accidents such as the attack on Tatyana Felgengauer on the premises of Echo of Moscow, i.e. when the assailant is a mentally disordered person. From time to time the Interior Ministry ‘reports’<sup>85</sup> successful detention of a suspected assailant on an foreign journalist during a protest rally. Indeed, that foreign journalist was Graham Phillips, a UK journalist and vlogger who works for Russia Today. So, when the victims are persons who defend and endorse the views of the authorities, the State is capable to promptly respond and find the evildoer.

## Conclusions

Violence on civic and political activists has become a norm in nowadays Russia. This vicious phenomenon has, regrettably, become so prevalent, commonplace and acceptable in the public and political environment that an individual attack on a particular activist barely captures the attention of federal mass media.

A perception of legitimacy of these attacks comes from statements of individual politicians and administrators which may at first glance appear emotional, but in actual fact are strategically conceived and bear far-reaching consequences.

Excluding from the accounts individual ideologists and persons with diagnoses, informal formations such as Cossacks, NOD and SERB seem to be put in the backseat. They tend to concede the right to use violence to the official authorities, i.e. to members of law enforcement agencies. Enforcers are granted a license to use torture and their unlawful acts are not caught by the Criminal Code when political violence is a sentinel of the State’s power. In this situation, pro-government hooligans are not much needed if at all. Moreover, those who incur violence, e.g. during massive protest rallies, automatically and perhaps paradoxically become the first candidates for administrative

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<https://zona.media/news/2018/06/25/shirmanov-dom>

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<https://77.мвд.рф/news/item/12203262>

indictments, at best, or for sitting on the bench of defendants at criminal courts, in the worst-case scenario.

The reality of our time is such that if you decide to engage in civic activity, in addition to detentions at protest rallies, searches and arrests, you should be prepared to face intimidations and assaults.

Dmitry Kolbasin,  
information analyst of Agora International  
specially for the legal service “Apologia of Protest”