

# Resurgent trends in punitive psychiatry in the Russian Federation

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The political abuse of psychiatry (i.e., punitive psychiatry) involves the misuse of diagnostic procedures and coercive treatment to marginalise civil dissent and impose social controls.<sup>1-3</sup> Past instances of punitive psychiatry have been documented throughout the former Soviet Union, China, Eastern Europe, South America, and other jurisdictions.<sup>1</sup> The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has coincided with an alarming resurgence of these practices in the Russian Federation to suppress anti-war opposition,<sup>3-5</sup> eliciting minimal condemnation from the global medical community.

Historically, psychiatric abuses were a prominent mechanism for sociopolitical repression during the Soviet era, particularly throughout the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> For the World Psychiatric Association (WPA), this became a central issue until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 1983, the Soviet All-Union Society of Neurologists and Psychiatrists pre-emptively withdrew from the WPA prior to formal expulsion and were conditionally readmitted in 1989 having publicly acknowledged the systematic misuse of psychiatry for political purposes.<sup>1</sup> Yet, by the late 1990s, this recognition was gradually superseded by the notion that there had been “scientific disagreements in individual cases” and reforms within the psychiatric leadership in the Russian Federation were obstructed.<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary contexts, the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation interdicts extremism and terrorism through wide-ranging definitions. Introduced in 2022, Articles 207.3 and 280.3 criminalise the discrediting or dissemination of “fake” information about the military (e.g., through social media posts). Socially dangerous offences can entail mandatory psychiatric treatment, which is determined by Russian courts based on expert opinions and may last indefinitely.<sup>6</sup> Under this framework, individuals protesting against the war in Ukraine are increasingly being subjected to compulsory psychiatric evaluations and hospitalisation, reminiscent of egregious approaches adopted in the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

Work from the Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development and the Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry shows an upsurge in psychiatric

abuses against civilians exhibiting anti-war behaviours in the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup> These investigations identified 34 cases of punitive psychiatry following the 2022 invasion, with 21 individuals having to undergo coercive treatment for real or alleged offences.<sup>4</sup> In psychiatric settings, peace protestors have reportedly experienced various harms, including violent threats, gender-based humiliation, compulsory medication, physical restraint, intrusive surveillance, and additional human rights infringements.<sup>3-5</sup>

Beyond the Russian Federation, concerning patterns are transpiring elsewhere, like Iran, where psychiatry is being misused to reform “anti-social behaviours” contravening state-sponsored ideologies, notably against women.<sup>7</sup> Separately, albeit under different circumstances, judicial rulings in Switzerland have potentially allowed for court-mandated therapeutic measures without a validated psychiatric diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> These troubling developments warrant extensive scrutiny.

Organisations like the WPA and the European Psychiatric Association (EPA) must leverage their influence to enforce professional transparency and accountability internationally. As previously implemented for suspected incidents of punitive psychiatry,<sup>1</sup> the WPA and the EPA could establish oversight bodies of neutral experts to monitor global forensic-psychiatric and medicolegal protocols and promote rigorous standards. They should also strengthen investigations into alleged abuses. Ideally, all national-level psychiatric associations should be engaged for bidirectional, cross-cultural dialogues; currently, the EPA suspended the Russian Society of Psychiatry after the invasion of Ukraine, but it remains a constituent WPA member.

More generally, the courage of those opposing political repression reminds us of the importance of protecting individual freedoms and respect for human rights. Today, collective efforts are necessary to counter ongoing violations and uphold moral commitments to the social contract.

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## Declaration of interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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