



Illustration: OVD-Info using AI

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## No Laughing Matter: A Full Timeline of Pressure and Persecution Against Comedians in Russia

Русская версия

On the morning of March 18, the Investigative Committee of Russia announced the detention of comedian Artemy Ostanin at the Belarusian border as he was attempting to leave Russia. Shortly before, authorities had opened a criminal case against the standup performer for «inciting hatred» (Article 282, Part 2, Clause ‘A’ of the Russian Criminal Code) based on a joke about a legless man. According to pro-war Z-channels, Ostanin’s joke allegedly referenced veterans of the war in Ukraine. The comedian himself denies this. Later reports revealed that Ostanin was beaten during his arrest and the comedian was placed in a pre-trial detention center (SIZO).

Comedians first began facing pressure for their statements about seven years ago, with stand-up performers periodically being charged with «inciting hatred.» Beyond persecution by law enforcement, comedians have also encountered targeted harassment and even direct death threats, though authorities systematically ignore such cases.

We’ve compiled a complete timeline of crackdowns on comedians in Russia. This investigation shows how security forces began targeting stand-up comedians and the ensuing consequences.



✱ A Flourish data visualization

Photos: 1 — Danila Poperechny's YouTube channel; 2 — Stand-Up Club #1 YouTube channel; 3 — David Frenkel, Mediazona; 4 — Mediazona; 5 — Alexey Kvashonkin's YouTube channel; 6 — Ariana Lolaeva's social networks; 7 — Denis Chuzhoy's Instagram; 8 — Ruslan Bely's Instagram; 9 — Denis Chuzhoy's Twitter; 10 — Mikhail Shats's Instagram; 11 — Semyon Slepakov's Instagram; 12 — OVD-Info subscribers; 13 — Ruslan Bely's YouTube channel; 14 — Danila Poperechny's Instagram; 15 — Operational Summaries Telegram channel; 16 — Denis Chuzhoy's Instagram; 17 — Danila Poperechny's Instagram; 18 — Instagram of Anton Lirnik; 19 — press service of the courts of general jurisdiction of the city of Moscow. Collages were prepared using neural networks

## AT FIRST, PRESSURE ON COMEDIANS DIDN'T TURN INTO LONG-TERM PROTRACTED PERSECUTION

HOW WE COMPILED THE DATA



We have included all known cases of politically-motivated harassment and persecution of comedians in the timeline. However, not all instances of pressure on comedians were directly tied to their comedy—some, like being labeled a «foreign agent,» stemmed from criticizing Russian authorities.

We excluded cases not driven by political motives (such as the **legal case** against stand-up comedian Ilya Sobolev for insulting a lawyer from Tolyatti) as well as instances of TV censorship (like when a joke by comedian Pavel Volya about Putin's palace **was cut** from a broadcast).

We also included cases against ordinary Russians prosecuted for jokes, even though they were not professional comedians.

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According to our data, law enforcement first targeted comedians in early 2018, when stand-up performer Danila Poperechny was placed on a wanted list. This followed accusations of «insulting believers' feelings» (Article 148 of the Russian Criminal Code) over his satirical music video «Pop Culture», which mocked the corrupt Orthodox priesthood.

The crackdown was likely tied less to Danila Poperechny's comedy work than to his prominence as a blogger. In an **interview** with journalist Yuriy Dud, the stand-up comedian accused State Duma deputy Vitaly Milonov of instigating the case. According to Poperechny, the official allegedly used the case to get more media traction. After all, the case quickly fell apart because the comedian had filmed the video on a set, not in an actual church, as Milonov had insisted.

The next known case of pressure on comedians occurred two years later, once again prompted by accusations of «insulting religious feelings.» In early 2020, comedian Sasha Kapadya (Alexander



Dolgopolov) was **forced to leave** Russia after police launched a preliminary investigation into her 2019 performance in St. Petersburg. During the show, Sasha had joked that Jesus Christ should have been named «Bogdan», a slavic name meaning «God-given», because he was, quite literally, «given by God.»

## **COMEDIANS STARTED FACING WIDESPREAD HARASSMENT AND PERSECUTION IN 2021**

Kapadya's case never became a formal investigation, but by 2021, comedians were increasingly facing three forms of pressure: harassment from authorities, smear campaigns from state propagandists, and backlash from ordinary citizens offended by their jokes.

Belarusian comedian Idrak Mirzalizade, who is originally from Azerbaijan, experienced all three of these types of pressure. In the summer of 2021, the Orthodox TV channel «Tsargrad» targeted him in a **report**. He started **receiving threats** and was eventually beaten up in central Moscow. Mirzalizade was later **jailed** for 10 days on charges of «inciting hatred» (Article 20.3.1 of the Russian Administrative Code) and was banned from entering Russia.

The pretext for the pressure on Mirzalizade was a joke he had made about renting an apartment, in which he was mocking xenophobia. He joked about how hard it was for him to rent an apartment because of his ethnicity.

«I was throwing out a filthy mattress with my brother, and this apartment had a filthy mattress left behind. By the way, the previous tenants were Russian. Apparently, Russians smear themselves with shit and go to sleep, » Mirzalizade added.

Over the course of several months in 2021, five comedians faced different forms of pressure. For example, after Denis Chuzhoy released his stand-up special «**Do It Yourself, »** the police started **questioning his acquaintances**.

In an interview with OVD-Info, Chuzhoy said that, officially, the authorities wanted to talk to his friends about a joke he made about bribing officials to acquire a passport more quickly. According to him, he made up the bribery story based on things he'd heard from other comedians in Russia and Central Asia. Investigators eventually determined that the story was fictional, but they still kept contacting him. In early February, «some supervisor» from an law enforcement agency called Chuzhoy and told him she didn't see any reason to open a criminal case against him.

«It was mostly just scary to even interact with that world, because it's unpleasant, even if you're the injured party. And when your calendar is filled with interrogations and comedy gigs back-to-back, that's just not a normal life, » Chuzhoy recalls. „Looking back, I think in 2021, [the authorities] just started keeping tabs on anyone remotely prominent who didn't align with the party line.“

## **SECURITY AUTHORITIES IGNORE RUSSIANS WHO INCITE HARASSMENT AGAINST COMEDIANS**

Most cases of persecution against comedians involve accusations of inciting hatred or enmity. At the same time, comedians also **face harassment and direct threats** from regular citizens and propagandists who are offended by their work. Technically, this harassment should have been formally considered a criminal offense but has gone mostly ignored by the authorities.

One of the most high-profile cases involved comedian Ariana Lolaeva in 2021. The backlash was triggered by a year-old video where her colleague Alexander Nie joked that she had an «Ossetian pie between her legs.» Lolaeva **started receiving messages** filled with insults and threats because, as an Ossetian, she supposedly failed to stop the joke from being made. Later, in an interview with journalist Yuri Dud, she **admitted** that Ossetians were actively looking for her in Moscow, and out of fear for her safety, she temporarily moved to a house outside the city.

Denis Chuzhoy, who once had a **funeral wreath delivered** to his show with a ribbon that read «For a Traitor to Russia, » believes the authorities' unwillingness to act in these situations might be because „in Russia, you often have to beg the police to do their job unless it's something like murder or robbery.“ According to him, when it comes to harassment cases, the authorities would have to defend people „whom they would gladly pressure themselves.“

Comedians also wish to avoid drawing extra scrutiny, as Dan the Stranger points out. Their families often request that threats against them aren't widely publicised. They fear that while security forces might eventually take notice, they are more likely to intensify the pressure than offer protection.

«When someone brought a funeral wreath onto the stage during my show, I posted about it on Twitter,» the comedian explained. «It spread through the media, and the very next day, FSB officers were attending my show. Personally, I would have preferred if it had just stopped with the wreath.»

## **COMEDIANS PERSECUTED AMID THE WAR**

Despite frequent reports of comedians facing persecution and intense harassment, politically-motivated legal cases against standup comedians remain rare. As of April 2024, we know of only five administrative cases targeting comedians, three of which were launched after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022. For example, Ruslan Beliy was **fined** in April 2024 (under Russia's «foreign agent» law) for neglecting to include the mandatory «foreign agent» label on his materials. Six months later, Danila Poperechny was fined under the law prohibiting the «discrediting» of the Russian armed forces (under Russia's war censorship laws). Both comedians **failed** in their **attempts** to appeal the rulings.

In the third administrative **case**, Dmitry Gavrilov was detained for 13 days on the charge of «inciting hatred.» Unlike Beliy and

Poperechny, who had openly criticised the war in Ukraine, the trigger for Gavrilov's case was a recording of a performance in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital. This recording was published over 18 months prior to his arrest. In the routine, Gavrilov joked about fleeing Russia to avoid mobilisation: «To keep myself from getting too relaxed, I wrote 'Fuck Russians' on the wall at home, just so I don't forget where I am.»

Currently, Artemy Ostamin is the sole comedian known to be facing politically motivated *criminal* charges stemming directly from his stand-up routines. Blogger Anna Bazhutova (known online as YokoBovich), who also performs stand-up, **faced** criminal charges not for her comedy but for a live stream where she read out accounts from residents of Bucha, a town near Kyiv now infamous for the atrocities committed there during the Russian occupation. In June 2024, Bazhutova was **sentenced** to five and a half years' imprisonment under Russia's law about «fakes» about the army.

Russian authorities also frequently label comedians as «foreign agents.» By April 2025, seven people known for their comedy work had been added to the official registry.

Aside from cases targeting comedians for their stand-up work, we know of four other examples where jokes led to politically motivated persecution. In a notable instance from November 2022, Ekaterina Mizulina, head of the pro-Kremlin League for a Safe Internet, filed a complaint against Nekoglai, a TikToker from Moldova. The issue was a parody video in which Nekoglai mimicked footage purportedly showing a Russian soldier tossing away a grenade dropped by a Ukrainian drone.

Nekoglai was subsequently found guilty of violating Russian residency rules and **deported** to Moldova. While detained, first at Moscow's Presnensky district police station and later at a detention center for foreign nationals in Sakharovo, near Moscow, Nekoglai reported being **tortured**: officers beat and attempted to sexually assault him with a one-litre Coca-Cola bottle. He was also forced to apologize on camera, and his head was forcibly shaved.

Many comedians have left Russia since 2022, relocating to countries such as Georgia, Armenia, Germany, Spain, and the USA. Some who faced pressure back in Russia, including Sasha Kapadya and Dan the Stranger, have started performing in English abroad. These comedians have told journalists their moves were driven more by the shrinking space for Russian-language events than by direct political motives. The precise number of comedians who have left due to pressure from the authorities remains unknown.