



## The Eurasia Center Brief: US-Russia Program

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# Domestic Violence: The Russian Federation's Secret Shame



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*In February 2017, parliament decriminalized first instances of battery among family members. © 2018 Rebecca Hendin for Human Rights Watch*

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/29/chilling-inaction-domestic-violence-russia-endangering-womens-lives>

### ***Introduction:***

If a state cannot protect its citizens from external and internal violence, it has failed to maintain one of its core functions. Domestic violence is a plague throughout the world that can impact all individuals, but increasingly affects women's human rights and remains one of the largest public health issues facing women worldwide.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Russian Federation, not only has the government failed to protect the survivors of domestic violence in its nation but has often engaged in victim blaming.<sup>2</sup> Developing over time, the Russian people's views of domestic violence have largely reflected the rhetoric promoted by the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church, in that keeping families together, rather than aiding domestic violence survivors or punishing offenders is the people's main priority.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in recent years, the Russian government abolished the main method of trying domestic violence crimes in court, and instated

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<sup>1</sup> "Violence against Women," November 29, 2017, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

<sup>2</sup> Maija Jäppinen and Janet Elise Johnson, "The State to the Rescue? The Contested Terrain of Domestic Violence in Postcommunist Russia," in *Gender Violence in Peace and War: States of Complicity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), p. 146, <https://www-jstor-org.proxyau.wrlc.org/stable/j.ctt1f5g4sc>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.

heavy restrictions on NGOs that could help domestic violence victims, creating nearly insurmountable barriers for women who are trying to escape a life of violence and abuse.<sup>4</sup>

## **Violence:**

The universally accepted definition of domestic violence, as promulgated by the United Nations, consists of the following, “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this definition being widely accepted internationally, the Russian Federation has failed to develop any legal definition of domestic violence or any concrete laws designed to combat domestic violence.<sup>6</sup> Without a legal understanding or acknowledgement of domestic violence, it is not a surprise that Russia’s domestic violence statistics appear to be staggering from what little data the government and independent research groups have collected. Evidence collected from Russia’s Internal Ministry of Affairs in 2008 reveals that in Russia, “40 percent of all serious violent crimes are committed by a family member,” and “every year about 14,000 women die at the hands of their spouses or other family members...”<sup>7</sup> These statistics are shocking enough without framing them in an international context. However, when looking at the United Nation’s estimates from 2017, it is made clear that out of the 87,000 women killed by partners or other family members, “roughly one in ten women killed worldwide through domestic violence was Russian.”<sup>8</sup> Further, this data does not fully represent the levels of domestic violence in Russia as 60-70% of domestic violence victims do not reach out to the police for aid.<sup>9</sup> It would not be surprising to discover that this percentage could be greater in Russia due to the police’s reputation for commonly refusing to help domestic violence victims and the frequent failure of the police to recognize pleas for assistance from domestic violence victims.<sup>10</sup> This information reveals horrifying facts about domestic violence in Russia and according to Russian civil society organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened factors that can instigate domestic violence like stress, quarantining, and economic strains, correlating to greater numbers of domestic violence cases.<sup>11</sup> The limited data concerning domestic violence in Russia and the lack of support from the police reveals a grim narrative of domestic violence in Russia that calls for an examination as to why Russian domestic violence rates are staggering.

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<sup>4</sup> Olimpiada Usanova, “Kennan Cable No. 53: Russia’s ‘Traditional Values’ and Domestic Violence,” [www.wilsoncenter.org](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-53-russias-traditional-values-and-domestic-violence) (Wilson Center, June 2020), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-53-russias-traditional-values-and-domestic-violence>.

<sup>5</sup> “Violence against Women.”

<sup>6</sup> Yulia Gorbunova, “The Chilling Inaction on Domestic Violence in Russia Is Endangering Women’s Lives,” [www.hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/29/chilling-inaction-domestic-violence-russia-endangering-womens-lives) (Human Rights Watch, October 28, 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/29/chilling-inaction-domestic-violence-russia-endangering-womens-lives>.

<sup>7</sup> Olimpiada Usanova, “Kennan Cable No. 53: Russia’s ‘Traditional Values’ and Domestic Violence.”

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Violence Against Women in the Russian Federation*: alternative report of the ANNA National Centre for the Prevention of Violence, 46th session (July 2010), p.7, available from [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/RUS/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_RUS\\_46\\_9974\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/RUS/INT_CEDAW_NGO_RUS_46_9974_E.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> “Domestic Violence in Russia: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Chatham House, July 23, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/domestic-violence-russia-impact-covid-19-pandemic>.

## Views:

Given the known statistics on Russian domestic violence, analyzing the Russian people's view on the matter sheds light as to why these rates of domestic violence have been tolerated for so long. Historically, Russia has always possessed an extremely patriarchal culture.<sup>12</sup> This belief of male dominance and superiority has translated into the common acceptance that a woman must obey her husband and accept violence he may choose to inflict upon her.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging this acceptance, it is not unforeseen that Russia has never had any comprehensive laws or protections in place for victims of domestic violence, reinforcing the prevalent notion that domestic violence is a private matter between a husband and wife and law enforcement has no place in disrupting a marriage.<sup>14</sup> These attitudes contribute to creating an environment in which collecting evidence necessary to support new domestic violence legislation and increasingly strengthens law enforcement's general belief that intimate partner violence is a private matter that is not worthy of law enforcement's time and attention.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the efforts of international and domestic human rights and women's groups and organizations to change the view of domestic violence among the Russian population, Vladimir Putin's "independent path" ideology has greatly contributed to strengthening the narrative that domestic violence is a family matter. In order to support his conservative policies, Vladimir Putin has adopted the strategy of claiming that his decisions and legislation are reflective of preserving Russia's traditional values, which greatly conflict with western, secular, liberal values.<sup>16</sup> This argument has been frequently used by the Kremlin when refusing to take up new domestic violence or women's issues initiatives, such as in 2018 when Russia declined to confirm the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.<sup>17</sup> Putin's reasoning behind the denial was that its provisions clashed with "the principal approaches of the Russian Federation to the protection and promotion of traditional moral and family values and the Concept of State Family Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025."<sup>18</sup> Noting Russian traditional family values, it is worth mentioning that in what little action Putin has taken to address domestic violence it has directed to emphasize violence in the family, ignoring all gender-based aspects of domestic violence, and has placed pressure and blame on women to keep the family together no matter what.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the minuscule measures enacted do not empower women, but play on the fiction that women are weak and need to be saved.<sup>20</sup> The Kremlin has also been supported by the Russian Orthodox Church when defending its decisions regarding domestic violence policy, as the Church promotes patriarchal values and believes that domestic violence law would cause families to be broken up and children to be given to homosexual couples and that domestic violence is simply inherent to traditional family life in Russia.<sup>21</sup> Despite the overwhelming odds against changing Russian attitudes towards domestic violence in Russia, it is necessary to keep fighting for the right to a life without domestic violence, and as a 2020 survey by

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<sup>12</sup> Usanova.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Maija Jäppinen and Janet Elise Johnson, "The State to the Rescue? The Contested Terrain of Domestic Violence in Postcommunist Russia," in *Gender Violence in Peace and War: States of Complicity*, p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> Usanova.

the Levada Centre reflects, more and more Russians are starting to believe that domestic violence is a serious problem.<sup>22</sup>

## **Violations:**

Mentioning the little action taken by Putin concerning domestic violence, Putin has made it more difficult for women to seek justice and protection from their abusers and hindered women's rights and domestic violence-geared nongovernmental organizations that aid domestic violence survivors. Reviewing its first Russian domestic violence case, in 2019, the European Court of Human Rights held that "domestic violence and the official inaction the applicant faced was not an isolated incident, but rather the result of a systemic, ongoing failure on part of the Russian authorities to properly address domestic violence."<sup>23</sup> This case, along with the failure to develop comprehensive domestic violence legislation, reveals that Russia has violated its international human rights commitments.<sup>24</sup> However, pressure from the international community has only heightened Putin's ability to defend his position on the basis of preserving traditional Russian values, strengthening Putin's conservative support base, including the Russian Orthodox Church, explaining the government's apathy in regard to domestic violence.<sup>25</sup>

The withdrawal of avenues to try domestic violence crimes notably enhanced in 2016 when Russia decriminalized non aggravated battery, forming it into an "administrative offense punishable by a fine or detention," while keeping "repeated battery and battery committed against close relatives" a criminal offense.<sup>26</sup> However, this would change in 2017, when Russia removed the clause regarding violence against family members from *poboi*, or battery, which has always been the core channel for trying domestic violence crimes in Russia, also converting it into an administrative offense, mainly punished with fines.<sup>27</sup> Not only do administrative fines not address the issue of domestic violence, but they place a financial hardship on families, possibly exacerbating economic strife, which is a key cause of domestic violence.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, removing the family clause from *poboi* has mammoth symbolic ramifications as it "downplays violence against women by putting *poboi* on the same level as a minimally delinquent behavior like a speeding ticket."<sup>29</sup>

Since the elimination of the family clause from *poboi*, Russian women's rights activists have noted a considerable increase in intimate partner violence, making resources for domestic violence victims critical.<sup>30</sup> However, in addition to restricting avenues to prosecute domestic violence crimes, the Kremlin has placed a series of restrictive laws on NGO's impacting their ability to aid

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<sup>22</sup> "Domestic Violence in Russia: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic," Chatham House.

<sup>23</sup> Yulia Gorbunova, "The Chilling Inaction on Domestic Violence in Russia Is Endangering Women's Lives," [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

<sup>24</sup> Nerses Isajanyan, "Russia: Decriminalization of Domestic Violence," June 1, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/domestic-violence/russia.php>.

<sup>25</sup> "Domestic Violence in Russia: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic."

<sup>26</sup> Nerses Isajanyan, "Russia: Decriminalization of Domestic Violence."

<sup>27</sup> Olga Semukhina, "THE DECRIMINALIZATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN RUSSIA," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 28, no. 1 (Winter, 2020): pp. 15, 37, <https://search-proquest-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/2347875072/fulltextPDF/99CBAD99A28C4368PQ/1?accountid=8285>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Usanova.

domestic violence survivors.<sup>31</sup> For example, a 2006 law created registration difficulties for NGOs and the 2012 “Foreign Agent” law forced all NGOs that receive foreign funding or engage with politics to register with the Russian government as “foreign agents.”<sup>32</sup> As a result of these new policies, many NGOs, including many women’s rights and domestic violence organizations, were forced to close due to the newfound absence of international funding.<sup>33</sup>

## ***Conclusion:***

The Russian government has failed to protect its female citizens through their blatant disregard and indifference towards domestic violence. While the international community largely views domestic violence as one of the greatest issues facing women today, Russia has failed to even provide a legal definition of domestic violence, let alone produce any extensive legislation to help prevent domestic violence or prosecute abusers. Producing horrifying statistics on domestic violence, Russia’s patriarchal, traditional view that a woman should be subservient to her husband and endure any punishment he sees fit, reveals a dark reality of what many Russian women may experience throughout their lives. In recent years, Vladimir Putin has adopted a strategy to defend his conservative policies and his lack of initiative on combating domestic violence by claiming that western, secular, liberal values conflict with Russia’s traditional values, supported by a large conservative base including the Russian Orthodox Church. Violating Russia’s international human rights commitments, Putin has increasingly promoted the common belief that domestic violence is a private family matter and preserving the family unit is the woman’s responsibility. This rhetoric is reflected in the Russian government’s elevated measures to remove methods of prosecuting domestic violence crimes and making it extremely difficult for NGOs that support domestic violence victims and women to operate in Russia. Recognizing the extreme barriers facing Russian victims of domestic violence and the ever-increasing rates of domestic violence in Russia, it is of the utmost importance that the international community does not subside its pressure on the Russian government to ensure its citizens’ rights to a life free of domestic violence and abuse.

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<sup>31</sup> Maija Jäppinen and Janet Elise Johnson, “The State to the Rescue? The Contested Terrain of Domestic Violence in Postcommunist Russia,” p. 149.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>33</sup> Usanova.

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