

# **Administrative Extremism as a Mechanism of Loyalty Management: An Analysis of Law Enforcement Practices, 2014–2023**

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## **Open Peer Review**

This article underwent an open peer review process in accordance with the editorial policy of the journal.

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The reviewers confirmed the absence of any conflict of interest.

## **Acknowledgments**

The author expresses gratitude to the reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions, which contributed to refining the theoretical framework of the study.

## **Funding Statement**

This research was conducted without external funding.

## **Abstract**

This article analyzes the transformation of law enforcement practices in the field of countering extremism in the Russian Federation during the period 2014–2023. Particular attention is paid to the changes that occurred after 2021, when the recognition of several public organizations as extremist led to an expansion of criminal prosecution for participation in their activities, including forms of volunteer work that had previously been lawful.

The study demonstrates that, alongside criminal prosecution mechanisms, administrative measures—such as fines, official warnings, and disciplinary procedures—continue to be widely applied and exert a significant influence on the everyday behavior of citizens. Based on an analysis of publicly available court decisions, official explanations, and media documentation of relevant cases, the article identifies the emergence of a condition of normative uncertainty, which contributes to the spread of preventive self-restriction strategies among students and young professionals.

The article proposes that the combination of criminal and administrative practices can be interpreted as a mechanism of loyalty management, shaping the structure of civic activity and political participation in contemporary Russia.

## **Keywords**

anti-extremism legislation; administrative discretion; legal uncertainty; loyalty management; preventive self-censorship; political socialization; everyday authoritarianism; digital control; Russia; 2014–2023

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the application of legislation aimed at countering extremism in Russia has undergone noticeable changes. Formally, these legal provisions are intended to combat radical and violent manifestations. However, in practice they are increasingly applied in situations involving public statements, social media publications, and participation in civic initiatives.

A key turning point occurred in June 2021, when a court decision recognized the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) as an extremist organization. Following this ruling, participation in the organization's activities—and in some cases even previous volunteer involvement—began to be classified not as an administrative offense but as a criminal offense. As a result, not only the legal assessment of specific actions changed, but also the overall level of legal risk faced by citizens engaged in civic activity.

At the same time, alongside criminal prosecution, administrative measures continued to be actively used, including fines, official warnings, preventive conversations, and disciplinary procedures within universities. Even when sanctions were formally non-criminal, their consequences could be substantial: expulsion, dismissal from employment, or restrictions on participation in elections or employment in certain sectors.

As a result, a condition of heightened uncertainty has emerged: the boundaries of permissible behavior have become blurred, and the interpretation of legal norms increasingly depends on enforcement practices. This leads to changes in everyday behavior—people begin to limit themselves in advance, avoid public discussions, and distance themselves from civic engagement.

Thus, after 2021, anti-extremism regulation began to operate through two levels of influence: a criminal level directed at organizations designated as extremist, and an administrative level functioning as an instrument of everyday discipline affecting a much broader range of citizens.

## **2. Research Methodology**

This study is based on the analysis of open sources and qualitative observations. As part of the research, publicly available court decisions in administrative and criminal cases related to the

enforcement of anti-extremism legislation during the period 2014–2023 were examined. The study relied on materials from official court websites, statements by government authorities, and media publications.

To identify changes in enforcement practices, a comparative analysis was applied. The periods before and after 2021 were examined separately, which made it possible to trace shifts in the legal qualification of actions and the nature of sanctions.

In addition, the study considered materials from interviews and informal conversations with representatives of student and volunteer communities. These data had a supplementary character and were used primarily to illustrate the social effects of law enforcement practices. All information was analyzed in an aggregated form without indicating personal data.

The study employed the following methods:

- content analysis of court decisions and official communications;
- comparative analysis of legal formulations across different years;
- qualitative analysis of behavioral strategies described in open sources;
- synthesis of observations related to changes in digital and civic activity.

A limitation of this research is the exclusive reliance on publicly available sources, which does not allow for a full assessment of the scale of enforcement practices. Nevertheless, the analysis of open cases makes it possible to identify stable trends and trace changes in the nature of state regulation.

### **3. Research Results**

#### **3.1. 2014–2020: Expansion of “low-threshold” control through administrative and “preventive” practices**

The analysis of open materials shows that during the 2010s, the framework of anti-extremism regulation expanded not only through criminal provisions but also through administrative mechanisms and accompanying procedures. These included inspections, official warnings, documentation of “undesirable” activity, disciplinary pressure within institutions (including educational institutions), as well as the creation of registries and lists of “extremist materials.”

A typical pattern of this period was not necessarily imprisonment but rather the creation of a sense of manageable legal risk: a fine, public documentation of a violation, confiscation of equipment, questioning or interrogation, and so-called “preventive” measures. Studies of law enforcement practice note that once specific materials are recognized as extremist, their distribution may lead to administrative liability (for example, under Article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation), which makes digital publications particularly vulnerable to sanctions.

Example (typical, without personal identification): a repost or publication of material that is later included in the list of extremist materials, after which grounds appear for initiating an administrative case and conducting related procedural actions such as searches or seizure of digital media.

Importantly, even at this stage one can observe the emergence of an “anticipation of punishment” effect—people begin to adjust their behavior in advance, even when no direct punishment has yet occurred.

### **3.2. June 2021: Institutional Turning Point and the Shift to Criminal Qualification**

A key turning point occurred with the decision of the Moscow City Court on June 9, 2021, which designated organizations associated with Alexei Navalny (including the Anti-Corruption Foundation and regional штабы) as extremist organizations. After the ruling entered into force, participation in the activities of these organizations, their financing, and other forms of assistance became subject to criminal liability.

As a result, the nature of legal risk fundamentally changed. Previously, volunteer work in campaign offices and participation in civic initiatives had generally been regarded as forms of lawful civic engagement. However, after the organization’s legal status changed, such involvement could be reclassified under criminal law provisions.

According to monitoring by human rights organizations and publicly available reports from 2021–2023, in a number of cases criminal proceedings were initiated based on financial donations or participation in the work of campaign offices as volunteers or staff members. Public discussions also addressed the use of materials seized during investigative actions in organizational offices, which further increased the perception of legal vulnerability among individuals who had previously participated in their activities.

Even when a specific individual was not prosecuted, the mere possibility of being identified as a former participant or supporter created a condition of prolonged legal risk. This affected professional plans, migration decisions, and strategies of public behavior.

Thus, after 2021, anti-extremism regulation expanded to a qualitatively different scale. It began to encompass not only current activity but also past involvement, reinforcing the perception of retrospective legal liability.

### **3.3. Social Consequences and Behavioral Strategies under Conditions of Legal Uncertainty**

Changes in law enforcement practices after 2021 affected not only the legal status of particular actions but also the everyday behavior of citizens, especially within youth and university environments.

An analysis of open cases and observational materials makes it possible to identify several stable tendencies.

### **3.3.1. Spread of Digital Self-Censorship**

One of the most noticeable effects has been the transformation of behavior in the digital sphere. Social media users began to:

- delete previously published materials;
- close their accounts or switch them to private mode;
- avoid reposting politically sensitive content;
- use neutral formulations instead of direct political evaluations.

Even in the absence of direct sanctions, the initiation of cases against other individuals created a “warning through example” effect. As a result, the space for public discussion gradually narrowed.

### **3.3.2. Distancing from Civic Initiatives**

Within the university environment, a decline in open participation in civic and volunteer projects related to political topics has been observed. According to interviews and observations recorded during the research, many students after 2021 began avoiding formal participation in organizations, even when their activities were not prohibited by law.

The reasons included not only the threat of criminal liability but also concerns about disciplinary consequences, such as expulsion, problems with student housing, academic recommendations, or future employment.

Thus, legal risk began to be perceived as a factor capable of influencing educational and professional trajectories.

### **3.3.3. Changes in Career and Migration Strategies**

Another notable tendency has been the transformation of long-term life plans. In informal conversations, participants in volunteer initiatives noted that after 2021–2022 they began considering:

- the possibility of relocating to other regions or leaving the country;
- abandoning career paths in the public sector;
- choosing professions not associated with public or political activity.

In this way, law enforcement practices started to influence not only current civic participation but also long-term life strategies.

### **3.3.4. The “Anticipation of Punishment” Effect**

Even in cases where individuals were not directly subjected to administrative or criminal proceedings, the uncertainty of legal norms created a persistent state of caution. People increasingly evaluated their actions in terms of how they might be interpreted by state authorities.

This mechanism can be described as the anticipation of punishment effect: behavior is adjusted in advance, without the need for direct coercion.

## **4. Discussion**

The findings of this study allow several important conclusions to be drawn regarding the transformation of law enforcement practices.

First, there has been a shift from isolated demonstrative criminal prosecutions toward a more distributed system of regulation. Even with the emergence of a stronger criminal law component after 2021, administrative mechanisms continue to play a significant role. They are applied more frequently, affect a wider range of individuals, and create a background of constant legal risk.

Second, the predictability of sanctions appears to be as important as their severity. In situations where the boundaries of permissible behavior remain unclear, individuals tend to orient themselves not toward the formal wording of the law but toward examples of law enforcement practice. Individual cases widely discussed in the public sphere function as signals to a broader audience.

As a result, a phenomenon often described in legal scholarship as the “chilling effect” emerges. Citizens refrain from exercising their rights not because of direct prohibition but due to fear of potential consequences. In the context examined in this article, this effect manifests itself through reduced public expression, distancing from volunteer activities, and a decline in open political engagement.

Third, an important element is the emergence of retrospective uncertainty. After 2021, past participation in civic activities began to be perceived as a potential source of risk. This intensified the sense of instability surrounding legal boundaries and influenced long-term life strategies.

Thus, it is possible to speak of the formation of a regulatory model in which state influence operates not only through direct punishment but also through the production of caution. Behavior is adjusted in advance, and the space of permissible action narrows without the need for large-scale repressive measures.

It is important to emphasize that these processes are not always reflected in official statistics, since a significant portion of the changes are behavioral rather than formally institutional. Nevertheless, it is precisely these behavioral shifts that exert a long-term influence on the structure of civic activity.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study examined the transformation of law enforcement practices in the field of countering extremism in the Russian Federation during the period 2014–2023. Particular attention was paid to the changes that occurred after 2021, when the designation of several civic organizations as extremist led to the movement of certain forms of civic activity into the sphere of criminal legal risk.

The analysis shows that the contemporary regulatory model combines two levels of influence: a criminal level directed at organizations recognized as extremist and individuals associated with them, and an administrative level functioning as a broader mechanism of everyday control over public statements and symbolic actions. The interaction of these levels creates an environment of heightened normative uncertainty.

Empirical observations indicate that law enforcement practices affect not only the legal status of specific actions but also citizens' behavior more broadly. The spread of digital self-censorship, distancing from civic initiatives, and the reconsideration of professional and migration strategies point to the presence of an anticipation of potential sanctions effect.

Thus, anti-extremism regulation during the period under review functions not only as an instrument for responding to specific violations but also as a mechanism structuring everyday behavior. Even in the absence of large-scale criminal prosecutions, administrative and procedural measures may exert a significant social impact.

A limitation of the present study is the reliance exclusively on open sources, which does not allow for a full assessment of the scope of law enforcement practices. Future research could include broader comparative analysis and more in-depth interviews with participants in civic initiatives.

Nevertheless, the analysis presented here allows us to identify an important trend: under conditions of expansive interpretation of legal norms, legal uncertainty itself becomes an independent factor influencing the structure of civic activity.

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