

## ARTICLE

---

# Repression in Russia: The evolution of the political system<sup>1</sup>

OLGA NADSKAKUŁA-KACZMARCZYK<sup>2</sup> 

Department of Political and Legal Doctrines, Faculty of History and Cultural Heritage, The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland

### Abstract

The article presents the evolution of repressive politics in Russia, with particular emphasis on the lead-up to the State Duma election of 2021. Exploring how the Russian ruling elite intensified political repression against both critics of the political regime and independent social groups which had not been persecuted before 2021, the article demonstrates what effect the political persecutions have had on the regime. The main finding of the paper is that the repressions resulted not only in the destruction of anti-system oppositional structures (in particular those created by the politician Alexei Navalny) but also in severe disciplining of the so-called systemic opposition and persecution against independent media as well as groups and organizations formally uninvolved in politics.

### Keywords

Russia, repression, opposition, political system, Alexei Navalny

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21062/cejp.2023.001>

**How to cite:** Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk, O. 2023. "Repression in Russia: The evolution of the political system." *Central European Journal of Politics*. DOI: 10.21062/cejp.2023.001

---

<sup>1</sup> This study was prepared under a grant project supported by the National Science Centre (Poland), Grant No. 2014/13/D/HS5/00637.

<sup>2</sup> **Corresponding author:** Olga Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk, Department of Political and Legal Doctrines, Faculty of History and Cultural Heritage, The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Kanonicza 25, 31-002 Kraków, Poland. E-mail: [olga.nadskakula@upjp2.edu.pl](mailto:olga.nadskakula@upjp2.edu.pl)

## 1. Introduction

The year 2021 in Russia was marked by an unprecedented increase in state control, repressive measures and persecutions that targeted not only any critics of the regime, but also organisations and sections of society that managed to remain outside the state apparatus or enjoyed relative independence. There were various signs that the Russian political system was evolving in the direction of an increasingly repressive consolidated dictatorship (McFaul 2021).<sup>3</sup> These included not only a strong blow aimed at the anti-systemic opposition, in particular at the organisations founded by its leader Alexei Navalny, but also successful attempts to discipline the systemic opposition, put pressure on the independent media and abolish the Memorial (Memorial Human Rights Centre). This article describes the evolution of Russian repressive policy, paying particular attention to the intensification of repression directed against many independent social groups, which had begun a year before the 2021 elections to the State Duma. The context of these considerations will be the gradual increase in repression aimed at real and potential political rivals after the “For Fair Elections” protests in 2011/2012. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 greatly intensified repressive measures in an area which had previously been subjected to numerous prohibitions and limitations, i.e. freedom of speech, and will be remembered precisely in the context of threats which for the political regime mean an attempt to wipe out independent information completely.

The text focuses on state repressions (Davenport 2007),<sup>4</sup> with the emphasis on preventative repression for which it is essential to use administrative resources and legal tools in order to make effective action impossible for oppositional political forces, and also to intimidate social groups which the Kremlin considers to be a threat to the stability of the political regime. Although the evolution of political repression has not reached the stage of mass repressive measures typical of totalitarian systems, over the last few years the Kremlin has broadened the range of groups that face persecution.

Although the Russian regime is evolving all the time, the aim of this text is not to discuss its position on the continuum between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, but merely to attempt to show how repressive measures influence the direction of this evolution and its stability. The theoretical considerations on the topic of repressive

---

<sup>3</sup> Scholars debate the level of dictatorship that currently rules Russia. However, there is no doubt that the authoritarian system is constantly being strengthened.

<sup>4</sup> “By most accounts, repression involves the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions (...) Like other forms of coercion, repressive behaviour relies on threats and intimidation to compel targets, but it does not concern itself with all coercive applications (e.g., deterrence of violent crime and theft). Rather, it deals with applications of state power that violate First Amendment–type rights, due process in the enforcement and adjudication of law, and personal integrity or security” (Davenport 2007: 2).

measures, which are based on an analysis by the Russian political scientist Vladimir Gelman (2016), are intended to show the strategy used by authoritarian powers to deal with political rivals. This strategy was used by the Kremlin to fight the opposition and it remained valid in its main points right up until 2020. A year before the elections to the State Duma, the intensification of repressive measures, particularly horizontal in the sense that repression was extended to more and more social groups, gave a clear signal regarding the direction of the evolution of the Russian political regime and enabled discussions about how this direction could influence its stability.

## **2. Repressive policy in authoritarian systems**

For the purposes of this discussion, the analysis of the Russian political scientist Vladimir Gelman (2016) has been employed, which uses the example of Russia to describe the repressive strategies of authoritarian leaders. According to Gelman (2016), contemporary authoritarian systems are somewhat reluctant to resort to mass repression. The opposition is often persecuted for its public stance, but persecution of citizens who have decided to express their oppositional views but are not politically active is rare (Frye et al. 2017: 4). In today's world, the majority of authoritarian regimes apply repression selectively to divide their opponents, although the relative balance and the targets they choose differ considerably (Tarrow 1998; Lust 2005; Nugent 2020).

Gelman (2016) points out several factors that contribute to a lack of mass repression. Firstly, the main source of threat to an authoritarian regime is conflicts within the elite, rather than mass protests. From this point of view, wide-scale use of repression and a strengthening of the state's coercive apparatus are risky both for those in power and their closest associates, who have a greater chance of becoming the victims of repression than ordinary citizens.

Secondly, in contemporary urbanised and educated societies of a relatively high level of socio-economic development, mass repression and political violence are rarely considered to be legitimate mechanisms of maintaining political power. One can develop this point by adding Yekaterina Shulman's (2018) observation that excessively strict measures aimed by the government at the opposition can create an impression of an insecure and unstable system. It is crucial not to forget, however, that the Kremlin puts a large amount of effort into ensuring that the image of both the head of state and the whole system is the complete opposite of this. They want the president to appear to be a steadfast and self-assured darling of the crowd, who is indeed adored by the vast majority of Russians, so does not need to fear the opposition to any extent.

Thirdly, an authoritarian regime that does not hold elections can face a lack of recognition in the international arena. Because of this, many contemporary authoritarian regimes, which are keen to avoid a situation of lack of stability and political control, are forced to implement other instruments and mechanisms (rather than abolish elections)

in order to survive. Above all, they attempt to modify democratic institutions, such as elections, legislation and political parties, depending on the needs and interests of the ruling elite. They choose co-optation over coercion in dealing with entities that pose a political threat and also employ more sophisticated propaganda techniques (Gelman 2016: 28–29). The mechanism of repression itself is not completely rejected by authoritarian regimes; instead of mass-scale repression, selective repression is applied, with violence directed at those entities and organisations that criticise the regime fiercely (Davenport 2007; Earl 2011). Furthermore, repressive measures are most effective when they intensify divisions within opposition groups and pit them against each other (Holger 2006; Howard and Roessler 2006).

The purpose of selective repressions is to warn other citizens. Gelman (2016: 30) writes that, “the strategy of selective repression is not intended to punish enemies of the regime (although this motivation is often present), but first and foremost its aim is to prevent the spread of oppositional activism outside the relatively narrow circle of opponents of the regime”.

From the point of view of this analysis of the evolution of political repression in Russia, it is necessary to consider, however, what factors influence the fact that contemporary authoritarian systems are beginning to increase the scale of repression. In research on repression, there is a dominant view that the decision to intensify political repression is not always the choice of the authorities, who envisage that the advantages of such a policy will outweigh its potential costs (Davenport 2007; Slantchev and Matush 2019). The essential expected effect of repression is an increase in the probability that the regime will remain in power (Escribá-Folch 2013). Therefore, it is worth considering what factors may have contributed to the Kremlin’s choice of a policy of intensifying repression in Russia. In what way did the actions of individual political and social actors influence the dynamics of this policy and what influence did the inherent features of the system have on it?

According to Adam Przeworski (1991: 58), authoritarian balance rests on three pillars, namely lies, fear and economic wellbeing. If one of these pillars is weak, it forces authoritarian leaders to strengthen the other two. At the same time, as demonstrated by Sergey Guriev and Daniel Treisman in their article ‘New Authoritarianism’ (2015), there is an inverse relationship between the scale of repression and economic growth. At times of economic boom, authoritarian regimes choose the strategies of cooperation and buying the loyalty of potential political opponents. However, in a situation where the rate of growth drops, or when the economy is immersed in stagnation or recession, the strategy of those in power is to replace the proverbial “carrot” with the “stick” – or wide-scale propaganda (lies) with selective repressive measures (fear). At the same time, the turn to political fear and repression is strongly tied to the structural conditions and the health of an authoritarian regime (Gelman 2016: 31). Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have a similar view on the causes of repression: “if repressions are too expensive, the elite prefer

to buy citizens with promises concerning domestic policy, for example redistribution of income” (Acemoglu and Robinson 2015: 13; Kolesnikov 2017). If, however, there is nothing to parcel out, the government’s situation is significantly more difficult. Acemoglu and Robinson conclude that “greater inequality means that redistribution is more expensive for the elite and repressive measures more attractive compared to democratisation, like the promise of redistribution. This increases the readiness of the elite to use repression, even if it means enormous costs” (Acemoglu and Robinson 2015: 13).

On the other hand, in attempting to answer the question as to precisely which actions of an opposition contribute to the intensification of political repression, Christian Davenport (1995) analysed data from fifty-three countries from the years 1948–1982. He noticed that factors that contribute to an increase in repressive measures by a government against its critics include increasingly diverse strategies employed by the opposition, as well as a temporary increase in oppositionist activity, particularly protest activity. From the point of view of these theoretical considerations it is worth taking a look at how repressions are employed in the domestic policy of Russia’s political elite.

### **3. Repressive policy under Vladimir Putin up until 2020**

At the moment of Vladimir Putin’s taking office and during his first presidential term, it was relatively easy to halt those groups that opposed the government’s policies. Both the mechanism whereby pro-regime officials exaggerated the power and significance of “colour revolutions” and the creation of counter-revolutionary strategies worked very well. On the one hand, as Vladimir Gelman (2016) points out, the Kremlin used incentives to transform opponents or potential opponents into loyal systemic groups.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, in an attempt to marginalise its opponents almost completely, the Kremlin tightened the law that put pressure on its opponents and introduced the tactic divide and conquer. Changes in legislation were intended to block the possibility of oppositional forces taking part in elections at different levels in Russia, for example by using the municipal filter. Other changes in legislation concerned regulations regarding the election of mayors and governors (Duma 2012) and made it difficult to register opposition parties. Furthermore, new legislation was intended to discourage people from expressing views and promoting oppositional attitudes, an example of which was laws concerning internet censorship (RKN 2014), changes in legislation regarding public gatherings, the proliferation of regulations regarding the struggle with different forms of “extremism” (Kremlin 2016), including “offending religious sentiment” and “separatist aspirations” and the “foreign agent law”, which over the last few years has evolved considerably, so it

---

<sup>5</sup> E.g. “A Just Russia” (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*); NGOs seeking support from the state; pro-Kremlin youth organisations.

now concerns not only NGOs (Kremlin 2012), but also the media (Publication Pravo 2017), and since 2022, natural persons as well (Kremlin 2020). Not only were these practices defined legally, but the penalties for breaching the regulations also became much more severe (imprisonment in addition to the threat of a fine) (Horvath 2013).

As Davenport notes regarding the opposition's protest activity and the authorities' reaction to it, the 2011–2012 protests strengthened the Kremlin's counterrevolutionary activity. The law was also tightened following the 2017 anticorruption protests, organised by Alexei Navalny. In February 2018 President Vladimir Putin voiced his opinion on this matter, instructing the Ministry of the Interior to suppress resolutely "attempts to involve young people in illegal activity" (Aptekar 2018).

Apart from legal tools, the Kremlin also used a whole array of extra-legal tools, such as intimidation and deprecation of potential enemies of the system. One of the most frequently used methods for dealing with political rivals is to force them to emigrate (Gelman 2015: 3) After 2012 this system of "incapacitating" opponents was employed not only with members of the opposition, journalists and social activists, but also with academics from higher education establishments, for example the rector of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Sergey Guriev and professor Mikhail Sava from Krasnodar were accused of espionage.

After Crimea had been annexed and political rivals and antiregime activists discredited, the government's policy of creating fear materialised in more active and systematic harassment of the opposition. The killing of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov by the walls of the Kremlin in February 2015 was a warning to all genuine and potential critics and active opponents of the Kremlin. However, the greatest pressure was exerted on the most active opposition activist, Alexei Navalny. Apart from trumped up criminal cases against him and an attempt to discredit his activity in pro-Kremlin media, Navalny was also not free to act as an oppositionist aiming to take power. For many years he had tried without success to register his political party, and because of the ongoing criminal cases against him he was also not permitted to take part in the 2018 presidential elections.<sup>6</sup>

Navalny was not only the only oppositionist capable of bringing crowds out on to the streets in various parts of Russia, but also a politician who motivated a significant part of society dissatisfied with Putin's regime to take part in elections at various levels. For this he used his own decisive election campaign, i.e. the "smart voting" project.<sup>7</sup> Despite

---

<sup>6</sup> House arrest for Navalny, persecution of his associates, his brother Oleg Navalny's arrest and imprisonment, even more intense deprecation of the opposition in the media, new GONGO organisations (a government-organized non-governmental organization), aimed at preventing anti-government mobilisation.

<sup>7</sup> This idea made it possible to mobilise the opposition's rebellious electorate, who had so far been rather passive during elections, believing that there was no point in taking part in dishonest elections. Navalny's concept, which was intended to harm the ruling elite's image, exploited the potential, and position within

the widespread belief that in Russia it will never be possible to win against the authorities through elections, Navalny showed that it is also possible to make it difficult for the Kremlin or the ruling party to win elections easily and to undermine views that society's support for the government is unwavering. Despite attempts to discredit Navalny and his activity, despite the ever-narrowing opportunities to operate in Russian socio-political reality, Navalny attempted to use all windows of political opportunity to oppose the regime and make it difficult for political decision makers to act.

The final step in dealing with the oppositionist was the attempt to poison him with the nerve agent Novichok in August 2020. Above all, the founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation Navalny's disposal was supposed to deprive the opposition of its most hardworking and articulate activist, and in so doing, to reduce the risk of the political system becoming destabilised. This unsuccessful attempt to kill Navalny did not stop the Kremlin's repressive machinery from targeting him and his associates, particularly as the growing recognisability of the main opponent of the Kremlin was for the ruling elite an inconvenient consequence of the campaign to incapacitate him.

Summarizing the Kremlin's policy towards its opponents before 2021, we can draw attention to the government's instruments of political repression, which were specifically:

- persecution and intimidation of real and potential opposition – both private persons and organizations (mostly NGOs, which are considered to be centres of anti-government networks);
- an increase in control over the spread of information (a change of the head of some media outlets as well as a tightening of regulations concerning freedom of speech, understood broadly);
- “hysteria”, caused by Russian propaganda, surrounding the enemy from outside, but which also has a column within Russia. Hysteria, which is effectively used by the Kremlin as a tool for consolidating public opinion of the Kremlin and discrediting opponents.

As a result of all this activity, many opposition activists left the country, numerous NGOs were forced to censor themselves or cease their activity, while others were dubbed “foreign agents”. Parties that were not loyal to the Kremlin were either blocked from taking part in regional and local elections or this was made difficult for them, not to mention the growing number of obstacles when opposition parties tried to register.

Despite the fact that persecutions of the Kremlin's critics are a hallmark of Putin's regime, having only grown in intensity since the annexation of Crimea, twelve months

---

the political system, of parties that belonged to the so-called systemic opposition, such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the Liberal Democrat Party of Russia (LDPR).

before the 2021 elections to the State Duma the nature of repressive measures in Russian politics changed completely.

#### **4. The year 2021 – the intensification of repression**

One of the most important political events of 2021 in Russia was the elections to the State Duma, which took place in September (Zavadskaya and Rumiantseva 2022). Concerns among people from the ruling elite about the results of the vote played a role in many decisions that were intended to consolidate and strengthen the Russian political system. Looking closely at the internal politics of Russia in 2021, it is worth drawing attention to that activity that the ruling elite believed would help them maintain the regime's status quo. These are, above all, an intensified struggle with the opposition, particularly with Alexei Navalny, and with independent media and institutions, such as the Human Rights Centre Memorial, whose activity contradicted the official narrative of the Kremlin.

The year 2021 began with a series of anti-regime protests which were motivated by a film called "Putin's Palace. History of World's Largest Bribe", published on a channel founded by Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation.<sup>8</sup> Sabine Fischer (2021) believes that three aspects of the Kremlin's reaction to the antiregime protests at the start of the year suggest that the nature of repressive policy in Russia had changed. Firstly, the scale of the repression was significantly greater. During the protests at the end of January and the beginning of February 2021, over 11,500 people were arrested. Security forces used violence against the protesters and their basic rights were respected neither during their arrest nor during their subsequent detention. By way of comparison, in protests organized by Navalny in March and June 2017 the number of arrests did not exceed 1800 (Fomin and Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk 2022: 119).

Another facet of the Kremlin's reaction is the repression that spread to organisations and groups that previously had not encountered such persecution in connection with protests. Force was used against some journalists who reported on street protests, lawyers who talked about the need to respect the rights of demonstrators, as well as social activists and TikTokers.

Thirdly, departing from its previous practice, the state started to encroach on the private sphere and pay attention to people who were neither politically nor socially active. During the protests security forces visited potential protesters at home or at work and warned them against taking part in street protests. Appeals were also made to parents who were warned about the negative effects of their children taking part in protests.

The wave of repression that had begun in January and was aimed at Navalny's supporters and critics of the regime did not end when social mobilisation fizzled out. The

---

<sup>8</sup> This film describes a 100-billion-rouble palace complex, with an area of almost 18,000 m<sup>2</sup>, which belongs to Putin.



authorities continued to use the available “legal” means to marginalise his active supporters completely. Navalny’s organisations were declared extremist and consequently outlawed, and his closest associates and some activists from his regional headquarters emigrated. In June 2021 a law aimed at Anti-Corruption Foundation activists was passed, which retrospectively deprived people who were “involved in an extremist organisation” of passive voting rights.

In 2021 other institutions and social groups also met with persecution and pressure from the Kremlin. Popular, independent online media were declared “foreign agents”, after which some were forced to cease their activity. These include such websites as VTimes, Open Media and MBH-Media. The online investigative portal “Proyekt” was declared undesirable and was subsequently also closed down. It is worth pointing out that at the end of 2021 over 170 entities in Russia had the status “foreign agent”, which for them meant bureaucratic complications and possible financial penalties. The number of entities classified as so-called “undesirable organisations” also grew, and on this basis were outlawed; there are currently around fifty of them including “Open Russia”, which is critical of the Kremlin.<sup>9</sup> According to opinion polls conducted by the independent Levada Center, society’s perception of the authorities’ repressive policy in this area is changing. Whilst previously, as mentioned by Denis Volkov (2021), the majority of respondents stated that we need to fight “Western influence”, now most people are convinced that the “foreign agents” act was created to limit freedom of speech. This general trend in the growth in critical attitudes towards the authorities has appeared partly thanks to the development of independent media online, with which the Kremlin is fighting so vehemently.

The war in Ukraine brought with it a tightening of censorship in both traditional media and on the internet. On 4th March the Duma passed and Putin signed a law outlawing any so-called fake news about the Russian army (Duma 2022). According to the new law, persons who spread “false information” about the actions of the Russian armed forces face up to three years at a penal colony. The worst punishment of up to fifteen years in prison is reserved for those who spread unreliable information that has serious consequences. The law has succeeded in scaring those independent media that still operate in Russia. Before the law was passed, Radio Echo Moscow and TV Dozhd’, which often presented opinions critical of the government’s actions, were blocked.

A clear example of repressive measures aimed at persons disseminating information that does not conform to the Kremlin’s official narrative was a situation

---

<sup>9</sup>An organisation founded by the former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, which brings together activists and political oppositionists.

involving the Human Rights Centre – Memorial that arose at the end of 2021.<sup>10</sup> In November, the Prosecutor General requested the Supreme Court to shut down the Centre because of “justification of extremism and terrorism” (Domańska 2021),<sup>11</sup> “falsifying historical memory” and “creating a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state”. The Supreme Court’s decision can be explained with reference to the broader context of the activity of “Memorial” (VSRF 2021). On the one hand, this contradicts the political history accepted by the authorities, that is, it stands in opposition to the Kremlin’s apologetics for the past and the emphasis it lays on its brighter episodes. On the other, it is oriented towards defending human rights and publishes a list of persons persecuted by the current regime.

Elections to the State Duma also showed a change in how the Kremlin controls and subordinates individual social groups. It seemed that the elections had changed nothing fundamentally in the power structure, although the Kremlin’s approach to political groups operating on the Russian political scene had been modified. The main change concerned the systemic parties which, although they had preserved a minimal level of autonomy and subjectivity, had hitherto remained conformist to a large extent and accepted the rules of the political game imposed by the president’s administration. In 2021 the Kremlin began to perceive this minimal independence as threatening. On the one hand, this was because people who join groups of the so-called systemic opposition in Russia are those who in reality want to be active in putting an end to current social problems and treat membership of a systemic party as an infeed conveyor to such activism. On the other hand, the “smart voting” project, which Alexei Navalny had spent two years implementing on all levels of the elections, also played a role. In 2021 it was precisely the CPRF that was the greatest victor thanks to “smart voting” and before the elections became a victim of a hate campaign in the media.<sup>12</sup> This is why Tatyana Stanovaya – an analyst from the Carnegie Moscow Center – claims that the most important message of the September campaign was directed towards the systemic opposition (Stanovaya 2021b). It is precisely on this opposition that, after the non-systemic opposition had been destroyed, the Kremlin began to exert pressure. In doing so, the Kremlin did not allow the systemic opposition much room for manoeuvre: it had either to head in the direction of complete subordination to

---

<sup>10</sup> This international, historical, educational, charitable and human rights centre is the oldest independent organisation in Russia that deals with human rights and collects documents about crimes and repression under Stalin.

<sup>11</sup> Documents collected by “Memorial” include ones concerning the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses and persons suspected of being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a fundamentalist pan-Islamic party, but one that uses only peaceful methods of political struggle. In Russia these organisations are considered to be extremist and terrorist, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> A representative of the communist party – a candidate for the CPRF in the 2018 presidential elections Pavel Grudinin – was ostentatiously removed from the Duma elections.

the president's administration, or risk repeating the fate of the non-systemic opposition (Stanovaya 2021a).

An explanation for the increase in the intensity of repression may be the inverse relationship between persecutions and economic growth, mentioned at the beginning of this article. The Russian ruling elite has ever less to offer society. The so-called "Crimea effect", based on a feeling of pride in a nation that had challenged the West, has exhausted itself. The system is becoming extremely ineffective, incapable of ensuring stable economic growth and halting the fall in citizens' incomes. Since the pensions reform was introduced (in 2018) societal support for Vladimir Putin has fallen. Considering that Kremlin has ever fewer opportunities to take action against society's frustration and "buy" citizens' support, the strategy of increasing the control, violence and oppression against society appears to be a way out that ensures that the political equilibrium is maintained.

Whilst the last few years have witnessed, one after the other, an increase in censorship and an intensification of pressure on and persecution of critics of the regime and independent journalists, an interesting, but at the same time worrying aspect of political repression is the fact that it is spreading to new social groups, previously free from pressure from the Kremlin, and which potentially did not pose a direct threat to the activity of the ruling elite. The deepening of repression in those areas previously affected by persecutions as well as the horizontal expansion in the scale of repressed social groups reveals new trends in the policy of the Kremlin and at the same time opens the floor to a discussion about the extent to which these trends are strengthening the political regime in Russia.

## **5. Conclusions and findings**

The previous subsections show the evolution of political repression in Russia. The intensity of the repressive measures and the broadening of their application to more and more non-political social groups is a clear indication that the government believes that an intensification in repression will increase the likelihood of the regime's survival. The higher the probability that an autocrat will lose power, and the higher the level of threat that the ruler perceives, the greater the level of repression (Escribá-Folch 2013).

The elections to the State Duma were both a dress rehearsal and a peculiar test of strategies and mechanisms before the next presidential election, which will be particularly important from the point of view of maintaining a balance of power. In the case of the elections, the political field was cleansed to a significant extent and certain sections of society, not only those critical of the authorities but also ordinary independent ones that did not support the Kremlin's narrative, were neutralised. All mechanisms and methods employed in 2021 show clearly that the aim of the government is to strengthen and "concrete over" the current system, regardless of the costs to its image. Many factors,

including the developing crisis, legitimization of the political regime (Fischer 2021), and decisive and effective action by opposition groups, particularly those linked to Aleksei Navalny (before 2021), influence the government's choice of strategies for increasing repression and broadening the range of unaffected social entities.

The choice of strategies of repression was dictated by ossifying and maintaining the stability of the political system, and in so doing minimizing the threat from potential civil groups. However, the most important question is whether and in what circumstances such a strategy is effective.

Research into state repression in authoritarianism shows that repression alters groups' reasoning behind their strategic action: it changes their constraints and hinders them in mobilizing themselves individually against the regime (Nugent 2020). Moreover, despite grievances people can live in a system generally considered to be unjust for some considerable time before undertaking any political action (Tarrow 1993; Portes 1995). Merely destroying Navalny's structures was enough to reduce the frequency of social mobilizations. The year 2021 showed that the Kremlin is placing ever greater pressure on citizens and organisations whose activity falls outside the control of the government. Even though they are not blatantly non-systemic, they are starting to be perceived as anti-state and as a threat to the status-quo. Repressive measures currently constitute the most important instrument for controlling and disciplining society. The situation in Russia in 2021 and after the beginning of the war with Ukraine in February 2022, which also contributed to an increase in internal repression, confirms the view expressed above regarding the effectiveness of repression in authoritarian regimes, i.e. that repression works. It considerably reduces the likelihood that Putin will be replaced in the near future (Escribá-Folch 2013).

Furthermore, even if we ignore the societal apathy maintained artificially by the policy of repression, there are no sufficiently clear theoretical models which show how collective demands could bring about the fall of the repressive regime while the apparatus of coercion remains loyal to it. While the state remains capable of repression, dissidents and the opposition have no chance of revolutionary success. These political groups will not be able to achieve their goal, i.e. a regime change, until the state is incapacitated in some way in terms of internal conflict or weakness among the elite as well as a not particularly loyal coercive apparatus which cannot stand up to its challenge (Gause 2011), because of serious economic crisis and international pressure (Skocpol 1979). Although for researchers of the Russian political regime information about the cohesion of the Russian political elite and the actual loyalty of the *siloviki*<sup>13</sup> is not always entirely clear and transparent, at present it seems that that section of the Russian elite that forces an

---

<sup>13</sup> *Siloviki* is translated as "people of force". These are the people who work for the *silovye ministerstva*, literally "the ministries of force" or for other state organisation that is authorised to use force against citizens. This word is also used for a politician who came into politics from these organisations.

aggressive anti-West policy both in domestic and foreign policy is winning against those groups that are aiming at more moderate solutions. Which, of course, does not mean that this cannot change.

Nor do these theories mean that the Russian political regime, as it evolves in the direction of a consolidated dictatorship, does not have any influence on the negative consequences of implementing a policy of repression. There are several threats linked to the intensification of political repression and the exercising of repression against social groups who do not constitute a radical opposition to the government. One of these threats is the fact that repressed social groups may create a joint anti-regime collective identity of victimized groups and decreased polarization, while targeted repression prompts opposition groups to build distinct identities that increase polarization among them (Nugent 2020). The government should be aware that repressive measures often impact on other aspects of the functioning of an authoritarian regime in an unexpected way, affecting its stability.

A basic problem for an authoritarian regime in a situation of increased repression is the fact that it is unable to reliably assess either the extent of support for opposition to it, or the preferences of its citizens. Although a lack of open political action against an authoritarian regime can ossify the governments of authoritarian leaders, a lack of “steaming out” takes away the authorities’ chances of obtaining feedback: where is the core of society’s dissatisfaction and what is its scale? As the political scientist Aleksander Kynev (2018) notes, in most cases authoritarian leaders who employ repressive measures do not consider the consequences of their actions. This also applies to Russia, where using force to put pressure on one’s critics and election opponents, or simply all those who “hamper” the authorities in ruling the country, is the Kremlin’s simplest and most instinctive response, which is based on the law of force and the law of the stronger.

Usually, however, such behaviour is not preceded by reflection on the negative consequences that it may have. Kynev also observes that the logic of “forcing and intimidating” instead of “convincing and reconciling” has significant side effects, both regulatory and socio-psychological. From a normative point of view, solutions that involve force devalue the formal rules of the political game as well as everything connected to these rules, i.e. the question of legitimising election results, protection of property rights, and a guarantee of the safety of those currently in power. The socio-psychological effects are even more dangerous. The practice of exerting pressure and intimidating distorts social discourse as a whole and changes the nature of both those in power and the opposition. However, the opposition does not usually change as the government would wish. The two most significant effects of a change in the opposition resulting from repression are internal mobilisation and radicalisation.

In a situation of increased repression, there is also a strong status-quo bias that favours regime supporters, but also depoliticizes them in such a way that it weakens their motivation to involve themselves in costly political initiatives in defence of the regime.

(Slantchev and Matush 2019). For the Russian ruling elite this can be a serious problem, particularly in a situation of armed conflict with Ukraine and setbacks at the front, where questions not only of military, but also political mobilization are becoming a serious challenge for the government.

## References

- Aptekar, P. 2018. *Zakon dlja Alekseja Naval'nogo*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/05/11/769139-zakon-navalnogo>, 18.05.2018
- Asemoglu, D. and Robinson, D. 2015. *Jekonomicheskie istoki diktatury i demokratii*. M. Moskva: Vysshaja shkola jekonomiki.
- Davenport, C. 1995. "Multi-Dimensional Threat Perception and State Repression: An Inquiry Into Why States Apply Negative Sanctions." *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (3): 683–713. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111650>
- Davenport, C 2007. "State Repression and Political Order." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10: 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.143216>
- Domańska, M. 2021. *Rehabilitacja sowieckiego totalitaryzmu: Kreml likwiduje Memoriał*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2021-12-29/rehabilitacja-sowieckiego-totalitaryzmu-kreml-likwiduje-memorial>
- Duma. 2012. *Sovet Dumy prinjal k rassmotreniju vnesennyj Prezidentom zakonoproekt o prjamyh vyborah gubernatorov*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/6383/>
- Duma. 2022. *Vvoditsja otvetstvennost' za rasprostranenie fejkov o dejstviah VS RF*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/53620/>
- Earl, J. 2011. "Political Repressions: Iron Fist, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37: 261–284. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102609>
- Escribá-Folch, A. 2013. "Repression, political threats, and survival under autocracy." *International Political Science Review* 34 (5): 543–560. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512113488259>
- Fischer, S. 2021. "Repression and Autocracy as Russia Heads into State Duma Elections." *SWP Comment* 40. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/repression-and-autocracy-as-russia-heads-into-state-duma-elections>
- Fomin, I. and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk, O. 2022. "Against Putin and Corruption, for Navalny and the 'Revolution'?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 55 (1): 99–130. <https://doi.org/10.1525/j.postcomstud.2022.55.1.99>
- Frye, T., Gehlbach, S., Marquardt, K.L., and Reuter, O.J. 2017. "Is Putin's popularity real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33 (1): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1144334>
- Gause, F.G.III. 2011. "Why Middle East Studies missed the Arab Spring: The myth of authoritarian stability." *Foreign Affairs* 90 (4): 81–84.
- Gelman, V. 2015. "Calculus of Dissent: How the Kremlin Is Countering Its Rivals." *Russian Analytical Digest* 166. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: [http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/Russian\\_Analytical\\_Digest\\_166.pdf](http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/Russian_Analytical_Digest_166.pdf)
- Gelman, V. 2016. "The Politics of Fear: How Russia's Rulers Counter their Rivals." *Russian Politics* 1 (1): 27–45. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24518921-00101002>
- Goldstone, J. A. 1991. *Revolution and rebellion in the early modern world*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Greene, S. 2014. *Moscow in Movement. Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Guriev, S. and Treisman, D. 2015. "The new authoritarianism." [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://voxeu.org/article/new-authoritarianism>
- Holger, A. 2006. "How can opposition support authoritarianism? Lessons from Egypt." *Democratization* 12 (3): 378–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340500126798>
- Howard, M.M. and Roessler, P. 2006. "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2): 365–381. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00189.x>
- Horvath, R. 2013. *Putin's 'Preventative Counter-Revolution': Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution*. London/New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203101391>
- Kolesnikov, A. 2017. *V ozhidanii chetvertogo sroka: rossijskij politicheskij rezhim za god do vyborov*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2017/04/04/ru-pub-68501.17.12.2017>
- Kremlin. 2012. *Federalnyj zakon ot 28.07.2012 g. no 134-FZ "O vnesenii izmenenij v statju 28 Federal'nogo zakona «O nekommercheskih organizacijah*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/35787>
- Kremlin. 2016. *O vnesenii izmenenij v Ugolovnyj kodeks Rossijskoj Federacii i Ugolovno-processual'nyj kodeks Rossijskoj Federacii v chasti ustanovlenija dopolnitel'nyh mer protivodejstvija terrorizmu i obespechenija obshhestvennoj bezopasnosti*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52489>
- Kremlin. 2020. *Vneseny izmenenija v zakon ob informacii, informacionnyh tehnologijah i o zashhite informacii*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/98/events/63483>
- Kynev, A. 2018. *Kak vlasti splotit' oppoziciju*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/03/06/752831-splotit-oppozitsiyu>
- Lachmann, R. 1997. "Agents of revolution: Elite conflicts and mass mobilization from the Medici to Yeltsin". In: J. Foran (ed.), *Theorizing revolutions*. London: Routledge: 73–101. [https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203206638\\_chapter\\_3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203206638_chapter_3)
- Lust, E. 2005. *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McFaul, M. 2021. "Russia's Road to Autocracy." *Journal of Democracy* 32 (4): 11–26. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0049>
- Meduza. 2022. *Rech' Putina pro «ochishhenie obshhestva» ot predatelej vyglyadit tak, budto v Rossii nachalsja totalitarizm Politolog Vladimir Gel'man ob "jasnjaet, pochemu vse ne tak prosto (i ocenivaet umestnost' sravnenija Putina s Gitlerom)*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/03/17/rech-putina-pro-ochischenie-obschestva-ot-predateley-vyglyadit-tak-budto-v-rossii-nachalsya-totalitarizm>
- Nugent, E.R. 2020. "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization." *World Politics* 72 (2): 291–334. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887120000015>
- Portes, A. 1995. "On grand surprises and modest certainties: Comment on Kuran, Collins, and Tilly." *American Journal of Sociology* 100: 1620–1626. <https://doi.org/10.1086/230676>
- Przevorski, A. 1991. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139172493>
- Publication Pravo. 2017. *Federalnyj zakon ot 25.11.2017 no 327-FZ "O vnesenii izmenenij v stati 10-4 i 15-3 Federal'nogo zakona "Ob informacii, informacionnyh tehnologijah i o zashhite informacii" i statju 6 Zakona Rossijskoj Federacii "O sredstvah massovoj informacii"*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201711250002?index=0&rangeSize=1>
- RKN. 2014. *Prikaz Roskomnadzora*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: [http://rkn.gov.ru/docs/prikaz\\_Roskomnadzora\\_ot\\_09.07.2014\\_N\\_99.pdf](http://rkn.gov.ru/docs/prikaz_Roskomnadzora_ot_09.07.2014_N_99.pdf)

- Skocpol, T. 1979. *States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815805>
- Shulman, E. 2018. *C'est pirog i sohranit' ego. Avtoritarnye taktiki vyzhivaniya i verojatnost' cvetnoj revoljucii v Rossii*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: [http://www.counter-point.org/9\\_shulman/](http://www.counter-point.org/9_shulman/)
- Slantchev, B. and Matush, K.S. 2019. "The Authoritarian Wager: Political Action and the Sudden Collapse of Repression." *Comparative Political Studies* 53 (2): 214–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019843564>
- Stanovaya, T. 2021a. *Playing at Politics: Manufacturing Russia's Parliamentary Parties*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85464>
- Stanovaya, T. 2021b. *How War Would Change Russia*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/863567>
- Tarrow, S. 1993. "Cycles of collective action: Between moments of madness and the repertoire of contention." *Social Science History* 17 (2): 281–307. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171283>
- Tarrow, S. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813245>
- Volkov, D. 2021. *Pochemu rossijane ravnodushny k proishodjashhim segodnja repressijam? Otvechajut sociolog, politolog, istorik i psiholog*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: <https://www.levada.ru/2021/11/01/pochemu-rossiyane-ravnodushny-k-proishodyashhim-segodnya-repressiyam-otvechayut-sotsiolog-politolog-istorik-i-psiholog/>.
- VSRF. 2021. *O likvidacii Mezhdunarodnoj obshhestvennoj organizacii «Mezhdunarodnoe istoriko-prosvetitel'skoe, blagotvoritel'noe i pravozashhitnoe obshhestvo «Memorial»*. [online]. [cit. 28. 1. 2023]. Available at: [https://www.vsrfr.ru/stor\\_pdf.php?id=2075644](https://www.vsrfr.ru/stor_pdf.php?id=2075644)
- Zavadskaya, M. and Rumiantseva, A. 2022. "The Party of People's Distrust: The Roots of Electoral Success of the Communists in 2021." *Russian Politics* 7 (2): 265–288. <https://doi.org/10.30965/24518921-00604020>