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Fear and Loathing in Russia: Repressions as a Tool of Kremlin's Rule

By Vladimir Gel'man (European University at St. Petersburg and University of Helsinki)

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Since 2012, the Kremlin has relied upon extensive use of selective political repressions vis-à-vis its rivals in various forms. These attacks have gone far beyond the most infamous cases, the killing of Boris Nemtsov in 2015 and poisoning of Alexei Navalny in 2020. Every instance of mass protest has faced Kremlin counter-attacks, which have included overt intimidation, public discrediting of critics, and persecution, harassment and violent coercion of opposition activists and/or supporters. The most recent wave of protests in January 2021, soon after the arrest and imprisonment of Navalny, resulted in detainment and arrest of thousands of participants across the country, mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. What are the major features of these repressions, and to what extent might they help to preserve Kremlin rule over time?

Political repressions under authoritarianism perform both punitive and signaling functions. First and foremost, their immediate goal is punishment and (if possible) elimination of actual and/or potential challengers to the regime. At the same time, the Russian government pursues repressions (or threat thereof) aimed at preventing the spread of public discontent towards anti-regime mobilization and aversion of spread of organized opposition across various segments of Russian society. Thus, regime critics receive a strong signal about the risks of unconventional behavior for their career and well-being, and may be less willing to be involved in anti-regime activism. To some extent, this approach to political repressions resembles those in the late Soviet Union, which in the 1960s pivoted from the use of mass repressions to selective targeting of dissident activism, a strategy which was able to contain it to a certain degree. While the number of political prisoners in the Soviet Union at that time never exceeded several hundred persons, preemptive control and monitoring enabled the Communist regime to avoid protest mobilization until the years of perestroika. In a sense, this experience serves as a role model for present-day Russia's rulers.

According to comparative studies, the scope and intensity of repressions towards regime opponents depends upon a combination of three factors. First, threat perceptions of rulers have forced them to rely upon repressions even when the danger of overthrow by dissenters is not very strong. Second, the previous experience of successful use of repressions for curbing protests is usually considered as an argument in favor of further reliance on these tools. Third, as co-optation

and repressions serve as two sides of the same coin, economic stagnation puts limits on the rewarding of loyal active citizens by the regime, and contributes to increase of sanctions for disloyalty. Russia's recent experience fits these arguments. The Kremlin's narratives wildly exaggerated the threat of "color revolutions", especially after the 2014 regime change in Ukraine. During the first wave of repressions, launched in 2012 after post-election protests (the Bolotnaya Square case), some dozens activists were imprisoned and several hundred fled Russia, quieting opposition activism for a while. From the viewpoint of the Kremlin, this experience, alongside vicious attacks on independent media and NGOs, was quite successful, and encouraged the regime to crack down harder during the next wave of protests during the 2019 Moscow City Duma elections and later on in 2021. Finally, amid the stagnation of real incomes of Russians in 2010s–2020s, the Kremlin was unwilling to buy Russians' loyalty and less inclined to offer enough side payments for satellite parties such as the KPRF. Also, unlike in the 2000s, the Kremlin no longer expands the pool of its supporters through support for loyalist youth movements, NGOs, and the like.

The expansion of scope and intensity of repressions in Russia recently developed in several directions. The list of potential targets, initially limited to NGOs (labeled as "foreign agents" and faced with many restrictions and fines), extended to media and individuals as well as other non-registered organized entities (such as regional networks of Navalny's headquarters), who faced even more severe restrictions and fines. The repressive regulations in Russia went further to cover new territory, such as "enlightenment activities", which were considered by the Russian parliament (who proposed a new bill aimed at their state licensing) as a dangerous channel of Western influence. Regulations of Internet and social media with criminalization of "fake news" and other forms of spread of unwanted information as well as threats to switch off certain website and services for Russian users also became tougher by the 2020s. Second, punishment of protesters become more severe by 2021, as fines, typical for the 2010s, were replaced by more arrests and criminal cases against activists. Third, vested interests of the coercive apparatus of the Russian state, which expanded its size through building of special anti-extremist departments in different agencies, also played an important role in increasing the scope of repressions, and instances of cases fabricated and/or

pushed by certain officials (such as the Network case or the Yury Dmitriev affair) demonstrated this tendency.

Figure 1: The Scope of Arrests and Fines after Political Protests in Moscow

Year	Total arrests in person-days	Total fines in million Russian roubles	Number of administrative and criminal cases against protesters in Moscow—initiated (completed)
2017 (26 March – 26 April)	591	7.2	905 (759)
2019 (27 July – 27 August)	1,082	15.7	2,466 (2,189)
2021 (23 January – 24 February)	6,736	6.4	5,716 (3,751)

Source: <https://www.proekt.media/research/statistika-arestov-mitingi/>

About the Author

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Elections 2021: Tense Atmosphere, Likely Regime Victory, and Uncertain Policy Outcomes

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For electoral authoritarian regimes like the Russian one, elections are always causes for concern. However, the Russian leadership has particular reasons for worrying about the Duma elections of 2021.

Russia enters the election year in rather bad shape from an economic point of view. Since 2013, the country has

As of yet, repressions have brought only partial successes for the Kremlin. Punishments of activists curbed opposition activism for a while, but they were not able to eliminate protests completely. Signaling of repressions in Russia in the atmosphere of fear and loathing faces a rising discontent of Russians with the regime, especially among the Russian youth. These contradictions between popular demands for change and the regime's supply of preserving the political status quo at any cost are likely to increase in the wake of the upcoming 2021 State Duma elections. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's increasing over-reliance upon repressions as the major tool of its rule is a risky game because of the great empowerment of the coercive apparatus of the Russian state. In a number of autocracies, similar tendencies have paved the way to military coups against unpopular dictators who have lost their legitimacy. To what extent Russia's leadership will be able to avert these risks remains to be seen.

experienced economic stagnation. The Covid-19 pandemic has hit Russia hard, with an estimated 260,000 excess deaths from April to November 2020¹ and with the government providing much smaller economic assistance to the population and to businesses than most large economies.² The pandemic contributed to the further decline of Putin's

1 Kobak, D. (2021). Excess mortality reveals Covid's true toll in Russia. *Significance*, 18(1), 16-19.

2 <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/396629-pandemiya-so-skidkoy-rossiya-vydelila-na-pomoshch-naseleniyu-i-biznesu-v-70-raz-menshe>