



## Russian Domestic Politics: The Coming Spiral of Repression

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No matter the eventual outcome of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Vladimir Putin regime is entering a new era in which the equilibrium that has governed Russian political and social life for the past decade is no more. This new situation is, as yet, highly unstable and has the potential to develop in dynamic fashion toward extreme outcomes: either toward the creation of a stable and highly repressive regime or toward regime collapse.

Prior to 2011-12, the Putin regime had largely successfully “gamed” democratic politics by means of media dominance (especially over television), ersatz political parties and candidates, outright ballot stuffing, and the like. At that time, it largely continued to pursue a stance of integration and cooperation with the world community and the West, flirting with xenophobic anti-Western notes, yet hoping to be perceived abroad and by its own citizens as a “modern and democratic state” among others.

Following mass protests in 2011-12 against this “virtual politics” (as described by political scientist Andrew Wilson), the regime pivoted towards starkly anti-Western positions in order to shore up legitimacy and cohesion among its supporters.<sup>1</sup> The opposition and protest movements were branded as “pawns of the West,” seeking to destabilize Russia with a “color revolution,” such as those that had taken place in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004-5). Episodes such as the Pussy Riot prosecution were instrumental in constructing a “culture wars” account of

how Western values were a threat to Russian national culture. Official rhetoric turned more emphatically towards an account of the 1990s and 2000s as a period in which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had unjustly humiliated Russia. Steadily increasing state control over the media, now assimilating most print and internet news media, allowed the regime to blanket Russian public discourse with its own narratives. Taken together, these strands of political discourse and policy allowed the regime to articulate a successful conception of “loyalist” patriotic politics and to isolate and marginalize opposition figures, such as Alexey Navalny, and their supporters as fundamentally “anti-Russian”—as part of a longstanding Western conspiracy against the Russian Federation.

The Crimea occupation and pursuit of hybrid war in Ukraine in 2014 expressed the new dominance of a politics of “Russia against the West,” and further reinforced it. While that episode was fueled in large part by strategic, territorial, and geopolitical aims, it undoubtedly was also intended to galvanize and reinforce the rhetoric of opposition with a reality of confrontation. And while Western sanctions imposed a cost on Russia, this turned out to be an acceptable price to pay for the actual rise in popularity that the regime achieved in the wake of the Crimea annexation.<sup>2</sup>

For all that, the Putin regime continued throughout the 2010s to balance the

politics of “Russia against the West” against economic integration, cooperation in various areas of global geopolitical life, academic and cultural integration, daily commerce and tourism, and toleration of internal dissent, within rather wide bounds. As long as Russians who did not agree with the regime did not come onto the street to protest in large numbers or threaten to organize into an effective anti-regime political opposition, they were allowed to continue their lives unimpeded and to express their views in classrooms, marginal media spaces, social media, on the square, and in the cafes. While there was a push towards economic self-sufficiency in some areas, in response to post-2014 sanctions, this was a limited effect in relation to the actual and continuing integration of the Russian economy in European and global flows, supply chains, movements of people and services, and transnational business. To take just one example, in academic policy, Russians scholars continued to be incentivized, by means of grants and hiring and promotion criteria, to collaborate and compete with Western institutions and projects and to publish in Western journals, etc. The state appeared to recognize that, anti-Western rhetoric aside, Russia needed integration with the West to be economically and socially competitive.

With the Ukraine war of 2022, all of this has radically changed, and the results are difficult to predict. Russia has “clicked” into a new and far more crystalline position, both in the internal and external arenas. The Putin elites and regime, based on the experience of 2014, may have imagined that the further invasion of Ukraine could lead to a quick military success and a limited response from the West in the form of increased, but limited

sanctions. Such a scenario would have brought a rise in polling figures, achieved by means of an intensification of the same pattern of balance between anti-Western actions and rhetoric, on the one hand, and integration and tolerance for dissent, on the other. Yet, the prolonged experience of the war, coupled with and eliciting far more extensive economic punishment and isolation imposed by the West, has shifted the Russian domestic and international areas towards stark and extreme positions. Population mobility between Russia and the West has been curtailed. Economic, intellectual, and cultural integration with the West is completely off the table. Internal dissent and oppositional activity have been criminalized (especially with relation to any criticism of the war). This is no longer a balance of integration and opposition with regard to the West, but a decisive move into the latter pose, which appears to be gaining more and more rigidity and intensity.

Although there is some possibility that these new conditions will be ameliorated once active fighting ends, in what will probably be a shaky and unstable ceasefire rather than any actual operational peace accord, it remains far more likely that they will be intensified. Currently, the regime has achieved new heights of popularity in response to (its distorted representation of) the prosecution of war in Ukraine. Following cessation of active conflict, it will dawn on many elements of the population (reaching far beyond the marginalized opposition) that the war was a failure and that it was incredibly costly in terms of Russian lives and continuing economic isolation and malaise.

Faced with weakening support and a sense of precarity in the face of economic blight that it cannot address, the regime will find

it necessary to increase pressure on oppositional political discourse in order to quash any and all dissent. This will lead to intensified application of existing laws and adoption of new and more extreme criminalization of oppositional activity. So far, the state has acted most energetically to eliminate the few remaining oppositional media outlets available to Russians—blocking internet access to portals such as Meduza.io, closing the internet television station TV Rain and the radio station Echo of Moscow, and banning social media such as Facebook, Instagram, etc. A number of oppositional non-governmental organizations, including the Memorial Foundation and Carnegie, have been forced to close their doors. Yet, other independent civil society institutions remain, including a number of private educational institutions, such as the European University at St. Petersburg and the Moscow School for the Social and Economic Sciences (the “Shaninka”). These will be first on the list for the next wave of repression.

Institutional closures are likely to be only a part of the picture in the new round of repressive measures. State rhetoric, including Putin’s high-profile addresses to the nation, has significantly raised the dither on the theme of “enemies within.” Russia today is rife with denunciations by ordinary Russians of their colleagues, teachers, and compatriots.<sup>3</sup> Given the actuality of complete isolation, after the state has abandoned efforts to balance anti-Western policies and stances with integrationist ones, there will be nothing to provide a “brake” on these tendencies from above or below. As has happened before in Russian (Soviet) history, such political dynamics may easily spin out of control, in what may turn into a paroxysm

of repressive measures, mass waves of denunciation, and energetic and cruel enforcement on the ground of increasingly strident official intolerance for dissent, as each seeks to save life and limb or to advance personal agendas by persecuting others.

It is still possible, of course, that the Russian regime will be able to pull back from the brink, both in Ukraine and in the internal political scene. In my view, intensification of repressive politics is a far more likely outcome. Where will that dynamic lead? Ultimately, such a wave of political repression may result in the increased regime stability that it is intended to achieve, as dissenters are imprisoned, fall silent, or depart the country (already, tens and, by some estimates, hundreds of thousands of Russians have fled). However, this increased stability will have a limited half-life, as Russians both at the elite and popular levels assess not only the negative outcomes of the war itself, but also the negative outcomes of repressive politics, including increasing corruption and social violence, further loss of economic and intellectual competitiveness, and social de-modernization. Where this new swing of oppositional sentiment will lead, whether to new social violence and even more extreme repression or towards regime change, is beyond the scope of possible assessment at present.

## Endnotes

1. Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), esp. pp. 33-48.
2. See, Levada Center data on Russian popular approval of Putin and his state, showing a sharp increase in approval following the Crimea annexation, here: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>.
3. Anton Troianovski, "Spurred by Putin, Russians turn on one another over the war," *New York Times*, April 10, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/04/10/world/ukraine-russia-war-news/spurred-by-putin-russians-turn-on-one-another-over-the-war>.