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GOVERNANCE THROUGH REPRESSION: MINORITY RIGHTS IN WARTIME RUSSIA

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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has intensified domestic repression targeting ethnic and religious minorities. Wartime mobilization policies have led to disproportionately high conscription and casualty rates among minority populations, while cultural and linguistic institutions have faced accelerated dismantling. Simultaneously, religious groups outside the Russian Orthodox Church have been subjected to surveillance, legal harassment, and the closure of places of worship under expanded extremism and national security laws. These patterns demonstrate how war has been used not only to project power abroad, but also to consolidate control at home by suppressing cultural autonomy, criminalizing dissent, and narrowing the space for independent identity. The result is a domestic landscape increasingly defined by forced conformity, demographic targeting, and the erosion of pluralism.

Keywords: Ethnic repression; Religious persecution; Forced conscription; Cultural suppression; Russia–Ukraine war.

1. Introduction

Since the launch of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian state has intensified its efforts to suppress internal diversity through expanded repression of ethnic and religious minorities. While much international attention has focused on Russia's external aggression, less scrutiny has been paid to how wartime policies have reshaped domestic governance and social control. This paper investigates how the Russian government has used the conditions of war to accelerate longstanding patterns of internal repression—particularly targeting minority communities through disproportionate military conscription, cultural erasure, legal persecution, and the suppression of non-Orthodox religious groups.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: *How has Russia's war in Ukraine affected the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities within its borders, and what governance strategies underlie this repression?* This inquiry is grounded in a close

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examination of official policy changes, regional conscription patterns, documented cases of persecution, and the use of legal tools to criminalize dissent. By focusing on the intersection of war mobilization and minority governance, the paper seeks to illuminate how domestic control mechanisms have evolved under the pressure of wartime imperatives.

This paper draws on a combination of document-based content analysis, including legislation, public statements, human rights reports, and verified media investigations—and firsthand qualitative insights informed by direct engagement with affected individuals, civil society actors, and community advocates. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, insights drawn from direct engagement with individuals and civil society actors are not individually identified. Observations are incorporated in generalized form and supported, where possible, by publicly available sources.

By situating wartime repression within broader patterns of governance, this paper offers a deeper understanding of how authoritarian regimes may use external conflict to intensify internal control—and at what cost to the fabric of pluralistic society.

2. Theoretical Framework: Internal Colonialism and Wartime Governance

This study applies the framework of internal colonialism to examine how the Russian state systematically manages and constrains ethnic and religious minorities during periods of war. Originally articulated by Hechter (1975), internal colonialism describes a situation in which a dominant political and cultural core incorporates peripheral groups—often distinguished by ethnicity, language, or faith—while denying them genuine equality. These populations are nominally part of the state but are positioned as second-tier citizens, particularly during moments of heightened national tension.

In the Russian context, formal commitments to federalism and cultural pluralism coexist uneasily with state practices that reinforce ideological centralization (Etkind, 2013). Policies on language instruction, concentration of administrative authority, and the elevation of the Russian Orthodox Church contribute to a governance model that accommodates minority identities only when they pose no challenge to the dominant national narrative.

This dynamic extends to religious communities that do not align with Orthodox norms. Groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Christians have been subject to state repression under the pretext of extremism or anti-mobilization violations, frequently portrayed as foreign-influenced or inherently disloyal. The conflation of religious divergence with political subversion reflects a broader state approach in which nonconforming faith

traditions are treated as destabilizing elements within a tightly controlled ideological framework (Pomerantsev, 2024).

Wartime intensifies these mechanisms of control. Through laws governing censorship, mobilization, and civil oversight, the Russian government has expanded its capacity to suppress dissent under the rationale of preserving national unity. This is not a sudden break with past practice, but an amplification of existing internal colonial logics—a deliberate strategy to suppress diversity and secure compliance through coercive means during crisis.

By viewing the current wave of wartime repression through the lens of internal colonialism, this paper argues that the state's targeting of minority populations is structured, intentional, and ideologically motivated. It is part of a broader campaign to transform internal heterogeneity into a controlled, monolithic identity—particularly where ethnic and religious variation is seen as incompatible with state-defined loyalty.

3. Ethnic Minorities at War: Demographic Extraction and Cultural Erasure

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not only escalated its external military campaign but has also deepened existing patterns of domestic control over minority populations. Among the most heavily burdened within the Russian Federation are ethnic minority populations, particularly those residing in autonomous republics and particularly those in historically marginalized republics and border regions. This is especially evident in the uneven distribution of military recruitment and battlefield fatalities. Analysis published by Mediazona in 2023 highlighted stark disparities between the heavily targeted minority regions and the more insulated ethnic Russian provinces. Areas with small population shares have nonetheless experienced outsized casualty rates, exposing a pattern in which marginalized groups are overrepresented in the human cost of war (Mediazona, 2023).

These patterns reflect a historical continuity in how the Russian state has managed its ethnic periphery. From the Tsarist Empire to the Soviet Union, the state has frequently displaced or sacrificed peripheral communities to consolidate internal control. The forced relocations of entire ethnic groups under Stalin exemplify this logic of treating borderland populations as both expendable and suspect (Chatham House, 2019). Today's conscription practices continue that logic, relying on peripheral populations to sustain a war driven by the political center.

Reports suggest that some minority regions now suffer the highest per capita wartime losses in the country. These findings, based on journalistic investigations and crowdsourced data, point to a targeted enlistment strategy that relies on underprivileged, non-Russian

populations to sustain a war largely designed and directed from the capital (The Moscow Times, 2022).

This approach is neither unprecedented nor incidental. For decades, the state has tapped peripheral regions to fill the ranks of high-risk military deployments. In the current wartime environment—marked by censorship, centralized recruitment authority, and aggressive suppression of dissent—this logic has become more entrenched (Amnesty International, 2024). By focusing recruitment on economically disadvantaged and ethnically distinct populations, the Kremlin avoids destabilizing politically influential urban centers while maintaining dominance over historically marginalized communities.

Targeted mobilization has triggered backlash in minority regions. In fall 2022, women in several republics organized public demonstrations against mobilization efforts—only to be met with violent crackdowns, arrests, and threats (AP News, 2022). For many of these communities, the war represents not just a foreign conflict but an existential struggle over identity, survival, and autonomy.

Beyond forced conscription, the war has accelerated efforts to dismantle cultural autonomy. The 2018 abolition of mandatory native language instruction in ethnic republics marked the beginning of a broader campaign to undermine minority cultural institutions. Languages such as Tatar, Bashkir, Udmurt, and Mari have experienced declining support and visibility as federal authorities pursue linguistic homogenization. (ICELDS, 2018). While framed as educational reform or modernization, these measures function as tools of Russification, eroding linguistic heritage in the name of patriotic unity (Jankiewicz, Knyaginina, & Prina, 2020).

Wartime rhetoric has emboldened the state to suppress even mild cultural dissent. Teachers, local leaders, and cultural organizers who resist these policies frequently face punitive measures—ranging from professional dismissal to criminal prosecution. One prominent case is that of Kalmyk activist Batyr Boromangnaev, who was fined and later had his organization branded an extremist group in 2023 (SOVA Center, 2023). Others, including activist Arslang Sandzhiev, have reported state surveillance, travel restrictions, and ongoing legal pressure (Terzyan, 2025).

By the end of 2023, numerous minority-led NGOs, cultural institutions, and regional media outlets had been labeled “foreign agents” under expanded wartime regulations (Terzyan, 2025). Groups such as the Free Buryatia Foundation—which has documented discriminatory conscription practices—were among those targeted (AP News, 2023). Such

designations often precede raids, forced closures, and criminal proceedings. These legal tools signal that any expression of ethnic identity outside state control is now treated as a threat.

More broadly, the state has securitized minority identity itself. Peaceful advocacy for language preservation, environmental protection, or regional rights is increasingly framed as a national security threat. In 2022, Bashkir civic figure Fail Alsynov was sentenced to four years in prison for allegedly inciting interethnic discord after publicly defending Bashkir language rights (Meduza, 2024). His case illustrates how even nonviolent, constitutionally grounded activism is now criminalized—sending a chilling signal to others across the ethnic periphery.

In today’s Russia, expressions of loyalty are no longer measured by civic engagement or legal compliance but by visible alignment with a narrow vision of national identity.

In several regions, particularly in the Volga basin and North Caucasus, the state has deployed advanced surveillance technologies to prevent unrest and suppress cultural expression. Tools originally developed for counterterrorism operations—such as facial recognition systems, algorithmic flagging of online activity, and behavioral profiling—have been redirected to monitor civic life among ethnic minority populations (Masri, 2023; RFE/RL, 2024).

These trends underscore the enduring imperial hierarchy that continues to structure the Russian Federation. Despite official claims of multicultural federalism, power is centralized around a dominant ethnic Russian core, while minority regions are treated as politically and culturally subordinate (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). The state’s multidimensional approach—encompassing demographic exploitation, cultural suppression, and legal intimidation—constitutes an expansive domestic campaign to eradicate internal diversity.

Table 1: Mechanisms of Ethnic Governance Under Wartime Russia

Governance Strategy	Operational Mechanism	Underlying Logic	Implications
Demographic extraction	Disproportionate conscription from ethnic peripheries	Use expendable populations to minimize central unrest	Deepens periphery-core inequality; fosters alienation
Cultural containment	Weakening of minority languages and institutions	Neutralize non-Russian identity as a basis of dissent	Homogenization under patriotic unity
Preemptive securitization	Surveillance and criminalization of civic activism	Frame cultural assertiveness as a security threat	Deters regional autonomy and grassroots organizing
Symbolic assimilation	Emphasis on Orthodox-Slavic national myths	Redefine loyalty through cultural hegemony	Marginalizes hybrid or multiethnic identities

And yet, these efforts have not gone uncontested. In exile and online, minority-led initiatives such as Free Buryatia and Free Idel-Ural continue to expose abuses, preserve suppressed histories, and campaign for regional autonomy (Terzyan, 2025). Their digital platforms serve as spaces of memory and resistance, challenging both the current war and the deeper structures of domination that sustain it.

Absent real engagement with the demands of these communities—for language rights, political representation, and acknowledgment of historical injustice, the state’s current trajectory risks not resolution but fragmentation.

4. Religious Minorities and Ideological Conformity

The war in Ukraine has become a turning point not only in Russia’s foreign policy but also in its domestic assault on ideological diversity. Among the groups most vulnerable to this campaign are religious minorities, especially those that fall outside the institutional boundaries of the Russian Orthodox Church. Under the pretext of national security, the Kremlin has sought to remake the religious landscape into one of enforced homogeneity, where spiritual independence is no longer tolerated but treated as inherently suspicious. Through restrictive legislation, cultural engineering, and bureaucratic coercion, authorities have moved to consolidate a single religious identity closely tied to state-defined loyalty.

Beginning in 2022, Russian authorities significantly expanded the use of national security and anti-extremism laws to intensify pressure on minority faiths. Jehovah’s Witnesses—banned as an “extremist organization” in 2017—have been among the most

targeted groups. In March 2024, a court in Irkutsk sentenced nine members to prison terms ranging from three to seven years based on evidence from private worship recordings (Reuters, 2024a). Later that year, in June, three other members—Nikolai Polevodov, Vitaliy Zhuk, and Stanislav Kim—received sentences exceeding eight years, marking the harshest punishments to date for peaceful religious activity in Russia (Reuters, 2024b).

This campaign has extended beyond Russia into occupied Ukrainian territories. Russian forces have shut down evangelical and Greek Catholic churches, detained clergy, and replaced community-based religious instruction with Russian Orthodox doctrine. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), these actions mirror domestic patterns of repression and led to Russia’s designation as a “Country of Particular Concern” in 2025 (USCIRF, 2025). According to the Presidential Mission in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, out of 2,220 religious organizations active before Russia’s invasion, only 932 remained by January 2024 (Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 2024).

Protestant groups, Pentecostal congregations, and pacifist Christian communities have also been prosecuted under vague criminal codes that conflate religious outreach with subversion. Sermons and community organizing are increasingly targeted when they deviate from state-approved narratives or criticize military action (MySpiritFM, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

In addition to criminal prosecutions, the state has stepped up enforcement of the 2016 Yarovaya Law, which restricts missionary activity to officially registered sites. Between January 2024 and April 2025, Forum 18 identified at least 124 administrative prosecutions under Article 5.26 for conducting unregistered religious gatherings—primarily targeting Protestant clergy and lay leaders—often initiated through informant reports or anonymous tips (Forum 18, 2024). These legal actions have effectively criminalized core activities of minority denominations and confined religious expression to state-approved venues.

Table 2: Religious Repression as a Tool of Ideological Conformity

Category of Religious Identity	Perceived Threat by the State	Mode of Control	Function in Wartime Governance
Independent spiritual groups	Doctrinal deviation; foreign ties	Extremism laws, censorship, surveillance	Eliminate autonomous spiritual networks
Conscientious objectors	Undermining patriotic sacrifice	Criminal prosecution for draft refusal	Enforce militarized loyalty
Evangelicals and Protestants	Unauthorized outreach, moral autonomy	Missionary restrictions, fines, legal harassment	Suppress alternative moral authorities
Clergy in occupied territories	Dual loyalty, cultural independence	Detentions, church closures, Orthodox substitution	Reshape regional identity under occupation

Religious repression has also intersected with military policy. While the Russian constitution allows for alternative civilian service, wartime mobilization procedures have rendered conscientious objection nearly impossible. Rights organizations have documented cases in which Jehovah’s Witnesses and evangelical Christians who refused conscription on religious grounds were prosecuted or coerced, with courts often rejecting exemption requests without substantive review (Forum 18, 2023a; Forum 18, 2023b). In these cases, the refusal to bear arms is treated not as a protected belief, but as subversion of state authority.

The campaign against religious minorities has increasingly targeted their institutions. Since 2022, under the expanded “foreign agent” and “undesirable organizations” laws, numerous faith-based groups have been labeled foreign agents or outlawed outright. Most recently, Brigham Young University (BYU), affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), was officially listed as an “undesirable organization” by Russian authorities. This designation prohibits all BYU-related activities within Russia, imposing criminal penalties for involvement or support (The Moscow Times, 2025).

Additionally, other minority religious communities across Russia, such as Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Pentecostals, have faced intensified scrutiny, closures of their houses of worship, and increasing legal pressure designed to restrict their public presence and activities (Forum 18, 2025; Evangelical Focus, 2025).

Furthermore, since the onset of the war in 2022, Russian public schools have systematically embedded Orthodox rituals, militaristic exhibits, and nationalist historical narratives within mandatory patriotic education programs (United 24 Media, 2025; AP News, 2023). According to a 2025 report by OVD-Info, 59 percent of teachers who publicly opposed wartime propaganda or expressed sympathy toward non-Orthodox perspectives were either dismissed or pressured to resign (OVD-Info, 2025).

These actions are supported by a strategic alliance between the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church. High-ranking church officials have publicly endorsed the state's efforts to marginalize minority religious groups by categorizing them as harmful "cults" posing risks to Russian society. Organizations such as the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects (RACIRS) actively monitor these religious communities, producing and circulating negative portrayals in the media. RACIRS frequently characterizes these groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, as manipulative and comparable to extremist organizations, claiming they threaten Russian cultural traditions and national stability (Davlikanova & White, 2024).

Additionally, an October 2024 Forum 18 report highlights the widespread censorship and surveillance of online religious content in Russia, noting that authorities frequently block websites and materials from groups like Jehovah's Witnesses under allegations of "extremism," creating an atmosphere of significant digital monitoring and restriction (Forum 18, 2024).

Taken together, these developments constitute not isolated incidents but a coordinated effort to remake Russia's religious landscape into an instrument of authoritarian control. The objective is not passive tolerance of difference but the active transformation of spiritual life into a tool of political control. In this vision, faith that operates beyond state supervision becomes indistinguishable from sedition. Just as the state disciplines ethnic identity in the periphery, it now disciplines belief itself—recasting faith as another frontier to be secured.

The impact of Russia's intensifying religious repression is increasingly felt internationally, as reflected in the rising number of Russian nationals seeking asylum abroad (International Investment, 2025).

5. Implications: Governance, Legitimacy, and Minority-State Relations

The analysis presented in this paper shows that Russia's wartime repression is not a circumstantial response to conflict but a deliberate extension of its domestic governance

strategy. These practices carry significant implications for the structure of state power, the future of minority inclusion, and Russia's relationship with international legal norms.

First, the instrumentalization of repression to control internal diversity marks a departure from even the appearance of federal pluralism. The Russian state increasingly treats cultural, linguistic, and religious variation not as constitutionally protected forms of identity, but as liabilities to be contained. Administrative and educational institutions that once offered limited support for minority expression have been either dismantled or placed under strict state oversight. This shift reflects a deepening of vertical control and a corresponding decline in the credibility of regional participatory mechanisms, particularly in ethnic republics and areas with strong religious traditions.

Second, the targeted suppression of minority communities undermines more than individual freedoms—it corrodes the foundations of social cohesion. The suppression of regional languages, the prosecution of faith-based communities, and selective military mobilization policies collectively contribute to the breakdown of trust between the state and its peripheral populations. These actions foster a sense of exclusion that is especially acute in regions historically shaped by colonial domination or center-periphery tension. Where legal and civic channels for redress have been closed, disillusionment is likely to harden into disengagement or resistance, further destabilizing interethnic and interreligious relations.

Third, these internal dynamics place Russia in growing tension with its international obligations. The repression of peaceful religious practice, cultural advocacy, and minority organizing violates international human rights standards, including provisions under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Although Russia has withdrawn from some international legal frameworks, documentation by human rights monitors, diaspora organizations, and exile-based advocacy groups continues to generate evidence for global scrutiny. These materials shape how foreign governments, courts, and institutions assess the legitimacy and accountability of the Russian state.

Finally, the long-term effects of these repressive policies will extend beyond the war itself. The dismantling of minority civil society, the erosion of pluralistic institutions, and the narrowing of ideological space will continue to weaken the state's adaptability and resilience. By eliminating avenues for peaceful participation, the government increases the likelihood of future instability—whether in the form of political unrest, increased emigration, or regional estrangement. In prioritizing enforced conformity over negotiated coexistence, the

state may secure short-term compliance but at the cost of institutional legitimacy and long-term unity.

6. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this study reveals that Russia's internal response to the war in Ukraine represents not an emergency deviation, but an intensification of its longstanding model of centralized control. Ethnic and religious minorities, historically positioned at the margins of political power, have become focal points in a broader campaign to engineer ideological conformity and suppress expressions of autonomous identity.

What characterizes this moment is not just the persistence of repression, but its integration across state functions—from military policy to cultural administration to religious regulation. The war has enabled a convergence of legal, bureaucratic, and symbolic tools to consolidate a narrow conception of national identity, often at the expense of communities that do not fit neatly into state-defined categories. In this environment, diversity is not merely excluded from public life—it is actively constructed as a threat to cohesion and stability.

Rather than resolving internal tensions, this approach reconfigures them. The marginalization of minority voices, the collapse of participatory channels, and the retreat of pluralistic institutions indicate a governing logic that prioritizes control over inclusion. While these strategies may reinforce short-term authority, they also reveal the system's deep reliance on coercion in the absence of consensus.

By examining these developments through the lens of wartime governance and internal colonialism, this article has shown that domestic repression is not ancillary to Russia's external war effort, but central to its internal political strategy. The state's attempt to recast pluralism as vulnerability points to a deeper reordering of state-society relations—one in which the suppression of difference is not incidental, but foundational to regime stability.

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