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The State of Human Rights and Political Freedoms in Russia: Bound to Deteriorate?

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This paper explores the condition of human rights and political freedoms in the Russian Federation during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. It seeks to explain the structural logic underlying Russia's authoritarian governance and to assess whether the observed deterioration of rights reflects temporary political choices or a more entrenched governing strategy. A widely held view among international observers is that Russia has become more repressive than at any point in the post-Soviet period.ⁱ The persistence and expansion of coercive practices raise fundamental questions about the trajectory of the Russian political system and the prospects for meaningful liberalization.

From a human rights perspective, the central question is not merely

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whether repression has increased, but how it has become normalized and politically sustainable.

This article contributes to existing scholarship by reframing Russia's human rights regression not primarily as institutional failure or democratic backsliding, but as a process of normative redefinition in which rights are systematically subordinated to state-centered notions of sovereignty, stability, and moral authority. In doing so, the article bridges empirical human rights reporting with interpretive approaches to authoritarian rule that emphasize meaning, legitimacy, and the construction of political normalcy.

Russia's post-Soviet transition did not produce a stable democratic order. Instead, it resulted in a political system characterized by the centralization of power, the personalization of leadership, and the gradual erosion of institutional constraints on executive authority.ⁱⁱ Unlike many post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia did not experience a unifying anti-communist consensus capable of delegitimizing authoritarian rule. The Soviet system was not broadly perceived as a foreign imposition or as an obstacle to national sovereignty. As a result, political elites and society failed to converge on a shared understanding of democratic transformation and institutional reform.ⁱⁱⁱ This absence of consensus created favorable conditions for the re-emergence of hierarchical governance structures under the banner of stability and state continuity.

Scholarly analyses of contemporary Russia generally describe the regime centered around Putin as a personalistic form of authoritarian rule combining conservative ideology with populist appeals.^{iv} While formal democratic institutions continue to exist, their substantive role has been significantly weakened. Elections are carefully managed, political competition is restricted, and opposition activity is framed as a threat to

national security. Within this framework, repression functions not as an exceptional response to crisis but as a routine mechanism of governance.

This normalization of repression is maintained through a set of interconnected mechanisms. One key factor is the deliberate use of legal indeterminacy. Vaguely formulated laws provide executive authorities with extensive discretionary latitude, enabling enforcement to be guided by political alignment rather than objective legal standards. As a result, coercive measures retain a formal appearance of legality while remaining sufficiently arbitrary to generate uncertainty and deterrence.

A second mechanism lies in the internal incentive structures of law enforcement and security institutions. Professional advancement, institutional resources, and political approval are frequently linked to demonstrable success in detecting and suppressing alleged threats. Within such an environment, broad and elastic interpretations of extremism, foreign involvement, or disloyal conduct become institutionally rational practices rather than deviations from legal norms.

Finally, the lack of effective judicial independence removes any substantive check on executive authority. Courts operate less as autonomous guarantors of rights than as procedural venues that validate decisions originating within the security and administrative apparatus. Taken together, these dynamics recast repression from a discretionary political response into a self-perpetuating mode of administrative governance.

This article proceeds from the premise that the deterioration of human rights in Russia cannot be sufficiently explained by institutional fragility or democratic regression alone. Instead, it reflects a particular state-centered conception of rights that diverges sharply from liberal universalist traditions.

Within the Russian political order, rights are not treated as inherent attributes of individuals, but as contingent entitlements whose scope is determined by the perceived priorities of the state.

From the standpoint of international human rights law, this conception represents a fundamental inversion of the relationship between the individual and the state. Rights are no longer understood as inherent and universal entitlements that constrain political authority, but as conditional privileges granted by the state and withdrawn when deemed politically inconvenient. This shift is central to understanding why legal continuity in Russia has not prevented substantive rights regression: formal guarantees persist, but their meaning is hollowed out through discretionary interpretation and enforcement.

This logic produces a stratified understanding of rights. Civil and political freedoms are tolerated only insofar as they do not enable autonomous collective action or challenge dominant narratives of stability.

In practice, this stratification affects core civil and political rights protected under international standards, including freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, and the right to participate in public affairs. These rights are selectively tolerated for politically loyal actors while being systematically curtailed for groups or individuals perceived as autonomous, critical, or insufficiently aligned with state priorities.

The consequences of this framework are particularly pronounced for groups perceived as departing from dominant norms of loyalty, identity, or conformity. Minority rights, whether ethnic, religious, or social, are especially exposed within this system, as they complicate the state's preferred vision of unity. Rather than being approached as expressions of

equal citizenship, minority claims are frequently securitized and managed through surveillance and regulatory control. This conceptual lens informs the analysis that follows, shaping the interpretation of repression, marginalization, and exclusion in contemporary Russia.

The overall state of human rights in Russia has markedly declined during Putin's presidency. Core civil and political freedoms, including freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, are consistently restricted both through legislation and administrative practice.^v Legal safeguards are routinely undermined by selective enforcement, while judicial institutions lack the independence necessary to constrain executive power. These conditions have produced a climate of uncertainty in which political participation entails substantial personal risk.

The scope of documented human rights violations is extensive. It includes arbitrary arrest and detention, the widespread use of torture by law enforcement, life threatening conditions in detention facilities, politically motivated prosecutions, and extrajudicial violence.^{vi} State authorities also engage in systematic surveillance that intrudes on personal privacy without meaningful oversight. Journalists, human rights defenders, and political activists are frequent targets of intimidation and harassment, while opposition figures face legal and procedural barriers that effectively exclude them from meaningful participation in the political process.

Ethnic and religious minorities are particularly vulnerable within this repressive environment. Human Rights Watch's reporting on Russia highlights recurring patterns of racial profiling, arbitrary detention, and excessive use of force by law enforcement, especially in the application of counter-extremism and security legislation and in regions such as the North Caucasus, as well as in large urban centers with significant migrant

populations.ⁱ These practices are often facilitated by broadly defined security criteria that blur the distinction between individual conduct and collective suspicion, resulting in systemic violations of minority rights.ⁱ

What distinguishes this pattern from episodic discrimination is its institutionalization. Minority identity itself becomes a trigger for enhanced surveillance and coercive intervention, independent of individual conduct. As a result, minority communities experience not only higher exposure to abuse but also a chronic erosion of legal predictability, reinforcing their marginalization within the political order.

Such dynamics are not incidental but form part of a governance strategy that relies on surveillance and coercion to manage perceived internal threats.

Media freedom provides a further illustration of the state's restrictive approach. According to Freedom House, the Russian government directly or indirectly controls the majority of national television channels, most radio stations, a significant portion of print media, and most regional outlets.^{vii} While limited space for independent journalism persists, particularly online, the overall media environment remains highly constrained.^{viii} State dominance over information flows enables the Kremlin to shape public narratives on politically sensitive issues, including elections, corruption, military operations, and ethnic relations. The resulting concentration of informational power directly undermines the public's ability to exercise freedom of expression and to access pluralistic sources of information, both of which are essential preconditions for meaningful political participation.

Legal instruments play a central role in suppressing dissent. Human rights organizations have consistently documented the use of broadly worded legislation to criminalize criticism and silence independent voices.^{ix} A major

escalation occurred in May 2019 with the adoption of legislation granting the authorities the power to restrict or isolate internet access without judicial oversight.^x This measure significantly expanded state capacity to control information and limit access to alternative sources.

Repressive legislation intensified further in December 2019, when a law authorized the designation of journalists and bloggers as foreign agents.^{xi} Under this framework, individuals who distribute media content and receive foreign funding may be labeled foreign agents regardless of whether their activities involve political advocacy.^{xii} This designation carries severe legal and social consequences, exposing journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens to harassment and stigmatization.

Beyond its immediate legal effects, the foreign agent framework performs a crucial symbolic function. In this sense, the foreign agent designation is less a regulatory tool than a technology of political delegitimation.

Civil society organizations have also faced sustained pressure. While a vibrant civil society is widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic governance, Russian non-governmental organizations remain weak and marginalized in terms of public trust, financial resources, and policy influence. Evans attributes this condition in part to Soviet legacies of distrust toward independent associations and skepticism toward the public sphere.^{xiii} These historical patterns have been reinforced under Putin, as state rhetoric increasingly portrays civic activism as destabilizing and foreign inspired.

The Kremlin has systematically constrained civil society through legal restrictions, funding limitations, and targeted prosecutions.^{xiv} From a human rights perspective, the restriction of civil society represents not only an attack on organizational autonomy but a broader denial of collective rights. By

criminalizing cooperation, advocacy, and external engagement, the state restricts the ability of individuals to exercise their rights collectively, rendering political participation fragmented, individualized, and more easily controlled.

The 2012 Foreign Agent Law represented a decisive turning point by requiring organizations engaged in broadly defined political activity and receiving foreign funding to register as foreign agents.^{xv} In practice, this law has disproportionately affected organizations working on sensitive issues such as minority rights, religious freedom, and LGBTI advocacy. Many of these organizations have faced fines, reputational damage, or forced closure.^{xvi}

The repression of minority rights is closely connected to the Kremlin's emphasis on traditional values. To legitimize restrictions on civil liberties, Russian authorities have sought to delegitimize liberal democracy itself by portraying it as alien to the Russian national character.^{xvii} Putin has repeatedly argued that liberal ideology has exhausted its historical purpose and no longer reflects the interests of the majority.^{xviii} Liberal democracy is frequently associated with the protection of sexual minorities, which the president has framed as evidence of moral decay and cultural decline.^{xix}

Within this narrative, Western societies are depicted as imposing minority norms that threaten national traditions and social cohesion.^{xx} Russia, by contrast, is presented as a defender of sovereignty, order, and traditional morality.^{xxi} This framing has contributed to the normalization of homophobic attitudes and the marginalization of cultural diversity. Survey data indicate that a significant portion of the Russian population believes that sexual minorities seek to undermine traditional values.^{xxii} These perceptions provide social legitimacy for restrictive policies and reinforce the president's

strongman image.

The portrayal of dissent as foreign subversion has also served to delegitimize political opposition. Civic activists and opposition figures are routinely labeled foreign agents, traitors, or instruments of Western influence.^{xxiii} Legislative measures aimed at shrinking public space further stigmatize reform oriented movements as hostile to national values.^{xxiv} At the same time, Putin has consistently framed political opposition as a source of instability, warning that it could lead to chaos similar to events in Ukraine.^{xxv} Mass protests are depicted as externally orchestrated attempts to undermine state sovereignty.^{xxvi} This framing effectively converts the exercise of fundamental rights, such as peaceful assembly and political expression into evidence of disloyalty, thereby stripping these rights of their protective function.

Public attitudes toward opposition reflect the effectiveness of this narrative. Survey data show that while many Russians acknowledge the theoretical importance of political opposition, a substantial share associates it with disorder and internal division.^{xxvii} ^{xxviii} Parliamentary opposition parties are widely perceived as weak, fragmented, and lacking credibility. They are often described as symbolic or controlled, reinforcing the perception that no viable alternative to the current leadership exists.^{xxix}

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that Russia's authoritarian trajectory is deeply entrenched. The repression of political freedoms, the control of media and civil society, and the marginalization of ethnic and social minorities function as integral components of governance rather than temporary responses to crisis. In the absence of institutional constraints or a broad societal consensus in favor of liberal reform, the continuation of these practices appears likely.

The analysis above suggests that the deterioration of human rights in Russia should be understood less as a sequence of discrete abuses and more as a reordering of the relationship between the individual and the state. When rights are treated as contingent and politically managed rather than inherent and legally enforceable, the boundary between lawful governance and coercive control becomes increasingly porous. In such a system, the central question is not whether rights exist formally, but who is perceived as entitled to them in practice and under what conditions they may be restricted.

This reordering carries important implications for the durability of repression. Because restrictions are framed as protective measures in defense of sovereignty, stability, and social cohesion, rights violations become normalized as an administrative necessity. The result is a political environment in which legal change is not the primary driver of repression, but one of its instruments, used to retrospectively justify practices that would otherwise appear illegitimate. Even if particular statutes were amended or softened, the underlying governing logic would still incentivize selective enforcement, discretionary punishment, and the continual expansion of categories of “risk.”

For ethnic minorities, the implications are especially severe. A conditional rights regime tends to generate stratified citizenship, in which minority identity functions as a marker of heightened scrutiny and reduced protection. When minority communities are routinely treated through the lens of security, ordinary activities such as travel, religious practice, association, and political expression can be interpreted as suspicious conduct. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which enhanced surveillance and coercive policing produce mistrust and marginalization,

which are then used to justify further securitization. In this context, the central risk for ethnic minorities is not only episodic violence or discriminatory treatment, but the institutionalization of a status in which equal protection is unpredictable and, at times, effectively unavailable.

The implications extend beyond domestic governance. A political order that defines rights claims, especially minority claims, as instruments of external influence is likely to treat international human rights monitoring as hostile rather than corrective. This reduces the space for genuine engagement with international norms and increases the likelihood that external critique will be absorbed into domestic narratives of besiegement. The outcome is a hardened interpretive framework in which outside pressure can inadvertently strengthen official claims that rights advocacy is a vehicle for destabilization.

While the dynamics described here are shaped by Russia's specific historical and institutional context, similar patterns can be observed across contemporary authoritarian regimes that preserve formal legal structures while hollowing out their substantive content. The Russian case is therefore not anomalous, but illustrative of a broader mode of authoritarian consolidation in which legality, security discourse, and selective enforcement substitute for overt repression.

Finally, the Russian case illustrates how authoritarian consolidation can proceed through a transformation of meaning rather than through open abandonment of legal forms. Elections, courts, and formal rights language can remain in place while the practical content of rights is narrowed through securitization, stigma, and selective enforcement. The most consequential implication is therefore conceptual: repression is sustained not only by coercive capacity, but by an institutional and ideological environment in

which the state positions itself as the source of rights and the judge of when rights must yield. Under such conditions, deterioration is not an accidental outcome. It is a predictable feature of governance.

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