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Klaire Mason March 5, 2025

From Reform to Repression: Putin's Third Term and the Making of an Authoritarian State.

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Abstract

From Reform to Repression: Putin's Third Term and the Making of an Authoritarian State

By Klaire Mason

This thesis examines the evolution of Russia's political system under Vladimir Putin, tracing the shift from an illiberal democracy during his first two terms (2000-2008) to a more overtly authoritarian state in his third term (2012-2018). In the early 2000s, Putin's leadership was marked by a managed democracy, where democratic institutions existed but were tightly controlled, and political opposition was marginalized rather than fully suppressed. Throughout this period, there was hope, both domestically and internationally, that Russia would gradually move toward greater democratization, particularly as economic stability improved, and some reforms were introduced. However, this optimism began to fade as Putin's government increasingly centralized power, weakened checks and balances, and suppressed dissent. The mass protests of 2011-2012, sparked by allegations of electoral fraud, marked a turning point, as the regime responded with harsh crackdowns on opposition figures like Alexei Navalny and the passage of restrictive laws targeting civil society, media, and political freedoms. The 2014 Sochi Olympics symbolized the regime's dual strategy of projecting global strength while masking internal repression. By Putin's third term, any remaining hope for democratic reform had largely dissipated, as the regime relied on coercion, propaganda, and the suppression of dissent to maintain control. This analysis highlights the mechanisms of authoritarian consolidation in modern Russia and underscores the challenges faced by democratic movements in an increasingly repressive environment.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to the courageous Russian people who stood up against Vladimir Putin's regime during the 2012 protests and to those who continue to fight for freedom and justice. Your resilience and bravery in the face of oppression are a constant source of inspiration.

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“Надежда Умирает Последней”

(“Hope Dies Last”)

On May 7, 2000, Vladimir Putin's inauguration didn't just mark the beginning of a new presidency, it was a watershed moment in Russia's post-Soviet history. The grandeur of the nearly 200-year-old Grand Kremlin’s Palace, with its rich gold detailing and soaring ceilings, served as a fitting stage for the unfolding spectacle. A mix of Russian elites and foreign dignitaries, all eyes trained on the future of the world's largest country, stood witness to a pivotal transition, one that hinted at both hope and uncertainty. As Putin, sharply dressed in a dark suit, swore his oath before the assembled masses, it was more than a ceremonial gesture. It was an indelible statement to the Russian people and to the world: a new chapter was beginning, and Putin was determined to lead the charge.[1]

Western leaders, aware of the delicate balance Russia was facing, offered cautious congratulations. U.S. President Bill Clinton expressed hope for continued cooperation between Russia and the United States, acknowledging the significance of Putin's win.[2] U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright assessed Putin’s inauguration speech positively, “We were quite encouraged by a speech...in which he talked about the importance of freedom of expression, of association, of press, and his dedication to a rule of law,”[3] Albright said on NBC's “Meet The Press.” German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder emphasized the importance of building strong ties between Germany and Russia, recognizing that Putin's presidency was a key moment for both

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[1] “Церемония вручения Владимиру Путину должности Президента России.” Кремль.ру, 7 мая 2000.
[2] National Security Archive. "Putin's First Election: March 2000." Last modified March 21, 2024.
[3] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "Putin, 15 Years Ago: First Impressions From the West." Last modified March 19, 2015.

nations.[4] Dutch Foreign Minister Jozias van Aartsen was quoted by the Associated Press as saying after Putin's appointment, "You can do business with that kind of person. I don't expect a setback for democracy under Putin."[5] These congratulations, while generally positive, were tempered with caution, as leaders recognized the need for democratic reforms and a peaceful resolution to ongoing issues like the conflict in Chechnya. Putin's victory, while celebrated at home, was seen as a complex signal to the West: a call for stronger ties, but also a challenge to navigate the intricate balance between supporting Russia's sovereignty and ensuring the country remained on a path toward democracy. The world watched, waiting to see whether Putin would honor the hopes of the international community or follow his own vision of governance.

As Putin settled into his role as president, his early interactions with Western leaders, particularly with Bill Clinton, would play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of U.S.-Russia relations in the years to come. Putin would fondly recall his limited time working with Clinton, expressing gratitude for the former president's support as he entered the political spotlight. "We had a very good relationship [with Bill Clinton]. I can even say that I am very grateful to him for certain moments that occurred in the early days of my career in big politics," Putin stated in an interview.[6] In the early 2000, as Russia's acting president, Putin exchanged messages with Clinton, emphasizing that despite differences, Russia and the U.S. should continue fostering cooperation. On Putin's first day as acting president, Clinton called to congratulate him, noting Yeltsin's, the former Russian president, resignation and Putin's response "are very encouraging for the future of Russian democracy."[7] By June 2000, Clinton visited Moscow, where discussions covered the

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[4] Jamestown Foundation. "The World Welcomes Putin." Accessed March 2, 2025.
[5] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "Putin, 15 Years Ago: First Impressions From the West." Last modified March 19, 2015.
[6] ТАСС. "Путин заявил, что благодарен Клинтон за поддержку в начале его карьеры." ТАСС, 17 июня 2016.
[7] National Security Archive. "Putin and Clinton Transitions." *The George Washington University*, November 2, 2020.

Balkans, the North Caucasus, and other pressing matters. Beyond diplomacy, Putin gave Clinton a tour of the Kremlin's Senate Palace and attended a jazz concert with him, Clinton, a passionate saxophonist, particularly enjoyed the evening. Putin and Clinton had several more meetings and phone calls before Clinton's presidency ended.[8] Their last personal interactions occurred between 2009 and 2010 when Putin was Russia's prime minister and Clinton had long left public office, Putin praised Clinton's role in improving Russian-American relations, hoping that the incoming administration would continue this progress.

Initially, this hope was fulfilled, despite the Republican Party's reputation for being tough on Russia. When George W. Bush assumed office in January 2001, it did not prevent the two leaders from establishing a positive dialogue. At their first meeting in June 2001, held in a historic castle in Ljubljana, Slovenia, Bush famously remarked that he "looked into Putin's eyes" and "sensed his soul," calling him a "straightforward person worthy of trust."[9] The peak of U.S.-Russia relations occurred between 2001 and 2002. After the 9/11 attacks, Putin was the first world leader to call Bush, offering support. Two months later, during a ten-day visit to the U.S., Putin met Bush at the White House and even received a personal invitation to Bush's Texas ranch, Prairie Chapel.[10] Additionally, on November 16, 2001, President Putin visited the site of the World Trade Center attacks in New York City. He made an inscription on the World Trade Center Memorial Wall, paying his respects to the victims of the tragedy.[11] In an unprecedented move, Putin attended a closed CIA briefing, a gesture the Americans described as a sign of gratitude for Russia's

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[8] Кремль. "Встреча с президентом США Биллом Клинтоном." Президент России – Кремль, 4 июня 2000 г.
[9] The White House Archives. "President Bush and President Putin Discuss Stronger Relations." *The White House*, June 18, 2001.
[10] Московская Таймс. "Кремль опубликовал новые кадры визита Путина к Бушу в Техас в 2001 году." Газета «Москоу Таймс», 29 января 2020 г.
[11] AP Archive. "President Putin at Ceremony to Mark Building of 9/11 Memorial." *YouTube*, July 21, 2015.

cooperation in counterterrorism efforts.[12] During Bush's return visit to Moscow in May 2002, the two nations signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty and a Joint Declaration on a New Strategic Relationship.[13] By November, Bush declared Putin "one of my closest friends."[14]

In March 2003, the U.S. and U.K. launched the Iraq War without UN approval, based on later-debunked evidence, the infamous "Powell test tube" incident. Russia, alongside NATO allies like France and Germany, strongly opposed the invasion.[15] Further strain emerged with NATO's 2004 expansion, which included former Soviet republics, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.[16] Other friction points included missile defense disagreements and the rise of "color revolutions" in post-Soviet states.[17] Despite these tensions, Bush and Putin maintained personal rapport. Even after Putin's 2007 Munich speech, where he criticized U.S. unipolar dominance, Bush hosted him at his family estate in Maine, where they enjoyed a boat ride with George H.W. Bush.[18] By the time Putin's second presidential term ended in May 2008, he had met Bush 28 times. Their final summit in Sochi produced a Declaration on Strategic Framework, acknowledging both achievements and challenges in U.S.-Russia relations. The two leaders briefly crossed paths again at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, but the event was overshadowed by the Russia-Georgia conflict. Amidst the hostilities, Bush assured Putin that "nobody wants war," though their interpretations of that conversation later

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[12] George W. Bush White House Archives. "President George W. Bush and President Vladimir Putin of Russia at the White House." May 24, 2002.
[13] Arms Control Association. "Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) at a Glance."
[14] George W. Bush White House Archives. "Remarks by President Bush and President Putin After Their Meeting." May 24, 2002.
[15] Journal of Democracy. "What Putin Fears Most." *Journal of Democracy*, accessed March 2, 2025.
[16] The Guardian. "NATO's Eastern Expansion: The Forgotten Story." *The Guardian*, April 2, 2004.
[17] NATO Defense College. "The Color Revolutions and Their Implications for NATO." *NATO Defense College*, 2005.
[18] George W. Bush Presidential Library. "President George W. Bush and President Vladimir Putin Tour the Bush Family Home." *George W. Bush White House Archives*, July 1, 2007.

diverged.[19] Before Bush left office in January 2009, he and Putin exchanged warm words over the phone. Putin later described Bush as "a decent man and a good comrade" whose diplomatic efforts helped avoid deeper crises in bilateral relations.[20]

As George W. Bush's presidency came to a close, the global landscape was shifting, and U.S.-Russia relations were at a crossroads. Entering office in 2009, Barack Obama aimed to improve U.S.-Russia relations by shifting away from the tension and mistrust during the end of the Bush era, promoting a fresh approach to diplomacy and cooperation. In July 2009, during President Barack Obama's first visit to Russia, he met with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at his residence in Novo-Ogaryovo in Moscow.[21] At the start of their conversation—one that lasted longer than scheduled—Putin remarked, "We link hopes for development of our relationship with your name."[22] Putin acknowledged the complexities of U.S.-Russia relations, noting the fluctuating periods of both cooperation and tension.[23] Following Vladimir Putin's two consecutive terms as president, he stepped aside in 2008 due to constitutional term limits, paving the way for his close ally, Dmitry Medvedev, to take over. Though widely seen as Putin's protégé, Medvedev projected a more moderate and reformist image, raising hopes in the West for a potential thaw in relations. It was against this backdrop that Obama, who took office in 2009, placed his faith in Medvedev, believing that the new Russian president's seemingly pragmatic stance might offer a

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[19] PBS. "Putin and the Presidents." *PBS Frontline*, September 14, 2009. See also: George W. Bush White House Archives. "Remarks by President Bush and President Putin After Bilateral Meeting." *The White House*, August 9, 2008.
[20] George W. Bush"George W. Bush: When I First Met with Putin 'I Looked into His Eyes...'" *YouTube*, November 15, 2017.
[21] The White House, Obama Administration. "U.S.-Russia Relations: Reset Fact Sheet." *The White House*, March 17, 2009.
[22] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). "Obama Praises Putin At First Meeting." *Radio Free Europe*, July 7, 2009.
[23] The White House. "U.S.-Russia Relations: Reset Fact Sheet." *Obama White House Archives*. February 2011.

fresh opportunity for collaboration.[24] However, despite these efforts to improve ties, Obama later reflected on the growing tension in his relationship with Putin, noting that over time, their interactions became more strained as failed attempts to reach common ground on key issues persisted, particularly over Russia's support for the Assad regime in Syria, human rights abuses, and Moscow's increasingly aggressive stance toward neighboring countries, culminating in the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

While Medvedev's tenure offered a brief period of hope for improved relations, particularly with his more moderate and reform-oriented rhetoric, the reality of Russian domestic and foreign policy remained complex. Medvedev's popularity among Russia's middle class was notable, but his ability to drive significant change was often overshadowed by the enduring influence of Putin. As Obama noted in *A Promised Land*, Medvedev's willingness to strengthen ties with the United States was always contingent on Putin's approval. Putin's distrust of Medvedev began following the latter's handling of NATO's actions against Moammar Gadafi during the 2011 Arab Spring, leading Putin to announce his own presidential run that same year. This decision, coupled with constitutional manipulation, sparked widespread protests across Russia, most notably at Bolotnaya Square, which drew international attention and concern over American involvement in Russian politics.[25] The protests and the subsequent crackdown highlighted the increasingly authoritarian nature of Putin's governance, marked by electoral manipulation, media control, and the suppression of dissent. Putin's shift toward hard-right nationalism and explicit anti-liberal ideology alienated a significant segment of Russian society, as evidenced by the intense demonstrations following his third election and the rise of figures like Aleksei Navalny.

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[24] "Assessing the Obama-Medvedev Reset." *E-International Relations*. September 3, 2015.
[25] Mark Kramer. "Putin's Return to the Kremlin: The Politics of a 'Managed Democracy'." *Russian Politics and Law* 49, no. 2 (2011): 22-44.

Specialists in Russian history and Putinologists often examine Putin's childhood or his KGB career to understand Russia's turn towards authoritarianism. However, this approach is criticized for being ahistorical and lacking systematic analysis, as it often relies on political science or journalistic perspectives. Timothy Frye, a professor of post-Soviet foreign policy at Columbia University, explores the complexities of Putin's leadership in his book, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*. Published by Princeton University Press in 2021, Frye offers a more structured analysis by breaking down Putin's governance into political economy and foreign policy. Frye links the survival of Putin's autocratic system to Russia's economic success, arguing that repressive measures, including media manipulation and journalist suppression, are essential to maintaining the government's reputation among the population. Similarly, David Satter's *The Less You Know, The Better You Sleep*, based on his firsthand experience as a journalist in Russia from 1976 to 2013, describes Russia under Putin as a state-managed like a criminal organization, tolerating free speech only as long as it aligns with the state's ideology. Both Frye and Satter identify Russia's economic vulnerabilities as a potential weakness in the regime. Satter notes that economic crises undermine confidence in the government, leading to doubts about the future and the authorities' ability to lead.

However, these observations do not fully explain how Russia's governance evolved, particularly in the lead-up to Putin's third term. Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia lacks independent institutions like a supreme court that could mediate between the ruling faction and the emerging opposition. Scholars such as Richard Sakwa (based at the University of Kent, UK), Oleg Zhuravlev (based at the Public Sociology Laboratory in Russia), and Maria Shevtsova (based at Goldsmiths, University of London) have examined specific aspects of Putin's third term. Zhuravlev, for example, compares current Russian protest movements to global populist movements, arguing that

Russia exhibits a “populism by default” that often co-opts movements while ignoring social demands. Sakwa highlights the 2011 protests as a clash between the constitutional state and the administrative regime, with the popular movement aiming to strengthen constitutional limits on government power. In response, Russia employed a mix of repression and concessions, passing repressive laws while also easing political party registration and ballot access.

This thesis is structured into an introduction, four main chapters, and an afterword, offering a comprehensive analysis of Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, the evolution of Russia’s political system, and the suppression of dissent. The subsequent chapters will analyze key events and political shifts: (1) the development of Putin’s illiberal democracy, (2) Putin’s return to power during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, (3) the repression of protests and opposition, and (4) the tools of authoritarian repression used to maintain control. Chapter 1 will argue that during his first two presidential terms (2000-2008), Putin systematically undermined democratic structures through media control, suppression of political opposition, and the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections, creating a political system that retained the appearance of democracy while functioning as an authoritarian regime. This chapter highlights the centralization of power and the establishment of a "managed democracy" that stifled genuine political competition. Chapter 2 will focus on Putin’s return to power during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency (2008-2012), exploring how Putin maintained his influence as prime minister while preparing for his re-election. The chapter will also analyze the protests leading up to the 2012 presidential election, driven by widespread public discontent over corruption, electoral fraud, and the erosion of political freedoms. These protests, the largest since the fall of the Soviet Union, reflected growing opposition to Putin’s rule and increasing demands for political reform. Chapter 3 will delve into the 2012 Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow and other Russian cities, which erupted in response

to alleged fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections. These protests represented a critical moment in modern Russian political history, signaling a significant public demand for a more democratic political system and highlighting the increasing tension between the Russian state and its citizens. Chapter 4 will analyze the tools of authoritarian repression employed by Putin's regime, including the Foreign Agent Law, anti-extremism legislation, and the use of security forces like the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) to suppress dissent. The legal and security measures were systematically used to eliminate opposition, control civil society, and maintain authoritarian control, further entrenching Putin's power. The afterword will also reflect on the 2014 Sochi Olympics as a symbolic culmination of Putin's authoritarian consolidation, showcasing Russia's global ambitions while masking the regime's repressive tactics. The Olympics, intended to project an image of a modern, prosperous Russia, were marred by widespread corruption, human rights abuses, and the brutal suppression of dissent in the North Caucasus. Despite these issues, the West largely turned a blind eye, prioritizing geopolitical and economic interests over holding Putin accountable for his oppressive policies. The Sochi Olympics thus serve as a stark reminder of how the West's pragmatic approach to Russia allowed Putin to consolidate power while continuing to undermine democratic freedoms at home.

Putin's Illiberal Democracy

Consolidating Political Power (1990–2002)

Under Boris Yeltsin's leadership in the 1990s, the Russian Federation endured hyperinflation, widespread poverty, and the privatization of state assets, which led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few oligarchs. This economic disarray was accompanied by severe social consequences, with living standards plummeting for much of the population.[26] Yeltsin's leadership, particularly in his second term, increasingly alienated many Russians as a result of his decision to wage war in Chechnya and the turmoil following the 1993 constitutional crisis. By the end of the 1990s, the central government had lost control over both economic and federal elites in the government units, further contributing to Russia's political fragmentation.[27] By the time Putin emerged, the country was deeply divided, with regional and economic elites controlling the central government.

During the 1990's, Russia was run by a mix of oligarchs, corrupt insiders, and regional strongmen. One such strongman was Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch with deep Kremlin ties, who secured a role in the Security Council, using it to protect his business empire, until Putin forced him into exile. Yeltsin's inner circle, known as "The Family,"[28] treated the state like a personal asset, while regional governors, like those in Yakutia and the Far East, ruled their territories with near-total autonomy. Putin's rise from Prime Minister in the 90's to President in 2000, was built

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[26] William E. Pomeranz. "Yeltsin Under Siege — The October 1993 Constitutional Crisis." *American Diplomacy*, October 2014.
[27] Peter Reddaway. "Russia's Constitutional Crisis 1990 to 1993." *Birkbeck Law Review* 1, no. 2 (2005): 233-259.
[28] The term "The Family" was popularized by pro-Luzhkov media, notably NTV, to describe Yeltsin's inner circle, thereby casting them as a mafia-like group.

on crushing the oligarchs, centralizing control, and presenting himself as the only leader who could restore order. A former KGB officer who had worked in St. Petersburg's municipal government, Putin presented himself as a man with the experience and personality needed to heal the nation.[29] In the lead up to the 2000 election, Putin's response to the apartment bombings in 1999, attributed to Chechen separatists, cemented his reputation as a strongman. Putin capitalized on the political vacuum left by Yeltsin's chaotic presidency to authorize a massive invasion of Chechnya and initiate the Second Chechen War.[30] His popularity rose by projecting the look of a virile, strong leader partaking in stunts such as flying over the war zone and spending the day with troops.

Putin's leadership was characterized by a blend of pragmatism and authoritarianism that played on the fears and desires of a population tired of the chaos of the previous decade. In a country struggling with economic hardship, Putin's promises of stability and national security resonated with the general population. His economic policies, particularly those aimed at stabilizing the ruble and fostering economic growth through state intervention, helped Russia recover from the crises of the 1990s. Putin's rise was not just about seizing power but about crafting a narrative of national resurgence that countered the disillusionment and decline of the Yeltsin era.[31] Compared to Yeltsin, who was often perceived as erratic and plagued by health issues, Putin was seen as a younger, more disciplined leader with a technocratic and pragmatic approach to governance. His background in the KGB was noted, but it did not initially raise major red flags in the West, as he positioned himself as a reformer willing to work within existing democratic

[29] Karen Dawisha. "Putin's First Year in Office: The New Regime's Uniqueness in Russian History." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2001): 191-214.
[30] Hudson Institute. "The Mystery of Russia's 1999 Apartment Bombings Lingers." *Hudson Institute*, October 19, 2018.
[31] "Analysts Discuss the 20-Year Rule of Vladimir Putin." *Harvard Gazette*, December 20, 2019.

structures and build a relationship with global institutions such as the European Union and NATO.[32]

Some Western analysts and politicians hoped he would continue the market-oriented economic reforms initiated under Yeltsin, further integrating Russia into the global economy through cooperation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). As Prime Minister, Putin actively pursued agreements with the EU aimed at expanding economic integration, particularly in the oil and gas sector, where Russia sought to position itself as a key energy supplier to Europe. Additionally, Russia engaged in discussions about aligning certain regulatory standards with European norms, reflecting a willingness to cooperate on economic governance.[33] At the same time, there was cautious optimism that he would maintain democratic reforms, uphold media freedoms, and stabilize Russia's fragile political landscape. Reflecting this optimism, NATO opened an information office in Moscow soon after Putin was inaugurated as president in May 2000, signaling a desire for closer cooperation between Russia and the alliance.[34] Additionally, there was hope Putin would take meaningful steps to combat the rampant corruption that had flourished under Yeltsin's oligarch-dominated system. Given his background in law enforcement and his rhetoric about restoring order, some Western observers believed he might implement stronger anti-corruption measures and strengthen state institutions.[35]

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[32] Julian Borger. 2021. "Ex-Nato Head Says Putin Wanted to Join Alliance Early on in His Rule." *The Guardian*, November 4, 2021.
[33] Dov Lynch. "Russia's Strategic Partnership with Europe." *The Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 99–118.
[34] NATO. "NATO Press Release PJC." May 24, 2000.
[35] Oleg Nesterenko. "Russia: The Battle Against Money Laundering." *Finance & Development*, September 2000. International Monetary Fund.

Inheriting a country plagued by political instability, economic turmoil, and widespread corruption, Putin initially focused on restoring order and stability. His early years in office were marked by efforts to strengthen state institutions, enforce the rule of law, and reassert central authority. While he sought to curb the unchecked power of oligarchs and recentralize governance, these moves were largely framed as necessary steps to rebuild a functioning state rather than outright repression.[36] One of Putin's earliest and most significant acts as president was the creation of the "power vertical," a structure aimed at consolidating power within the central government and diminishing the authority of regional leaders. Under Yeltsin, Russia's political system had been characterized by a fragmented federal structure where regional governors wielded significant power, often challenging the authority of Moscow.[37] In the mid-1990s, the governor of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, had amassed considerable autonomy, even negotiating deals directly with foreign investors, undermining federal policies. For Putin, this decentralization posed a threat to his vision of a unified and centralized Russia. Putin sought to reassert control by establishing his influence within the "power ministries," such as the police, military, and FSB (formerly known as the KGB), and foster the "siloviki," who are at the top of the power, as a counterbalance to governors and oligarchs.

These envoys were given sweeping powers to monitor regional governments, enforce Moscow's policies, and report on the political situation in their districts, "The federal law sets out the grounds for and cases when the President can appoint an interim head official in a region and clarifies the grounds for temporarily removing or dismissing the head official of a region from

[36] Brian D. Taylor. "Putin's Reforms and Russia's Governors." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*.
[37] Dmitri Trenin. "The Power Vertical and the Nation's Self-Consciousness." *Global Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2007).

office."[38] Their security service experience aligned with Putin's strategy of consolidating power through trusted officials with a strong loyalty to the state.[39] The establishment of these districts was a direct response to the challenges posed by oligarchs and Putin's weakening of central authority through negotiating sovereignty treaties with the Russian Federation.[40] Regions like Sakhalin and the Far East had negotiated sovereignty treaties with the Russian Federation, asserting tangible autonomy in governance and resource management. These agreements underscored the growing influence of regional leaders, prompting Moscow to reassert control and counterbalance their power.[41]

The power vertical continued to take shape in the following years, with regional governors still being elected by the public, giving them a democratic mandate and political legitimacy. However, some of these governors, such as Yuri Luzhkov who represented Moscow, had presidential ambitions. Aman Tuleyev, the governor of Kemerovo, had become increasingly independent and openly defiant of federal authority. At a meeting of the regional governors in Emmaus near Tver, they discussed issues like social tensions and dissatisfaction with local and federal authorities. Luzhkov took issue with one of the federal government's plans to replace social programs with monetary allowances. He argued the plan could jeopardize existing regional programs and make it harder to meet social obligations. Luzhkov demanded the government stop the initiative, emphasizing that a stable system was needed.[42] Other critics of the government's

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[38] President of Russia. "President Vladimir Putin Has Signed the Federal Law Changing the Election System in the Country's Regions." Accessed January 17, 2025.
[39] Eberhard Schneider. "The Russian federal security service under President Putin." In Politics and the Ruling Group in Putin's Russia, pp. 42-62. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008.
[40] See also: Williams, Brad. "Federal–regional relations in Russia and the Northern Territories dispute: the rise and demise of the 'Sakhalin factor'." The Pacific Review 19, no. 3 (2006): 263-285.
[41] Brad Williams. "Federal–regional relations in Russia and the Northern Territories dispute: the rise and demise of the 'Sakhalin factor'." The Pacific Review 19, no. 3 (2006): 263-285.
[42] Кира Латухина. "Правительство – Остановись!" Независимая Газета, 26 марта 2004.

plan to replace social programs argued this change returned “Russia to the Soviet era, when the Kremlin appointed local Communist Party bosses… ending a major part of Russia's decade-long experiment with decentralization and undermines the country's status as a federation, which is stipulated in the constitution.”[43] Rather than an outright reversal of decentralization, Putin’s approach was aimed at creating a more functional and unified system of governance after years of fragmentation. Although the shift increased federal control, it was not as extreme as some feared, as regional leaders still retained a degree of autonomy within the framework of a stronger central state.

Alongside the centralization of political power, Putin moved to consolidate control over Russia’s political party system. The 2001 reforms, which raised the bar for political parties to gain official registration and participate in elections, effectively weakened opposition parties, particularly those critical of the Kremlin.[44] Smaller liberal and left-wing parties, such as Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces**,** found it increasingly difficult to operate within the new system, “In February, both Yabloko and the CPRF announced a "toughening" of their confrontation with the government. Yavlinsky declared his party a “systemic opposition.” And Zyuganov, head of the Communists, simply stated the change of president had brought nothing good or new.”[45] As a result, opposition parties like Union of Right Forces found it increasingly difficult to access media outlets and raise funds, as state-controlled media largely ignored their campaigns. The Kremlin's dominance over both media and regional politics created an environment where opposition parties struggled to gain traction. One of the most illustrative examples of this was the 2003 Duma

[43] Jeremy Bransten, "Russia: Putin Signs Bill Eliminating Direct Elections of Governors," *RFE/RL*, December 13, 2004
[44] Alexander Baunov. "Putin's Constitutional Reforms Consolidate Power Around the Presidency." *GPP Review*. July 13, 2020.
[45] газета, Новая. “светлой памяти российской оппозиции.” *Новая Газета*. April 11, 2001.

elections.[46] The United Russia Party emerged as the frontrunner in the election, securing 37.5% of the votes and 120 seats. The Communist Party followed in second place with 12.6% of the vote, earning 40 seats. Close behind was Vladimir Zhirinovsky's ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which received 11.45% and 36 seats. Meanwhile, the two liberal, pro-market parties, the Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Yabloko, fell short of the 5% threshold required to gain party list representation.[47] This result highlighted the difficulties faced by opposition parties in Russian politics during this period. The 2001 reforms, along with the Kremlin's increasing control over regional authorities and media, effectively marginalized opposition parties and helped United Russia maintain its dominant position in Russian politics. This was not surprising since many politicians take strategic steps to secure their party's position, whether through legal reforms, media influence, or institutional control. When Clinton criticized Putin for the way he was handling the government, Putin replied, "Russia does not have an established political system. People don't read programs. They look at the faces of the leaders, regardless of what party they belong to, regardless of whether they have a program or not."[48]

A key part of Putin's efforts to reshape the government was to crackdown on the country's influential oligarchs who had inherited their wealth and power from Yeltsin's presidency, most notably seen in the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The 2003 arrest of Russia's wealthiest oligarch and the head of the Yukos oil company highlighted the growing tensions between the Kremlin and the oligarchs who had gained immense wealth and influence in the 1990s. Khodorkovsky, a former Komsomol member who had become a billionaire through the

[46] "Правительство – Остановись!" *Независимая Газета*, December 8, 2003.
[47] Inter-Parliamentary Union. "Russian Federation: Parliamentary Elections Gossoudarstvennaya Duma, 2003."
[48] National Security Archive. "Putin and Clinton Transitions." *The George Washington University*, November 2, 2020.

privatization of state assets, was seen as a potential political rival to Putin. He had publicly criticized Putin's administration, calling for political reforms, and was seen as a supporter of the opposition parties. Mikhail Khodorkovsky's public criticism of Vladimir Putin in a televised forum was a pivotal moment in the relationship between the two. Khodorkovsky, who had built an immense fortune through the Yukos oil company, focused on the centralized power in the Kremlin and diminishing the influence of independent political actors. This televised forum, which occurred in the early 2000s, was especially significant because it gave Khodorkovsky a platform to air his grievances about Putin's government. The criticism was not just about policy issues but extended to a broader condemnation of the political environment in Russia, including the lack of democracy, the erosion of civil liberties, and the growing power of the state over business and society. Khodorkovsky criticized the government's handling of the economy, which he believed was stifling competition and innovation, as well as the increasing state control over key industries. He was also outspoken about the government's tendency to suppress dissent and control the media.

For an oligarch, someone who had benefited greatly from the post-Soviet privatization of Russian industries, this was an extraordinary step. Oligarchs were expected to align themselves with the Kremlin and avoid political involvement. Khodorkovsky, however, seemed willing to use his wealth and influence to confront Putin directly.[49] This defiance did not go unchallenged. Shortly before Khodorkovsky's arrest, Putin told former CEO of the British oil company BP, John Brown, in a private conversation: "I have tolerated this man [Khodorkovsky] for too long."[50] Putin's government saw Khodorkovsky as a threat to its authority, and the televised criticism marked the beginning of a concerted effort to dismantle Khodorkovsky's power. Putin ordered

[49] Richard Sakwa. Putin and the oligarch: The Khodorkovsky-Yukos affair. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, Ch. 3.
[50] РБК. "Главный Враг Российской Власти: История Михаила Ходорковского." РБК, Декабрь 20, 2013.

Khodorkovsky's arrest on charges of tax evasion and fraud, leading to his eventual conviction and imprisonment. In the aftermath, Putin divided up Yukos and sold the assets to political allies. The Kremlin's handling of Khodorkovsky's case sent a clear message to other oligarchs: loyalty to the state was paramount, and those who crossed the line could face severe consequences.[51] The case also had wider implications, as it marked the state's increasing control over Russia's major economic sectors, with state-owned companies, such as Rosneft, acquiring assets from Yukos during its dismantling. This move further solidified Putin's control over both the political and economic landscapes of Russia.[52]

Western governments and analysts noted the shift away from the more open political landscape of the 1990s, interpreting it as part of a broader trend of centralizing power under Putin. However, they were not necessarily seen as outright authoritarian at the time. Despite these concerns, Russia and the West maintained a cooperative relationship, particularly in the wake of 9/11. Following the 9/11 attacks, the shared threat of terrorism brought Russia and the United States into closer cooperation, as both nations had suffered from devastating terrorist incidents. Putin was one of the first world leaders to call U.S. President George W. Bush, offering condolences and pledging Russia's full support in combating terrorism. As a result, Washington and Moscow found common ground, with Putin leveraging this alignment to strengthen diplomatic ties and position Russia as a crucial partner in international counterterrorism efforts.[53] President Bush, eager to build an anti-terror coalition after 9/11, saw Putin as a pragmatic ally. Key American politicians and officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor

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[51] Masha Gessen. *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*. Riverhead Books, 2012, 111–145.
[52] "Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the Kremlin's Prisoner." *Institute of Modern Russia*, October 2013, 2–8.
[53] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2001. "U.S.-Russia Relations After September 11, 2001." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2001.

Condoleezza Rice, viewed Russia's support as a significant geopolitical win, as it suggested that post-Soviet Russia could work with the West rather than against it. In May 2002, Russia's status as a great power was reinforced by a strategic partnership agreement with the U.S., committing both nations to collaborate on addressing global challenges. The Bush administration established the NATO-Russia Council in and "gave Russia a seat at the table within the alliance and extensive—though not untrammeled—consultation rights, confirming its status as a significant power."[54] The U.S. largely accepted Putin's framing of the Chechen conflict as part of the broader War on Terror, despite concerns from some human rights organizations about Russia's heavy-handed military tactics in the region. Putin when asked about his relationship with Bush and America, stated, "I do believe that our relationship developed normally—not bad—and they are being strengthened every time we meet. And the relationship between Russia and the United States is entirely different than that between the United States and the Soviet Union… Of course, we will continue our relations in the future."[55]

By the end of 2003, Putin had effectively transformed Russia's political system into a "managed democracy," where democratic institutions and elections existed, but their outcomes were predictable. While political maneuvering and behind-the-scenes corruption were understood to be part of the system, they were not seen as unusual or particularly alarming, after all, previous leaders had done the same. What set Putin apart, in the eyes of many, was that he delivered tangible results: economic growth, rising wages, and a renewed sense of stability. Rather than protesting or resisting his consolidation of power, much of the public saw it as necessary to prevent a return

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[54] Tracey German. "From Cooperation to Confrontation: US-Russia Relations since 9/11." *International Politics* 61, no. 3. October 13, 2023: 567–86.

[55] The American Presidency Project. "Remarks Following Discussions With President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and an Exchange With Reporters in Kennebunkport." July 02, 2007.

to the instability of the Yeltsin era. The Kremlin's control over the media also played a role, reinforcing the narrative that Putin was a leader who stood above corrupt elites and was acting in Russia's best interests. Elections continued, political opposition technically existed, and democratic institutions remained in place, giving many the impression that the system was still functioning. For many Russians, this was not a betrayal of democracy but rather the way power had always operated, and as long as their lives were improving, there was little reason to challenge it.

Putin, the West, and the War on Terror (2004–2006)

In 2004, the devastating Beslan school siege took place, an event that would have profound implications for Putin's governance. The terrorist attack, carried out by Chechen militants, resulted in the deaths of over 300 people, including 186 children. The tragedy shocked the nation and heightened fears of terrorism, which Putin skillfully leveraged to justify sweeping security reforms, even as his government's incompetence in handling of the hostage rescue turned the crisis into a fiasco. In the aftermath of the siege, Putin pushed through laws that expanded the powers of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and other security agencies, enabling them to conduct surveillance, arrest suspects without clear evidence, and stifle any opposition that might be deemed a threat to national security.[56] Nikolai Kovalyov, who headed the FSB from 1996 to 1998, said: "This is a very logical decision of our president. I think we all understand very well, and we have

[56] John B. Dunlop. "The Beslan Tragedy and the Breakdown of Russian Counterterrorism." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19, no. 2 (2006): 231–278.

been able to see it recently how much our country needs a strong security service."[57] These measures were framed as necessary steps in state-building, aimed at strengthening Russia's ability to combat terrorism and maintain national stability. While they did lead to a tightening of political control, they were not yet indicative of full-blown authoritarianism but rather an effort to create a more centralized and functional state after years of instability. Human rights organizations and independent observers voiced concerns about these policies. Lyudmila Alexeyeva, said the FSB's enhanced role was a step backward, "They are re-creating the old monster," she told the Associated Press. "It will definitely have a negative impact" on the creation of a law-based society that tolerates dissent."[58]

The Beslan tragedy reinforced Putin's use of nationalism as a unifying force, much like how other leaders, including in the U.S. after 9/11, mobilized national identity in response to terrorism. Framing security measures as a collective national struggle was not unusual, but in Russia, it would become increasingly tied to strengthening state authority and justifying tighter control. Putin used the event to rally public support for his administration, portraying the Russian state as the protector of the nation against external and internal enemies. Nationalism was weaponized to cast any form of dissent as unpatriotic, a threat to the very fabric of Russian identity. The Kremlin's media apparatus played a crucial role in this effort, casting those who criticized the government's response to the siege as disloyal to the Russian people. The media refrained from reporting accurate information about Beslan, instead disseminating misleading details about the number of hostages and the identities of the attackers. While print media have shown a slight revival post-Beslan, the firing of *Izvestia's* editor for probing into state failures illustrates the

[57] Sharon LaFraniere. "Putin Gives Security Service New Powers." *The Washington Post*, March 12, 2003.
[58] Sharon LaFraniere. "Putin Gives Security Service New Powers."

restrictions on questioning the government's actions.[59] Headlines from the *Moscow Times* newspapers from 2004 after the Beslan hostage crisis read: 'Officials Rally 130,000 Against Terror,' 'Putin Tells Nation 'This Is an Attack Against All of Us.'' In the previous headline, the article reads, "Many held Russian or Moscow city flags, tied with black ribbons, while large place cards said, "Russia will not be put on her knees!" and "We will not be intimidated!" Attendees interviewed in the article reveal the rally was advertised on television and organized by the pro-government trade federation. People who attended the rally were called "traitors and bastards." They also had their posters ripped down by policemen while being told, "Why don't you get a proper sign?" This rhetoric of patriotism, combined with the state's near-total control over the media, ensured that Putin's approval ratings remained high, even as concerns grew over his increasingly authoritarian rule. This stood in stark contrast to the treatment of protesters during the First Chechen War, when a relatively free press provided a platform for dissent, and public criticism of the conflict was far more visible and tolerated.[60]

By 2004, the ongoing Chechen conflict became a cornerstone of the Kremlin's strategy to galvanize nationalist sentiment and consolidate its grip on Russia's political landscape. Coupled with a series of high-profile terrorist attacks, such as the bombing of two Russian passenger planes and the attack on a Moscow metro station, the Kremlin seized on public fear and outrage to frame the Chechen conflict as an existential struggle for Russia's territorial integrity and national survival.[61] Putin capitalized on this atmosphere of fear and patriotism to consolidate power. He

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[59] Michael McFaul. *"State of Siege: Putin's Strong Hand Is Failing Russia."* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
[60] John B. Dunlop. "The Beslan Tragedy and the Breakdown of Russian Counterterrorism." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19, no. 2 (2006): 231–278.
[61] Svetlana Pasti. "The Media and Political Crisis in Russia: The Coverage of the Beslan Tragedy." *Journalism* 10, no. 2 (2009): 178–96.

pushed through sweeping legislative changes, including the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections and the strengthening of federal oversight, all justified under the pretext of national security. Dissenters, including journalists, human rights advocates, and opposition politicians, who questioned the Kremlin's policies in Chechnya were increasingly branded as traitors or accused of sympathizing with terrorists.[62]

The integration of state-controlled media with nationalist rhetoric further solidified Putin's position. His government used the media to stoke fears of foreign interference and to present opposition figures as being aligned with foreign powers. This narrative was particularly effective in rallying the public around Putin's leadership, as the government framed dissent not as a legitimate political stance but as a betrayal of the nation's interests. Media outlets, particularly the major television networks, portrayed him as the protector against destabilizing forces, whether they were internal critics or external enemies.[63] Amidst this climate of fear and nationalism, Putin sought re-election in 2004, a contest that would further cement his hold on power. The election, while technically democratic, was marred by widespread manipulation. The opposition, weakened by the media crackdown and the centralization of political power, was unable to mount a serious challenge. Putin's victory in the 2004 election, in which he secured more than 70% of the vote, was largely seen as a result of the Kremlin's control over the media and the political system.[64] The tightly controlled electoral environment allowed Putin to present himself as the legitimate choice of the Russian people, despite the growing evidence that the country's political system had become increasingly undemocratic.

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[62] Fiona Hill. "The Evolution of Russian Authoritarianism: Putin and the Chechen Wars." *Brookings Institution*, September 15, 2004.
[63] Reporters Without Borders. *Russia: Media Under Siege*. Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2005.
[64] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). "Russian Presidential Election 2004: Final Report."

After Putin's election to his second term, on Russia's Constitution Day leaders of Russia's liberal opposition gathered in Moscow to warn of Putin's tightening grip on power. Boris Nemtsov of the Union of Right Forces framed the moment as a test for civil society, arguing the future of Russian democracy depended on whether opposition groups could overcome their divisions. He explains, "The question is, can civil society in Russia defend the freedom and democracy for which we fought so hard? The answer depends on whether democratic forces will be able to surmount their disunity or not."[65] Their warnings came to pass as Putin advanced legislation that would fundamentally alter how Russia's regional governors were elected. This move was framed by Putin as a necessary step to curb regionalism and ensure greater national unity, particularly in areas with ethnic minorities and separatist movements.[66] Putin's reform centralized power by replacing elected governors with Kremlin-appointed officials, ensuring loyalty to Moscow over local needs. This patronage system made regional budgets dependent on federal funds, widening economic disparities as wealth concentrated in Moscow while provinces remained impoverished. Over 70 regional legislative assemblies submitted proposals to the State Duma, with only the legislators from the Murmansk region opposing Putin's initiative. While other assemblies backed the proposal, all regions firmly resisted the idea that refusal to confirm the president's nominee could lead to their own dissolution. "The results of public opinion prepared by VTsIOM (the oldest independent research center for studying public opinion, headed by sociologist Yuri Levada) showed that 52% of Russians prefer the previously existing system of electing governors, and only 28% are in favor of their appointment."[67] While Putin justified the reform to ensure stability and

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[65] Jeremy Bransten. "Russia: Putin Signs Bill Eliminating Direct Elections Of Governors." *RFE/RL*, December 13, 2004.
[66] Brian D. Taylor. "The Decline in Regional Power under Putin." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22, no. 4 (2006): 319-344.
[67] Лысенко, Валерий. *Назначение вместо выборов: Новая практика формирования региональных властей в России*. *Federations*, том 4, № 3 (2004).

prevent unrest, the new system effectively removed the possibility of democratic accountability at the regional level, consolidating power firmly in Moscow.[68] With governors accountable only to the Kremlin, political competition and regional self-governance were effectively dismantled. While Putin framed the change as a stability measure, it ultimately suppressed democratic accountability and reinforced Moscow's dominance at the expense of regional autonomy.[69]

Many in the U.S. acknowledged that Putin's policies, such as consolidating regional governance through the appointment of governors and strengthening federal institutions, were aimed at stabilizing a country that had experienced severe political and economic upheaval in the 1990s. American policymakers recognized that Russia's internal challenges, including the 2004 Beslan school siege and continued instability in Chechnya, necessitated a stronger state response. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger viewed Putin as a pragmatic leader focused on restoring Russia's position as a strong and orderly state. However, others, particularly within the State Department, were more critical. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned in 2005 that Russia was experiencing a retreat from democracy. "We have concerns, and we've made it clear, about internal developments in Russia…It is important that Russia make clear to the world that it is intent on strengthening the rule of law, strengthening the role of the independent judiciary, permitting a free and independent press to flourish."[70] while Senator John McCain was one of Putin's harshest critics, accusing him of suppressing dissent and consolidating power at the expense of political freedoms.

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[68] Robert Orttung. "Russia's Return to the Direct Election of Governors." *Demokratizatsiya* 14, no. 2 (2006): 247-268.
[69] Vladimir Gel'man. *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015, 75-120.
[70] *The Spokesman-Review*. "Rice Offers Ideas for Better Russia." February 6, 2005.

Despite these differing perspectives, economic ties between the U.S. and Russia remained strong. Trade between the two nations increased, and American energy companies, such as ExxonMobil and Chevron, pursued investment opportunities in Russia's oil and gas sector. Additionally, cooperation on nuclear security continued under the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, with both countries working to dismantle decommissioned Soviet-era nuclear weapons.[71] Russia also played a role in diplomatic efforts regarding Iran's nuclear program, negotiating alongside the U.S. and European nations on nonproliferation agreements. However, by 2006, the initial post-9/11 goodwill was fading, particularly as Russia grew more assertive in its opposition to NATO expansion and U.S. involvement in former Soviet republics.[72] President George W. Bush, who had once spoken of looking into Putin's eyes and seeing his soul, grew more skeptical, stating in a 2005 interview that he was concerned about the trajectory of Russian democracy.[73]

Formalizing Illiberal Democracy (2006–2008)

By 2006, the Kremlin had expanded its influence over politics, the economy, and the media. Putin cultivated an image as the guardian of Russian stability and national pride while

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[71] Рыбаченков В. И. "Российско-американское сотрудничество по программе совместного управления оружием." Центр по контролю над вооружениями, энергетике и экологии МФТИ, стенограмма лекции, 18 апреля 2002 г.

[72] Троицкий Михаил и Самуэль Чарап. Российско-американские отношения на постсоветском пространстве: как рассматривать игру с нулевой суммой? Доклады Рабочих групп по Будущему Российско-Американских Отношений, выпуск 1, сентябрь 2011.

[73] The American Presidency Project. 2005. "The President's News Conference with President Vladimir Putin of Russia in Bratislava." February 24, 2005.

consolidating power and reshaping democratic institutions that had emerged in the post-Soviet era. Through media control, security reforms, and political maneuvering, the government maintained the appearance of democracy while strengthening its authority. Framed as a response to both external and internal challenges, Putin's leadership was increasingly seen as essential to Russia's stability and future.[74] Vladislav Surkov, Putin's deputy chief of staff and key strategist, outlined the ideology and goals of United Russia in a speech at a party seminar. Published in *Moskovskie Novosti* under the title "The General Line," a nod to Soviet-era policy, the speech was widely circulated and seen as the Kremlin's new official doctrine. Surkov emphasized Putin's vision for Russia, blending democratic and market rhetoric with centralized power, ideological nationalism, and economic protectionism. He also called for accelerating economic reforms and deeper integration into global markets, arguing that increased trade openness could enhance efficiency, management, and transparency, areas that had struggled since the post-Communist transition. At this point, no opposition group in Russia appeared capable of seriously challenging United Russia's dominance in the 2007 parliamentary or 2008 presidential elections. However, this did not mean the complete elimination of opposition; rather, it reflected the party's overwhelming control over political structures and public support, making significant electoral competition highly unlikely. In his address to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin's rhetoric marked a clear shift toward nationalism, emphasizing Russia's sovereignty and the need to protect it from external forces. He stated, "in those difficult years, the people of Russia had to both uphold their state sovereignty," a direct appeal to national pride and historical strength.

This shift towards not only undermined democratic institutions but also solidified the characteristics of an illiberal democracy, as seen in the 2007 parliamentary elections, where United

[74] Lilia Shevtsova. *Putin's Russia.* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005, 67–89.

Russia's dominance was bolstered by media manipulation that delegitimized opposition parties. The 2007 election also coincided with the state's takeover of major television networks, which were once critical in fostering political discourse. By this time, these outlets had become instruments of state propaganda, ensuring the government's narrative was the only one widely disseminated.[75] This shift in media control marked a significant step in the development of a political system where elections were no longer a genuine contest but a way to reinforce the existing power structure. The "managed democracy" model was designed not to encourage competition but to maintain the appearance of democracy while eliminating any real challenge to Putin's rule.[76] This political arrangement would continue to shape Russian politics in the years to come, with the 2007 election serving as a clear example of how the Kremlin had perfected its control over both the formal and informal levers of political power.

The opposition in Russia was deeply fragmented and widely seen as ineffective and corrupt, even among many anti-Putin voters. Beyond internal divisions, it was also heavily marginalized by the state, with limited access to major media outlets and little opportunity to contest election results effectively. These structural barriers, combined with public disillusionment, further weakened the opposition's ability to mount a serious challenge to Putin's dominance.[77] This situation illustrates how the Kremlin's grip on power was reinforced through methods that rendered elections symbolic rather than competitive, ensuring the continuation of Putin's regime.[78] For example, the closure of opposition newspapers like *Novaya Gazeta* and the

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[75] Москва Таймс. "Контроль Путина над российскими СМИ ужесточается." Москва Таймс, 6 декабря 2007 г.
[76] Daniel Treisman. "Putin's Electoral 'Success': The 2007 Russian Parliamentary Elections." *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 95-108.
[77] Stephen White. "Political disengagement in post-communist Russia: a qualitative study." Europe-Asia Studies 57, no. 8 (2005): 1121-1142.
[78] Stephen White."The 2007 Russian Parliamentary Elections: United Russia and the Absence of Competition." *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 4 (2008): 483-505.

harassment of figures such as Garry Kasparov and Mikhail Kasyanov were instrumental in neutralizing political opposition. Samara police raided the local office of *Novaya Gazeta*, seizing the personal computer of Editor Sergei Kurt-Adzhiyev, the last one remaining after a raid in May, along with the publication's financial documents. In mid-October, Kurt-Adzhiyev was formally charged with violating Russia's copyright infringement laws, with penalties including up to six years in prison, echoing the tax infractions of Khodarkovsky showing this was clearly selective prosecution. "The authorities in Samara have effectively silenced an independent newspaper that dared to cover an opposition party campaign in an election year," CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon said. "We call on local prosecutors to drop all charges against Sergei Kurt-Adzhiyev, return all seized equipment and financial documents, and allow the paper to print without fear of harassment."[79] This pressure on the Samara editor began in May, when the opposition group Other Russia, led by Garry Kasparov, was organizing a Dissenters' March in the city. The widespread use of counterfeit software was a common reality in Russia, with even major institutions and businesses relying on unlicensed programs. This issue extended beyond private use and became a tool for state repression. During an earlier raid, police accused the newspaper's staff of using counterfeit software, using this as a pretext to confiscate all its computers, a tactic that underscored how intellectual property laws could be selectively enforced for political purposes.[80] The following day, additional officers arrived to seize the bureau's papers, which had been regularly covering activities related to Other Russia. Oleg Panfilov of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations noted that such charges of software piracy were often used by Russian authorities to target

[79] Committee to Protect Journalists. "Authorities Shutter Novaya Gazeta's Samara Edition," November 13, 2007.
[80] Josie L. Little, and Osagie Imasogie. "McRussia: The weaponization of intellectual property." IDEA 63 (2022): 306.

independent outlets, and Kurt-Adzhiyev was accused of causing financial damage to Microsoft and a local software company due to his use of unlicensed software.

The campaign was marked by an overwhelming presence of pro-Kremlin rhetoric in the media, which consistently painted opposition parties as corrupt, disorganized, and irresponsible.[81] The Kremlin-controlled media, including major television channels such as Channel One, NTV, and Russia-1, played a critical role in shaping public perception. “Television coverage was monopolized by the ruling party," the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) representative for freedom of the media, Miklos Haraszti, complained in a statement focusing on the media bias.[82] These outlets, which had increasingly fallen under the control of state-aligned oligarchs loyal to Putin, portrayed opposition figures as out of touch with the needs of the Russian people. They were often depicted as chaotic, incapable of governing, and aligned with Western powers, which many Russians viewed with suspicion. For example, the opposition parties Yabloko and the Communist Party were repeatedly ridiculed on television for their inability to offer coherent alternatives to Putin’s policies. In addition, the liberal Yabloko Party, asserts that it was disqualified in St. Petersburg due to allegations that some of the 40,000 signatures it gathered for registration were fraudulent.[83] This media monopoly ensured that United Russia would maintain a commanding majority in the State Duma, making it virtually impossible for opposition parties to mount an effective challenge.[84] Despite the appearance of electoral competition, the results were seen as predetermined, with United Russia securing nearly 65% of the vote.[85] This

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[81] Alexander Morozov. "The Political Economy of Media Control in Russia: The Case of the 2007 Parliamentary Elections." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2008): 45–66.
[82] *Deutsche Welle*. “Observing Russia.” December 6, 2007
[83] Gregory Feifer. “Opposition Leaders: Moscow Undermining Elections.” *NPR*, February 19, 2007.
[84] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL). "Russia’s 2007 Parliamentary Elections: Media Bias and Political Control." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 2007.
[85] Richard Sakwa. "Putin’s ‘Managed Democracy’ and the 2007 Parliamentary Elections." *Democratization* 15, no. 4 (2008): 698-715.

overwhelming victory was less a product of genuine public support and more the result of electoral manipulation through media control and opposition suppression. However, rather than outright rigging the election, the state engineered an environment where a fair political contest was virtually impossible. At this stage, his dominance relied primarily on manipulation rather than outright fraud or force, an important distinction that highlights the evolving nature of his rule. However, those who would criticize the elections as being undemocratic would be reminded by Putin that if Russian deputies has used subversive methods, "it was because they had learned these bad habits from the West."[86] Even further, gerrymandering, voting restrictions, ballot stuffing, and all other techniques did not start in Russia, these tactics had "flourished for decades in the United States and parts of Western Europe and continued to do so in so-called 'illiberal democracies' like Hungary and Poland."[87]

While undemocratic patterns were emerging under Putin, Russia continued to hold elections, which the U.S. viewed as a sign that the country had not completely abandoned its democratic trajectory. Washington hoped that electoral processes, even if flawed, could eventually push Russia toward greater political openness and reform. The political landscape reached a critical juncture in 2008 with the election of Dmitry Medvedev, a close ally of Putin, as president. Medvedev's victory initially raised cautious optimism in the West. At the least, "it sent a signal to the West that Putin wants to keep relations within manageable bounds."[88] As a leader who projected a more liberal image, his rhetoric suggested a potential softening of the Kremlin's increasingly centralized rule. The fact that an election took place, rather than an outright extension of Putin's rule, was seen by some in the U.S. as evidence that political competition and reform

[86] Philip Short. *Putin*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2022, pg 466.
[87] Philip Short. *Putin*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2022, pg 466.
[88] "Russia Report: March 25, 2008." *RFE/RL*, March 25, 2008.

were still possible. NPR's Gregory Feifer stated, "Russia's priorities include establishing justice and freedom."[89] Despite concerns over election irregularities and the broader lack of true political competition, Medvedev's rise to power created speculation that, with the authority of the presidency, he might enact meaningful reforms. His public commitments to combating corruption and strengthening the rule of law offered a glimpse of a Russia that could still embrace democratic principles.

[89] "Putin's Chosen Successor Wins in a Landslide." *NPR*, March 3, 2008.

Putin’s Return to Power During Dmitry Medvedev's Presidency

Dmitry Medvedev came to power in 2008 with a vision for a modernized Russia. With his background as a lawyer and his relatively liberal-minded stance, he presented himself as the antithesis to the old Soviet-style political system, promising reforms that would bring Russia into a new era of openness, rule of law, and economic modernization.[90] He argued that, “we must strengthen the judiciary, improve the quality of legislation, and ensure transparency in government to build a just and fair society.”[91] He wanted to distance himself from the heavy-handed system that had been associated with Putin’s two presidential terms, advocating for political reforms that could democratize Russia's system and reduce the influence of state-controlled enterprises and oligarchs. Medvedev’s vision promised a future where Russia could integrate more fully with the international community, expanding its influence in global markets.[92] However, this vision of a new Russia quickly faded under the heavy weight of Vladimir Putin’s influence. Despite being elected as president, Medvedev was never truly free to implement his vision of reform. The power structures in Russia remained controlled by Putin’s loyalists, and the idea of a political system characterized by greater freedom and modernization was increasingly seen as incompatible[93]

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[90] Richard Sakwa. *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 45–78.
[91] Президент России. “Выступление на 12-м Петербургском международном экономическом форуме.”
[92] Kirill Rogov. "Medvedev’s Presidency: In Search of Political Liberalization." *Pro et Contra* 14, no. 1–2 (2010): 15–33.
[93] Peter Rutland. "Medvedev’s Modernization Dilemma." *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 76 (2010): 2–5.

Medvedev's Presidency: A Transitional Phase

The election of Dmitry Medvedev as President of Russia in 2008 was a carefully orchestrated transition designed to maintain Vladimir Putin's control over the country, despite the constitutional limits on the presidency. However, the circumstances surrounding Medvedev's candidacy made it clear his rise to power was part of a broader political strategy rather than the result of an open, democratic contest. In the run-up to the 2008 election, it was widely known that Putin, despite being constitutionally barred from a third term, was not ready to relinquish his grip on power. According to reports, Putin personally selected Medvedev to be his successor, and the Kremlin's media apparatus quickly rallied behind Medvedev, presenting him as a leader capable of continuing Putin's policies while promising some level of reform in technology, innovation, and economic diversification.[94]

Medvedev's campaign, mostly run by *Russia Today* (RT), was marked by a carefully crafted media strategy.[95] Medvedev's speeches and interviews were frequently aired. One of the main aspects of RT's campaign coverage was the emphasis on Medvedev's background. Medvedev was presented as a man of intellect and practical experience, well-suited to lead Russia through a period of economic transformation. Most notably, his past leadership role at Gazprom, the state-owned energy giant, was highlighted to showcase his understanding of Russia's key industries, especially its reliance on oil and gas exports.[96] "At least Dmitri Medvedev's declarations are slightly liberal. He supports business development and seems in favor of a reduction in State

[94] PBS. "Frontline/World. Dispatches. Russia: Who Is Mr. Medvedev?" February 23, 2008.
[95] Dmitry Medvedev. "Russia's Vision for the Future." *Russia Today*, February 23, 2008.
[96] Luke Harding. "Russia Election Not Free or Fair, Say Observers." *The Guardian*, March 3, 2008.

influence in the economy. He is also the most pro-European of all of Vladimir Putin's team," Mark Urnov the Director of the think-tank *Expertiza* stated.[97] The message was clear: Medvedev was a younger, more dynamic figure capable of leading the country into a new era of reform and development. This portrayal aligned with Medvedev's own rhetoric, where he emphasized his commitment to modernizing Russia and improving its image on the global stage.[98] While Russia's urban middle class had initially supported Putin, drawn in by his rhetoric, their growing disillusionment led them to shift their support toward Medvedev. As this group, shaped by the post-shock therapy era, began seeking change, they found Medvedev's message more appealing.[99]

While Medvedev was popular and a member of the United Russia party, the same as Putin, his election was somewhat tainted by electoral manipulation that helped secure the party's victory in the December 2008 parliamentary elections. Facing growing public dissatisfaction over corruption, economic stagnation, and political repression, the party had struggled to maintain its dominance. Many in the urban middle class, who had once benefited from economic growth, began demanding political reform. As United Russia's popularity declined, fraud was used to secure its position, sparking mass protests across the country, particularly in Moscow and other major cities.[100] Opposition leaders were systematically excluded from television coverage, with rare exceptions on REN-TV, a channel now controlled by a Putin ally but still displaying some independent tendencies, "Opposition figures were effectively barred from television coverage, except for a few limited appearances on REN-TV, which remains partially independent but is now

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[97] Robert Schuman Foundation. "Unsurprising Victory for Dmitri Medvedev in the Russian Presidential Election." *European Issues - Policy Papers*, no. 770, March 3, 2008.
[98] "Россия сегодня Освещает видение Медведева по диверсификации экономики." Россия сегодня, 10 марта 2008 года.
[99] Gontmakher, Evgeny, and Cameron Ross. "The middle class and democratisation in Russia." In State against Civil Society, pp. 111-126. Routledge, 2017.
[100] Richard and William Mishler. "How do electors respond to an" unfair" election? The experience of russians." Post-soviet affairs 25, no. 2 (2009): 118-136.

under the control of a Kremlin-friendly oligarch."[101] Stringent requirements for petition signatures, often invalidated arbitrarily, kept some opposition parties off the ballot, while others, like the pro-Western Union of Right Forces, faced blatant harassment.[102] The climate of repression intensified as the election approached, with security forces violently dispersing opposition-organized "Marches of Dissent" in cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, leaving dozens injured. At a rally on November 21, Putin derided opposition figures as "jackals" who sought foreign support instead of relying on their people, a veiled attack on figures like Garry Kasparov, a former chess champion turned opposition leader, who was arrested and detained for attending a banned rally.[103] The election results on December 2 underscored the Kremlin's dominance: United Russia claimed 64% of the vote, while democratic opposition parties like the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko failed to surpass 1.5%, overshadowed by parties such as the Communists, the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and the pro-government Fair Russia.[104]

When Putin became prime minister in 2008, many in the West speculated about how long he would remain in power. Some analysts believed that his move to the prime minister's office was a way to gradually step back from politics, allowing Dmitry Medvedev to emerge as an independent leader. Given that other world leaders, including former Russian officials, had retired after leaving the presidency, there was an expectation that Putin might eventually do the same. Additionally, Medvedev's rhetoric about modernization and legal reforms led some to believe that Russia could move toward a more Western-style democracy, with Putin slowly fading into the

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[101] Московское время. "Оппозиционным деятелям запретили освещать события на телевидении в преддверии выборов в Думу." Декабрь 2007 г.
[102] Mark Kramer. "The 2008 Russian Presidential Election: A Carefully Orchestrated Transition." *The National Interest*, no. 97 (2008): 72–78.
[103] Yulia Nikitina. "The" Color Revolutions" and" Arab Spring" in Russian Official Discourse." Connections 14, no. 1 (2014): 87-104.
[104] Cathy Young. "After Putin." Reason.Com, March 25, 2008.

background. At the time, Russia's economy was strong, and there was no immediate political crisis that would require Putin to return to power. However, others were more skeptical, arguing that Putin's continued control over security forces, energy policy, and the ruling United Russia party suggested he had no intention of truly stepping away.

Medvedev's Policies and Reforms

Early in his presidency, Medvedev outlined an ambitious vision for Russia's future, placing a strong emphasis on modernizing the country's economy, which was heavily reliant on oil and gas exports. He introduced his "Strategy 2020" plan, aiming to diversify the economy, reduce its dependency on energy, and encourage innovation in industries like technology, manufacturing, and high-tech sectors.[105] Medvedev envisioned a Russia that could compete on the global stage in these emerging fields, stating, "Russia's experts will improve information technology and strongly influence the development of global public data networks, using supercomputers and other necessary equipment."[106] A key initiative to showcase this new vision was the Skolkovo Innovation Center, a tech hub outside Moscow that was meant to foster research, development, and innovation.[107]

[105] Президент России. "Статья Дмитрия Медведева «Россия, вперед!" 10 сентября 2009 г.
[106] Президент России. "Статья Дмитрия Медведева «Россия, вперед!"
[107] Ольга Разумовская. «Инновационный центр «Сколково» бросает вызов водам». Московское время, 15 июня 2011 г.

Alongside his focus on economic modernization, Medvedev attempted to portray a more open political climate which could improve Russia's governance system. One of his first acts as president was to promise political reforms, including the easing of party registration laws and a pledge to strengthen civil society. In a landmark speech in 2008, Medvedev called for political openness, pledging to make Russia's political system more democratic and inclusive, "I am firmly convinced that the strength of the state resides in its citizens, in their ability and willingness to raise up the country and make it modern, successful and safe, in the ability of people to think freely, work independently and assume responsibility as citizens."[108] He also voiced support for greater political competition and an end to some of the restrictions on opposition parties and backed a move to increase the number of political parties eligible to participate in elections by reducing the threshold for party registration. [109] Additionally, he advocated for reducing the barriers for candidates to run for office and promised greater transparency in the electoral process.[110] His government also supported Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), viewing it as a step toward integrating Russia into the global economy and signaling openness to reform. However, despite these promising developments, Medvedev faced significant challenges throughout his term, testing his ability to enact real change. From managing economic turmoil to navigating conflicts abroad, his presidency was shaped as much by obstacles as by his reformist ambitions.[111]

Medvedev focused on modernizing Russia's legal and governance structures, seeking to reduce corruption and create a more transparent system. Upon taking office, he made a concerted

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[108] Президент России. «Выступление на торжественном приеме по случаю Дня России». 12 июня 2008 г.
[109] Дмитрий Медведев. «Послание Президента Российской Федерации Федеральному Собранию Российской Федерации», 12 ноября 2009 г.
[110] "Medvedev pledges Russian political reforms." *Al Jazeera*, December 22, 2011.
[111] "Medvedev's reforms." *Deutsche Welle*, November 12, 2009.

effort to emphasize the importance of a "law-based state," a concept that suggested a government more accountable to its citizens and guided by the rule of law. One of his early moves in this direction was the signing of an anti-corruption law in 2009, which aimed to increase transparency among government officials and provide clearer regulations regarding their financial dealings. Medvedev's administration also modernized the Russian judiciary by promoting greater independence for courts and introducing reforms to improve the functioning of the legal system. Medvedev's rhetoric focused on increasing government accountability, which resonated with many Russians who were frustrated by widespread corruption and a lack of legal recourse. Although these reforms faced significant resistance from entrenched political and business elites, Medvedev's early focus on tackling corruption represented a bold attempt to address one of the country's most persistent issues.[112]

Additionally, Medvedev engaged more openly with civil society and wanted to reduce the Kremlin's direct interference in public life. He made a point to foster a more diverse public dialogue by meeting with opposition figures and supporting discussions on national issues. His decision to create the "Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights" was a key example of his desire to provide a platform for public debate and push for greater political freedom.[113] Activists who participated in the meeting said "the meeting was fruitful and sincere and expressed hopes that it would become the first step in the process of establishing positive dialog with the powers."[114] This was a notable shift from the highly controlled political environment that had characterized Putin's first two terms in office, where dissent was often

[112] "Medvedev urges court reform to restore judicial faith." *Refworld*, May 23, 2011.
[113] Human Rights House Foundation. "Dmitry Medvedev in a Discussion with Human Rights Defenders," April 17, 2009.
[114] Human Rights House Foundation. "Dmitry Medvedev in a Discussion with Human Rights Defenders."

suppressed and opposition voices were marginalized. Medvedev's relatively more permissive stance on civil society was exemplified by his initial attempts to allow greater freedom for the media. While state control over media remained significant, there was a slight relaxation of censorship during his presidency.

As a result, he was seen as more approachable and less focused on cultivating a cult of personality compared to Putin. One of the key examples of this was his use of social media, particularly his blog and Twitter account, where he shared his thoughts on governance and encouraged interaction with the public. Medvedev's embrace of digital tools was seen as a sign of his desire to connect with younger, more technologically adept Russians. In 2009, Medvedev became the first Russian president to have a Twitter account, and he used the platform to discuss a wide range of issues, including modernization efforts and his thoughts on Russia's place in the world.[115] His accessibility via social media marked a contrast to Putin's more reserved and formal public persona, and many viewed Medvedev's engagement as a step toward a more transparent and democratic political system.[116] Medvedev publicly acknowledged the importance of independent media, emphasizing its role in conveying the realities of Russia's economic struggles. He argued that independent outlets were "the most reliable source of information," contrasting them with state-controlled media, which he criticized for presenting "patriotic voices" that often obscured the truth.[117] Medvedev demonstrated a more empathetic attitude toward press freedom and journalist safety. Unlike Putin, who maintained a more dismissive stance on such issues, Medvedev openly condemned journalist murders, using a "sympathetic tone" that resonated with calls for accountability. This was accompanied by legislative reforms, such as his decision to veto

[115] Reuters. "Russian President at Twitter, off to Silicon Valley." *Reuters*, June 23, 2010.
[116] Darrell M. West. "President Dmitry Medvedev: Russia's Blogger-in-Chief." *Brookings*, April 14, 2010.
[117] "Pressing for Change: Journalistic Freedom in Russia." *Harvard International Review*, October 17, 2009.

a bill that would have expanded the definition of treason, potentially criminalizing anti-government speech.[118]

The West closely watched Medvedev's presidency, looking for signs of real political change in Russia. Obama noted that Putin's decision to step down and support a younger leader known for relatively liberal and pro-Western views indicated that he was at least mindful of maintaining appearances, "Putin was no longer Russia's president: Despite dominating the polls, he'd chosen to abide by Russia's constitutional prohibition against three consecutive terms."[119] This move also raised the possibility that Putin might eventually retire from elected office and assume a role as a power broker and elder statesman. Such a transition could pave the way for a new generation of leaders to steer Russia toward becoming a modern, law-abiding democracy. Obama saw this as a potential opening for a reset in U.S.-Russia relations, with Medvedev representing a more progressive approach compared to Putin's more assertive stance. Obama recounts a detailed meeting with Vladimir Putin at his dacha located in a suburb outside Moscow. Obama, accompanied by Russia experts Mike McFaul, Bill Burns, and Jim Jones, was advised by Burns to keep the initial presentation brief. Burns suggested that Obama ask Putin for his opinion on the state of U.S.-Russian relations to allow him to express his concerns, given Putin's sensitivity to perceived slights and his view of himself as the more "senior leader." The meeting, which was supposed to last an hour, extended to two hours as Putin elaborated on his grievances. Obama noticed Putin seemed to have rehearsed his points, but his sense of grievance appeared genuine. Understanding that continued progress with Dmitry Medvedev depended on Putin's tolerance, Obama chose not to interrupt. During the meeting, Putin highlighted his grievances by pointing

[118] "Pressing for Change: Journalistic Freedom in Russia." *Harvard International Review*.
[119] Barack Obama. *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 460–645.

out instances where he felt the U.S., particularly under President George W. Bush, had gone back on its word. He expressed frustration over what he perceived as broken promises, such as the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, which he believed contradicted assurances given after the Cold War that NATO would not move closer to Russia's borders. Putin also referenced the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, which he saw as a betrayal of earlier agreements aimed at maintaining strategic stability. These actions, in Putin's view, demonstrated a pattern of the U.S. disregarding Russia's concerns and undermining trust between the two nations. After about forty-five minutes, when Putin finished speaking, Obama began to respond to each of Putin's points in detail. Despite the tense moments, Putin listened attentively, and by the end of the extended meeting, he expressed a degree of openness, if not enthusiasm, for the reset effort. As the meeting concluded, Putin walked Obama to his waiting motorcade while saying, "Of course, on all these issues, you will have to work with Dmitry," Putin told me as he walked me to my waiting motorcade," Obama later wrote. "These are now his decisions."'[120] Both parties understood the dubious nature of this statement, but it was the closest the West would get to an endorsement from Putin at that time.[121]

Medvedev's Transparency: A Bridge or a Barrier?

[120] Barack Obama. *A Promised Land.*
[121] Barack Obama. *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 460–645.

Like Putin before him, Medvedev inherited a country in crisis, and his presidency would be defined by his response to two major challenges: the Great Recession and the 2008 Russian-Georgian War. These events not only shaped his time in office but also highlighted the contrast between his formal authority as president and Putin's continued influence behind the scenes. When the global financial crisis hit in 2008, it started with the collapse of the U.S. housing market and quickly spread around the world. Banks failed, stock markets crashed, and businesses struggled to stay afloat as credit dried up. At first, Russia seemed like it might escape the worst of it. For most of the 2000s, the country had experienced an economic boom, thanks to high oil and gas prices. With billions in foreign currency reserves and years of strong growth, Russia appeared financially stable. However, this sense of security didn't last. As the crisis deepened, global demand for oil dropped sharply, causing prices to plunge from over $140 a barrel in mid-2008 to under $40 by early 2009. Since Russia's economy depended heavily on energy exports, this collapse hit hard, cutting off a major source of government revenue and triggering a financial downturn.[122] The effects were felt across the country. Russia's economy shrank by almost 8% in 2009, making it one of the hardest-hit nations. The stock market lost more than two-thirds of its value, wiping out the savings of many investors. Wealthy business leaders rushed to move their money out of Russia, leading to an estimated $130 billion in capital leaving the country.[123]

The contrast between Medvedev's and Putin's visions for Russia's future became especially clear in their responses to the financial crisis. Medvedev focused on long-term economic reforms, advocating for modernization and a transition away from oil dependency. He championed projects

[122] РИА Новости. 2013. «Финансовый кризис 2008 года: причины и последствия». РИА.ру, 16 августа 2013.
[123] Agata Dubas, Jadwiga Rogoża, and Iwona Wiśniewska, *Russia in Crisis: Year One*. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies [OSW], January 27, 2010.

like Skolkovo and development in fields like IT, biotech, and nuclear energy.[124] He acknowledged that unemployment was significantly higher than official reports suggested, signaling a commitment to transparency. However, the global recession created significant obstacles to these reforms, forcing the government to focus on immediate economic stabilization. As prime minister, Putin took an active role in addressing the financial crisis, frequently appearing in public to discuss economic measures and reassure the population. His approach was reminiscent of his first presidential term, marked by publicity stunts, strong rhetoric, and direct engagement with officials and businesses. While Medvedev was formally leading the country, Putin's highly visible responses to the crisis suggested that he remained a key figure in shaping government policy, particularly in economic matters. In one moment, Putin visited the town of Pikalyovo, where several factories had ceased operations, leading to significant social unrest. During a televised meeting, Putin publicly reprimanded Oleg Deripaska. '"Have you signed it?" Putin asked Volkov. Deripaska answered positively. "Oleg Vladimirovich has signed it? I don't see your signature, go and sign it," Putin told the businessman. After that, Deripaska went to the presidium table, read all the pages of the agreement and put his signature under it."[125] This event was widely covered in the media, highlighting Putin's direct intervention.[126] Some critics and political analysts viewed the stunt with skepticism, arguing that it was a carefully orchestrated display rather than a genuine economic solution. They pointed out the systemic issues causing factory closures were not truly addressed and that Putin's intervention was more about optics than long-term reform. Beyond financial interventions, Putin also projected a strong, hands-on leadership style that contrasted sharply with Medvedev's more reserved and technocratic approach. He regularly toured crisis-hit

[124] Kathryn Stoner-Weiss. "Russia and the Global Financial Crisis: The End of 'Putnism'?" *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, no. 2 (2009): 103–15.
[125] Интерфакс. "Путин потребовал запустить производство в Пикалево." Интерфакс, 4 июня 2009 г.
[126] Andrew E. Kramer. "Russia's Putin Raps Tycoons in Crisis-Hit Town." *Reuters*, June 4, 2009.

regions, meeting with factory workers, agricultural producers, and local officials to assure them that the government was in control.[127]

At the same time, the 2008 Russian-Georgian War sent mixed signals about the balance of power between the two leaders, leaving it unclear how authority was truly divided. When Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered an offensive to retake the breakaway region of South Ossetia, Russian forces responded with overwhelming force, swiftly pushing deep into Georgian territory. Although Medvedev was technically the commander-in-chief, reports and accounts from key officials suggested that Putin played a far more influential role in shaping Russia's military response. Notably, when the war erupted, Putin was in Beijing attending the 2008 Summer Olympics. Yet, within hours of the conflict breaking out, he was reportedly in direct communication with Russian military leaders, issuing guidance before Medvedev had even made a formal public statement.[128] While Medvedev eventually addressed the crisis, announcing Russia's intervention and later negotiating the ceasefire with the help of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, it was clear that the key military and strategic decisions had been heavily influenced, if not outright dictated, by Putin. However, this was due to the fact that many within Russia's security and military establishment, including the powerful siloviki, remained loyal to Putin.[129] According to Medvedev, "Vladimir Vladimirovich simply made a statement that we categorically do not accept this, naturally, he did the right thing... Then he returned, we, naturally, discussed some things, but even before his return I convened the Security Council" However, it is important to note that Sarkozy got the truce by talking to Putin, not Medvedev and dissuaded him

[127] Михаил Нейжмаков. "Визиты в регионы: Путин, Медведев и Риски Для Губернаторов." Региональные комментарии, 17 июля 2017 г.
[128] РБК. "В.Путин Дважды Звонил Д.Медведеву Передм Начало Войны с Грузией." РБК, 8 Августа 2012.
[129] Нестан Чарквиани. "Август 2008. Война По Плану?" Голос Америки, 8 Августа 2012.

from continuing until he crushed Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili Sakashvili. At the same time, at a press conference on August 8, Putin refrained from answering a journalist's question, who asked whether the decision to use force was his, Putin responded, “that's another question.”[130] The war’s outcome, which saw Russia securing control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, closely aligned with Putin’s long-standing vision of countering NATO expansion and maintaining Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space.

Internationally, Medvedev’s presidency marked a significant shift in Russia's diplomatic posture. While he maintained Russia's traditional interests, his approach to foreign policy was more measured and pragmatic compared to Putin's often confrontational style. One of Medvedev’s major early achievements in foreign relations was the signing of the New START treaty with the United States in 2010. This agreement was a major arms control pact between the two countries, which reduced the number of strategic nuclear warheads each side could deploy.[131] The treaty was hailed as a major diplomatic success and marked a significant step toward resetting relations between Russia and the United States, following the tension that had characterized the later years of George W. Bush's presidency. Medvedev’s diplomatic efforts attempted to improve relations with the European Union, particularly on issues like trade, energy security, and climate change. His outreach was perceived as a departure from the more adversarial rhetoric of Putin’s earlier years, signaling a potential shift toward greater cooperation between Russia and the West.[132]

Medvedev’s calls for a more open political climate were undermined by the reality of the "tandemocracy" arrangement with Putin, in which power was still largely concentrated in Putin’s

[130] Нестан Чарквиани. “Август 2008. Война По Плану?”
[131] ТАСС. “Договор о СНВ-III: основные положения.” ТАСС, 8 апреля 2010 г.
[132] RFE/RL. “Medvedev Unveils Little New In Russia’s Foreign-Policy Course.” *RFE/RL*, July 16, 2008.

hands due to the fact he controlled United Russia and was at the center of the *Sistema*.[133] Although Medvedev took steps to distance himself from the Putin era, he struggled to break free from Putin's shadow, with many observers seeing his presidency as largely symbolic. Alexey Mikhailov, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Gazeta.Ru, wrote, "Disappointment is probably the best word to describe the time of President Dmitry Medvedev. It's not that I was particularly enamored with him, but there was certainly some hope with his election."[134] The most important decisions were still being made by Putin, and Medvedev's ability to implement meaningful reform was constrained by the power structures that had been built under Putin's rule. For instance, while Medvedev publicly called for a reduction in the concentration of power, he did little to challenge the dominance of Putin's political party, United Russia, or the influence of the oligarchs. These systemic issues limited the extent to which Medvedev could enact the modernization and liberalization he promised. In practice, the government's response to opposition groups remained repressive, and those seeking to challenge the status quo faced significant obstacles. As a result, the gap between Medvedev's early promises and the realities of his presidency quickly became apparent, with many of his reformist gestures being perceived as superficial and without the political muscle to effect real change. Settting the tone for a leadership that, while rhetorically promising modernization and openness, ultimately struggled to overcome the entrenched political system that had been established under Putin's leadership.[135]

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[133] *Sistema* in contemporary Russia is a shorthand term for a 'system of governance' that usually refers to open secrets or governance matters not-to-be-named.
[134] Алексей Михайлов. "Миссия Не Выполнена." Газета.Ru. 23 апреля 2012 г.
[135] Angus Roxburgh. *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, 200-250.

The Reality of Power Dynamics

By 2011, Vladimir Putin had begun laying the groundwork for his return to the presidency in 2012 by implementing a series of legal and strategic moves. Among the most crucial was his successful push to amend the Russian Constitution, specifically Article 81, which governs the duration of the presidential term. Initially, the constitution stipulated the president could serve two consecutive four-year terms. However, the amendment introduced in 2011 extended the presidential term from four years to six years, essentially altering the power dynamics in Russia. The decision was framed to enhance political stability, citing that longer presidential terms would provide more continuity in governance and reduce the frequency of elections. This constitutional revision was presented as part of a broader reform package intended to modernize Russia's political system.[136] The changes elicited different reactions. Vladimir Ryzhkov, a Kremlin opponent and former Duma deputy stated, "This is very negative. It's a clear signal that the regime will be authoritarian and autocratic, and control everything. It's all about keeping power."[137] This view reflected a broader consensus: the Kremlin was effectively using constitutional mechanisms to undermine the very principles of the constitution. Rather than an outright rejection of democratic institutions, the strategy involved manipulating legal frameworks to extend power indefinitely while maintaining a façade of legitimacy.[138]

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[136] Mark Kramer. "The Russian Constitution: A Tool for Consolidating Power." *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2011): 125-140.
[137] Luke Harding. "Russian Vote Paves Way for Early Putin Comeback." *The Guardian*, November 14, 2008.
[138] Paul Chaisty. "The uses and abuses of presidential term limits in Russian politics." The Politics of Presidential Term Limits (2019): 385.

Dmitry Medvedev on the other hand publicly supported the amendment. Medvedev claimed the change would strengthen Russia's political framework, suggesting it was an effort to align the country with global practices where longer terms were seen as normal for a head of state. In many European countries, executive terms are typically set at five years. For instance, the French presidency operates on a five-year term, with a limit of two consecutive terms. Similarly, the British Prime Minister is not subject to a fixed term limit but must maintain the confidence of the House of Commons, which has a maximum term of five years. In contrast, countries with largely ceremonial presidencies often have longer terms; for example, Ireland's president serves a seven-year term, while executive power primarily resides with the Prime Minister. In his address to the Federal Assembly, Medvedev stated that the extension was necessary to "increase the time during which the strategic objectives could be implemented."[139] While the move was framed as a modernization effort, the revision had the unintended effect of consolidating the power of the "tandemocracy" arrangement.

The Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, overwhelmingly approved the constitutional amendment, along with a vote to extend the Duma's term from four to five years. The amendment did not apply to Medvedev because it was not retroactive, meaning it only affected future presidential terms. Since Medvedev's four-year term was already in progress and set to end in 2012, the new six-year term would only take effect with the next elected president.[140] With 388 of the 450 deputies voting in favor of the changes, the Duma was primarily controlled by Putin's United Russia party, which typically approved presidential initiatives. The only opposition came

[139] Luke Harding. "Critics Alarmed as Medvedev Reveals Plan to Extend Russian Presidential Term to Six Years." *The Guardian*, November 6, 2008.
[140] Интерфакс. "Госдума одобрила продление полномочий президента и парламента." *Interfax*, 21 ноября 2008.

from the semi-autonomous Communist party, which voted against the amendments.[141] In addition to the constitutional changes, Putin's party, United Russia, used this period to solidify its control over key political institutions. In 2009, Russia changed its electoral laws to make it more difficult for small opposition parties to compete, raising membership requirements and restricting their access to state-controlled media. At the same time, **United Russia** further weakened regional autonomy by ensuring that governors were appointed rather than elected, securing their loyalty to the Kremlin.[142] Putin used his position as prime minister to subtly shape the political narrative and to secure loyalty from key figures in government, industry, and the military, ensuring that he would have the support he needed when the time came to reclaim the presidency. This allowed Putin to dominate both the legislative and executive branches of government. The extended presidential term also gave Putin a more secure and prolonged period of influence, making it less likely that his return to power would be seen as an abrupt or destabilizing move.[143] While this was the hope, dissent occurred almost immediately.[144]

Putin's Return to Power

[141] Luke Harding. "Russian Vote Paves Way for Early Putin Comeback." *The Guardian*, November 14, 2008.
[142] Бузин А. Ю., Любарев А. Е. "Изменения федерального избирательного законодательства в 2003–2024 годах: экспертные оценки." *Избирательная политика* № 2 (12) (2024): 3.
[143] Anna Politkovskaya. *Putin's Russia: The Rise of a Dictator*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004.
[144] Fyodor Lukyanov. "The Russian-Georgian war as a turning point." Russia in Global Affairs 24, no. 11 (2011): 2011.

The announcement of Vladimir Putin's decision to run for the presidency in 2012 on September 24, 2011, was a defining moment in Russian politics, and it sparked significant reactions both domestically and internationally. The event took place during the United Russia Party Congress, where Putin addressed thousands of party members, declaring his intent to return to the presidency after Dmitry Medvedev's term. While this decision was framed as a natural step for the country's continued growth and stability, it had been anticipated by those familiar with Russia's political elite. In fact, the political move was seen as a culmination of the "tandemocracy" arrangement that had been in place between Putin and Medvedev since 2008, where they had shared power, with Putin serving as Prime Minister and Medvedev as President.[145] During the Congress, Medvedev publicly endorsed Putin's candidacy, reinforcing the idea that the transition of power had been planned all along. "Just now, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, as the chairman of the party, officially addressed me and the congress with a proposal to lead the Party of United Russia. This is undoubtedly a responsible and very serious and very serious proposal. I accept it."[146] Medvedev praised Putin's leadership, stating that his return was essential for Russia's future, and framed the change as a guarantee of stability and continuity.

This endorsement was not just symbolic; it was a crucial element in revealing the power transition had been coordinated behind closed doors, rather than emerging from any competitive democratic process. Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, explained "a reason for the decision had to be provided. For United Russia's supporters, this will suffice."[147] Medvedev also responded to criticism over his September 24 statement at the United

[145] "Путин будет баллотироваться на пост президента." Московское Время, 23 сентября 2011 г.
[146] "Выступление Д.Медведева и В.Путина на съезде партии "Единая Россия"' *YouTube*, 2011.
[147] Александра Одинова. «Медведев говорит, что Путин более популярен и авторитетен». Московское Время, 2 октября 2011 г.

Russia convention, where he revealed that the plan to hand over the presidency to Putin had been discussed before he ran for president in 2008. This admission at the United Russia convention was a politically damaging revelation. This statement reinforced longstanding perceptions that Medvedev's presidency was merely a transitional arrangement rather than an independent leadership. Even members of United Russia ridiculed Medvedev as weak, further undermining his political credibility. Medvedev clarified that he and Putin had kept quiet about the plan due to potential shifts in voter preferences.[148] The decision was deeply reflective of the political system that had been in place for years, where the same elite figures rotated through positions of power, ensuring that no real political opposition had the chance to challenge the status quo. Medvedev's endorsement also signified that Russia was to remain under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, further consolidating the power of the ruling elite and diminishing the hope for meaningful democratic change.

The "castling" announcement, as it came to be known, triggered both acceptance and dissent within Russia. Domestically, many in the pro-government elite were relieved by the news, seeing Putin's return as essential for maintaining the political and economic stability that had characterized his previous two terms. This continuity was especially significant for those who had benefitted from Putin's leadership, including businessmen, government officials, and regional leaders.[149] Russia's middle class was generally horrified by Medvedev's admission and the planned power transition back to Putin in 2012, seeing it as a clear sign that political liberalization was not forthcoming. However, among a growing number of opposition groups and younger, more politically active Russians, the announcement was viewed as further entrenching the country's

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[148] Valerie Sperling. *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 150-180.
[149] Michael McFaul. 2011. "Putin's Power Play: The Return to the Kremlin." *Foreign Affairs* 90 (6): 12-22.

autocratic political culture, reinforcing the belief that meaningful change could only come through direct activism rather than the existing political system.[150] For many Russians, particularly in urban centers, the carefully orchestrated power transition confirmed their worst fears about the stagnation of the political system. The 2011 protests, often called the White Ribbon movement, brought together people from across the political spectrum, not just liberals, but also nationalists, communists, and anarchists. Stepan Zimin, one of those who would later be convicted in the Bolotnaya case on fabricated charges stated, “The foundation was formed right then.”[151]

[150] Sean Guillory. "Whatever happened to “Russia without Putin”?" New Eastern Europe 01 (25) (2017): 69-76.
[151] Андрей Новашов. “Чтобы не было революций, начинают войну.” Вспоминая Декабрь 2011 Года. Радио Свобода, 9 декабря 2024 г.

Repression, Opposition, and the Rise of Putin's Authoritarian Rule

The period leading up to the 2012 Russian presidential election was marked by an unprecedented wave of civic activism and opposition, reflecting deep dissatisfaction with the country's political trajectory. This period also saw a further shift in Russian governance. His return to leadership was never just about winning an election—it was a meticulously orchestrated step toward tightening his autocratic grip.[152] Mikhail Kasyaanov, a former Russian prime minister stated the Russian public had run out of patience, "especially in large cities where people are well-educated, well-informed who understand they are not ready to tolerate such lawlessness when they are ignored and their votes are cynically stolen."[153] The 2011-2012 protests were not only a reaction to Putin announcing his return to the presidency (in 2011) and the electoral fraud (in 2012) but also a significant moment of political awakening for the Russian population.[154] Protests occurred in 99 cities across Russia and in major cities like St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, with thousands participating nationwide.[155] Bolotnaya Square saw around 50,000–100,000 people in Moscow at the protest's peak. The protests, though tolerated, were unlikely to result in immediate political change. While demonstrations were allowed to proceed, the government's allowance for such events was largely symbolic, aimed at showing some level of opposition was being tolerated.

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[152] Lilia Shevtsova. *Russia: Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007.

[153] "Anti-Putin Protests Erupt across Russia." *Al Jazeera*, December 11, 2011.

[154] Kryshtanovskaya, O. "Russia's Political Landscape and the 2011-2012 Protests." *Russia in Global Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2012): 45-57.

[155] "10 лет Болотной: крупнейшие протесты эпохи Путина." Московское Время, 9 декабря 2021 г.

Despite this controlled response, the protests indicated the public mood was changing, and people were no longer accepting the status quo and they posed a significant challenge to Putin's authority, revealing the growing dissatisfaction towards the political direction Russia was going.[156]

Many Russians believed their votes were stolen in the 2011 parliamentary elections due to widespread reports of fraud and irregularities. Statistical analyses of election results revealed numerous indicators of manipulation, such as anomalously high voter turnout in certain regions, inflated results favoring Putin's United Russia party. Evidence of "carousel voting," where groups of voters were bussed between polling stations to cast multiple ballots, further fueled suspicions.[157] Geographic studies showed fraudulent activity was most prevalent in regions where United Russia had strong political control, suggesting a coordinated effort to manufacture electoral support. Beyond outright fraud, many Russians viewed the elections as unconstitutional and illegitimate.[158] The government's dominance over state media ensured a lack of balanced coverage, while opposition parties faced severe restrictions, from candidate disqualifications to legal and physical intimidation. Reports surfaced of state employees and pensioners being pressured to vote for Putin's United Russia Party under the threat of job loss or reduced benefits.[159]

The Return of the 'Color Revolutions'

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[156] Bremmer, I. (2014). *The Ukraine Crisis: Putin's Power Play*. Foreign Affairs.

[157] Skovoroda Rodion, and Tomila Lankina. "Fabricating votes for Putin: new tests of fraud and electoral manipulations from Russia." Post-Soviet Affairs 33, no. 2 (2017): 100-123.

[158] White, Allison C. "Electoral fraud and electoral geography: United Russia strongholds in the 2007 and 2011 Russian parliamentary elections." Europe-Asia Studies 68, no. 7 (2016): 1127-1178.

[159] Graeme Gill. "Russia and the Vulnerability of Electoral Authoritarianism?." Slavic Review 75, no. 2 (2016): 354-373.

On December 11, 2011, President Dmitry Medvedev reacted to the mass opposition rally that took place the previous day on Bolotnaya Square, where tens of thousands of protesters gathered to contest alleged fraud in the parliamentary elections:

"According to the Constitution, citizens of Russia have freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. People have the right to express their position, which is what they did yesterday. It's good that everything took place within the framework of the law. I do not agree with either the slogans or the statements made at the rallies."

His response, however, was met with skepticism from opposition leaders and political analysts. Some experts saw his statement as a cautious attempt to engage with civil society, while others dismissed it as a superficial move aimed at diffusing public anger without leading to real political change.[160] Dmitry Medvedev announced that he had ordered an investigation into allegations of electoral fraud following the December 2011 parliamentary elections, responding to widespread protests. The specifics of the investigation remained vague, and critics doubted its independence. The Kremlin-controlled Central Election Commission had already dismissed many complaints, while opposition activists argued that any probe conducted under the current

[160] РИА Новости. "Медведев: Я не согласен с лозунгами и речами на митинге." РИА Новости, 11 декабря 2011 г.

government would lack transparency and accountability. However, Medvedev's investigation was perceived as a symbolic gesture rather than a serious effort to address electoral fraud.[161]

Vladimir Putin's perception of the Bolotnaya Square protests and his growing concerns about the possibility of a domestic uprising played a critical role in shaping the trajectory of his political leadership, particularly as he entered his third term as president in 2012. The Bolotnaya Square protests marked the largest and most significant opposition demonstration since Putin first took power in 2000.[162] Putin's concern about losing control of the situation was amplified by his understanding of how mass movements like the ones that had swept through Ukraine in the 2000s could gain momentum and result in a shift in political power. The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine had been a particularly formative event for Putin. There, a popular uprising had toppled a pro-Russian president after widespread allegations of electoral fraud. The rapid rise of political opposition, the mass mobilization of citizens, and the success of the revolution had shaken Putin, who feared that a similar movement could emerge in Russia. He saw in the Bolotnaya Square protests the potential for a new chapter of dissent that could grow into a challenge to his authority in the same way that the Orange Revolution.[163]

The paradox lies in Putin's fear of popular uprisings while simultaneously engaging in extreme measures to suppress political challengers at home, further underscoring the extent to which he was willing to protect his grip on power at all costs.[164] This fear of losing power, combined with the growing discontent among the Russian population, significantly influenced

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[161] France 24. "Medvedev Orders Investigation into Election Fraud Claims." December 11, 2011.
[162] LeftEast. "Russia: The Protest Movement is Younger, Poorer, and More Left-Wing."
[163] "Russia: Four Years After Bolotnaya Square Protests, Prosecution of Protesters Continues." *Freedom House*, May 6, 2016.
[164] Taras Kuzio. "From Kuchma to Yushchenko Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections and the Orange revolution." Problems of post-communism 52, no. 2 (2005): 29-44.

Putin's political strategy as he prepared to reclaim the presidency in 2012. In response to the protests and the broader opposition movement, Putin became increasingly authoritarian, taking steps to eliminate the potential for political opposition, limit public dissent, and reinforce his control over the political system. The Bolotnaya Square protests not only highlighted the vulnerabilities in his rule but also provided a clear signal to him that Russia was on the brink of political change. In Putin's view, the threat of a "color revolution" or a popular uprising could no longer be dismissed.[165] In response to the growing protests against his rule, Vladimir Putin dismissed the demonstrators as agents of the West, mocking their symbols of discontent, such as the white ribbon, which he comically compared to a condom. He claimed that the protests, which saw over 50,000 people gather at Bolotnaya Square on December 10, 2011, were part of a foreign-backed effort to destabilize Russia.[166]

During a televised Q&A that lasted for over four and a half hours, Putin avoided addressing protesters' demands for a recount or annulment of the election results, instead focusing on his presidential promises, which included increasing pensions, providing housing for military officers, and ensuring Russia's protection from unspecified foreign threats. He lashed out at the United States, stating that America no longer seeks allies, but instead desires vassal states. His comments suggested frustration with what he perceived as Western interference in Russia's domestic affairs. He also criticized US Senator John McCain, who had linked Russia's protests to the Arab Spring, stating that McCain had "enough civilian blood on his hands" due to his role in the Vietnam War.[167] Putin also took aim at London, specifically addressing Russian oligarchs Boris Berezovsky (who

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[165] "Russia: Bolotnaya Protest Anniversary Marked by New Repression." *Amnesty International*, May 6, 2014.
[166] Guardian. "Vladimir Putin Calls Russia's Protesters 'Paid Agents of the West.'" *The Guardian*, December 15, 2011.
[167] "Стенограмма пресс-конференции Президента России Владимира Путина по итогам президентских выборов 2012 года." Правительство России, 5 марта 2012 года.

would be killed in 2013) and Roman Abramovich, who were embroiled in a high-profile legal battle in the UK. Putin frequently deflected criticism by blaming external actors, referring to a photograph of a defaced election ballot in London, which bore a derogatory message aimed at him. He linked this to a broader narrative of Russian oligarchs and dissidents fleeing to London to escape his rule.[168]

Following Russia's parliamentary elections in December 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voiced "serious concerns" about widespread reports of electoral fraud and voting irregularities. Speaking at a meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), she described the elections as neither free nor fair, citing reports of ballot-stuffing, voter intimidation, and manipulation of the vote count. Clinton called for a "full investigation" into these allegations, stressing the need for greater political transparency and accountability in Russia. Her remarks were echoed by European leaders, with officials from the European Union and OSCE also criticizing the elections for failing to meet democratic standards.[169] In response, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin accused Clinton and the United States of actively inciting protests against his government. He claimed that Clinton's statements "set the tone for some opposition activists" and that the U.S. had provided financial support to opposition groups in an effort to destabilize Russia. Putin framed the protests as an orchestrated attempt by Western governments to undermine Russian sovereignty, reinforcing his long-standing narrative that the West sought to interfere in Russia's domestic affairs. He further alleged that foreign-funded NGOs and activists were being used as tools for political subversion.[170]

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[168] "Стенограмма пресс-конференции Президента России Владимира Путина по итогам президентских выборов 2012 года." Правительство России, 5 марта 2012 года.
[169] CNN. 2011. "Clinton Voices 'Serious Concerns' over Russia Election." CNN, December 6, 2011.
[170] Luke Harding. 2011. "Vladimir Putin Accuses Hillary Clinton of Encouraging Russian Protests." *The Guardian*, December 8, 2011.

Middle-Class Dissent

In 2011, a significant shift occurred in Russia's protest landscape, as the country's emerging middle class, particularly urban professionals who had benefitted from Vladimir Putin's economic policies during his first two terms, began to actively participate in protests against Putin. This demographic, which included lawyers, doctors, scientists, business professionals, and intellectuals, had been some of Putin's most ardent supporters during his first two terms. They had witnessed the stabilization of the Russian economy, increased foreign investment, and rising living standards, particularly in major cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg. Putin's policies, which included economic growth fueled by high oil prices and a more predictable political environment, had won the loyalty of this group, who saw him as a stabilizing force after the chaos of the 1990s. However, by 2011, this support began to erode as many middle-class Russians became disillusioned with the growing authoritarianism, political repression, and corruption under Putin's rule.[171] The rigged parliamentary elections of December 2011, in which United Russia was accused of widespread electoral fraud, were the breaking point for many.[172] Middle-class citizens, who had once been beneficiaries of Putin's reign, now felt that the system no longer served their interests. The lack of a genuine political alternative, combined with increasing evidence of electoral manipulation,

[171] NPR Staff. "The Core of the Russian Protests: The Middle Class." NPR, December 12, 2011.
[172] Harvey, C.J., 2016. Changes in the menu of manipulation: Electoral fraud, ballot stuffing, and voter pressure in the 2011 Russian election. Electoral studies, 41, pp.105-117.

spurred them to take to the streets in the tens of thousands, particularly in Moscow, where large protests erupted.

Medvedev, once viewed as a symbol of modernization and a softer alternative to Putin, also suffered a decline in public perception. According to Titov, Russians had initially seen Medvedev as "a nice person but not as a politician or leader," which had made him appealing. However, the decision at the United Russia congress to announce the "castling" move revealed him as "a political tagalong" lacking independence or the authority expected of a national leader. His decision damaged Medvedev's image and, by extension, weakened the legitimacy of the tandem government itself. Political analysts Mikhail Dmitriyev and Sergei Belanovsky argued that the Putin-Medvedev tandem had previously been a masterstroke, successfully uniting opposing ideological poles within Russian society. "Putin and Medvedev appealed to different social poles. Their individual brands complemented each other,"[173] with Putin appealing to traditionalists and Medvedev to modernizers. However, the tandem's unraveling exposed deep societal divisions and left neither leader capable of addressing the growing demands for reform. Dmitriyev and Belanovsky added that the "forthcoming castling move exposed Medvedev as a political liability."

Beyond the individual failings of Putin and Medvedev, the public grew increasingly disillusioned with the broader political system. Vladimir Lapkin noted that "society is becoming weary of what passes for political struggle in Russia," as staged political theater replaced genuine debate. This dissatisfaction suggested that the electorate was beginning to demand "a resolute, energetic policy of competition for resources of development," which posed serious risks for Putin's presidency moving forward.[174]

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[173] RFE/RL. "Putin's Winter of Discontent."
[174] RFE/RL. "Putin's Winter of Discontent."

A roundtable at Moscow State University highlighted how discontent reflected deeper societal changes, particularly among younger Russians. Sociologist Yelena Shestopal observed that "the demand for stability typical of the 2000s is changing beyond recognition,"[175] as a new, post-Soviet generation, educated in liberal ideals, began to challenge the passivity that had characterized their parents' political behavior. Shestopal, noted the Russian students were "fairly critical with regard to the powers that be," reflecting a shift away from blind loyalty toward Putin. One participant, Victor Titov, emphasized the public's growing frustration with Putin's carefully cultivated macho image, which had once been a hallmark of his appeal. Staged events such as driving a Lada through Siberia or scuba diving for "buried treasure" were initially seen as proof of his charisma, strength, and dependability. Titov noted, "now, twelve years after, Russians are no longer blind to his liabilities as well," including "promises that were never kept, absence of control over his subordinates, [and] the deterioration of living standards." However, this decline in living standards was a matter of perspective. While the early 2000s saw rapid economic growth fueled by high oil prices, the Great Recession exposed vulnerabilities in Putin's petrostate model. Although Russia recovered relatively quickly compared to some Western economies, the crisis disrupted the illusion of sustained prosperity and highlighted the risks of overreliance on resource exports.[176] The economic slowdown, combined with growing corruption and inefficiency, led many Russians, particularly the urban middle class, to question the long-term viability of Putin's economic and political system.[177]

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[175] RFE/RL. "Putin's Winter of Discontent." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 22, 2011.
[176] Neil Robinson. "Russia's response to crisis: The paradox of success." Europe-Asia Studies 65, no. 3 (2013): 450-472.
[177] RFE/RL. "Putin's Winter of Discontent." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 22, 2011.

Dmitry Raev, a 29-year-old real estate lawyer at an international firm had never protested before, but in 2011, he found himself in the streets of Moscow, surprised by the large turnout of middle-class citizens, "I looked around and I saw thousands of people like me, like my friends - lawyers, scientists, doctors, intellectual people who usually don't go to the streets, people who have something that they can lose…30,000 people understood that they could be arrested."[178] Raev emphasized that one of the key outcomes of the protests was that their message had been acknowledged. The Moscow government had granted permission for the rally, which brought together around 30,000 people, reflecting the state's strategy of "managed democracy," allowing limited opposition expression under controlled conditions while ensuring that protests remained non-threatening to the regime. Raev also mentioned that the opposition, represented by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, had announced his candidacy for the presidential elections, a move that gave the protesters a glimmer of hope for political change. Raev expressed his support for Prokhorov, "we want to be heard by the authorities and this is our main goal…I think that I will support him…Vladimir Putin will win…but we don't like the situation when we don't have choice."[179]

The Protests

On December 10, 2011, the Bolotnaya Square rally began at Revolution Square, where people began to gather around 1 p.m. The goal was to begin a wave of protests that would spread

[178] "At The Core Of Russia's Protests: The Middle Class." *NPR*, December 12, 2011.
[179] "At The Core Of Russia's Protests: The Middle Class." *NPR*, December 12, 2011.

across Russia. The police were surprisingly polite, allowing protesters to pass through metal detectors without issue. Law enforcement officers repeatedly used megaphones to remind people that the rally had been relocated to Bolotnaya Square. By 1:50pm, more than a thousand people had gathered, with some heading directly to Bolotnaya while others formed additional groups. The march to Bolotnaya Square took protesters along several significant landmarks, such as the Lubyanka Square and Old Square, offering a view of the Ivan the Great Bell Tower and the Kremlin, which were heavily guarded by internal troops and OMON units. Amid the crowd were individuals from various backgrounds from students, who had sewn and distributed white ribbons to express solidarity with the cause, to older protesters. 64-year-old Chernina had traveled from Chistopol to express her dissatisfaction with the government's corruption and the poverty it caused. "I am not happy with what is happening in the country: that there is corruption, and that everyone steals, and that people live in poverty while Putin's friends become billionaires," she said, despite her son's attempts to dissuade her.[180] Her son's concern, likely stemmed from the state's increasingly repressive response to dissent, where police brutality, mass arrests, and legal persecution were commonly used to deter participation in protests. The Russian authorities' pattern of criminalizing opposition and using the judicial system as a tool of intimidation suggests he feared not just immediate violence but also long-term legal and social repercussions for his mother.[181] The rally continued into the evening, with protesters remaining in the square, chanting slogans and holding banners such as "Silence of the Lambs is over" and "Putin is the death of Russia." These signs represented a growing sense of urgency and anger against the status quo, while individuals of all ages, from young students to elderly citizens, joined together in their

[180] "Nemtsov: 'We Are Here Because We Have a Sense of Self-Esteem!'"
[181] Renata Mustafina. "Turning on the lights? Publicity and defensive legal mobilization in protest-related trials in Russia." Law & Society Review 56, no. 4 (2022): 601-622.

demand for honest elections and political change. “The citizen has finally woken up in Russia!” said Gennady Gudkov, a deputy from A Just Russia. “He slept for ten years, but he woke up! I can't help but be happy about this.”[182] This moment marked not only a significant display of unity among the opposition but also a break in the media’s previous indifference, signaling a turning point in Russia’s political climate.[183]

Svetlana Alexievich, a Nobel Prize-winning author known for her deeply humanistic and polyphonic approach to documenting history, seeks to understand Russia’s transformation under Putin by speaking directly with its people. The voices captured in this section of Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time* reflect a historical continuum of political dissent in Russia, echoing the frustrations and aspirations of those who have long felt disenfranchised by authoritarian rule. One protester declares, “I go to protests because it’s time they stop treating us like chumps. Bring back free elections, you lowlifes!”[184] This sentiment is reminiscent of earlier moments in Russian history, such as the protests of the late Soviet era, when citizens similarly demanded accountability and democratic reforms. Many protestors were driven by personal convictions, such as a woman who attends protests with her mother, saying, “I want to live to see a Russia without Putin.”[185] For the elderly woman and others who participated, the protests were a poignant reminder of the challenges of achieving meaningful change in a system resistant to reform. Yet, her determination to attend the demonstrations, despite the risks, underscores a resilience and hope that have persisted across generations. This hope, though often deferred,

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[182] "Nemtsov: 'We Are Here Because We Have a Sense of Self-Esteem!'" *Nemtsov Most*, December 10, 2016.
[183] "Nemtsov: 'We Are Here Because We Have a Sense of Self-Esteem!'" *Nemtsov Most*, December 10, 2016.
[184] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Translated by Bela Shayevich. New York: Random House, 2016, pg. 297-301.
[185] Svetlana Alexievich. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*.

remains a powerful force in Russia's historical trajectory, as each generation continues to strive for a future defined by freedom and justice rather than repression and control.

The Rise in Popularity of Alex Navalny

Putin's election to a third term in the early 2010s fueled growing public dissatisfaction, propelling Alexei Navalny to prominence as a key opposition leader. His movement mobilized mass protests, exposing both the potential for political resistance and the harsh limits imposed by an increasingly repressive regime.[186] Navalny's path to prominence began in the mid-2000s, when he first gained attention for his legal work exposing corporate corruption. However, it was the use of social media and being an outspoken critic of Putin's government that catapulted him into the spotlight as a key figure of resistance. One of Navalny's most significant early actions was his involvement in the "RosPil" project, a civil initiative he launched in 2010 to combat government corruption, particularly in public procurement. The project was designed to expose fraudulent government contracts, which Navalny described as one of the biggest sources of corruption in Russia. Through RosPil, Navalny and his team publicly identified and campaigned against instances of state officials siphoning off funds from state contracts. The project received

[186] Dasha Litinova. "How Putin's Russia Evolved from Tolerating to Suppressing Dissent." *AP News*, March 6, 2024.

widespread media attention, and Navalny's blog became a key platform for his critiques of the political elite. One notable example was his investigation into the state-owned Russian oil company Transneft, where he uncovered evidence of corruption involving a multibillion-dollar pipeline project. His revelations about Transneft's dealings were widely shared online and further solidified his reputation as a fearless anti-corruption activist.[187]

Navalny's effectiveness in using social media to circumvent state-controlled media marked a turning point in Russian politics. His blog posts, tweets, and viral videos allowed him to reach a broad audience and present a stark critique of the Kremlin's corruption. He also coined the term "the Party of Crooks and Thieves" to describe Putin's United Russia party, a slogan that resonated widely across Russian society, particularly with younger people who were increasingly disillusioned with the political system. This tactic also allowed him to "out-populist" Putin's claimed populism. Navalny's accusations against high-ranking members of the government, including Putin's allies, were often accompanied by detailed evidence, further fueling the perception that the Russian political system was deeply corrupt and unaccountable. Navalny saw his chance to further mobilize society against the establishment with the electoral fraud protests of December, 2011. These protests, which would come to be known as the "For Fair Elections" movement, galvanized opposition groups and individuals who were outraged by the clear manipulation of the election results. The protests were organized in part through social media, where Navalny played a pivotal role and as a result, he became one of the most prominent voices

[187] Irina Kazun, and Anastasia Semykina. "Media Control and State Repression in Russia: The Case of Alexei Navalny." *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 4 (2020): 743-760.

calling for free and fair elections, and his slogan "Russia Without Putin" became a rallying cry for the growing movement.[188]

Alexei Navalny emerged as a new type of protest leader by being able to use social media and digital activism to mobilize opposition in ways reminiscent of the Arab Spring. Unlike traditional politicians, he bypassed state-controlled media and reached supporters directly through platforms like LiveJournal, Twitter, and YouTube. His blog became a powerful tool for exposing government corruption, particularly through his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), which published investigations into embezzlement and fraud among top officials. One of his most influential reports in 2012 detailed corruption at state-owned company Transneft, sparking widespread outrage online. He also experimented with digital organizing, using online petitions and crowdfunding to sustain his movement, making it more resilient against state repression.[189] The scale and coordination of the protests, amplified by digital tools, forced the Kremlin to rethink its approach to repression. Rather than relying solely on traditional methods of censorship and police crackdowns, the government adapted by tightening internet controls, passing new laws to classify online activism as extremism, and deploying pro-Kremlin online propagandists to counter opposition narratives. Navalny's rise demonstrated the threat digital activism posed to the regime, as dissent spread across Russia.

Navalny's presence at Bolotnaya Square symbolized the rising influence of grassroots activism in Russia, and his message of anti-corruption and demands for political accountability helped mobilize people from a wide spectrum of society. At the protest, Navalny delivered a speech

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[188] Regina Smyth and Irina V. Soboleva. "Navalny's Gamesters: Protest, Opposition Innovation, and Authoritarian Stability in Russia." *Russian Politics* 1, no. 4 (December 30, 2016): 347–371.
[189] Regina Smyth and Irina V. Soboleva. "Navalny's gamesters: Protest, opposition innovation, and authoritarian stability in Russia." Russian Politics 1, no. 4 (2016): 347-371.

in which he condemned the electoral fraud, called for an end to Putin's rule, and demanded reforms to ensure that future elections would be free and fair. Navalny's direct challenge to Putin's government, calling it a "party of crooks and thieves" and declaring that "Russia is our country, and Russia will be free!"[190] was a sharp departure from the kind of complacency that had previously been attributed to Russian society. His declaration that "I don't have another country; I have nowhere to go" highlighted the deep emotional and personal commitment behind the resistance, proving that the opposition was not just a marginal group, but was gaining traction among a broader portion of the population. The widespread public response to Navalny's speech, evidenced by the cheers and chants of "Putin is a thief!" from the crowd. The protest marked a critical turning point, as it demonstrated that the discontent that had been simmering beneath the surface had now emerged in full force. The collective energy and defiance of the protestors contradicted the long-standing narrative that Russia lacked a vocal opposition to Putin's rule. In fact, Navalny's speech and the response from the crowd demonstrated that the perception of a passive, compliant Russian populace was outdated. Rather than resigning themselves to corruption and autocracy, many Russians had found their voice and were now demanding reform and political change.[191] This shift was amplified by new technology, as protesters used smartphones to film demonstrations, document police violence, and share real-time updates on social media, bypassing state-controlled television.[192] Navalny's message was clear: Russia's political system needed to change, and citizens should no longer passively accept the status quo. The speech was met with

[190] "Alexey Navalny's Speech at Bolotnaya Square," *The Interpreter Magazine*, December 10, 2011
[191] "Alexey Navalny's Speech at Bolotnaya Square," *The Interpreter Magazine*, December 10, 2011
[192] Sarah Oates and Tetyana Lokot. "Twilight of the gods?: How the Internet challenged russian television news frames in the winter protests of 2011-12." How the Internet Challenged Russian Television News Frames in the Winter Protests of 12 (2011).

enthusiastic applause and cheers from the crowd, solidifying Navalny as a prominent figure in the opposition movement.

In addition to Navalny, other opposition leaders played critical roles in organizing and participating in the protests. Among the most prominent was Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister and one of the most vocal critics of Putin's government. Nemtsov had been a leading figure in Russian politics during the 1990s but had become increasingly disillusioned with the direction that Putin had taken the country. By the time of the Bolotnaya protests, Nemtsov was a key figure in the anti-Putin opposition, advocating for democratic reforms, transparency, and greater political freedom.[193] Boris Nemtsov spoke passionately at the rally, vividly recalling an incident during the Duma elections at a polling station on Lenin Hills, where votes were allegedly stolen from communists. This is notable because Nemtsov was part of an anti-Communist party, yet by insisting that all votes be counted, even those of his political opponents, he was advocating for democracy itself, rather than merely opposing Putin. He continued by emphasizing that lawmakers who truly represented the people should relinquish their mandates, and that Vladimir Churov, head of the Central Election Commission, must resign. “All cases related to his criminal vote counting must be investigated,”[194] he insisted. Nemtsov also demanded that the authorities investigate all instances of election fraud, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. “We must create a center for investigating their criminal activities,"[195] he urged. The lack of political freedom, particularly the failure to register opposition parties, was another key issue. “They are obliged to register the opposition,” Nemtsov stressed, noting that no opposition party had been allowed to register in the past twelve years. He called for fair and transparent elections, condemning the

[193] "The Bolotnaya Maydan." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 27, 2013.
[194] "Митинг 10 декабря на Болотной: Выступления." *RFI. 10 декабря 2011 г.*
[195] "Митинг 10 декабря на Болотной: Выступления."

government's habitual electoral manipulations: "They have proven that they are a party of crooks and thieves. But we must prove that we are a proud and free people."[196]

Waves of Dissent: Cities That Rose with Bolotnaya

Chelyabinsk

The reception of Vladimir Putin's election to a third term in Chelyabinsk revealed significant public discontent, driven by widespread allegations of electoral fraud. Chelyabinsk is in western Russia, just east of the Ural Mountains, which separate Europe and Asia known as a major industrial hub with a strong history in steel production and military manufacturing. Teachers and election monitors in the region were often coerced into participating in these fraudulent practices, with some acquiescing due to fear of losing their jobs, while others bravely risked personal and professional consequences to expose corruption.[197] Others felt like there was nothing left for them in Russia and decided to leave. Mikhail Galyan represented a growing wave of Russia's educated and skilled professionals seeking opportunities abroad. Frustrated by systemic corruption and limited prospects at home, he relocated to Germany, joining the many fueling Russia's "brain drain." His departure reflects the sense of disillusionment among Russians who saw the political and economic system as stagnant, designed to preserve itself rather than drive progress or address societal needs. His criticism of the system is sharp and echoes widespread

[196] "Митинг 10 декабря на Болотной: Выступления."
[197] Anne Judah. *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia*. New York: Penguin Books, 2016.

frustration. “Maybe there are some individuals who aren’t bad, but they are part of a system whose one goal is to keep that system in place,”[198] he observed, capturing the feeling of entrapment many Russians experience.

In Chelyabinsk, tech-savvy individuals leveraged social media platforms like VKontakte, the Russian version of LinkedIn, to organize protests and share evidence of electoral misconduct. These grassroots efforts mobilized a wide range of participants. This included students, middle-class professionals, and older citizens disillusioned by unfulfilled promises of stability and prosperity. Protesters employed creative methods of dissent to highlight their grievances, such as using white ribbons to symbolize honesty and staging satirical performances to ridicule the regime's accusations that they were merely troublemakers. One notable example was a demonstration in which participants dressed as clowns, mocking official narratives and amplifying the call for political reform. These acts of defiance in Chelyabinsk reflected the broader unrest across Russia during this time, where dissatisfaction with the electoral process evolved into a powerful expression of civic discontent.[199]

Kazan

One of the most unbelievable results in Russia's controversial elections was the claim that United Russia received nearly 80% of the vote in Tatarstan. Tatarstan, like several other Russian regions, had a history of delivering overwhelmingly pro-government results, often attributed to

[198] Anne Judah. *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia*. New York: Penguin Books, 2016.
[199] Anne Judah. *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia*.

state pressure, administrative influence, and electoral manipulation. The percentage raised concerns among observers and opposition groups, who cited statistical anomalies indicative of electoral fraud. Analyses by researchers, such as Sergei Shpilkin, found evidence of ballot-stuffing and inflated voter turnout in regions like Tatarstan.[200] On the following Saturday, around 2,000 Tatars braved the freezing temperatures to protest against the evident fraud. Authorities were frustrated by their failure to identify the "organizers" of the protest, which had been organized through social networks, writes Oleg Pavlov. The rally took place on December 10, 2011, in Kazan, where the weather was notably colder than in Moscow, with temperatures plunging to minus twelve degrees Celsius and a biting wind making it uncomfortable for those gathered. As the rally time approached, large numbers of police officers and crowd-control vehicles began to appear in the area, accompanied by ambulances positioned nearby. Estimates of the crowd size varied, but it was believed that around 2,000 individuals, primarily young people, attended the protest. However, the police appeared to preemptively seal off the square once they judged the crowd to be sufficiently large, leaving many potential protesters behind barriers. This move led to chants of "Shame" and "Give us back our votes" from those who had gathered.[201]

The Tatarstan demonstrators' outrage, like that of many others across Russia, was met with police's attempts to disperse the crowd. Two speakers were able to address the protesters from the steps of a Lenin statue. However, the authorities soon intervened, citing the organizers' failure to submit the necessary permits as the basis for ordering the protesters to leave the square. As the situation intensified, the demonstrators began chanting "Police, support the people!" A loud bang was heard, and OMON riot police swiftly sealed off the area. The loud noise, cited as a danger to

[200] Skovoroda, R., & Lankina, T. (2016). Fabricating votes for Putin: new tests of fraud and electoral manipulations from Russia. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *33*(2), 100–123.
[201] Pavlov, Oleg. "Kazan's White Revolution." *openDemocracy*, December 16, 2011.

the public, has been speculated to be a stun grenade thrown by the police, further suggesting that the forceful removal of protestors might have been orchestrated by the Russian authorities. In response to the growing tension, Tatarstan's Minister of Internal Affairs, General of Police Asgat Safarov, made an appearance, only to be immediately surrounded by local media. The presence of the press caused such chaos that journalists, including the editor of a Kazan-based internet newspaper, had to push through the crowd just to get close enough. Notably, local media outlets made no mention of the protest. In a brief exchange with the press, Safarov's response was seen as dismissive and insulting, as he remarked, "Well, have you had a good look at me? Now go home," failing to provide any substantial answers or address the concerns of the protesters. His response reflected a tone of arrogance, frustrating those present who had hoped for a meaningful explanation or response to the police's actions.[202]

[202] Pavlov, Oleg. "Kazan's White Revolution."

Tools of Authoritarian Repression

Vladimir Putin's third presidential inauguration in May 2012 marked the beginning of a more overtly authoritarian phase in his leadership. Unlike his first two inaugurations, which were met with public displays of support and celebration, there was a noticeable absence of large, enthusiastic crowds on the streets following his controversial election victory. This stark contrast to previous ceremonies highlighted the growing discontent with his rule, spurred by the mass protests of 2011 and 2012. On the day of his inauguration, security forces were deployed in force across Moscow, surrounding protest sites and making thousands of arrests, including key opposition figures. The authorities shut down demonstrations before they could gain momentum, preventing large gatherings and dispersing smaller ones with aggressive tactics. The absence of significant opposition on the streets that day was not a sign of widespread support for Putin, but rather the result of an effective campaign of suppression.[203] The protests leading up to the 2012 election had been a clear challenge to his dominance in years, and Putin's reaction was to clamp down hard. In the aftermath, opposition leaders, including Alexei Navalny, were arrested and charged with organizing unauthorized protests, while independent media outlets were targeted for their coverage. The harsh treatment of demonstrators, combined with new laws aimed at curbing political freedoms and restricting public dissent, sent a clear message: any opposition to Putin's rule would be dealt with swiftly and decisively.[204]

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[203] The Guardian. "Vladimir Putin Inaugurated as Russian President Amid Heavy Security." May 7, 2012.
[204] Amnesty International. "Russia: Putin Urged to Reject Law Restricting Right to Peaceful Assembly." June 12, 2012.

Legislative Crackdown

During his earlier terms, Putin employed a range of refined tactics aimed at cleaning up the chaos left by Yeltsin's presidency, such as co-opting oligarchs, and fostering a perception of stability and prosperity. Civil society, while restricted, was not openly targeted with the same intensity or hostility that would define his third term. The March of Millio**ns** protest, which took place in Moscow on May 6, 2012, was one of the key demonstrations organized by opposition groups to express dissent against President Vladimir Putin's government but was the catalyst for the passing of the "The Law on Public Assembly" law. The protesters were primarily opposing the perceived lack of political freedoms, the rigging of elections, and what they viewed as the authoritarian nature of Putin's rule. The demonstration was organized by several opposition groups, including the "Other Russia" coalition, and aimed to mark the end of a series of protests that had erupted earlier in the year in response to allegations of election fraud during the 2011 Duma elections. Despite submitting all the necessary permits and paperwork for the demonstration, the organizers faced a series of bureaucratic and legal challenges. Moscow authorities, led by the city's mayor at the time, Sergei Sobyanin, repeatedly refused to grant approval for the protest. The government justified the denial of permits by citing "public safety" and "traffic disruptions." In some cases, they even claimed the protest would pose a "threat to public order," a vague justification that allowed them to shut down any opposition movement.[205]

[205] Human Rights Watch. "Russia: The 'March of Millions'." *Human Rights Watch*, June 13, 2012.

As the June 2013 protest continued without the necessary approval, the government deployed a large number of riot police and security forces to prevent the rally from proceeding. The Law on Public Assembly, passed in 2013, targeted public gatherings and protests. In this context, the government imposed stricter controls over the right to organize public demonstrations, making it increasingly difficult for opposition groups to hold protests legally. The law required all public gatherings be approved by the authorities, and it imposed strict requirements on organizers, including the need to pay for any damage to property during the protest. In practice, this law allowed the government to preemptively shut down any opposition protests by refusing to grant permits or by creating legal obstacles that made it financially and logistically difficult for organizers to go forward with their actions. The law also authorized the police to disperse any unapproved protests by force.[206] In the case of the June 2013 "Rally for Fair Elections," organizers were required to apply for a permit, but the Moscow authorities refused to grant permission. Authorities cited reasons such as "public safety concerns" and "logistical issues," but opposition leaders and observers believed these were merely pretexts to prevent the rally from taking place. The government's rejection of the protest permit demonstrated the law's power to legally stifle opposition, as the authorities could arbitrarily deny permission for rallies, even those aimed at pressing for democratic reforms. By denying the permit, the government ensured that the opposition rally could not legally take place, effectively preventing it from proceeding as planned.[207]

The "Law on Public Assembly" also provided the police with the legal authority to disperse any unapproved protest, and the "Ban on Protests" allowed for the use of force to remove

[206] Московская Таймс. "Поправки в закон о протестах снижают штрафы и ответственность организаторов." 8 августа 2013 г.
[207] BBC News. "Russia: Thousands protest against Putin in Moscow." *BBC News*, June 12, 2013.

demonstrators. The combination of these two pieces of legislation gave the government legal cover to repress the rally, even though the protestors were advocating for basic democratic reforms. The authorities' use of force to break up the rally led to dozens of arrests. Many opposition leaders were detained, and several demonstrators faced charges related to participating in an illegal gathering. The use of police force and arrests became a common tactic in response to protests in Russia, as the government increasingly relied on the legal tools provided by the new laws to crack down on dissent.[208]

In March of 2013, the Russian government introduced the “foreign agent” law, a significant development in its effort to suppress opposition and consolidate control over civil society. This law marked a sharp departure from the more restrained and indirect strategies employed during Vladimir Putin’s first two presidential terms. The “foreign agent” law reflected a new, more overtly authoritarian approach. It required any organization receiving funding from foreign sources and engaging in activities the government deemed “political” to register as a “foreign agent.” This designation carried a deeply stigmatizing implication, associating these organizations with espionage, disloyalty, and subservience to hostile foreign powers. The term "foreign agent" resonated with Soviet-era rhetoric, invoking fears of infiltration and betrayal, and was strategically used to isolate and discredit organizations critical of the Kremlin. [209] The "foreign agent" law institutionalized repression, providing a legal framework to systematically target and marginalize critics of the regime. Independent media outlets, NGOs, and advocacy groups were among the primary targets, forced to disclose their funding sources and label their publications with the

[208] Московская Таймс. “Митинг за честные выборы завершился арестами.” Москоу Таймс, 12 июня 2013 г.
[209] Evgeny Finkel. “The Use and Abuse of the ‘Foreign Agent’ Law in Russia.” Europe-Asia Studies 74, no. 6 (2022): 915–31.

"foreign agent" tag. This labeling not only damaged their reputation but also created practical obstacles, such as increased scrutiny, onerous reporting requirements, and the constant threat of hefty fines or legal repercussions for noncompliance. Many organizations faced public backlash, declining funding, or closure altogether, as the label made it difficult to sustain operations or maintain public trust. [210]

In early 2013, the Russian government carried out a massive wave of inspections targeting over 2,000 NGOs across the country, marking one of the most extensive crackdowns on civil society since the Soviet era. These inspections were conducted by prosecutors, tax authorities, and law enforcement officials, who often arrived unannounced at NGO offices, demanding extensive documentation related to foreign funding, political activities, and internal communications. Human rights activists and NGO leaders described the inspections as politically motivated harassment aimed at suppressing dissent.[211] Authorities, including law enforcement and tax officials, conducted inspections of thousands of NGOs across various regions of Russia, and "in some cases, NTV journalists come to the offices of organizations along with the inspectors."[212] One of the primary targets of this crackdown was Memorial, Russia's oldest human rights group. Prosecutors accused Memorial of engaging in political activities while receiving foreign funding, a charge the organization denied. Despite its longstanding reputation for documenting Soviet-era repression and contemporary human rights abuses, Memorial was fined for failing to register as a foreign agent. Another major victim was Golos, an election-monitoring organization that had exposed widespread fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections. Authorities confiscated the group's

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[210] David Herscovitch. "Russia's 'Foreign Agent' Law and Its Impact on Independent Media." *Journal of International Media & Entertainment Law* 11, no. 2 (2021): 112–116.
[211] Ведомости. "Минюст предлагает расширить список оснований для проверок НКО." Ведомости, 9 Апреля 2013.
[212] Татар-Информ. "В России начинаются масштабные проверки некоммерческих организаций." Татар-Информ, март 2013.

equipment and imposed a 300,000-ruble fine (approximately $10,000 at the time) for its refusal to register as a foreign agent. By June 2013, the group had suspended its operations under mounting legal and financial pressure.[213] The Moscow Helsinki Group, Russia's oldest human rights watchdog, was also subjected to surprise inspections. Officials reviewed financial records and accused the group of conducting politically motivated activities with foreign backing. Head of the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG) Lyudmila Alekseyeva stated, "These inspections are illegal, they had no right to conduct them and now they have no right to issue us warnings."[214] Similarly, the Amnesty International Moscow office was raided in March 2013, with authorities claiming they were merely checking compliance with Russian laws. Amnesty denounced the move as an attempt to intimidate independent human rights monitors.[215] As a result of these inspections, dozens of NGOs were fined, forced to register as foreign agents, or shut down entirely. Many organizations struggled under the legal and financial burdens, while others faced negative publicity and smear campaigns in state-controlled media, which painted them as traitors or Western-funded saboteurs.

Alongside the "foreign agent" law, the Russian government also passed multiple new legislations aimed at combating what it labeled "extremist" activities. This legislation significantly expanded the government's power to suppress dissent and target a wide range of groups and individuals. The primary goal of these laws was to create a legal framework for curbing political opposition and any forms of resistance to the government, under the pretext of combating extremism. The laws criminalized a broad spectrum of activities, including actions that could be

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[213] Интерфакс. "Минюст РФ: проверки НКО проведены в рамках планов Генпрокуратуры." Интерфакс, 28 марта 2013.
[214] Совсекретно. "Людмила Алексеева: Массовые проверки НКО Незаконные – Мои Не Иностранные Агенты." Апрель 2013.
[215] Азаттык. "В России проходят массовые проверки НКО." Радио Азаттык, 26 марта 2013.

interpreted as “inciting hatred,” “disrupting public order,” or “undermining the Russian state.”[216] The vague nature of these terms gave the authorities significant discretion in defining what constituted an act of extremism. As a result, the laws were often applied to target political activists, civil society organizations, journalists, and even individuals involved in peaceful protests or discussions about sensitive political issues, including government corruption or human rights abuses. One example was the “gay propaganda law,” banning the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relations" to minors. Advocacy groups like the Russian LGBT Network and Coming Out (Vyhod) were targeted under the law, with authorities raiding offices, imposing heavy fines, and labeling them as “foreign agents” to discredit their work. In August 2013, a court in St. Petersburg fined Coming Out 500,000 rubles (around $15,000 at the time) for allegedly violating the “gay propaganda” law.[217] Activists such as Nikolai Alekseev, one of Russia’s most prominent LGBTQ+ advocates, were frequently detained, and some were violently attacked with little to no police intervention. Pride events, including Moscow and St. Petersburg Pride, were outright banned, with police violently dispersing gatherings and arresting participants.[218] In November 2013, authorities shut down an LGBTQ+ film festival in St. Petersburg, citing “extremism” and “public morality” concerns. Meanwhile, online platforms that promoted LGBTQ+ rights, such as Deti-404 (a support group for LGBTQ+ youth), were blocked under internet censorship laws.[219] This law, combined with anti-extremism legislation, not only forced many LGBTQ+ organizations to close but also

[216] Dresen F. Joseph. "Anti-Extremism Policies in Russia and How They Work in Practice." Kennan Institute, January 14, 2013.
[217] Joseph Patrick McCormick. “Russia: LGBT Rights Group Fined 500,000 Rubles under ‘Foreign Agent’ Law.” *PinkNews | Latest Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans News | LGBTQ+ News*, June 19, 2013.
[218] Московская Таймс. «Организатор российского гей-прайда получил 10 суток тюрьмы». 1 июня 2015 г.
[219] Московская Таймс. “Российский сайт поддержки ЛГБТ “Дети-404” внесен в черный список.” 11 октября 2016 г.

fueled a climate of fear, encouraging homophobic violence and reinforcing state-sponsored discrimination.

Under the new “extremist” legislation, which was the equivalent of the old “anti-Soviet agitation” charge, meant expressing dissenting opinions or criticizing the government in any public way could be seen as a threat to the stability of the state. A particularly controversial aspect of the law was its imprecise definition of “extremism.” The law broadly defined extremism as any activity that could “undermine the constitutional order” or “disrupt the integrity of the Russian Federation.” This created ample room for interpretation, allowing authorities to label a wide variety of activities as extremist. Alexei Navalny, and his Anti-Corruption Foundation, the Citizens’ Rights Protection Foundation and “headquarters.” Navalny was charged with extremism-related offenses multiple times, even though his activities were nonviolent and focused on exposing government corruption.

Russian authorities increasingly used the expanded "extremism" laws to crack down on online dissent, particularly targeting bloggers and social media users who criticized the government. The legislation allowed the state to classify online posts, comments, or even shares as extremist content if they were deemed a threat to social stability. The vague wording of the law made it easy for authorities to justify prosecutions, as almost any criticism of the government or its policies could be framed as inciting discord. Andrey Teslenko, a resident of Novoaltaisk in Siberia, found himself targeted by authorities for sharing Navalny content on social media. Teslenko had posted a video titled “Let's remind the crooks and thieves about their 2002-Manifesto”[220] on his VKontakte page, a platform widely used for political discussions in Russia.

[220] Andrey Tselikov. "Regional Bloggers Targeted for ‘Extremism’ by Russian Police." *Global Voices*, November 10, 2013.

The video was critical of the ruling United Russia party, referencing its unfulfilled promises from the early 2000s and highlighting issues of corruption and governance failures. Shortly after posting the video, Teslenko was summoned for police questioning. Authorities cited Russia's strict extremism laws, which had been increasingly used to suppress political dissent, as justification for the investigation. During the interrogation, he was pressured to explain his intentions behind sharing the content, and law enforcement officers warned him about the potential consequences of spreading "anti-government propaganda." After he was released, he had a warning to others, "By the way, the anti-extremism cops let slip that I'm not the only one to be visited in Barnaul [*regional center -A.T.*]"[221] In another case Aleksandr Serebryanikov, known as Blogger 51, was charged with extremism in 2013 and placed under travel restrictions. Initially questioned as a witness, his status later changed to suspect and then to accused. Authorities charged him under Article 282 of the Russian criminal code, which relates to inciting enmity and promoting superiority or inferiority based on nationality, race, or religion. Serebryanikov denied all accusations, while his supporters argued that the charges were politically motivated, stemming from his criticism of local officials, particularly Governor Marina Kovtun. His blog, which covered bureaucratic misconduct and regional issues, gained widespread attention, including exposing election fraud and reporting on a submarine fire. The case drew significant concern from both local bloggers and international media, with outlets like NRK and The New York Times highlighting its implications for press freedom.[222] Their cases are not unique, dozens of individuals across Russia were similarly targeted for expressing opposition to government policies on platforms like VKontakte (Russia's largest social network), Facebook, and LiveJournal.

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[221] Andrey Tselikov. "Regional Bloggers Targeted for 'Extremism' by Russian Police." *Global Voices*, November 10, 2013.
[222] Trude Pettersen. "Blogger 51 Accused of Extremism." *Barents Observer*, August 16, 2013.

Human rights organizations also became prime targets of the law, as the government framed their work as "subversive" or "foreign-sponsored" in nature.[223] Natalia Zviagina, Amnesty International's Moscow Office Director, said: "Vladimir Putin's regime is compensating for its waning public support by creating an atmosphere of fear and despair, throwing its political rivals behind bars, forcing them out of the country and banning one after another those organizations held in disfavour by the regime." Groups such as Memorial, which worked to preserve the memory of political repression in the Soviet Union, were also accused of engaging in activities that undermined the Russian state and could be prosecuted as extremism. Agora, founded by prominent human rights lawyer Pavel Chikov, had a history of defending political activists, journalists, and victims of police abuse. In 2013, Russian authorities began investigating the group under the country's expanding anti-extremism and foreign agent laws, accusing it of engaging in politically motivated legal work. The government claimed that its support for activists, including those involved in anti-Putin protests, constituted a threat to national security.[224] These organizations faced not only legal charges but also harassment, surveillance, and pressure to shut down. Journalists who reported on sensitive issues such as corruption, police violence, or the crackdown on opposition movements were also targeted by the law. This created an atmosphere of self-censorship, where many journalists and outlets avoided controversial topics or toned down their coverage for fear of being labeled as "extremist."[225]

The Russian state-controlled media played a pivotal role in shaping public perception of opposition movements and protests. Channels like Channel One and Russia-24 were quick to

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[223] Amnesty International. "Russia: Aleksei Navalny's NGOs Banned as 'Extremist,' Depriving Thousands of Their Rights." Last modified June 2021.
[224] Ведомости. "Правозащитная организация "Агора" ликвидирована." Ведомости, 10 февраля 2016.
[225] Amnesty International. "Russia: A Year of Putin's 'Foreign Agents' Law Choking Freedom." Last modified November 2013.

portray protesters and activists as radicals, often linking them to foreign powers and labeling them as agents of destabilization. The government's narrative was clear: the opposition was a threat to national security, and any attempt to challenge the government was viewed as an attempt to undermine Russia's sovereignty. This media manipulation was a critical tool in maintaining control over the population, as it skewed public perceptions of protest movements, casting them as unpatriotic and even dangerous.[226] While media oligarchs-controlled television channels after the fall of the Soviet Union, Putin quickly consolidated control once in power. For example, Channel One is 51% state-owned, with the remaining shares held by close allies of Putin, such as Yuri Kovalchuk and Roman Abramovich. Similarly, the Rossiya TV channel is entirely state-controlled, and after a 2000 raid, NTV was brought under the control of the Gazprom media group. Because of this dominance, the anti-government channel Dozhd only reaches a tiny fraction of the population, emphasizing the extent to which state-aligned networks control the narrative in Russia.[227]

Journalist Ulrike Gruske, a political scientist, journalist, and author specializing in Russia and the South Caucasus for the *n-ost*, a network, conducted interviews with approximately 30 television workers and journalists, many of whom requested anonymity due to fear of job loss. The report reveals how the Kremlin's control over television, a key pillar of state power, remains pervasive despite the rise of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Television still serves as the primary source of political information for 90% of the Russian population, where state-run channels regularly promote the president run on, "every evening the three main TV

[226] Human Rights Watch. "Russia: Silencing Activists, Journalists Ahead of Sochi Games." *Human Rights Watch*, August 7, 2013.
[227] Виддер, Беньямин, и Кристина Хебель. "Телевизионная власть Путина: Кремль по всем каналам."

channels praise the Russian president."[228] For instance, Dmitry Kiselev, a prominent anchor on Rossiya TV, spent 12 minutes last year celebrating Putin's birthday, and recently claimed that Russia is one of the freest countries in the world. The report highlights that, under Putin, television is the primary target for control, as he understood the importance of media for maintaining power.

Navalny's Legal Troubles (2013)

Alexei Navalny's rising political influence in Russia posed a significant threat to Vladimir Putin's grip on power, especially as the country's political and economic system became increasingly dominated by a small circle of elites loyal to the Kremlin. Navalny's criticism of government corruption and his efforts to expose the kleptocratic nature of Putin's administration attracted a growing following, particularly among Russia's younger, urban population. His popularity surged after his anti-corruption campaigns, including detailed investigations into the wealth and corruption of key political figures close to Putin. These investigations placed Navalny squarely at odds with the Kremlin. The 2013 trial and conviction of Navalny in the Kirovles case were a pivotal moment in his political career, and many saw it as a deliberate attempt by the government to neutralize him as a threat to Putin's authority. The case against Navalny stemmed from an alleged incident in 2009 involving a logging company, Kirovles, a state-owned enterprise in the Kirov region. Navalny, at the time a lawyer and an outspoken critic of the Kremlin, had been

[228] Виддер, Беньямин, и Кристина Хебель. "Телевизионная власть Путина: Кремль по всем каналам." *Inopressa*, 8 октября 2013 г.

involved in advising a group of minority shareholders in the company. He was accused of conspiring to embezzle timber from Kirovles by arranging for the sale of timber at below-market prices to a middleman, who then resold it for a higher price. The prosecution claimed this scheme defrauded the state-run company of around 16 million rubles (about $500,000 at the time).[229] However, the evidence presented in court was flimsy, and many observers believed that the charges were politically motivated. No direct evidence linked Navalny to any illegal activity, and it was widely acknowledged that his role in the company was limited to advising the minority shareholders, not in managing the day-to-day operations of Kirovles. In fact, the company's own officials did not consider Navalny responsible for the alleged embezzlement. Nevertheless, the Russian court found Navalny guilty of embezzlement and sentenced him to five years in prison, a decision that appeared to be more about political retribution than genuine criminal justice.[230] The trial was a highly publicized and politically charged event, drawing massive attention both within Russia and internationally. Seen by many as a blatant attempt to sideline a key opposition figure, it fueled further protests and intensified global scrutiny of Russia's judicial system and its use as a tool for political repression.

Navalny's conviction served multiple purposes for the Putin regime. First, it was a way for the Kremlin to sideline a prominent opposition figure who had been gaining influence and mobilizing public support. Navalny's growing political clout, bolstered by his anti-corruption campaign, made him an increasingly visible and effective critic of Putin. His legal troubles were seen as a tool to silence him and diminish his ability to challenge the political status quo. Second, the conviction was aimed at discrediting Navalny personally and politically. By framing him as a

[229] "Alexei Navalny Convicted of Embezzlement in Russia." *The Guardian*, July 18, 2013.
[230] "Russian Court Convicts Navalny of Embezzlement." *The New York Times*, July 18, 2013.

criminal, the government sought to delegitimize his calls for reform and undermine his credibility with both domestic and international audiences. While this method had been effective in neutralizing Khodorkovsky and, to a lesser extent, Pussy Riot, it failed with Navalny, whose support only grew as many saw the charges against him as politically motivated. The trial was widely perceived as a warning to other opposition figures: anyone who sought to challenge the Kremlin's authority would face similar legal challenges and personal consequences. Navalny was seen during the trial tweeting, "Oh, well. Don't get bored without me. And, importantly, don't be idle."[231] His continued presence on social media, where he stayed in the public eye with posts like his defiant tweet during the trial, only amplified his status as the figurehead of opposition.[232] "To put hipsters on trial is only to ruin the trial,"[233] says one tweet that Navalny retweeted. He also told followers to stop the despairing Tweets, instead telling them to take a cue from "the Joker." He then posted a photo of a grinning Russian President Vladimir Putin, added, "it seems it's only me and [Putin] aren't so sad about the verdict."[234] The timing of the trial was also important, Navalny's supporters claim that it was "politically motivated and meant to bar him from political office."[235] In 2013, Navalny was preparing to run for mayor of Moscow, an election that would have provided him with a larger platform and the opportunity to build a base of political support. If successful, Navalny could have positioned himself as a credible contender in future national elections, further threatening Putin's dominance.

Inside Russia, many saw the trial as a transparent effort to eliminate a rising political threat, and it galvanized opposition to Putin's rule. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev said the case

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[231] PBS NewsHour. "Alexei Navalny: Russian Opposition Leader." *PBS NewsHour*, March 2, 2021.
[232] Стан Прибылов. "Как Навальный и Другие Оппозиционеры Прорывались Сквозь Российскую Цензуру и Запреты?" *ГОЛОС АМЕРИКИ*, April 27, 2023
[233] "Navalny's Tweets Of Defiance." *RFE/RL*, July 18, 2013.
[234] "Navalny's Tweets Of Defiance." *RFE/RL*, July 18, 2013.
[235] Екатерина Кравцова. "Навальный уверен во втором туре выборов." The Moscow Times, 9 сентября 2013 г.

had “left a very serious impression,” in a statement published in Russian on the Gorbachev Foundation website. He said, “everything I know about this case – how it started, how it was closed, and then opened again, how it was considered in court – unfortunately confirms that we do not have an independent judiciary.”[236] The case further exposed the authoritarian nature of the Russian government and reinforced the perception that the legal system was being used as a tool for political repression. Even some within the pro-Putin camp were uncomfortable with the blatant politicization of the trial, and the Kirovles case became a symbol of the increasingly repressive nature of Russian politics. Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin criticized the ruling, saying on Twitter that it “is not so much punishment as it is intended to isolate [Mr. Navalny] from public life and the electoral process.”[237]

Navalny’s sentence was later reduced to a suspended sentence of three-and-a-half years, which allowed him to remain free but still under the shadow of the legal system. The suspended sentence ensured that Navalny would remain politically sidelined and subject to the constant threat of re-arrest if he violated the terms of his probation. This decision was likely made to avoid the international backlash that would have come with imprisoning him while simultaneously allowing the authorities to keep up the pressure on him.[238]

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[236] CNN. "Russia Convicts Navalny in Embezzlement Case." *CNN*, July 18, 2013.
[237] Wall Street Journal. "Russian Opposition Leader Navalny Convicted of Embezzlement." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2013.
[238] "How the Kirovles Case Changed Russian Politics." *The Moscow Times*, July 19, 2013.

Instruments of Control: The Role of Police and the FSB

In 2013, the role of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in suppressing dissent reached new levels of intensity to outright repression of dissent. While the government had long relied on police forces to manage protests, the FSB, with its broader mandate and resources, increasingly took the lead in targeting political opposition and dissenting voices. The expansion of the FSB's role in repression signaled a further consolidation of power under Putin's government. By 2013, as mass protests erupted in response to claims of electoral fraud and growing discontent with Putin's leadership, the response became systematic and violent. The FSB's involvement was crucial in monitoring and dismantling opposition networks, often through covert surveillance, wiretapping, and the infiltration of activist groups. The agency also used psychological pressure and intimidation tactics to undermine opposition leaders and deter potential protesters.[239]

In addition to surveillance, the FSB and police forces, such as the OMON (riot police), played a prominent role in violently dispersing protests. The aggressive tactics employed included physical violence, arbitrary arrests, and the blocking of public spaces where demonstrations might occur. The 2013 repression saw an increase in the use of force, including the deployment of riot police who would routinely beat protesters with batons. In July 18, 2013, activist Dmitry Monakhov was brutally beaten by police during a rally in Moscow. During a protest, Dmitry Monakhov shouted, "Freedom for Navalny!" before police seized him by the arms and legs, carrying him to a paddy wagon. Inside, an officer choked him, struck his head multiple times, and continued beating him with a rubber truncheon. Another officer dragged him by the hair and

[239] Catherine Belton. *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*. London: *William Collins*, 2020.

pressed a knee into his chest while also twisting his genitals. Journalists witnessed the abuse, and authorities attempted to confiscate a photographer's camera and erase the images. An hour later, Monakhov and other detainees were released. Doctors later diagnosed him with a head injury, bruises, and neck compression marks. Russian authorities defended their actions, claiming the use of force was justified by Monakhov's alleged resistance.[240]

As Russia's primary security agency, the FSB utilized its vast network of informants, surveillance capabilities, and intelligence operations to monitor, infiltrate, and disrupt any opposition movement. Activists, journalists, and ordinary Russians who were suspected of engaging in anti-government activities were often subject to spying, harassment, and infiltration. There were several cases where individuals reported being followed by agents or experiencing mysterious break-ins, as well as the use of cyber-surveillance to monitor online activity. These covert actions allowed the state to build extensive files on individuals, ensuring that the police and FSB could react quickly if any form of protest or opposition emerged. This included disrupting meetings, spreading misinformation, and inciting fear among opposition groups by making subtle threats.[241] This escalation was evident not just in Moscow, but also in cities across Russia, where protesters faced similar levels of violent repression.[242]

In the months leading up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russian authorities escalated their campaign of March August of 2013, environmental activists, particularly members of the Environmental Watch of the North Caucasus (EWNC), faced repeated harassment, including arbitrary detentions and searches of their homes and offices. They were urged " not to publish its

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[240] "Дмитрий Монахов: "Сначала я видел руки полицейских, потом – их ботинки," "Коммерсантъ," 3 декабря 2017 г.
[241] Joel Bakan. *The Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Age of President Putin*.
[242] Joel Bakan. *The Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Age of President Putin*. New York: *Simon & Schuster*, 2007.

report on environmental consequences of the Olympic preparations in order "not to harm the country."'[243] One prominent activist, Yevgeny Vitishko, was sentenced to three years in a penal colony for allegedly damaging a fence around a protected forest area, a case widely seen as politically motivated due to his outspoken criticism of the environmental damage caused by Olympic construction. Journalists covering issues related to the Olympics, such as corruption, environmental destruction, and the exploitation of migrant workers, were also targeted. Some experienced surveillance, threats, and physical intimidation.

The actions of the FSB and police forces were not just limited to repression of protests; they were also used as tools to limit political expression in everyday life. Social media activists, journalists, and bloggers who expressed critical opinions online faced direct harassment by both the police and the FSB. In some cases, individuals who shared anti-government opinions were summoned for questioning, forced to delete posts, or even arrested on charges of "inciting extremism." This demonstrated a clear intention by the Russian government to control public discourse, using both the police and intelligence agencies to police not only the streets but also the digital sphere. The increased violence and coercion that the police and FSB employed against the population sent a clear signal to ordinary Russians: any form of protest, no matter how small, would be met with force. The use of these tactics effectively created a climate of fear, where individuals were reluctant to engage in public dissent for fear of retribution. Moreover, the state's use of violence through the police and FSB helped to foster a sense of disillusionment and passivity among the population, as many began to internalize the government's message that resistance would only lead to severe consequences.[244]

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[243] "Russia: Silencing Activists, Journalists Ahead of Sochi Games." *Human Rights Watch*, August 7, 2013.
[244] "Анатомия процесса: Приговор именин НТВ." Новая газета, 25 июля 2014.

Elimination of the Opposition

Starting in 2013, Putin escalated its tactics against political opposition, signaling a new phase of repression under his leadership. While Putin's first two terms were marked by the imprisonment of oligarchs critical of Putin, and the occasional harassment of activists, the period after 2013 saw an increasingly violent and systemic approach to eliminating political opponents. High-profile opposition figures like Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister and vocal critic of Putin, were assassinated, signaling the state's shift from legal and political pressure to more lethal and illegal methods. Nemtsov was shot dead in February 2015, just days before a major opposition rally in Moscow, a murder widely believed to have been politically motivated.[245] His murder, carried out in a highly visible location near the Kremlin, was a brazen act designed to intimidate not just opposition activists but also anyone within elite circles who might consider breaking ranks. Extrajudicial killings are the hallmark of a brutal dictatorship, and under Putin, they became a tool of state repression. These assassinations sent a clear message: no dissenter was safe. The reach of state violence extended beyond Russia’s borders, as seen in the Skripal poisoning, while domestic critics like journalist Anna Politkovskaya were silenced with impunity. With suspects often linked to state security, these killings reinforced that political opposition could be met with deadly consequences.[246]

[245] "How Putin's Russia Evolved from Tolerating to Suppressing Dissent." *Associated Press*, March 2023.
[246] Amy Knight. Orders to kill: the Putin regime and political murder. Thomas Dunne Books, 2017.

The 2013–2015 period saw a broader and more ruthless crackdown that extended beyond harassment and imprisonment to outright elimination. The Kremlin was able to maintain a degree of plausible deniability, washing its hands of direct involvement while ensuring its critics met deadly fates. However, the 2015 assassination of Boris Nemtsov marked a dangerous escalation. Killing a former deputy prime minister and a prominent member of the oligarchs was unprecedented, signaling that even those with deep ties to Russia's power structure were no longer untouchable.[247] In the years that followed, this pattern of repression expanded. A growing number of high-profile Russians, politicians, oligarchs, and former insiders, began meeting mysterious fates, often under bizarre circumstances. Business executives and government officials linked to the Kremlin's financial networks were found dead under suspicious conditions, with around 15 reportedly "falling out of windows," dying in unexplained accidents, or succumbing to sudden illnesses. The message was clear: no one was safe, and dissent—whether political or financial—could be met with lethal consequences. The Kremlin no longer needed plausible deniability; fear itself became the ultimate tool of control.[248]

The West viewed Russia's 2013 crackdown on dissent and protesters with growing alarm, interpreting it as a significant step toward authoritarianism. Governments, human rights organizations, and international media condemned the Kremlin's use of restrictive laws, digital surveillance, and police violence to suppress opposition. In one article Human Rights Watch observes, "The Russian government's clampdown on free speech comes as a part of a larger crackdown on civil society, unleashed after the 2011-2012 mass protests and Vladimir

[247] Евгений Королев. "СМИ Опубликовали Видеозапись Момента Убийства Немцова." РБК, 28 февраля 2015 г.
[248] Yuri Shvidkovsky. *The Political Assassinations of Russia's Opposition*. Moscow: Academic Press, 2019.

Putin's return to the presidency in May 2012."[249] The European Union and the United States criticized these measures, warning that they undermined free expression and democratic principles. U.S. State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland stated that the "foreign agent" law was being used to "intimidate and restrict the work of civil society,"[250] while the EU called on Russia to respect its obligations under international human rights agreements.[251] Beyond legal repression, the West was particularly concerned about the Russian government's use of digital surveillance to monitor and silence online dissent. Russian authorities increasingly employed sophisticated cyber tools to track activists, hack opposition websites, and prosecute individuals for social media posts critical of the government. Physical repression was another major concern, Western media widely covered violent crackdowns on protests, including the May 2013 LGBT rights demonstration in Moscow, where police detained activists and allowed far-right counter protesters to attack them without intervention. The brutal beating of activist Dmitry Monakhov by police during a July protest against Navalny's conviction further fueled Western condemnation. Amnesty International called the crackdown on protesters a "relentless assault on freedom of assembly," and the U.S. and EU issued statements demanding an end to politically motivated arrests and police violence.[252] Despite international criticism, Russian authorities continued to tighten control over opposition voices, reinforcing Western fears that the country was sliding deeper into authoritarian rule.

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[249] Human Rights Watch. *Online and On All Fronts: Russia's Assault on Freedom of Expression.* July 18, 2017.
[250] Trend News Agency. "U.S. Concerned Over Russia's Crackdown on Dissent." *Trend*, July 19, 2012.
[251] European Parliament. Resolution on the Rule of Law in Russia (2013/2667(RSP)). July 4, 2013.
[252] David Rohde and Arshad Mohammed. "Special Report: How the U.S. Made Its Putin Problem Worse." *Reuters*, April 18, 2014.

Epilogue

"Отродясь такого не было, и вот опять"
("This has never happened before, yet here we are again")

As the Russian government tightened its grip on information, many citizens remained oblivious to the growing unrest simmering beneath the surface. State-controlled media, serving as the Kremlin's propaganda machine, ignored or twisted coverage of mass protests, political crackdowns, and human rights abuses, crafting a warped reality where opposition was dismissed as extremism. Independent journalism was relentlessly attacked, silenced through censorship, intimidation, or outright force. For most Russians, the only access to unfiltered news came from external sources, particularly social media, an increasingly dangerous refuge as the government expanded its surveillance, cyber crackdowns, and legal persecution of dissenting voices. This control of information wasn't just about suppressing the truth; it was a carefully executed strategy to cement Putin's grip on power, particularly as Russia prepared for its grand spectacle—the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. The games were more than a showcase of athletic prowess; they were a dazzling display of state propaganda, designed to project Russia's strength, unity, and resurgence as a global power. But beneath the shimmering facade, history was being rewritten. The Kremlin paved over the dark past of ethnic cleansing and oppression in the Caucasus, whitewashing the very ground on which the Olympics stood. Sochi itself, once the site of the brutal extermination and forced expulsion of the Circassian people by the Russian Empire, was now rebranded as a symbol of national glory. Billions were poured into constructing an Olympic paradise, while the

regime orchestrated one of its most ruthless waves of repression, jailing opposition leaders, crushing protests, and erasing inconvenient truths. [253]

The Sochi 2014 opening ceremony was an immaculate illusion, a spectacle so precisely engineered that it felt almost unnatural. Beneath the floodlights, Russia's past was reassembled like a museum diorama, elegant, controlled, and eerily incomplete. A young girl drifted weightlessly through a dreamscape of Russian history, guiding the audience through an idealized vision of the nation's past. Ballet dancers twirled in perfect synchronization, embodying the grace of Swan Lake, a nod to imperial splendor untouched by the revolutions that followed. A vast, glowing troika of galloping horses charged across the stage, symbolizing the power and majesty of Russia's empire, though it carried no memory of the millions oppressed beneath its rule. Above, cosmonauts floated effortlessly through a glowing constellation, celebrating Soviet triumphs in space while the ghosts of purged scientists and silenced dissenters remained unseen. A grand mechanical sun rose over a stylized St. Petersburg, an emblem of enlightenment and progress, though its brilliance cast no light on the darker recesses of Russian history. Grand processions moved in sweeping, cinematic perfection, an intricate choreography that erased the fractures, failures, and forgotten lives that had shaped the nation just as much as its victories. But outside the stadium's glow, Russia's repressive reality played out in real time. Western journalists covering the games reported that their hotel rooms were bugged, their emails were monitored, and their equipment was stolen or tampered with. Some arrived to find their accommodations unfinished or unusable, a clear sign that the Russian government cared more about its global image than the comfort or safety of those reporting on the event. Activists who dared to protest during the games were immediately detained, some arrested simply for holding signs critical of the Kremlin. While

[253] Yuri Shmelyov and Paulina Paciorkowska. "Russia's Olympic Shame."

the world marveled at the grandeur of Russia's carefully staged self-image, Putin's security forces were actively silencing dissent just outside the Olympic venues.

Nothing illustrated this more clearly than the attack on Pussy Riot, as Cossack militia members whipped and pepper-sprayed the punk activists for daring to protest near an Olympic sign, a violent display of exactly the kind of oppression the Kremlin wanted the world to ignore. On the day of the attack, the group of five women and one man gathered about 20 miles from the Olympic venue. Uniformed Cossacks and plainclothes security personnel swiftly intervened. One Cossack appeared to use pepper spray, while others used whips to strike the performers, ripped off their masks, and destroyed their guitar. The incident lasted only a few minutes, during which one member of Pussy Riot was left with a bloodied face after being pushed to the ground. Although the police arrived shortly after, no arrests were made. [254] Tolokonnikova later reported on the incident through Twitter, "Cossacks attacked Pussy Riot by a Sochi 2014 banner, hitting us with whips and spraying us with teargas, as we were singing the song Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland." Later that day, the group held another impromptu performance near the Olympic rings in central Sochi, where they sang the same protest song. One member of the group played a plastic guitar, and an individual dressed as an Olympic mascot briefly joined them. Although police observed the performance, they did not intervene.[255]

As the Sochi Games came to a close in February 2014, the streets of Kyiv erupted in bloodshed. Dozens of protesters were cut down by sniper fire as Ukraine teetered on the edge of revolution, ignited by its government's sudden abandonment of an EU integration deal in favor of Moscow's grip. While the world cheered its final gold medalists in Sochi, Ukrainian President

[254] Alexandra Topping. "Pussy Riot Attacked with Whips by Cossack Militia at Sochi Winter Olympics."
[255] Alexandra Topping. "Pussy Riot Attacked with Whips by Cossack Militia at Sochi Winter Olympics."

Viktor Yanukovych fled Kyiv, seeking refuge in Russia. Days later, with the world still paralyzed by hesitation, Putin seized Crimea in a brazen land grab, staging an illegal referendum that was widely denounced with limited actions. These included some very tepid sanctions.[256] Instead of resistance, he found acquiescence.[257] The West's response, empty condemnations, weak sanctions, and no real consequences only emboldened him. He had tested the limits of global passivity and found them nonexistent. With each unchecked move, he refined his playbook: weaponizing propaganda, exploiting Western divisions, and methodically pushing the boundaries of what the world would tolerate. Crimea was just the beginning. His success there set the stage for further aggression in Ukraine, years of cyber warfare, and an ever-growing influence campaign designed to weaken democracies from within. And as the world turned a blind eye to creeping authoritarianism, it paved the way for something even more unthinkable, a world where strongmen could rise unchecked, their ambitions met not with resistance, but with silence.

[256] See also: Mikhail A. Alexseev and Henry E. Hale. "Crimea come what may: Do economic sanctions backfire politically?." Journal of peace research 57, no. 2 (2020): 344-359.
[257] Kateryna Kobernyk. "February 20 — the Darkest Day of Euromaidan." *Babel*, February 20, 2025.

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