INTERNATIONAL RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION

UKRAINIAN PRISM: TEN YEARS OF EXPERTISE



POLICY PAPER

THE ANATOMY OF RUSSIA'S REPRESSIVE APPARATUS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL OPPOSITION UNDER AUTHORITARIAN RULE

ANTON OKSENTIUK
MYKHAILO SINAUK
IAROSLAV CHORNOGOR

JUNE 2026

The Anatomy of Russia's Repressive Apparatus and the Prospects for Political Opposition under Authoritarian Rule

The policy paper was prepared within the "Russian and Belarusian Studies" Programme of the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" with the support of International Renaissance Foundation. The views expressed are the sole responsibility of the "Ukrainian Prism" and do not necessarily reflect the position of International Renaissance Foundation.

Authors:

Anton Oksentiuk,
Fellow, "Russian and Belarusian Studies" Programme,
Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism".

Mykhailo Sinauk,
Fellow, "Russian and Belarusian Studies" Programme,
Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism".

Iaroslav Chornogor,
PhD in History, Co-Founder of the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism".

Art and Technical Editor:

Anatolii Chernysh,
Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism".

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INTRODUCTION

The full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine was not only a consequence of the Russian regime's foreign policy evolution but also a reflection of profound transformations within its domestic political system. Over the past two decades, the Russian Federation has evolved from a managed democracy into a consolidated authoritarian regime, in which political competition, independent media, civil society, and opposition activity have increasingly come under state control. A key role in this process has been played by an expansive coercive and repressive apparatus that combines security services, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, administrative regulators, and instruments of information control.

Following the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, repressive mechanisms in Russia underwent further expansion and institutional consolidation. Legislation concerning "foreign agents," "extremism," "undesirable organizations," wartime censorship, and the "discrediting of the armed forces" became the foundation for the systematic restriction of political freedoms and the persecution of both domestic opponents of the regime and representatives of civil society. At the same time, the intensification of repression has been accompanied by the transformation of the system of state governance itself, as security and administrative institutions have become increasingly integrated into mechanisms of political control.

Understanding how this apparatus functions is of both academic and practical significance. For Ukraine and its international partners, analyzing the internal architecture of the Russian regime is a key element in assessing its resilience, potential vulnerabilities, and possible scenarios for political transformation in the Russian Federation. Of particular importance is the question of the Russian political opposition's ability to operate under increasing state pressure, as well as the prospects for the emergence of alternative centers of political influence in the medium and long term.

The first part of the study analyzes the institutional architecture of the Russian Federation's repressive apparatus, its key components, and the mechanisms governing their interaction. The second part is devoted to examining the internal logic of this system's functioning, the role of the personalist factor, inter-agency competition, and the impact of the full-scale war against Ukraine on the transformation of repressive practices. The concluding part examines the current state and prospects of the Russian political opposition, as well as possible scenarios for the development of the domestic political situation in Russia.

The key research objective of this study is to determine the extent to which the system of repressive control created by the Putin regime is capable of ensuring the long-term stability of the regime, and whether it simultaneously lays the groundwork for future political crises, intra-elite conflicts, and the transformation of Russian statehood.

Therefore, the study of the Russian Federation's repressive apparatus is not only an attempt to describe the mechanisms of contemporary Russian authoritarianism, but also a tool for

assessing potential scenarios of Russia's future development and their implications for the security of Ukraine, Europe, and the international order as a whole.

CHAPTER 1. The Institutional and Functional Anatomy of the Russian Federation's Repressive Apparatus

1.1. The Security and Intelligence Bloc

The security and intelligence bloc of the Russian Federation is more than a collection of law enforcement agencies; it is a complex, hierarchically structured system of state security and control, in which the imperatives of national security are closely integrated with the task of sustaining the political stability of the incumbent regime. This apparatus, whose institutional genealogy can be traced from the Tsarist Okhrana to the contemporary security system, operates within a competitive inter-agency environment, where individual services vie for resources, influence, and political support from the state leadership, while remaining functionally complementary in the implementation of domestic and foreign policy.

One of the key institutional elements of the contemporary political system of the Russian Federation is the Federal Security Service (FSB). Over the past twenty-five years, this institution has undergone a functional transformation, evolving from a conventional security service into a central actor of state governance, marked by a high concentration of authority in the field of security and control over strategic economic resources. The FSB's institutional lineage from the Cheka-KGB has shaped the specific features of its operational culture, characterized by extensive reliance on agent networks, covert operations, and procedural coercion. Unlike intelligence service models in democratic systems, where mechanisms of parliamentary, judicial, and civilian oversight formally exist, the Russian model largely concentrates accountability within the presidential vertical of power. The ideological rationale for the security corps' privileged position has been articulated through the concept of a "new nobility," publicly formulated by Nikolai Patrushev. This framework positions the officer corps as a distinct governing stratum endowed with significant authority in state administration. The legal framework governing the agency, based on the 1995 Federal Law "On the Federal Security Service" and its subsequent amendments, formally declares the principle of legality. However, it is characterized by a limited level of external oversight, concentrating the primary mechanisms of accountability within the institution of the presidency, which results in a high degree of institutional autonomy of the service.

The structural architecture of the FSB allows it to be classified as an autonomous subsystem within the structure of the state apparatus, where the Economic Security Service (SEB), through its specialized Directorates "K" and "P," monitors and oversees the financial and industrial sectors, becoming integrated into the regulation of large-scale business. Meanwhile, the Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order and the Fight against Terrorism (SZKSBT) performs political security functions by ensuring control over manifestations of political opposition. By 2026, this has been accompanied by a growing number of criminal proceedings under articles related to "extremism" and "espionage." At the same time, the Internal Security Directorate (USB) functions as an instrument of internal

control and ensures the loyalty of personnel, while the Fifth Service (the Service for Operational Information and International Relations) conducts external intelligence functions across the post-Soviet space, participating in the implementation of the Russian Federation's foreign policy objectives, particularly with regard to Ukraine. The inclusion of its own penitentiary institutions within the agency's structure, notably the Lefortovo pretrial detention facility (SIZO), ensures the detention of individuals involved in cases investigated or handled by the FSB, while empirical evidence of intensified law enforcement activity is reflected in a fourfold increase in the number of criminal proceedings on charges of high treason compared to 2015. In the foreign policy sphere, the FSB has been associated in Western investigations and judicial materials with so-called "active measures," including cyber operations and cross-border operations against designated targets, most notably in the case of Alexander Litvinenko. This points to the treatment of international space as a potential area of operational activity for Russian security services. The FSB's functional role within the current political regime is that it simultaneously helps ensure regime stability and serves as one of the key institutions reproducing the existing model of power.

While the FSB serves as one of the key analytical, counterintelligence, and operational centers of the security system, the National Guard of Russia (Rosgvardiya) is institutionalized as the principal instrument for coercively maintaining internal stability. The establishment of this agency in 2016 by presidential decree reflected the political leadership's intent to strengthen control over domestic political processes and to minimize the risks of mass protests and state destabilization. The formation of Rosgvardiya took place through the consolidation of existing coercive resources, uniting approximately 140,000 personnel from the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, specialized police units (OMON) and rapid response units (SOBR), as well as non-departmental security forces. This brought the total size of the structure to approximately 400,000 personnel, including regional units in the Chechen Republic. The appointment of Army General Viktor Zolotov, who has long-standing personal ties to the President of Russia, as the head of the agency ensured a high level of political loyalty within the service. Direct subordination to the President and the absence of effective mechanisms of external civilian oversight over the agency's activities have significantly expanded its autonomy within the system of state governance. In practice, Rosgvardiya plays a key role in maintaining public order during political protests, as demonstrated during the mass demonstrations of 2021. Following the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its functions were expanded to include participation in combat operations and the execution of tasks in the occupied territories. In this context, Rosgvardiya units are engaged in the protection of administrative facilities, population control, and countering organized resistance.

Following the Wagner PMC mutiny in 2023, the agency was granted the right to use heavy weaponry, including armored vehicles and tanks, which further strengthened its role in ensuring internal security. In a broader context, Rosgvardiya constitutes an element of the militarization of domestic political governance, within which protest activity and public dissent are increasingly framed through the lens of security threats and the concept of "color revolutions."

Against the backdrop of the institutional strengthening of Rosgvardiya and the expansion of FSB powers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation has experienced a significant reduction in its functional capacity as powers were redistributed to other security structures. Historically, the MVD occupied a central position within the system of law enforcement agencies. However, following the 2011 reform, which provided for the transformation of the *militsiya* into the *politsiya* and formally aimed at raising professional standards within the service, a gradual narrowing of its political and administrative influence has been observed. A significant stage in this process was the removal in 2016 of Special Purpose Mobile Units (OMON), Special Rapid Response Units (SOBR), and the Internal Troops from the jurisdiction of the MVD and their transfer to the newly established Rosgvardiya. A further reduction of the ministry's coercive component occurred in 2023 following the transfer of the special-purpose units "Grom" to Rosgvardiya jurisdiction. Under these conditions, the functional model of the MVD under the leadership of Vladimir Kolokoltsev is primarily focused on the performance of policing and administrative tasks, including the investigation of general criminal offenses, traffic regulation, and the implementation of migration policy. Despite the reduction of its own coercive resources, the ministry continues to perform important internal security functions, providing procedural support for arrests, documenting offenses, and implementing law enforcement procedures during mass political demonstrations. The MVD also plays a distinct role in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, where, through its Main Directorate for Migration Affairs (GUVM), it implements the policy of granting Russian citizenship to the local population. In academic literature, this process is often interpreted as an instrument for integrating occupied territories into the Russian political and legal space. Thus, the contemporary MVD performs predominantly administrative, regulatory, and law enforcement functions, while the bulk of competencies in the areas of internal security, arms control, and countering threats to state security is concentrated within the remit of the FSB and Rosgvardiya, which defines its position within the contemporary structure of Russia's security sector.

The Federal Protective Service of the Russian Federation (FSO) occupies a distinct position within the system of security institutions, performing protective security functions while also shaping the information environment surrounding the head of state. Historically, the service is the successor to the Ninth Directorate of the KGB of the USSR, which determined its competencies not only in the sphere of physical protection for high-ranking officials but also in organizing secure communication channels and supporting executive decision-making.

Within the structure of the FSO's activities, an important component is the conduct of restricted-access sociological surveys and monitoring assessments used to brief the state leadership. These materials are employed as one of the sources for assessing the socio-political situation, alongside other departmental and official data.

The legal and regulatory framework governing the activities of the FSO provides for expanded powers in the field of state protection. In particular, legislative amendments adopted in 2017 granted the service the authority to expropriate land plots for state needs, restrict traffic movement, and temporarily limit the operation of communication systems within the scope of protective measures. Through the Special Communications and

Information Service (FSO Spetssvyaz), the agency ensures the functioning of governmental communications and provides technical support for key state administration systems, including secure data transmission channels.

Taken together, these functions shape the institutional role of the FSO as an agency responsible not only for the physical protection of officials but also for organizing a secure communication environment and the technical infrastructure of state governance. Within this role, the service interacts with other state authorities, and its personnel may be assigned to work in regional administrations or state-owned companies as part of personnel rotation mechanisms.

Within the external dimension of the Russian Federation's security apparatus, an important role is played by the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GU GSh, commonly referred to as the GRU), which is responsible for military intelligence and the conduct of special operations. The agency retains a significant portion of its organizational and human resource legacy from the Soviet period, which provides it with advanced human intelligence and operational capabilities.

The contemporary structure of the GRU includes a number of specialized units oriented toward different areas of intelligence and operational activity. Among them, Unit 74455 is frequently mentioned in open sources in connection with cyber operations and attacks on information systems, while Unit 29155 is associated in media reports and analytical assessments with the conduct of covert operations, including elements of sabotage and influence activities outside the Russian Federation. Open-source materials also contain references to the use in certain incidents of influence assets and specialized operational capabilities within operations that have been characterized by international investigative bodies as elements of state-directed special operations. These assessments are based on journalistic investigations and data provided by law enforcement agencies of various countries.

After 2023, analytical sources also describe the involvement of part of the resources associated with the former Wagner PMC in structures operating in a number of regions in Africa. These materials refer to the emergence of new organizational formats of interaction in the sphere of security and military presence outside the Russian Federation.

In its internal dimension, the GRU performs military intelligence functions, including those related to the assessment of the operational situation, counterintelligence coordination within the Armed Forces, and the provision of intelligence support for military planning.

An externally oriented element of Russia's security architecture is the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR RF), which, under the leadership of Sergei Naryshkin, is evolving into a structure that combines classical human intelligence (HUMINT) with elements of analytical, information, and cyber activity. It is the successor to the First Chief Directorate of the KGB of the USSR and retains traditional mechanisms of foreign intelligence while adapting them to the contemporary international environment. The SVR's

activities encompass the collection and analysis of intelligence data, alongside the support of information operations and political assessments utilized in state-level decision-making processes. A distinct domain is cyber intelligence and related operations involving cyber groups that Western governments and expert assessments have linked to APT29 (Cozy Bear). Such instruments are used to gain access to information resources, profile political opponents, and collect data that may be shared with other security agencies through inter-agency cooperation. In the public rhetoric of the service's leadership, references are made to external threats and potential scenarios of destabilization in neighboring states, shaping the informational context of Russia's foreign policy positioning. Taken together, the SVR performs the function of foreign intelligence and information support for state policy, providing analytical backing and expanding the Russian Federation's external influence within the international environment.

Thus, as of 2026, the security architecture of the Russian Federation constitutes a closed functional cycle. The SVR and the GRU provide the external intelligence, information, and operational component of the regime; the FSO and the FSB ensure protective security, counterintelligence control, secure communications, elite monitoring, and the internal stability of the institution of presidential power; while Rosgvardiya and the MVD form the domestic coercive and law-enforcement component, including responses to protest activity and public dissent. Taken together, these institutions constitute a high-intensity, internally competitive mechanism of regime self-preservation.

1.2. The Law Enforcement and Judicial Bloc

The law enforcement and judicial bloc of the Russian Federation comprises the judiciary, the Prosecutor's Office, and the Investigative Committee, and formally performs the classical functions of criminal justice, including investigation, prosecutorial oversight, the maintenance of public prosecution, and judicial adjudication. At the same time, in politically significant cases, this system increasingly functions not as an independent mechanism of legal arbitration but as an instrument for formalizing decisions generated within the political and security vertical of power. Consequently, its role extends beyond the application of criminal and administrative law to encompass the legitimization of repressive practices through formal legal procedures.

The central element of this subsystem is the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation (SKR), established in 2011 as an independent federal state body. Removed from the jurisdiction of the Prosecutor General's Office, the Committee was placed under the authority of the President of the Russian Federation. Historically, the agency is sometimes compared to the investigative offices of the Petrine era, which operated under direct imperial control. In the contemporary context, this is utilized as an analogy for the centralized nature of the SKR's leadership. Under the leadership of Alexander Bastrykin, the Investigative Committee serves as the principal body of pre-trial investigation for criminal cases falling

within its jurisdiction, including serious crimes against the person, economic offenses, and certain categories of cases related to state security. The agency conducts pre-trial investigations, prepares indictments, and forwards case materials to the courts for adjudication. Across various periods, the SKR has handled high-profile criminal cases involving senior public officials and business representatives, reflecting its role within the state system of criminal prosecution. The SKR's competence also includes the investigation of specific offenses related to public statements or actions qualified under relevant articles of criminal legislation, particularly in the spheres of public information and state security. Within the framework of inter-agency cooperation, the SKR collaborates with other law enforcement bodies, including the FSB, in investigating complex criminal cases. In politically sensitive cases, this broad mandate enables the SKR to act not merely as an investigative body, but as an instrument for the criminalization of opposition, anti-war, or civic activity.

The second pivotal component of the law enforcement and judicial subsystem is the Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation, which exercises oversight over compliance with the law and operates as a centralized, vertical system under the Prosecutor General. Its organizational structure is enshrined in the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation and operates through a strict hierarchical chain of command, ensuring uniform standards of supervisory and prosecutorial practice throughout the country. Its primary functions include general oversight of law enforcement by state authorities, organizations, and citizens, as well as the maintenance of public prosecution in court proceedings.

Within the scope of its authority, the Prosecutor's Office participates in the regulation of the legal status of non-profit organizations and media outlets, including through procedures for designating certain entities as "undesirable" or subject to restrictive legal regimes under the legislation of the Russian Federation. The agency also coordinates the enforcement of laws on "foreign agents" and engages in law enforcement practices intended to restrict the activities of organizations deemed to be in violation of Russian legal requirements. In cases involving "foreign agents," "undesirable organizations," extremism, and wartime censorship, the Prosecutor's Office performs not only a supervisory function but also a political-legal one. In this capacity, it translates the state's administrative and ideological priorities into procedurally formalized charges.

Under the leadership of Igor Krasnov, the Prosecutor General's Office exercises procedural oversight in high-profile criminal cases, ensuring the maintenance of public prosecution and coordination with investigative bodies. Krasnov previously served within the system of the Investigative Committee, where he participated in the investigation of a number of prominent criminal cases, which shaped his experience in the field of criminal prosecution. In practical terms, the Prosecutor General's Office interacts with the Investigative Committee and other security agencies within the framework of a unified criminal justice process, including the maintenance of prosecution in cases involving representatives of the political and economic elite.

Thus, the Prosecutor's Office functions as a supervisory and procedural body that ensures the enforcement of legislation and state participation in criminal proceedings, remaining an integrated component of the broader law enforcement system of the Russian Federation.

The final stage of the law enforcement and judicial subsystem is the court system of the Russian Federation, which is responsible for adjudicating criminal, civil, and administrative cases and issuing court rulings in accordance with applicable legislation. Formally, the judiciary is based on the principles of judicial independence and the separation of powers enshrined in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. It comprises the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, federal courts of general jurisdiction, and arbitration courts.

The 2020 constitutional amendments revised the procedures governing the composition and appointment of the higher judicial bodies. In particular, the President's powers in the appointment and dismissal of judges were expanded, altering the balance of institutional autonomy within the judiciary. Organizationally, the judicial system operates as a hierarchical structure wherein cases are distributed among courts of different levels, while administrative management is exercised through court chairpersons and the Judicial Department attached to the Supreme Court. In practice, courts adjudicate a wide range of cases, including criminal proceedings referred by investigative bodies, and ensure the application of criminal and administrative law. In complex or high-profile cases, courts may conduct hearings in closed or partially closed formats, while verdicts in politically significant cases often remain heavily dependent on materials submitted by the state prosecution.

Within the judicial system, special legal regimes are also applied, including legislation concerning "foreign agents," "extremism," and other categories of cases regulating the activities of specific organizations and individuals. Furthermore, certain provisions of criminal law provide for the possibility of modifying criminal penalties or granting exemption from liability under specified conditions, notably in connection with mobilization measures and enlistment for military service.

Consequently, the judicial system of the Russian Federation performs the function of the final stage of the criminal justice process, ensuring the legal formalization of decisions taken at earlier stages of law enforcement and sustaining the operation of the state's broader legal framework.

Thus, the interplay between the Investigative Committee, the Prosecutor's Office, and the courts forms a sequential criminal justice chain wherein each institution executes its formally assigned function. At the same time, in politically significant cases, this chain operates not only as a mechanism of criminal justice but also as an instrument for the legal formalization of politically motivated prosecution. The investigative authorities compile the case materials, the Prosecutor's Office ensures procedural supervision and supports the prosecution, while the judicial system provides the final legal form of the decision.

1.3. The Control-Administrative Bloc

The control-administrative bloc of the Russian Federation encompasses institutions that rely less on direct coercion and more on the legal, administrative, informational, and status-based restrictions on individuals and organizations deemed undesirable by the state. Through registers, special legal regimes, migration procedures, enforcement proceedings, and information regulation, this subsystem creates conditions for the professional, financial, organizational, and public isolation of political opponents. Consequently, its primary function is to translate macro-level political control into the routines of everyday administrative practice.

A key hub of ideological and legal regulation is the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, which, under the leadership of Konstantin Chuychenko, develops and implements state legal policy while maintaining the regulatory framework governing specific institutions and organizations. The agency participates in the preparation of legislative initiatives and the development of secondary regulations that define the legal framework of public administration. The Ministry of Justice coordinates and oversees the activities of the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) and the Federal Bailiff Service (FSSP), which are part of the system of enforcement proceedings and the execution of court decisions. Through the FSSP, procedures for debt collection, asset seizure, and enforcement of judicial decisions in criminal and civil cases are implemented, including coercive enforcement measures applied to both individuals and legal entities.

In addition, the Ministry plays a pivotal role in administering registers of legal entities and individuals subject to special legal regimes, in particular the register of "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations" under the current legislation of the Russian Federation. These mechanisms impose additional requirements on the activities of the respective entities, including enhanced financial and administrative reporting obligations. In a political context, these registers perform not only a record-keeping function but also a restrictive one: they mark an individual or organization as potentially dangerous, complicate access to funding, public activity, and cooperation with other structures, and lay the groundwork for subsequent administrative or criminal prosecution.

Since the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) and the Federal Bailiff Service (FSSP) are organizationally subordinated to the Ministry of Justice, the ministry is also implicated in the enforcement and penitentiary dimensions of state coercion. At the same time, a direct analysis of these institutions is more appropriately placed within a separate penitentiary-enforcement subsystem, as it is within this domain that administrative and judicial decisions are translated into tangible forms of isolation, asset-related pressure, and mobility control.

Thus, the Ministry of Justice executes the functions of regulatory oversight, coordination of enforcement services, and the implementation of special legal regimes within the system of state legal administration of the Russian Federation.

Administrative control over populations and territories within migration policy is exercised by the Main Directorate for Migration Affairs (GUVM) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) of the Russian Federation. This unit is responsible for implementing state policy regarding migration, citizenship, registration procedures, and monitoring the residency and status of foreign nationals within the Russian Federation. In 2016, the Federal Migration Service (FMS) was abolished as an independent agency, and its functions were transferred directly into the MVD framework. As a result, an integrated migration control structure was established, combining administrative and law enforcement powers and operating in coordination with other state bodies, including security agencies.

As of 2026, the GUVM of the MVD of the Russian Federation performs functions related to citizenship processing, passport issuance, registration of place of residence, and monitoring of migration regimes. A separate area of activity of the migration authorities concerns the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. In this context, the Russian authorities use passportization, population registration, and the determination of legal status as instruments for integrating the occupied territories into Russia's political and legal framework.

Consequently, the migration authorities function as an integral component of the administrative-legal framework of state governance, ensuring the regulation of population movements and the determination of the legal status of both citizens and foreign nationals within the Russian Federation.

The administrative subsystem also employs instruments regulating the legal status of citizens within the framework of cross-border interactions involving individuals residing abroad. Through institutional coordination between the MVD, the Ministry of Justice, and the consular institutions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, restrictions may arise regarding the remote issuance or renewal of passport documents, as well as the provision of certain consular services to citizens subject to specific legal or administrative procedures. This may affect their migration status in countries of residence and *necessi*tate personal engagement with Russian state authorities.

A distinct element of regulatory control is the institution of termination or revocation of citizenship for naturalized individuals under conditions prescribed by law, particularly in connection with actions classified as posing a threat to national security or violating established legal norms. This mechanism makes the stability of citizenship status dependent on compliance with current legislation.
Taken together, the Ministry of Justice and the migration authorities of the MVD of the Russian Federation form an integrated system of administrative-legal regulation that encompasses migration control, registration procedures, and the legal status of specific categories of individuals. The mechanisms employed are designed to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements and to sustain the functioning of the current system of public administration. Within this context, these instruments serve as part of a broader model of state regulation, in which administrative and legal procedures govern the state's interaction with citizens both inside Russia and abroad.

The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor, or RKN) occupies a pivotal position within this system. Its evolution from its establishment in 2008 to its current role in 2026 reflects the transformation of a technical regulatory body into a core instrument of state control over the information space. The systematic blocking of digital resources and restrictions on access to them have substantially eroded the practical exercise of free speech guarantees formally enshrined in Article 29 of the Constitution.

The contemporary operational model of Roskomnadzor (RKN) relies on integration with other state institutions and the deployment of its subordinate Main Radio Frequency Center (GRChTs) as a primary tool for monitoring the digital environment. Within this system, information flows are monitored, and the agency responds to content that falls under legally defined restrictions. The territorial bodies of the agency also operate in specific regions where specialized models of information space regulation are applied, including restrictions on access to certain information resources and platforms.

After 2022, Roskomnadzor effectively emerged as one of the primary operators of wartime censorship, ensuring the blocking of independent media, restricting access to international platforms, exerting pressure on VPN services, and overseeing compliance with requirements for the removal of content that the authorities classify as "discrediting" the armed forces or disseminating "fake news." Concurrently, it enforces the removal of other politically sensitive content deemed to violate Russian legislation or to pose risks to the regime's information stability. By 2026, the development of regulatory mechanisms has driven further automation in information space monitoring, utilizing algorithmic content analysis systems integrated at the internet service provider level. In addition, the technical regulation of network traffic continues to intensify, including restrictions on access to selected circumvention tools and the expansion of infrastructure for a managed internet environment. In this context, mechanisms are being developed to privilege certain domestic platforms within the broader architecture of network access.

In the international dimension, the activities of RKN partially correlate with global trends in state regulation of the digital space, including practices of centralized control over internet infrastructure, content filtering, and the strengthening of the state's role in governing digital platforms. Domestically, the agency functions as a regulator of the information environment, enforcing legal norms across mass media and digital communications while contributing to the state's overarching model of information governance.

1.4. The Penitentiary and Enforcement Bloc

The penitentiary and enforcement bloc of the Russian Federation constitutes the final component of the state coercion apparatus. It includes the Federal Penitentiary Service

(FSIN), the Border Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Federal Bailiff Service (FSSP). Formally, these institutions control the movement of individuals, enforce judicial decisions, and administer detention regimes. At the same time, in politically significant cases, these functions acquire a repressive dimension, as they enable the state to isolate opponents, restrict their property resources, and complicate their ability to leave or return to the country.

The Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation (FSIN) is the central institution of the penal system and operates under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. It administers the network of correctional institutions and is responsible for carrying out custodial sentences and other forms of criminal punishment. The agency's leadership oversees an expansive system of facilities and personnel that ensures the functioning of the penitentiary system throughout the country.

In politically significant cases, the FSIN performs not only a penitentiary function but also a disciplinary one. Conditions of detention, transfers to disciplinary isolation units, restrictions on communication with the outside world, difficulties in accessing medical care, and placement in remote penal colonies may be used as instruments of additional pressure on political prisoners.

After the start of the full-scale war in 2022, the penitentiary system also became integrated into wartime mobilization processes through the recruitment of convicted prisoners for participation in military operations against Ukraine. This development altered the function of part of the correctional system: alongside their role as institutions of confinement, certain facilities came to serve as a resource base for replenishing military units.

The Federal Bailiff Service (FSSP) serves as the state body responsible for the compulsory enforcement of judicial decisions and occupies a central position within the system of asset recovery and the execution of legal acts. It ensures the implementation of rulings issued by courts and other authorized bodies regarding both pecuniary and non-pecuniary obligations. Throughout the administrative reforms of the 2010s, the status of the FSSP was strengthened as an executive authority vested with law enforcement functions, including the application of compulsory enforcement measures. Such measures encompass asset seizure, the collection of funds from bank accounts, restrictions on international travel in cases of outstanding debts or non-compliance with judicial decisions, as well as other actions provided for under enforcement proceedings legislation. The FSSP interacts with the judiciary, the banking system, and other state bodies to ensure the execution of legally binding decisions. Within this framework, the service acts as a specialized financial and administrative enforcement mechanism that ensures the implementation of judicial decisions in the property domain and monitors compliance with obligations by both individuals and legal entities.

Specialized units within the FSSP handle enforcement proceedings concerning organizations and individuals included in special registers or subjected to restrictive measures under

current legislation. Within its competence, the service ensures the compulsory enforcement of financial sanctions, fines, and other decisions issued in administrative and criminal cases.

In politically motivated cases, the FSSP functions as an instrument of economic pressure against activists, journalists, "foreign agents," or individuals associated with opposition activity. This is achieved through fines, freezing of bank accounts, asset seizure, and restrictions on international travel.

The final component of the border control structure is the FSB Border Service (PS FSB). Following the liquidation of the independent Federal Border Service in 2003 and its incorporation into the FSB, border agencies were integrated into the broader structure of the security service. As a result, border functions were combined with operational tasks, including counterintelligence activities and information exchange within the framework of inter-agency cooperation. Formally, the PS FSB ensures oversight over state border crossings and administers the databases utilized for screening individuals during entry and exit procedures. In a political context, however, border control can be used as an instrument for restricting mobility. Through inter-agency databases, exit restrictions, the confiscation of travel documents, or additional screenings at checkpoints, the state can restrict the departure of individuals who are subject to scrutiny by security or administrative authorities.

The agency also interacts with other state bodies, including military commissariats and migration authorities, in the exchange of information necessary for the implementation of legislation on military registration, migration control, and the border regime. This ensures the coherence of state institutions in regulating the movement of individuals. At the international level, border control authorities cooperate with counterparts from other states within the scope of existing bilateral and multilateral agreements, specifically regarding border regimes, information sharing, and extradition procedures in cases provided for under international law. Overall, the FSB Border Service performs the function of primary control over the movement of individuals across the state border and constitutes an integral component of the overarching system of administrative, migration, and security regulation. It ensures the implementation of state policy in the field of border security and coordination with other executive authorities.

Consequently, in combination with other elements of the executive and penitentiary subsystems, the FSB Border Service forms part of the broader structure of state control over population mobility and the enforcement of legal restrictions established by legislation.

The interaction between the FSIN, the FSSP, and the PS FSB constitutes a closed system of state coercion, in which different institutions perform complementary functions of control and enforcement. The Federal Bailiff Service ensures the execution of financial and property-related sanctions, the FSB Border Service controls the movement of individuals across the state border, and the penitentiary system is responsible for implementing court decisions involving deprivation of liberty.

Taken together, these elements form a continuous chain of administrative and legal enforcement, ranging from the imposition of financial and statutory restrictions to the execution of court decisions within penitentiary institutions. This structure ensures the integration of different levels of state control – property-related, migration-related, and penitentiary-enforcement. As a result, a coherent law-enforcement framework is established, within which various executive bodies coordinate their actions to ensure the implementation of legislation and judicial decisions.

1.5. The Repressive Cycle

The repressive cycle in the Russian Federation functions as an organized state process in which law enforcement and punitive practices are implemented through a sequence of administrative and procedural stages, ranging from the ideological labeling of an individual or organization to the application of corresponding criminal, financial, and penitentiary restrictions.

The initial stage of the repressive cycle involves the political and administrative labeling of an individual or organization as a potential threat. At this stage, a pivotal role is played by the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Justice, and related regulatory mechanisms, which establish the normative framework and maintain special registers such as those of "foreign agents," "undesirable organizations," and "extremists and terrorists." Formally, these registers serve legal and administrative record-keeping purposes. However, in practice, they are used to restrict funding, public activities, cooperation with other entities, and access to audiences for non-systemic political actors, civil society activists, independent media outlets, and civil society organizations. Moreover, such designations often establish the legal groundwork for subsequent administrative or criminal prosecution.

The next stage involves the engagement of operational and investigative bodies, namely the FSB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation (SKR). The FSB provides operational support, intelligence gathering, and digital surveillance; the MVD performs functions related to initial detention, the documentation of administrative or criminal incidents, and police support; while the Investigative Committee transforms the collected materials into formal criminal proceedings. In the context of efforts directed against domestic opposition, particular importance is attached to legal provisions concerning "extremism," high treason, the "discrediting" of the armed forces, the dissemination of "false information" about the military, and participation in the activities of "undesirable" organizations. At this stage, the Prosecutor's Office performs not only a supervisory role but also a legitimizing function, providing the procedural framework for criminal charges and supporting the position of the investigative authorities.

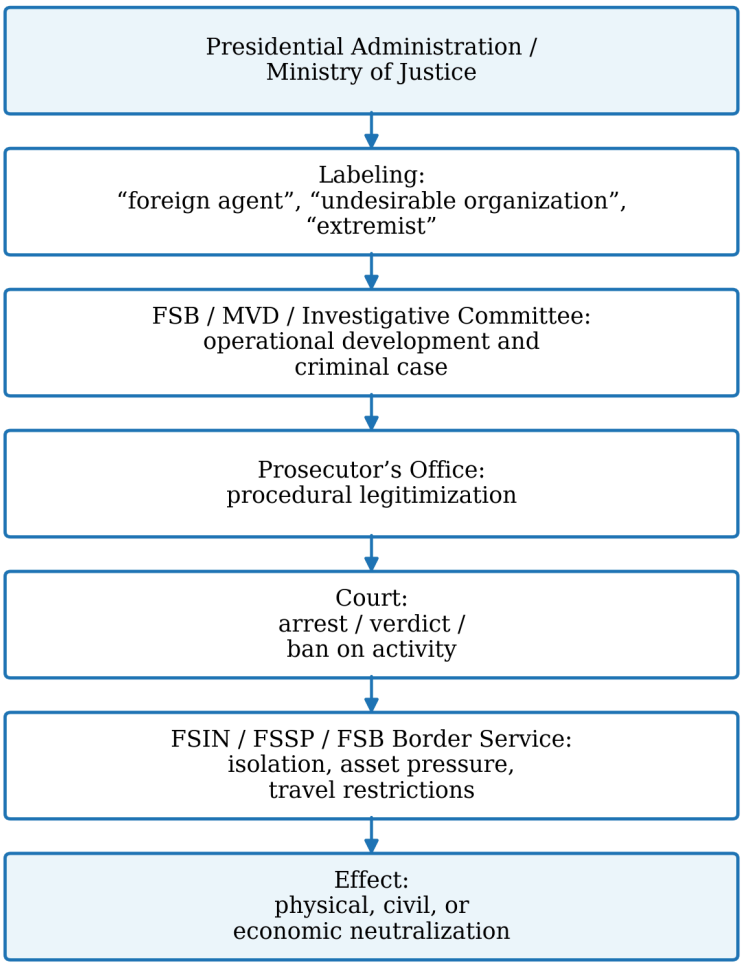
The judicial stage completes the legal formalization of the prosecution. Formally, the court system examines cases in accordance with established procedural rules. However, in

politically significant or high-profile cases, Russian courts are strongly shaped by the political context in which such proceedings take place. Closed or partially closed hearings are a common feature of politically sensitive cases.

The final stage of the repressive cycle entails the execution of adopted decisions and the conversion of legal status into tangible restrictions imposed on an individual or organization. The Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) ensures the isolation of convicts and the application of custodial control within the penitentiary system. In politically significant cases, this may be accompanied by additional forms of pressure through detention conditions, communication restrictions, and disciplinary measures. The Federal Bailiff Service (FSSP) implements the property-related dimension of prosecution through freezing of bank accounts, enforcement of fines, confiscatory measures, and restrictions on financial activity. The FSB Border Service (PS FSB) closes this cycle through control over the ability to leave the country, screening against restriction databases, the confiscation of documents, and other forms of border control.

Taken together, these stages constitute not merely a sequential law enforcement system but a repressive cycle in which administrative labeling, operational surveillance, investigation, judicial proceedings, enforcement procedures, penitentiary isolation, and border control mutually reinforce one another. This sequence enables the state to translate political disloyalty or civic activism into legal categories of offenses and subsequently into concrete restrictions on rights, property, freedom of movement, and physical liberty.

Repressive Cycle in Russia



CHAPTER 2. Interaction, Competition, and the Logic of the System's Functioning

The defining characteristic of the institutional structure of Russia's repressive apparatus is that the security, law enforcement, and administrative institutions themselves do not, by their mere existence, constitute the fully functioning mechanism that operates within the contemporary Russian political system. Rather, this system has been shaped to a significant extent by Vladimir Putin as a model of governance in which the practical functioning of the repressive apparatus depends on two interrelated factors: the formal powers of state institutions and, more importantly, an informal hierarchy of loyalty and proximity to the president. Regardless of how the powers and functions of a particular state institution are defined in Russian legislation, it is Putin who, acting as the sole effective arbiter within Russia's political system, ultimately determines how these institutions operate in any given political period.

In this context, the central factor is the combination of vertical centralization and internal competition among different institutions. This model has functioned for decades since Vladimir Putin's rise to power. At the same time, recent developments have revealed signs that the current system is increasingly facing internal strain – driven by the excessive personalization of governance, intensifying competition within the state apparatus, and the escalating costs of maintaining repressive stability.

This chapter demonstrates that the repressive apparatus in modern Russia functions not only as a mechanism for controlling the opposition and civil society, but also as a tool for managing the entire power structure. The absence of a fully monolithic structure within the ruling system, as well as the possibility of using repression against members of the political elite itself, serve a disciplinary function with regard to officials, regional authorities, business groups, and security agencies. As a result, their status, access to resources, and political security remain dependent on the will of a single arbiter – Vladimir Putin.

2.1. Centralization of the System around Presidential Power

In practice, the contemporary centralized system of power in Russia, within which all key decisions regarding the country's domestic and foreign policy are made directly by Vladimir Putin, has taken shape over several decades. By 2026, the architecture of Russian power represents a consolidated model of personalist dictatorship in which the principal elements of the repressive and administrative apparatus revolve around the figure of the president. The foundations of the current hyper-centralization were laid in the 1990s through the constitutional consolidation of executive dominance and the weakness of effective mechanisms of institutional checks and balances. The rapid rise of Vladimir Putin was a

direct consequence of these circumstances, and his accession to the presidency marked the transition from the chaotic oligarchic competition of the 1990s to a more ordered model, in which vast political and economic resources were gradually subordinated to a single center of power.

In fact, this centralization can be divided into two main stages. The first stage involved the gradual construction of a presidential vertical of power through the weakening of regional elites. The decisive effect of this transformation lay not so much in a formal change in the legal status of the regions, but rather in the restructuring of the actual chain of accountability. Local repressive and law enforcement mechanisms became increasingly less coordinated with regional authorities and became increasingly oriented toward the federal center, presidential envoys, and the Presidential Administration. The decisive phase of this logic was the abolition of direct gubernatorial elections and the gradual elimination of the institution of elected mayors, effectively converting the country's administrative structure from a nominally federal system into a de facto unitary model, in which regional elites became heavily dependent on political and budgetary redistribution by the federal center.

The second stage was the tightening of political control following the protests of 2011–2012. At this stage, the focus of the Russian authorities shifted sharply toward intensifying control over civil society through bureaucratic and legal instruments combined with selective criminal and administrative prosecutions. Crucial was not only the adoption of repressive laws and regulations, but also the fact that the entire personnel policy underpinning the practical implementation of repression was already completely tied to the president. It was the Russian president who appointed the heads of the security sector, prosecutors, and federal judges. In practice, this meant that Putin no longer needed to personally manage every repressive criminal or administrative case. Instead, he set the general priorities, controlled personnel rotations, and defined the informal boundaries of activity for the repressive apparatus embodied by the security agencies.

It is important to note that even the highly controlled political system formed by 2016 appears not to have satisfied Putin's desire for further control over the state. It is precisely through this lens that one should view the creation of Rosgvardiya (the National Guard of Russia) in 2016, which is directly subordinated to the president. The 2020 constitutional amendments elevated centralization around the president to the constitutional level. From then on, the president became not only the political center of the system, but also the formal guarantor of the coordinated functioning of the bodies that make up the "unified system of public power." This system includes federal authorities, authorities of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, and local self-government bodies. In other words, the constitutional formula of a "unified system of public power" legally solidified a trend that had actually been forming over the previous decades: the subordination of various levels of governance to a single presidential center.

In this design, the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation plays the role of a strategic center that initiates political cycles, coordinates the work of formally civilian ministries, and provides the managerial formulation of presidential decisions. A special place

in this hierarchy is occupied by the political bloc of the Presidential Administration, which under Sergei Kiriyenko has transformed into an expansive system of political management. Through a network of autonomous non-profit organizations, such as "Russia – Land of Opportunity," "Dialog," and the Internet Development Institute, the political bloc carries out the ideological shaping of society, controls career pipelines through the "School of Governors," and influences the media space. This allows the Kremlin to govern not only through direct coercion by the siloviki, but also through corporate methods of political management, creating a layer of managers whose loyalty is tied to the curators of the presidential vertical.

Within this system, Putin's role, as a result of decades in power, has evolved into a specific form of authority that cannot be reduced to a conventional model of autocracy. This refers to the role of a supreme arbiter through whom key conflicts between security, bureaucratic, regional, and economic groups within Russia are mediated and resolved. A crucial paradox lies in the fact that such a vertical of power does not eliminate elite competition, but rather elevates it to the highest level. It is precisely this logic that is commonly described through the metaphor of the confrontation between different Kremlin clans (the so-called "Kremlin towers"). In this context, Putin himself has traditionally not been a direct representative of any single "tower," but functions as a quasi-sacralized figure who alone possesses the right to determine the current weight of any given internal influence group, regardless of whether it belongs to the siloviki, the bureaucracy, regional elites, or economic groups.

As a consequence, a distinct feature of the contemporary Russian political system has emerged – access to the president, often referred to in Russian political jargon as "access to the body" ("*dostup k telu*"). This means that within the current Russian system, it is insufficient to merely demonstrate loyalty or even administrative efficiency. The physical and political opportunity to personally report to Putin on the results of one's work becomes the key resource. Regular contact with the president effectively guarantees a position within the closest inner circle of power, while proximity to Putin often outweighs formal institutional status.

As a result, Putin himself does not engage in the personal management of all repressive or administrative processes within the Russian political system. Instead, he has constructed a system in which officials and individuals close to the president continuously seek to develop political projects, governance decisions, or ideological initiatives that enable them to demonstrate their effectiveness more frequently and directly to the head of state. These may encompass state and supranational projects, personnel decisions, ideological campaigns, or new forms of social control. Since the system itself is structured around autocratic governance mechanisms and the increasingly expansive use of the repressive apparatus, a significant share of such initiatives acquires a repressive, disciplinary, or ideologized character. Within this logic, the promotion of even radical or excessively harsh projects can be converted for their initiators into political proximity to the president, additional budgets, personnel opportunities, and greater influence within the system itself.

A distinct aspect of this system is the delegation of power to figures who are personally close to Putin. One of the key examples is Alexei Dyumin, who managed Putin's personal security, subsequently spent eight years as the governor of the Tula region, and currently serves as the Secretary of the State Council of the Russian Federation. Crucially, unlike other representatives of the Russian elite who are associated with specific political circles or form their own political clans, such figures are tied primarily to the person of the president. This allows Putin to further centralize power over these actors. Concurrently, he keeps the system in a state of uncertainty, retaining the ability at any given moment to elevate those who find favor with him at that particular juncture. This sustains a system-wide perception that only continuous proximity to the president permits the acquisition and retention of power.

The short-term effect of this model is evident. It ensures rapid consolidation, rapid downward transmission of signals, and the capacity to combine legal, administrative, and coercive measures without protracted inter-agency disputes. Because major career and resource decisions are concentrated within a single center, the system is well-suited for electoral campaigns, protest suppression, territorial discipline, and mobilization tasks. In this sense, centralization enhances the manageability of the repressive apparatus precisely because it subordinates it to political rather than legal logic. However, it is precisely these mechanisms that pose long-term risks. First, officials and the siloviki begin to infer signals from above rather than solve actual problems. Second, personalist arbitration and competition for access to the president distort feedback loops: information transmitted upward is presented in a form that best aligns with the center's expectations. This factor culminated after the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

The outbreak of the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 generated a distinct political paradox. On the one hand, it triggered an even greater centralization of presidential power. On the other hand, this very centralization produced internal political strains that exposed the limitations of the model in which Putin functioned as an arbiter among various groups. Politically, the war amplified the influence of the security sector, primarily to the extent that it is linked to Putin's personal trust.

A potentially pivotal factor brought about by the war has been the accelerated militarization of personnel policy. In his address to the Federal Assembly in February 2024, Putin declared that the "true elite" consists of those who serve Russia, having proven their dedication through action. This led to the creation of a specialized program called "Time of Heroes" (*Vremya Geroyev*), the core of which is to train managers from among war participants and veterans. Crucially, this does not entail the autonomous advancement of the military as a social group, but rather a system for selecting and integrating loyal cadres who have secured their positions by virtue of the president's will. Even more significant is that the promotion of such cadres within the regions potentially fosters a confrontation between the established systemic bureaucracy and these new, to some extent anti-systemic, yet personally oriented toward Putin military managers.

A further structural problem stems from the fact that Putin, while remaining the foundation of the system, has devolved onto the regions and individual agencies the task of

independently managing the social and financial consequences of the war, without providing room for genuinely autonomous initiatives. As before, only those activities are considered sanctioned that correspond to the expectations of the center and accurately reflect the president's current position.

At the same time, during its first few years, the war did not expose significant issues regarding the stability of the contemporary Russian political system. The situation began to shift in early 2026, when Putin started making domestic political decisions that were bound to be received negatively not only by society but also by the loyal civilian bureaucracy. One such direction involved radical steps toward restricting the internet in Russia, with the ultimate prospect of severe isolation within the framework of the so-called "sovereign internet" strategy. Although this strategy had been developing for several years, the Russian authorities had previously sought to act incrementally, avoiding sharp radicalization. A potential reason for this was that Putin had likely taken into account the stance of representatives within the civilian bureaucratic apparatus.

The actions of the Russian president in 2026 provide grounds to suggest that he is increasingly listening to representatives of the security apparatus, who are inclined toward radical decisions aimed at strengthening the repressive system within Russia. This implies that as of May 2026, representatives of the security apparatus appear to exert the greatest influence over Putin's decisions. Consequently, this situation effectively begins to undermine the model of Putin as the supreme arbiter of the political system – a model in which both the security and civilian apparatuses enjoyed access to him, while the president himself counterbalanced both sides.

As a result, over recent months, a near-open conflict has become visible within the Russian political system between the security and civilian blocs. In the public sphere, this manifests through arrests and criminal cases targeting individuals close to various high-ranking representatives of the civilian apparatus. Concurrently, another key mechanism of Putin's centralization of power is the complete neutralization of any genuine coordination between different structures. All real power and key political decisions remain tied to Putin. Consequently, the resolution of conflicts between various structures also occurs primarily through the president.

2.2. Coordination and Competition Among Repressive Institutions

As previously noted, the Russian repressive system is not a monolithic bloc in which all institutions automatically and harmoniously cooperate to implement strictly defined functions set by the political center. Instead, it is characterized by a simultaneous combination of coordination and competition within the repressive apparatus itself. These processes are not mutually exclusive. Coordination is ensured by a unified presidential center, informal

signaling mechanisms, as well as a shared infrastructure of registers, blocking tools, and legal regimes. Competition, in turn, emerges primarily around access to the political center and, consequently, competition for resources, status, and control over financial flows.

This implies that a significant part of Russia's repressive apparatus – namely the security services – does not constitute a monolithic entity. Each structure represents its own bureaucratic interests and competes with the others, while competing groups and clans also exist within each individual agency. At the same time, all of them remain embedded in a common vertical hierarchy, in which Putin has, for decades, relied on division, mutual surveillance, and his role as supreme arbiter as a means of maintaining system manageability without allowing any single center of power to become dominant over the others.

The central player in this architecture remains the FSB, which has progressively consolidated its position as one of the key power agencies of the Russian political system. Its mandates extend far beyond classical counterintelligence, encompassing digital surveillance, economic security, border control, politically sensitive cases, and participation in purges within other structures. Concurrently, the expansion of the FSB inevitably generates zones of tension with other institutions, particularly the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation (SKR), which within the regime's political logic functions as an instrument of selective prosecution for high-profile cases, anti-corruption campaigns, and pressure on elites. Rosgvardiya, for its part, serves as the physical guarantor of the regime's domestic stability, possessing the capacity for the large-scale deployment of force inside the country. Thus, the FSB, the SKR, and Rosgvardiya do not simply duplicate one another's functions, but constantly intersect in their competition for status, budgets, and the role of the "most useful" instrument for protecting the regime.

In practice, the coordination process among repressive institutions operates through a sequential repressive cycle. First, a category of "threats" is established, such as extremism, terrorism, "foreign influence," "discrediting the army or the authorities," "fake news," or "threats to state security." This is followed by operational tracking and initial pressure, then administrative or criminal proceedings, prosecutorial oversight, judicial formalization, and the imposition of punishment, as well as the post-judicial intensification of sanctions against specific individuals or legal entities through registers, blocking measures, and restrictions on the ability to work in certain professions, obtain education, or conduct financial transactions.

Coordination in this case is primarily infrastructural in nature. For instance, the Ministry of Justice maintains the register of "foreign agents," while the Prosecutor General's Office issues decisions regarding the "undesirability" of a specific organization's activities and submits directives to Roskomnadzor. Roskomnadzor, for its part, manages the unified register of prohibited information and regulates the procedure for interaction with internet service providers and telecom operators. Rosfinmonitoring compiles the list of individuals linked to "extremist activity" or "terrorism" and conveys the corresponding decisions to organizations handling financial transactions. Coordination, in other words, operates through standardized channels for transmitting sanctions across agencies.

For this very reason, the political system in Russia does not require the continuous operation of a visible, unified repressive headquarters. It suffices for the president to signal general priorities at any given moment, such as the fight against "extremism," "foreign influence," or "discrediting the military." Subsequently, various institutions independently integrate these signals into their own practices, legal procedures, and repressive campaigns.

After 2022, this inter-agency mechanism expanded to encompass the anti-war sphere. In March 2022, the Russian authorities linked mass administrative prosecution with the possibility of subsequent criminal punishment. Initially, an individual is subjected to a fine or administrative detention for "discrediting," and subsequently, a criminal case may be initiated for a repeated offense. Concurrently, in the event of so-called "grave consequences," a criminal case can be launched even without prior administrative proceedings.

Despite the effectiveness of this structure, its foundation is still characterized by full-scale competition among repressive institutions. As previously noted, through competition for access to the president and his favor, these structures compete for budgets, powers, and status. They also compete for high-profile cases, as a high-profile political arrest, the exposure of "terrorist" networks, or demonstrated usefulness in protecting the regime increases the political value of the respective agency. In this manner, they gain either direct or indirect access to the presidential center of power.

However, this competition does not have a constraining effect. The reason lies in the absence of an institutionally strong, independent arbiter within the regime capable of rewarding moderation or punishing excessive coercion. On the contrary, the system, embodied by Putin himself, rewards initiative – but only insofar as it aligns with the president's current political preferences. Over time, these preferences have become increasingly radical, leading to the radicalization of the entire repressive apparatus even in the absence of formal, centralized directives. Consequently, the boundaries of acceptable behavior in Russia are continuously eroding. Given that political loyalty in the contemporary Russian system is measured by demonstrable utility to the president, agencies constantly expand their interpretation of "threats," offering new methods and pretexts for repression.

The full-scale war against Ukraine has only intensified these processes. In the military sphere, the political weight of the siloviki and their associated budgetary flows has increased significantly. Russia's total nominal expenditures on the military and security apparatus in rubles have increased nearly fourfold. The FSB has preserved its unique institutional position and has gained the ability to participate even in intra-elite purges, including within the armed forces, whereas before the war Putin did not allow such overt interference by security agencies in certain areas of intra-elite balance. Furthermore, the war has expanded the space for bureaucratic and institutional repressive initiative within an otherwise centralized system.

At the same time, the coordination of agency efforts often proves ineffective under conditions of real crises. The war in Ukraine and terrorist acts inside the Russian Federation

have demonstrated that the excessive focus of the siloviki on suppressing domestic dissent, rent-seeking, and the demonstration of loyalty can be accompanied by the degradation of real intelligence and preemptive capabilities. The Kremlin is compelled to compensate for this institutional inflexibility by involving civilian political managers and ideologues from the Presidential Administration. For this very reason, Kiriyenko's political bloc, the network of ANOs, digital platforms, and projects of ideological censorship become an important complement to the blunt methods of the FSB and other security structures.

It is in this precise manner that competition for status transforms into the production of new repressive directives and practices: from cases against the opposition and anti-war Russians to campaigns against LGBT communities, migrants, Western culture, and non-systemic political ideas. The same logic also applies to the repression of elites after the start of the war. Constant accusations of corruption are convenient precisely because they can be brought against almost any administrator, while their public demonstration simultaneously creates the effect of a continuous and escalating confrontation between the security apparatus and the politico-economic bureaucracy, including mid- and high-level officials.

2.3. Repression as an Instrument of Elite Control

Since Vladimir Putin's rise to power, repression against representatives of the Russian elite had existed primarily as a latent capability rather than as a systematic practice. Such measures were applied selectively and irregularly. The reason was that the Russian bureaucracy, the security apparatus, and business elites were interconnected through budgets, access to resources, and the distribution of spheres of influence. The amorphous state in which the Russian political system remained for a long time did not require the broad and systematic use of repression against its own elites. Moreover, until the beginning of the full-scale war, Putin himself did not demonstrate a systematic willingness to enter into conflicts with his own subordinates solely to maintain tight control over the vast apparatus of officials across the country. Until 2022, the system as a whole remained stable and did not display signs of open dissatisfaction with the Kremlin on the part of the elites.

Following the outbreak of the full-scale war and the imposition of severe sanctions, pressure on the Russian elite increased sharply. First and foremost, civilian officials and managers came under pressure – economists, financiers, former businessmen, as well as regional and military leaders. In most of these cases, the accusations are framed in a standardized manner: corruption, fraud, or abuse of power. However, the political subtext of these cases is evident. For instance, following failures in the Kursk sector, the security apparatus initiated criminal cases against the governor of the Kursk region and his subordinates, while the vice-governor of the Belgorod region and a number of other officials were accused of embezzlement during the construction of fortifications known as "Dragon's teeth."

Under conditions of strategic uncertainty and international isolation, the Kremlin increasingly abandons traditional methods of co-optation in favor of the repressive intimidation of its own elite. The repressive model of governance has gradually evolved from selective

administrative pressure toward a more systemic mechanism for re-enforcing the loyalty of the ruling class. Real power is increasingly shifting beyond the boundaries of formal state institutions, leading to the degradation of ministries and regional governments to the level of technical executors devoid of political agency. This transformation is accompanied by the replacement of a part of the "old guard" with younger technocrats and administrators who lack their own political weight and a personal history of relations with the leader, making them more convenient objects of control.

A separate manifestation of this "atmosphere of fear" has been reports of mysterious deaths of senior officials, intelligence officers, and top managers in the defense sector. In political terms, such incidents create the effect of an internal purge even outside formal judicial proceedings. In this logic, the security services, particularly the FSB, are increasingly assuming the functions of a 21st-century political police force: their task becomes not only the struggle against dissent, but also the elimination of signs of double loyalty within the elite circle.

Additionally, major processes of deprivatization and state-backed asset seizures were launched against businessmen who were "inconvenient" for the Kremlin or who had left Russia after 2022. The state began to expropriate enterprises from owners with dual citizenship or foreign passports, effectively demanding the "return of capital" to Russia under the threat of losing their property. Through this mechanism, the Kremlin attempts to transform big business into an even more dependent component of the political system. In recent years, the state has been conducting a campaign for the "forced transfer" of ownership of strategic and other large assets, which are being transferred to individuals and structures considered more loyal to the regime.

By mid-2025, according to estimates by the NSP law firm, approximately 4 trillion rubles in business assets had been transferred to the state budget. The typical targets of such measures were "opposition-minded" businessmen, as well as those who had emigrated or exhibited signs of insufficient loyalty to the Kremlin. A distinct legal avenue emerged in the expanding practice of reviewing privatization and property transactions from past decades. As a result of this wave of lawsuits and asset seizures, Russian business began demanding legal certainty, while the authorities were compelled to consider imposing a statute of limitations on privatization reviews, at least at the level of legislative initiatives.

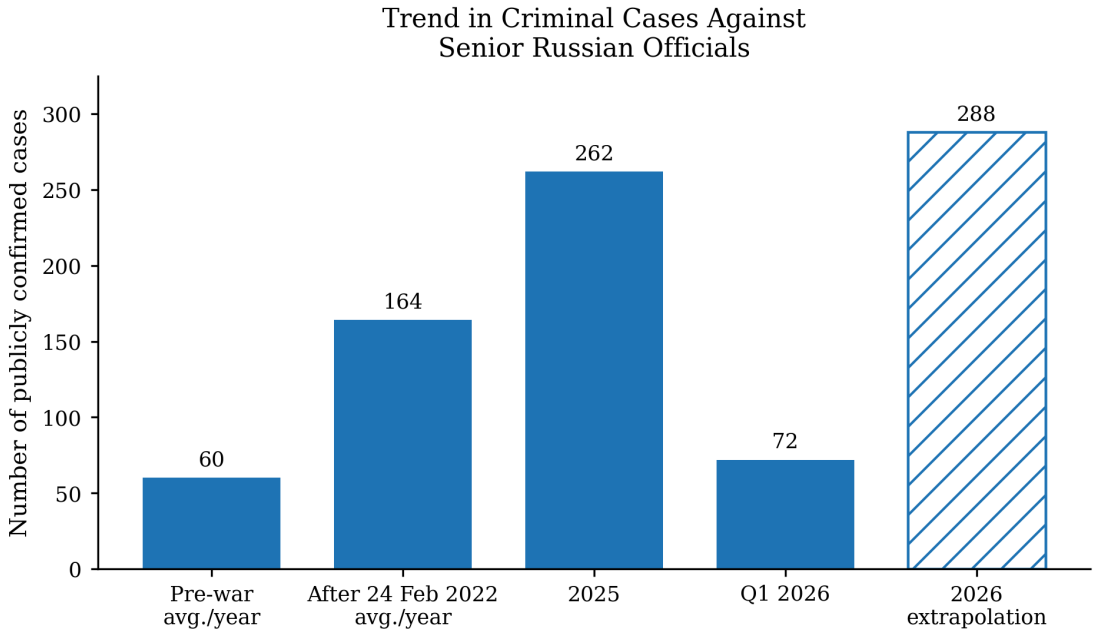
The main beneficiaries are companies controlled by those who currently stand closest to Putin. This refers to his immediate inner circle: the Rotenbergs, the Kovalchuks, as well as the families of the siloviki, such as the Patrushevs and the Kadyrovs. In other words, these are the groups for whom the collapse of Putin's personal power would likely mean the loss of their own power, assets, and security guarantees. In this sense, economic repression serves not merely a fiscal or anti-corruption function, but also as a mechanism for redistributing property in favor of the groups most loyal to and dependent on the president.

Regional officials and governors have also found themselves at the center of repression. Since approximately the summer of 2025, systematic efforts by the security apparatus

against the mid-level bureaucracy have been observed. This includes the detentions and arrests of vice-governors, heads of administrations, and even mayors of small towns. In July and August 2025, former Tambov region governor Maxim Egorov and former Chelyabinsk region vice-governor Oleg Bogashev were taken into custody. In June of the same year, Krasnoyarsk mayor Vladislav Loginov was arrested. During the same period, a number of senior officials from the Vladimir and Novgorod regions were also detained. One of the most high-profile episodes was the reported suicide of former Kursk region governor and former Russian transport minister Roman Starovoit, which occurred against the backdrop of investigations into the alleged embezzlement of funds allocated for the Kursk region's defenses.

Thus, the strategy of interaction between the authorities and the elite based on an exchange of loyalty for stability has effectively ceased to exist following the outbreak of the full-scale war against Ukraine. This involves both the expected repression of the civilian apparatus, particularly the mid-level bureaucracy, and the pressure exerted on those who for decades had been considered virtually untouchable due to their personal proximity to Putin.

One such campaign was the large-scale "dismantling" of the clan of former defense minister Sergei Shoigu. In fact, this became an event of almost unprecedented scale in modern Russian politics. Since the spring of 2024, several dozen senior military officials and associated contractors, including former deputy defense ministers, have been arrested or removed from their positions within a short period. The arrest of former deputy defense minister Timur Ivanov triggered a chain reaction. Shortly thereafter, the director of Voentorg, the head of the Ministry of Defense's digitalization department, builders of defense facilities, and contractors from Ivanov and Shoigu's inner circle were detained. Such purges had not previously affected such a large group within the defense establishment.



Note: the chart reflects a lower-bound estimate, not a comprehensive official register.

The trend in criminal cases against Russia's senior officialdom confirms that, following the outbreak of the full-scale war, pressure on the state apparatus escalated sharply. According to estimates by *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, since the outbreak of the war, criminal cases have been initiated against 697 high-ranking federal and regional officials. Furthermore, the annual average number of such cases rose from approximately 60 cases per year prior to the full-scale invasion to 164 following its launch. Notably, 262 such cases were recorded in 2025, and as many as 72 were recorded in the first quarter of 2026, suggesting that the intensity of criminal prosecutions as a form of pressure is being sustained or may be increasing further.

These processes also reflect a deeper rift between legacy security networks controlling strategic resources and newer factions within the security apparatus seeking to redistribute assets through internal pressure tactics and criminal prosecutions. Resource scarcity, the closure of external markets, and dependence on wartime budgets are turning intra-elite competition into a zero-sum game, where the strengthening of one group is perceived as a direct threat to another. This diminishes the state's capacity to respond adequately to crisis challenges and exacerbates internal mistrust.

The most obvious conclusion is that the radicalization of the Russian authorities' actions against their own elite was, to a large extent, Putin's reaction to Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny in the summer of 2023. Following this, the Kremlin began to keep the Russian elite in a state of constant tension, under which even demonstrative loyalty no longer guarantees protection from repression. This creates an atmosphere of fear within the bureaucratic apparatus and, in the medium term, may undermine Putin's authority as the guarantor of security and the supreme arbiter of the system.

Since the beginning of 2026, this trend has only intensified against the backdrop of the general expansion of the repressive apparatus. This refers, in particular, to the further restriction of the free internet in Russia and the potential introduction of administrative liability for using circumvention tools, particularly VPNs. Given Putin's prior caution regarding such matters, this radicalization may indicate the strengthening of the security bloc's influence on presidential decision-making.

In this context, the further escalation of the domestic political situation in Russia may be accompanied by intensified repression against civilian representatives of the elite. Consequently, this threatens to deepen the systemic rift between the security and civilian apparatuses, potentially weakening Putin's capacity to act as the supreme arbiter of various groups within the system. In this configuration, repression turns into the primary glue holding the system together, while paradoxically acting as a factor of destabilization: the fear of purges undermines the state's institutional memory, demotivates the mid-level bureaucracy, and paves the way for cascading failures if the president's personal power weakens.

CHAPTER 3. The Impact of the Repressive Apparatus on the Opposition and Prospects for Political Transformation

Russia's coercive and repressive apparatus has traditionally developed primarily as an instrument for combating domestic opposition. In effect, the main framework of repression used by the Russian authorities today was created long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. After the protests of 2011-2012, the authorities consistently built a mechanism of repressive control: the 2012 law on "foreign agents," the systematic tightening of rules for the media, the 2015 law on "undesirable organizations," the expansion of the concept of "foreign influence," and, in 2021, the designation of Alexei Navalny's organizations as extremist. However, whereas before the full-scale war this apparatus was used primarily against individual critics of the regime and organized opposition structures, after 2022 it shifted toward a model of combating any, even minimal, disagreement with the Kremlin's policy. In this sense, the war against Ukraine became the key justification for repressive radicalization.

3.1. The Repressive Apparatus as an Instrument of Structural Control over the Opposition

The current state of Russia's repressive system is defined by the fact that, after the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine, the Russian authorities established instruments for the systematic reconfiguration of the entire political field. Within this model, any action incompatible with the Kremlin's vision - such as non-systemic political coordination, financing, a public statement, legal defense, or even symbolic solidarity - can become grounds for administrative or criminal prosecution. As of April 2026, the UN had already recorded more than 343 "undesirable" organizations, more than 1,173 organizations and individuals in the register of "foreign agents," as well as 830 organizations and more than 20,000 individuals on the lists of "terrorists and extremists."

The instruments of Russia's repressive system can be systematized relatively clearly and divided into several functions:

- Punitive: the state punishes an action that has already been committed.
- Preventive: demonstrative detentions, public trials, and various repressive registers.
- Infrastructural: the designation of organizations as "extremist" or "undesirable," which in turn destroys even minimal possibilities for building organized activity, maintaining links with the regions, or performing other functions.

As noted above, this model did not emerge in 2022. After the protests of 2011-2012, the Russian authorities laid the legal framework for repressive control. Yet it was after the start of the full-scale war that the repressive apparatus was consolidated into a fully operational

structure that effectively nullifies the possibilities for non-systemic opposition activity even at a minimal level. Criminal liability was introduced for spreading "false information" about the armed forces, "discrediting" the armed forces, and calls for sanctions, while these provisions effectively prohibited any public criticism of the war. From 24 February 2022 to 17 February 2025, OVD-Info recorded more than 20,000 detentions for an anti-war stance. In 2022 alone, the project documented more than 18,900 detentions at public anti-war protests. At the same time, OVD-Info's annual review for 2025 underscored that although the number of new cases decreased in 2025, the average sentence in political cases rose from six years in 2021 to eight years, while the structure of repression itself became less transparent.

To understand how the Russian authorities created structural control over potential opposition after the start of the full-scale invasion, one key factor must be taken into account. "Structural control" should be understood not simply as the persecution of individual leaders, but as the transformation of the entire environment in which opposition activity can exist. One important element of this system was the law of 15 May 2024, which banned "foreign agents" from participating in elections at all levels, serving as election observers, and provided for the early termination of the mandates of already elected officials if they remained on the register. In this way, the Kremlin simultaneously introduced a mechanism for barring persons disloyal to the authorities from elections and created an additional instrument of pressure within the system itself through the threat of designating any deputy or official who even minimally opposes Kremlin policy as a "foreign agent." If, before the war against Ukraine, the Russian opposition still had formal legal opportunities to participate in elections at certain levels and retain some presence in Russian "politics," after the adoption of this law that possibility effectively disappeared. Freedom House recorded that "genuine" opposition candidates were already being barred from the 2025 regional elections.

Another clear fact is that, after 2022, Russian repressive policy has increasingly been directed not against individual persons, but against entire civil society structures that had previously formed the basis of a democratic society in Russia. This policy has become especially harsh over the past year. In May 2025, Amnesty International was designated an "undesirable organization"; in November 2025, Human Rights Watch received the same status; in March 2026, the Supreme Court designated the Anti-War Committee of Russia as a "terrorist organization"; and in June 2026, OVD-Info and Memorial were designated as "extremist and terrorist organizations."

Another factor has been the shift of the repressive apparatus toward combating any elements that were or are in any way connected to opposition movements inside Russia. In January 2025, three of Alexei Navalny's lawyers were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 3.5 to 5.5 years on charges of participation in an "extremist group," and in April 2025 four journalists each received 5.5 years for alleged work for channels linked to the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). This shows that the targets of repression are increasingly not only politicians and public figures, but also people who are professionally, legally, journalistically, or organizationally connected to their activities. The importance of this process lies in the fact that, in this way, the Kremlin not only blocks the activities of the

existing opposition but also narrows the space for future political self-organization. This means that even in the event of a minimal deviation from the political line by any Russian politician or public figure who today occupies a position "within the system," all those who support their organizational capacity or media activity will immediately cease such cooperation out of fear for their own future. In this way, the Kremlin has institutionalized and entrenched fear within politicized circles not only for one's own statements or position, but also for the positions held by anyone in one's professional environment.

At the same time, the media and digital space for opposition opinion is narrowing. In 2025, Human Rights Watch documented that, after the start of the full-scale war, the Russian authorities doubled down on online censorship, blocking, platform throttling, and internet shutdowns. The same applies to the blocking of Signal, Viber, and Discord, as well as intensified monitoring of online criticism of the authorities.

A particularly important factor in the structuring of repression has been the sharp increase, after the start of the war, in the individual cost of any opposition action. This is not only about the threat of imprisonment or an administrative fine. The 2024 law mentioned above required "foreign agents" to transfer income from rent, property sales, dividends, deposits, and intellectual activity to special ruble-denominated accounts, access to which is possible only after removal from the register. Similarly, the inclusion of a Russian citizen on the list of "extremists and terrorists" allows Rosfinmonitoring to freeze their bank accounts. This means that any public expression of an opposition stance can now lead to a level of legal, financial, and professional pressure that significantly complicates a person's ability to continue living in Russia.

The repressive apparatus has also begun to actively extend into social institutions that were previously more often seen as places where future opposition and opposition views could form. A 2025 study by OVD-Info and the student outlet Groza showed that, after the start of the war, university administrations became more active in interfering with the political activity of students and faculty, changing the rules of student self-government, and encouraging denunciations. Between 2022 and 2025, 21 organizations connected to the academic environment were designated "undesirable," 10 were designated "foreign agents," and at least 71 lecturers and researchers were added to the register of "foreign agents."

Although all the methods described above have not led to the complete destruction of the Russian opposition as a factor, they have fundamentally changed the form of its existence and activity. Today, mass street protests, open anti-war campaigning, the participation of opposition figures in elections, the creation of regional organizations, and the open financing of political structures have become almost impossible or associated with extremely high risks. Although independent media and investigative projects in exile continue their work, the Russian opposition, both inside Russia and abroad, remains fragmented and has lost most legal instruments of direct influence on domestic political processes.

3.2. The Current State of the Opposition Landscape in Russia

As noted above, the war launched in 2022 became the main driver of a complete and radical restructuring of the entire format of opposition activity in Russia. Because the Russian regime sharply narrowed the space for legal politics and intensified criminal and administrative prosecution for an anti-war stance, a significant part of the opposition, independent journalism, and human rights work moved into exile or into semi-clandestine forms of work. Exile became the main survival strategy. As a result, the contemporary opposition landscape in Russia includes not only public political figures, but also political prisoners, exile-based coalitions, anti-war and civic networks, independent media, human rights infrastructure, and regional and national initiatives. Due to the sharp strengthening of the repressive apparatus and large-scale emigration, the opposition has almost completely lost its legal domestic political presence, although it has preserved digital, media, human rights, and exile-based infrastructure.

The digital space has become the main channel for sustaining political and media activity. Independent media and opposition projects have shifted their center of activity to YouTube, Telegram, mirror sites, newsletters, podcasts, and their own applications. This model has demonstrated its ability to preserve part of the opposition's political and media presence. The Re:Russia project estimates the Russian-language opposition YouTube space at approximately 130 channels with an aggregate number of subscriptions of around 110 million. Re:Russia estimates the core audience at approximately 10 million people, with another roughly 10 million forming a peripheral audience. In effect, digital platforms remain the key space where the opposition retains a noticeable digital presence despite the effective destruction of legal political channels. Telegram channels, YouTube projects, independent media in exile, closed chats, VPN infrastructure, human rights databases, and mutual aid networks form the basis of the contemporary face of Russia's non-systemic opposition. Its functions have shifted from a direct struggle for power toward preserving an alternative public sphere, documenting the regime's crimes, supporting political prisoners, international advocacy, digital mobilization, and engagement with local social discontent inside Russia.

One form of adaptation has been the shift of part of the opposition environment from direct political activity toward human rights, legal, and humanitarian work. This activity has also become a channel for international advocacy.

One of the main forms of internal adaptation has been local campaigns that are not formally connected to politics or the opposition movement. The most indicative example after 2022 was the protests in Bashkortostan in January 2024, connected to the sentence against Fail Alsynov. They combined local public discontent around an environmental conflict over resource extraction, the defense of the Bashkir language and culture, regional resentment toward local authorities, and protest against repressive law enforcement. These protests demonstrated that communities capable of rapid mobilization around a specific symbol of injustice still exist in the regions. In this sense, after 2022 local protest has increasingly

taken a social rather than an overtly political form. One example is the protests of wives and mothers of mobilized Russian soldiers. Their demands may be formulated as requests for rotation, the return of their husbands, or compliance with limits on the duration of service, but the political meaning of such actions lies in the fact that they undermine the image of full public consent for the war. In June 2024, a group of wives of mobilized soldiers came to the Ministry of Defense building demanding the return of their husbands from the front and the establishment of clear limits on the duration of deployment. These protests were not mass protests on a nationwide scale, but they had disproportionate political weight because they undermined the official image of full public consent for the war.

In practice, the current Russian opposition landscape looks as follows:

Projects based on Navalny's political legacy and the FBK. The FBK did not disappear after 2024, but it fundamentally changed its form of existence. The foundation largely shifted its center of activity toward media, investigative, and international advocacy work. The team preserved large YouTube and Telegram channels, and in 2025, together with Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Yulia Navalnaya, launched the Russia's Future satellite television channel. The expert forum Platform of a Future Russia also continues to operate. At the same time, the FBK continues to face problems of internal legitimacy, growing disputes with other segments of the opposition, and an overall decline in authority among the Russian opposition audience. Nevertheless, the FBK remains one of the leading opposition movements.

Independent media and human rights organizations. According to JX Fund data, the Russian opposition sphere includes at least 63 active independent Russian media projects that have relocated to more than 25 countries, forming the world's largest community of journalists in exile. In effect, independent media have become one of the most resilient parts of the opposition landscape in exile after 2022. Human rights organizations also stand out in this context. Among them, the most significant are OVD-Info and Memorial, which conduct data work and expert analysis while also providing assistance to political prisoners.

Political prisoners and figures of moral authority. One important component of the Russian opposition consists of those politicians who have remained in Russia or are in prison. Alexei Gorinov is one of the notable examples of political prisoners whose case has symbolic significance for the anti-war segment of Russian society. Lev Shlosberg remained one of the few consistently anti-war voices inside the country after 2022, but in December 2025 he was arrested for spreading "false information about the Russian army" and is currently being held in a pretrial detention center (SIZO). Moreover, according to OVD-Info statistics, as of June 2026, 2,183 people in Russia were imprisoned or detained for political reasons.

Exile-based political platforms. The most visible exile-based political formats have been the Anti-War Committee of Russia, which from the outset brought together diverse figures in exile around an anti-war and anti-Putin agenda; the Free Russia Forum, as a platform for consolidation and discussion; various forums and summits involving opposition figures; and,

in early 2026, the new PACE Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces, which created an institutional channel of communication. The problem is that the opposition-in-exile environment is not monolithic in its political positions. Some actors represent a liberal-democratic and all-Russian discourse oriented toward regime change and democratization, while others represent a national-regional and decolonial discourse, which includes the Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum.

In effect, one of the main problems of today's Russian opposition is the absence of consolidated leadership. In this context, the death of Alexei Navalny in prison in February 2024 led to the loss of the most recognizable and organizationally capable opposition politician. As a result, over the past two years the Russian opposition has been unable to unite around a new public figure capable of expressing its shared interests. After the prisoner exchange of 1 August 2024, Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Andrei Pivovarov, and Oleg Orlov emerged in exile. The very fact of these figures being exchanged significantly increased the international visibility of the Russian opposition. But the exchange did not resolve the leadership problem. On the contrary, the opposition environment effectively entered a situation of multiple leaders but no single center.

As noted above, fragmentation and unresolved internal conflicts remain perhaps the key problem of the Russian opposition. The most illustrative case is the Berlin Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces, which calls for the withdrawal of troops from all occupied territories, the restoration of internationally recognized borders, the trial of war criminals, and compensation for the victims of aggression. The FBK refused to sign this document, as did Ilya Yashin.

3.3. Prospects for Political Transformation under Repressive Control

In light of the information analyzed above, as of spring 2026 the space for legal democratic change in Russia remains extremely limited. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the Russian authorities have strengthened the repressive apparatus every year. This means that, in the short and potentially medium term, change in Russia is barely connected to the institutions of legal politics. The main channels of public political competition are effectively blocked, while fear, censorship, and digital control have become core structural elements of the Russian regime. At the same time, this does not mean that the system is stable.

Today, the Russian political system is in a specific position: signs of intra-elite confrontation between the security and civilian apparatuses are becoming increasingly visible against the backdrop of the former's growing influence over Putin. In such a situation, the prospect of any change within the current Russian regime is most likely to be connected primarily to processes within the system itself, while a potential weakening of Putin's role as the supreme arbiter could create preconditions for systemic instability of the regime. Although Putin's position remains strong for now, it is already difficult to speak of the president's

unconditional and uninterrupted control over all processes inside the system. In this context, the war itself is the main source of risks of systemic transformation. Military losses, the threat of a new mobilization, the deterioration of the economic situation, rising expenditures, stagnation in civilian sectors, and the return of so-called "veterans" create the basis for future instability. All of these problems are likely to deepen if the war continues without political or economic adjustment of course. Therefore, under current conditions, political transformation in Russia is most likely to begin as a result of a combination of war exhaustion, intra-elite contradictions, economic pressure, a crisis of governability, and failures in repressive coordination.

Thus, at the current stage, the Russian system is entering a period of heightened risks of internal turbulence. The role of the opposition in this process will depend on the scenario under which the situation develops. Under current conditions, the Russian opposition does not appear to be an independent driver of transformation because it lacks real instruments of influence over domestic politics. However, this does not mean that it cannot become a beneficiary or a full participant in the process of changing Russia's political system.

The environment in which this system operates also requires separate attention. Russian authoritarianism relies not only on security agencies, criminal legislation, control over the courts, and the administrative vertical, but also on a specific state of society.

One of the key social mechanisms stabilizing the regime has been the population's adaptation to most changes in the political system toward greater radicalization and intensified repression. This adaptation is ongoing, which in turn reduces the likelihood that discontent will quickly turn into large-scale political protest. Since 2022, Russian society has not so much mobilized in support of the regime as become accustomed to the deterioration of the political and moral conditions of life. This adaptation does not mean the absence of anxiety or discontent, but it blocks the translation of these sentiments into mass political protest. In practice, none of the key decisions taken by the Russian authorities since the start of the full-scale invasion has so far led to a sustained wave of mass protest. Overall, this can be described as a demonstration of passive loyalty to the regime. In Russian society, people are reluctant to oppose the authorities. The idea that one must "work quietly," valuing familiar security and personal comfort above political freedom or radical change, is widespread. In such a position, a significant part of the passively adaptive segment of society is unlikely to move toward open protest without a strong external or internal catalyst. This means that the Russian opposition needs to focus its efforts to influence Russians on everyday socio-economic issues - the economy, housing, social welfare, a second wave of mobilization - and the use of digital channels for political mobilization. All these trends are complemented by the broader depoliticization of society, in which politics has become a taboo subject in Russian social life, which is also a consequence of the work of the repressive apparatus over recent decades. This means that a significant part of the population does not interpret its own discontent in political terms, which in turn requires further action by the opposition and external actors to re-politicize Russian society through social and cultural critique.

Although the implicit socio-political "contract" between the state and the population in Putin's Russia was long based on the formula of "stability in exchange for Russians' non-participation in politics," the full-scale invasion fundamentally transformed it. The first stage in this respect was the announcement of partial mobilization in 2022. Potentially important decisions may include further restrictions on the internet and a possible new, broader wave of mobilization as early as 2026. Yet even in this situation, we observe that the authorities' actions do not produce mass anti-regime discontent that translates into practical action. A significant part of society continues primarily to adapt to deteriorating living conditions without moving toward open political protest. This does not mean that protest potential is completely absent. However, the absence of legal political channels, fear of criminal cases, and the weakness of horizontal coordination do not allow any non-systemic political movement inside Russia to become a nationwide Russian movement.

Overall, at the current stage, two scenarios should be distinguished:

Ending the war / freezing the conflict along the front line. This scenario assumes a situation in which a de facto halt to the war may reduce the severity of some of the domestic political problems Russia is already facing today or postpone their escalation. After all, the strengthening of the security apparatus, as well as current budgetary problems, are primarily consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Therefore, any ceasefire is likely to contribute to the temporary containment of some of these problems, without further deterioration of the situation, at least in the medium term. In this case, the Russian opposition will face the task of resolving its internal divisions and selecting a single leader who could act as a representative of Russian democratic forces, gradually building a new institutional and media infrastructure aimed at Russians abroad and inside Russia, with an eye to future work. From the perspective of Ukraine's interests, under this scenario Kyiv would need to establish contact, public or non-public, with this unified opposition.

Continuation of hostilities. If Putin decides to continue the war against Ukraine regardless of the economic consequences, the Kremlin may, as early as 2026, face the question of a new wave of mobilization or other forms of expanded mobilization of human resources. This, in turn, could sharply worsen the domestic political situation, especially if mobilization is combined with economic pressure and rising casualties. This already occurred during the first partial mobilization in autumn 2022. In such a case, Putin could potentially find himself in one of the most difficult domestic political situations of his rule. The political situation in Russia could then become significantly less predictable, ranging from a direct split within the elite to attempts to reconfigure the regime through a "successor" scenario. This means that the role of the Russian opposition in such a scenario would consist not in an immediate struggle for power, but in performing the functions of an information channel and potential intermediary between different political and civic environments in possible negotiations involving European countries.

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