RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION: BACK IN THE USSR

In 2021, repressive measures used to pressure critics of the government in Russia reached levels unprecedented in the past 20 years.

The authorities aim to completely subdue the opposition and suppress the remaining free media. These goals, the methods used to achieve them, and the social processes taking place under increasing pressure present ever-clearer parallels with the Soviet period.

At the same time, the unprecedented scale of repression shows the regime cannot and dare not deal with its political opponents and critics in any other way but increased pressure and outright bans.

Although administrative measures to discourage or punish opposition activists and journalists harrying the central government have coincided with most of Vladimir Putin's tenure, the levels reached in 2021 merit a rather direct comparison with the methods once used in the Soviet Union.

Russia's central government has almost completely stopped disguising the real motives behind pressuring its political opponents. Classifying key organisations linked to Alexei Navalny as extremist organisations mark a new milestone – while various fabricated accusations had been used to obstruct these organisations before, declaring them extremist in the spring of 2021 was done with no effort to disguise the political motivation behind this. Already at the start of the legal proceedings, the authorities stated that these organisations were "engaged in creating conditions for destabilising the social and socio-political situation under the guise of liberal slogans", with an alleged long-term aim of dismantling the constitutional order. The verdict was drafted under the direct supervision of the Presidential Administration of Russia; the politicised and farcical trial once again warranted clear parallels with the Soviet period. The Presidential Administration also played a key role in initiating and passing a bill banning individuals affiliated with organisations designated as extremist from running in elections. The legislative proceedings appear to have taken place at an accelerated pace so that the law could enter into force before the autumn election was announced. In another sign of urgency, the methods used to pressure the opposition were ramped up along the way, reflecting a relatively rapid change in the ruling elite's risk assessment – the previously planned activities were no longer considered sufficient, and new measures were introduced on the fly, with barely enough time to put them into practice effectively.

Almost all opposition players and government critics with public visibility found themselves under significantly increased pressure from the authorities in 2021. The entire arsenal of administrative measures was put into service, including fabricated administrative and criminal charges, and designating the targets as foreign agents or

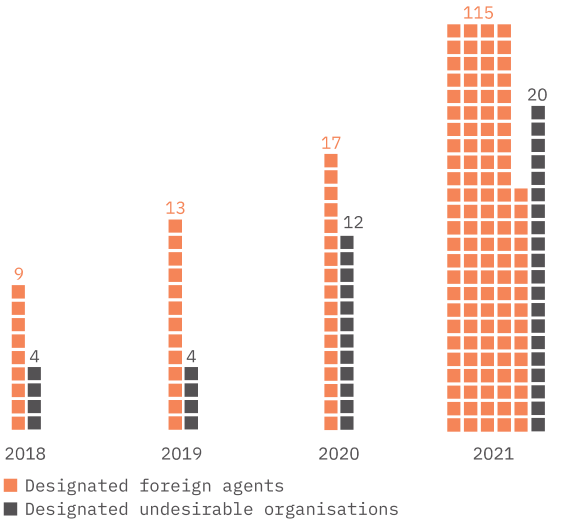
In 2021, nearly every slightly visible opposition figure and critic of the regime were repressed more forcefully than before.

undesirable organisations. This tendency to completely subdue the opposition again harks back to the Soviet era.

Putin's regime was particularly active in muzzling the press, intending to suppress any independent media completely. Administrative methods continue to be used to force independent media outlets to cease activities. At the same time, the regime also seeks to limit information published in independent outlets from finding its way to other media, primarily by wielding the cudgel of foreign agent designation. The state media's editorial policy is already on a par with communist practices – the topics covered and the positions taken are decided entirely by the Presidential Administration. The events of 2021 showed the Putin regime would ideally like to achieve a Soviet-type status quo in the near future – a complete absence of alternative media.

The foreign agent designation is in use in Russia since 2012, when a law allowing politically active NGOs receiving foreign funding to be labeled took effect. A separate legal framework for designating media outlets as foreign agents took effect more recently, in 2017. The conditions that have to be met in order to be branded a foreign agent have repeatedly been changed – and in recent years, simplified – while the restrictions and obligations that come with being designated as a foreign agent have consistently become more burdensome. This includes labeling any print or online publication issued by a foreign agent and even extending that obligation to any media outlet citing a foreign agent. For online publications that have been branded foreign agents, the designation has significantly reduced their advertising revenue as well as their network of sources. Regulations in force today also allow for the designation to be used for natural persons.

The number of designated foreign agents and undesirable organisations between 2018 and 2021



Since 2018, the number of organisations officially stigmatised by the authorities has started to increase again as a reaction to increasing criticism. This trend has persisted and worsened over the years.

While in 2020, the number of organisations labelled as foreign agents increased relatively smoothly, in 2021, the number soared along with the increase in force and pressure mechanisms implemented to quell freedom of thought and civil society. Media outlets were primarily labelled as foreign agents: independent media channels Dozhd and Meduza were included on the list, among others.

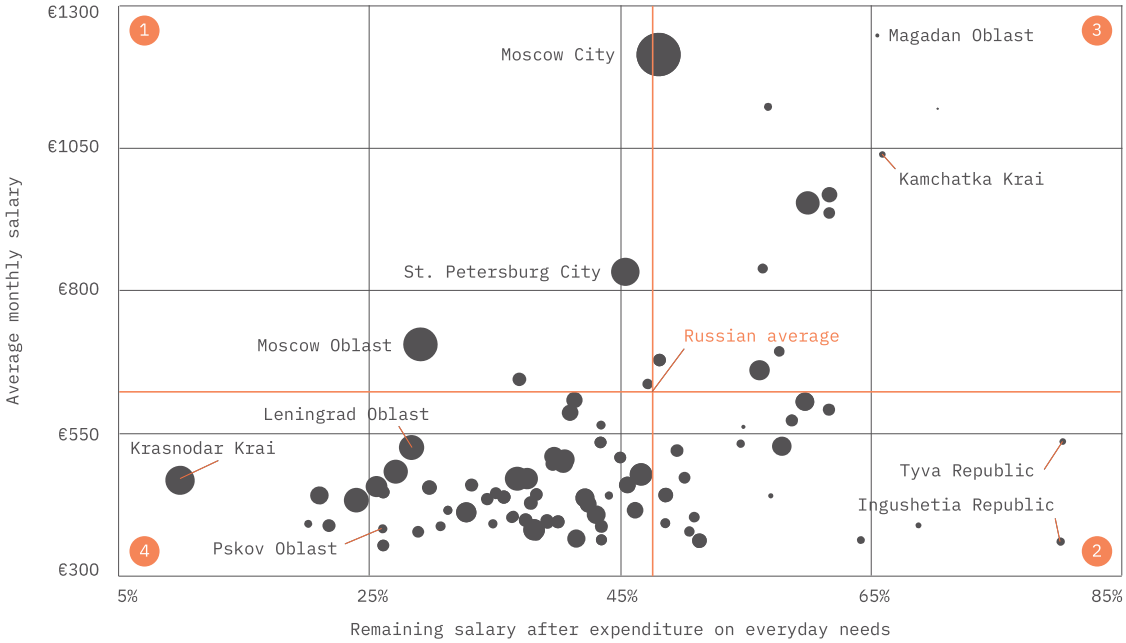
Source: Russian Ministry of Justice, OVD-Info

RUSSIA'S REGIONAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

A modest standard of living for the majority of the population continues to be part of reality under Putin's regime. Russia's socio-economic situation is characterised by great variability – the levels of income and household spending can differ significantly from region to region. The average monthly salary in the federal subjects (oblasts, krais, republics, and federal cities) varies from €350 to €1,200. However, wage levels cannot be directly linked to subsistence, as spending can also vary greatly from one region to the next. About half of Russia's average gross monthly income of €630 per capita remains after spending on everyday needs, which means a four-member household can make ends meet when at least two household members are employed, and two are dependants. This statistical average is derived from the income levels of two groups of regions that occupy two extremes: on the one hand, the city of Moscow and high-income mining regions, and on the other hand, peripheral regions with low wages but relatively high living costs with a total population of about 90 million (or 62% of the population).

In our assessment, the Russian ruling elite's ever fiercer attacks against the opposition and the remaining free media showed that it cannot and dare not deal with its political opponents and critics by any other method but increasing repression and outright bans. Although the sharp spike in repressive measures can be associated with the 2021 State Duma election – growing dissatisfaction and the increased activity of government critics created the need to suppress the opposition quickly, in time for the election – the new levels of repression, unprecedented in Putin's years in power, appear to be here to stay.

Russia's regional socio-economic situation



Source: ROMIR, Rosstat

1. The income of nearly 10% of the population in Russia is higher than the national average gross income (630 euros), but their living expenses are also higher than the average. This means that after spending on everyday needs, people will be left to use less money than average.

   Such a socioeconomic situation most often reflects the inhabitants of the city of St. Petersburg and the Moscow Oblast. In total, it describes the socio-economic situation of 15 million people of Russia.

2. At the same time, nearly 10% of the Russian population has an income less than the national average gross income (630 euros), but their living expenses are also lower than the average. This means that after spending on everyday needs, people will be left to use more money than average.

   There are 15 million people in Russia in this socio-economic situation, for example, in the Republics of Tyva and Ingushetia.

3. Nearly 18% of the Russian population have an income higher than the country's average gross income (630 euros) and have lower than average living expenses. This means that after paying fixed costs, people will be left to use more money than average.

   In such a socio-economic situation, the largest population is in the city of Moscow and in the mining regions, in the whole of Russia a total of 26 million people.

4. The income of most residents of Russia is lower than the national average gross income (630 euros), and their living expenses are higher than average. This means that after spending on everyday needs, people will be left to use less money than average.

   In total, it reflects the socio-economic situation of 90 million people of Russia.