Information, Creativity, and Autocratic Stability

Examining suppression and dissent in the RSFSR 1975-1990 and modern Russia

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Final Essay

Introduction:

To maintain power, an authoritarian ruler doesn't illegally arrest dissidents, but suppresses dissent by rewriting laws and selectively applying them. Depicting the people of these regimes as helpless victims denies the public's ability to influence their polity. I will present a theory of the role of information for effective protests in authoritarian regimes, by examining the coevolution of popular dissent and government response in Soviet and modern Russia. To do so, I will describe the theoretical role of dissent and information in autocracies. I will then analyze dissent and repression in the RSFSR after 1975 to illustrate the logic of my findings, specifically analyzing Soviet Rock's efficacy as a form of protest. Finally, I will evaluate informational repression and dissent in modern Russia in the context of "foreign agent" laws, and discuss the ramifications of these initiatives on Russian society.

Authoritarian institutions blur the line between maintaining state security and preserving a leader's power, causing these institutions to conduct activities that degrade security defined by a "continuous and safe existence of the country".[1] These institutions caused the fall of the Soviet Union, and modern Russian institutions similarly preserve Putin's power at the expense of efficiency.

Theory — Dissent in Autocracies and the Role of Information:

Dialogue between the government and the governed ensures that the social contract, where people consent to be governed in exchange for the public benefits produced by a society. In a functioning democracy dissidents can withhold their consent to be governed to demand lawmakers respond to the specific needs of their citizens.[2] However, a government doesn't have to uphold its part of the contract when the governed are repressed. In an autocratic regime, a ruler often maintains power by providing private goods to a minimum winning coalition, then represses the rest of the population. State stability is generated by people who work to produce private goods, which the leader distributes to the few people who keep him in power. The leader exchanges the population's labor for certain promises.[3] In the USSR, these were the core

[1] Konstantin Sonin. September 2024. "Modern Imperialisms." Becker-Friedman Working Paper No. 2024-115. 8
[2] For the purposes of this paper, a "dissident" is a person who wants systemic change in their government.
[3] Authoritarian regimes with natural resources fall outside of the dynamic I've described because they don't rely on the population to produce capital. This just increases that state's leader's ability to repress the population, because he doesn't rely on their production.

promises of Communism: prosperity and equality. Failure to keep these promises decreases the people's willingness to work. The leader then uses his monopoly on policy to engage in repression and force people to produce the goods which maintain his power, but repression is a cost that takes away from the pool of available resources to distribute as private and public goods. Repression cyclically destabilizes regimes by reducing the incentives for workers to produce the goods that winning coalition members require to continuously support the leader.

Because the autocratic regime relies on repression to keep producing private goods for its survival, effective resistance is fundamentally different in autocracies compared to democracies. In open systems, interest groups have stable representation in a political system, and protest groups which are underrepresented are fundamentally separate entities.[4] By forming coalitions around specific policies, interest groups leverage their access to representation to bargain for political change which reflects the specific needs of the people. Autocratic hegemonies claim a monopoly on political truth, so disallow interest group representation completely. Consequently, protest groups only need to be strong enough to coerce the government rather than build a coalition to influence all other groups. However, opposition movements which demand positions of power for their leaders to enact within-system change, rather than rejecting or reforming the system, strengthen an autocratic regime because competition for power reinforces winning coalition members' loyalty to the leader.[5] Generally, broad movements for system-wide change question the state's legitimacy, because they highlight that it is not strong enough to have a full monopoly over political truth or its people's actions.

Any form of dissent in a closed system fundamentally threatens its state stability because it threatens the state's monopoly on policy. Consequently, the definition of successful dissent and factors which improve protest outcomes in autocracies are also different from in democracies. I will define dissent in an autocracy as actions which limit the leadership's potential actions, unlike dissent in democratic regimes which is a form of bargaining with the government.

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[4] Kowalewski 57. He also describes revolutionary groups as separate to protest groups, where revolutionary groups seek regime change. I've combined the two, with revolutionary groups as a subset of protest groups, as the important difference for my argument is whether they have political representation or not.

[5] See Buena de Mesquitas et. al *The Logic of Political Survival* (2003) for more on selectorates and winning coalitions. In summary, because the winning coalition's membership is limited, and a new leader who has affinity with a member may move that member into the selectorate, current members are unwilling to support a new leader unless he can promise more private goods than the current one. Competition for power between the selectorate and winning coalition highlights the benefits of being in the winning coalition. Competition between the winning coalition members allows a leader to leverage instability and eventually reduce the size of the winning coalition, further increasing the benefit of remaining in the winning coalition by supporting him.

Classifying dissent as such allows for analysis of its efficacy[6] as a function of regime stability, which informs why autocracies repress dissent — limiting an autocrat's actions destabilizes his ability to provide goods to his supporters. Any demands other than for individual private goods attack the entire system, because autocratic rulers rely on the competition between classes formed after violating the social contract. In other words, it is not dissent to simply collect more power in the same autocratic system because the dissenter believes he can be more effective as the leader of the system.

Dissent in closed systems is a collective action challenge, but individuals operate under the singular goal of regime change. Mobilizing dissent in closed systems requires different interests to be represented. In game theoretic terms anti-autocratic dissent can be described as a 2-player game, where the players are the protestors and authorities, rather than an N-player game, where the players are all of the interest groups.[7] Successful protests must be broad and class-cutting to mobilize individuals in autocratic regimes, a large barrier compared to mobilizing blocs of interest groups. The most effective anti-autocratic dissent is non-violent and works within the rules of the regime. Non-violent protest is more effective than violent protest, because there is a low barrier to entry and regimes are more open to bargain with non-violent protest groups.[8] Additional recoil against the regime arises when information about its repression is disseminated: Non-violent protest's repression is an unjust act which breaks down society-wide regime support, mobilizes the general population, and causes international condemnation.[9] Dissent must also work within the regime's rules. Not only will illegal dissent immediately be overtly repressed, it can't grow. Legal dissent, on the other hand, can have multi-class contagion effects, greatly increasing its efficacy. Despite operating within the regime's rules, it still demands systems reform and because it disallows the selective application of laws and holds leaders accountable to their own rules.

Free information enhances the factors of effective anti-authoritarian dissent. Information publicizes the regime's failures, which broadcasts the true amount of resources it can commit to public goods, private goods, and repression, while proving that the regime's promises it makes in

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[6] I will define effective dissent as an action which, all else held equal, would cause change.
[7] Kowalewski, David, and Paul Schumaker. "Protest Outcomes in the Soviet Union." The Sociological Quarterly 22, no. 1 (1981): 58-60.
[8] Maria J. Stephan et al., "Why Civil Resistance Works," International Security, vol. 33–33 (President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008), 13
[9] Stephan et al., "Why Civil Resistance Works." 11

exchange for labor are not upheld. It also increases repression's costs. More people must be repressed when far-reaching information effectively mobilizes them, and it limits the methods of repression if the government is unwilling for the public to be aware of violent repression. Informational dissent can also cause a relatively small number of overt dissenters to be necessary to substantially restrict an autocratic regime, because the overt dissenters cause broad cultural change which people are enticed to participate in because of personal incentives of consuming media and in-group participation.

The USSR:

Ultimately, it's impossible to tell if the USSR's fall was directly caused by dissent, but on Christmas day, 1991, the Soviet flag was lowered. A mix of glasnost, socioeconomic conditions, and political turmoil, caused its demise when the people protested en masse to demand the state finally uphold its promises.

Information dissemination reduced repression in the USSR because the state couldn't afford the cost tradeoff of public violent repression, eventually forcing the state to make concessions. Distribution pathways also created avenues for non-state activities, and proved the USSR's control was not absolute. Successful informational dissent endogenously reduced cultural fears and perceptions of government's abilities.

Background:

The Soviet Union was a totalitarian system composed of bureaucracies under a supreme "super-bureaucracy" holding it together.[10] These bureaucracies competed with each other to implement the regime's policies while privately siphoning whatever possible from their position, devastating economic production. Despite their negative effects on the system, these bureaucrats were not regime opponents — politically rewarding individuals with positions from which they could siphon private goods was a feature, not a bug, of the partocracy.[11] Its fundamental systemic inefficiency obstructed the USSR's economic growth and ensured the state would never be able to uphold promises of prosperity and stability under communism.

The fifteen years prior to the fall of the Soviet Union marked a period of desperate attempts to prevent the regime's total collapse. The Helsinki Accords (1975) exchanged formal international recognition of Eastern Germany as a state for Soviet compliance with human rights. The Soviet-Afghanistan war (1979-1989) exacerbated popular unrest, because it caused massive domestic shortages and additional disillusionment with the government as more people were drafted without any real gains on the battlefront. Excess government expenditures on the military and rising inequality further contributed to systemic cracks. After a string of leader overturns,

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[10] Shtromas, A. Y. "Dissent and Political Change in the Soviet Union." Studies in Comparative Communism 12, no. 2/3 (1979): 212–44. 223

[11] Ibid.

including Yuri Andropov's short but massively repressive term, Gorbachev took power in 1985 on a reformist platform compared to Brezhnev's isolationist platform. Widespread systematic failure continued to sow popular discontent.

Repression Tactics in the late Soviet Union:

By the 70's, both Soviet officials and international observers recognized that civil disobedience was on the rise, but the government was forced to relax repression because weak economic production left it without the resources to do so. In previous decades Stalin's purges and Khruschev's consumer thaw quelled dissent, but backlash to violence prevented purges and the economy couldn't sustain increasing public goods. Wage incentives were ineffective in the face of worker dissatisfaction with the quality of Soviet goods and services.[12] Relaxed suppression decreased the cost of dissidents participating in semi-organized actions, such as accessing black market goods and information. Organized blatant opposition was always immediately repressed, but covert dissent had broken societal atomization and created civil cultures outside of state-sanctioned channels.[13] Non-violent repression increased to attempt to coerce people into compliance. Tactics included illegalizing dissent, psychiatric abuse, and generally instilling a culture of cynicism by demonizing the individual.

Despite amendments moving away from Stalin-era laws and codifying civil rights such as to demonstration and privacy on paper, the USSR constitution still criminalized acts of dissent. In the 1977 constitution of the USSR, in force until its dissolution, articles 59-69 in Chapter 7 allowed the Soviet to retract the rights it offered in previous sections. Article 59 stated "citizens' exercise of their rights and freedoms is inseparable from the performance of their duties and obligations",[14] and the following articles listed these obligations, including to work and "strictly observe labor discipline",[15] and "maintain public order".[16] Most importantly Article 62 codified the obligation to safeguard the "interests" of the USSR, an intentionally vague term, and

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[12] Central Intelligence Current Support Division, Office of Soviet Analysis. SOVIET ELITE CONCERNS ABOUT POPULAR DISCONTENT AND OFFICIAL CORRUPTION. CIA-RDP83T00853R000200150001-8. December 1982. Print. 2

[13] Sharlet, Robert. "Soviet Dissent since Brezhnev." Current History 85, no. 513 (1986): 321–40. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45315749. 321 SDB

[14] The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics "CONSTITUTION (FUNDAMENTAL LAW) OF THE UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS." Book. Novosti Press Agency Publishing House. Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, October 7, 1977. 35

[15] Ibid. Article 60

[16] Ibid. Article 65

explicitly states that "betrayal of the Motherland is the gravest of crimes against the people".[17] The legal system itself conditioned civil rights on compliance with the state. Selectively applying these obligation-type laws also created incentives for the bureaucrats' compliance, because bureaucrats would be rewarded with Western goods and lessened responsibilities, but blackmailed with penal punishment for taking these rewards to ensure perpetual support. Later additions to Soviet criminal law which allowed retrial and extended sentences, indefinitely prevented imprisoned dissenters' release.[18] These punishments increased people's uncertainty about the true risks of dissent, further deterring them from acting against the regime. However, because labor sentences were very costly, seen as a sign of public KGB failure, and caused negative publicity, less visible methods of coercion were preferred by the state.[19]

Psychiatric repression, where the USSR used psychiatric hospitalization to essentially imprison dissidents, was a common form of coercion which also culturally implied that the only reason to oppose the regime was mental illness. "Sluggish schizophrenia" was an internationally recognized bogus diagnosis used to suppress dissent.[20] The USSR withdrew from the World Psychiatric Association in 1983 to avoid psychiatric abuse investigations, which increased the medicalization of dissent.[21] In hospitals, dissidents were drugged and contained indefinitely, and on discharge, those diagnosed with sluggish schizophrenia lost their civil employment rights. Psychiatric repression delegitimized the dissidents, convincing the public they were simply crazy.[22] Discredited, dissidents couldn't reliably change culture such that people would behave in non-state sponsored ways.

The cynical culture in the RSFSR was the regime's most effective coercion tactic, because it reduced the dissident's apparent capacity to impose costs on their opponent. If an actor can't impose costs on an opponent, then fighting can't change the outcome of a negotiation — anti-regime actions appear to only incur personal costs upon individuals.[23] Language itself

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[17] Ibid. Article 62
[18] Sharlet, Robert. "Soviet Dissent since Brezhnev." 324
[19] Karklins, Rasma. "The Dissent/Coercion Nexus in the USSR." Studies in Comparative Communism 20, no. 3/4 (1987): 337. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45366861.
[20] Van Voren, R. "Political Abuse of Psychiatry--An Historical Overview." Schizophrenia Bulletin 36, no. 1 (November 5, 2009): 33–35. https://doi.org/10.1093/schbul/sbp119.
[21] Sharlet, Robert. "Soviet Dissent since Brezhnev." 324
[22] Lynch, Allen. "A Policy Perspective on Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union." The Fletcher Forum 7, no. 2 (1983): 366. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45331123.
[23] Branislav Slantchev "The Power to Hurt: Costly Conflict with Completely Informed States." American Political Science Review 97, no. 1 (2003)

was controlled, and official documents systematically used grammar to emphasize the public over the individual.[24] The regime monopolized information, and carefully controlled public culture to instill regime ideals. Rejecting the individual in favor of the collective public caused youth indifference to politics, theoretically allowing the government to run without the population's input. The government's economic and psychic bribery, including control over careers, mobility, and socialization, were not only direct and immediate threats but also demonstrated the government's all-encompassing power over individuals. Intensifying the population's belief that government influence was unidirectional caused people to accept their situation.

People's protest:

Why did people protest in the face of these tactics? People collectively dissent if the long-term benefits of action outweigh its short-term risks. The weakened regime increased people's perceived chances of success.[25] Cultural fear the state instilled in people who lived through Stalinist-era purges didn't deter a younger generation.[26] Despite repression, the CIA reported 280 overt incidents of Soviet protest in the 1970's, and actual numbers were likely much greater.[27] Most large-scale USSR protests were based on economic conditions;[28] shortages exacerbated people's demands of the state, who couldn't violently repress the workers without further economic consequences. The protests leading up to the USSR's dissolution toed the line regarding the maximum political challenge they could pose before warranting total instant repression, gradually moving the line for what was allowable.

Bureaucratic corruption and competition for privileges were both symptoms and causes of elite dissatisfaction, creating a vicious cycle.[29] Cross-class movements that engaged elites was the regime's biggest challenge. In addition to reducing the working class's productivity, these affected elite support, decreased state capacity to course-correct, and opened functional channels

[24] Anderson, Rebecca Diane. "Viktor Tsoi, Rock Star as Soviet Hero: Individual Resistance in the Lermontov Tradition." 28
[25] Karklins, Rasma. "The Dissent/Coercion Nexus in the USSR." 331
[26] Ibid 330
[27]Central Intelligence Agency, National Intelligence Council. Dimensions of Civil Unrest in the Soviet Union. (NIC M-83-10006). April 1983. Print. v.
[28] Ibid. v
[29] Central Intelligence Office of Soviet Analysis. SOVIET ELITE CONCERNS. 4

for dissent. All elites systematically used their position for private means, but many began to do so in ways that violated accepted norms and channels.[30]

By the 80's, Soviet dissent successfully broke the regime's monopoly on information.[31] *Samizdat*,[32] or literally "self-distributed", were journals which illegally[33] published and distributed information. Information dissent such as *Samizdat* mitigated the government's repressive efficacy, by informing the public of the regime's failures and increasing the strength of extrastate information channels. Consuming publications provided a small amount of cultural capital, incentivizing the public to participate, but few were willing to become journalists or produce material. Mass participation in *samizdat* was somewhat low risk, because consuming these publications wasn't extremely difficult. A key example of an organized protest group was the Moscow Helsinki Group, founded in 1976 in response to the Helsinki Accords, which aimed to publicize the Soviet regime's compliance with the agreement. The group insisted it was a free association on strict legal grounds, but the agreement's terms directly conflicted with the regime's core principles, so MHG publications challenged the regime's very existence.[34] Broad dissent caused real changes and responses by the Soviet government, both positive and negative.

Soviet government responses — concessions and initiatives:

Dissent and coercion are often thought to correlate, with an increase in coercion decreasing dissent, but the real relationship is less direct. Instead of deterring them, by the late Soviet period arrests increased dissident activity by fostering resentment and solidarity.[35] Additionally, the Soviet government accepted the argument that limited dissent valves people's grievances before they engage in more dangerous acts.[36] Theoretically, allowing limited dissent can mobilize

[30] While within-system dissent is ineffective if its goal is to transition power from the leader to the dissenter without rejecting the system, elites who siphoned resources and shirked duties directly limited state capacity. Unilaterally, their dissent would be ineffective, but in a cross-class context, they reduced the state's ability to impose costs on protestors.
[31] Sharlet, Robert. "Soviet Dissent since Brezhnev." 324
[32] Komaromi, Ann. "Samizdat and Soviet Dissident Publics." Slavic Review 71, no. 1 (2012): 70. https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.71.1.0070.
[33] Actions like samizdat are only protests because they are prohibited
[34] Karklins, Rasma. "The Dissent/Coercion Nexus in the USSR." 333
[35]Karklins "The Dissent/Coercion Nexus in the USSR." shows data for increased dissent after repression in the USSR, with dissent strongly correlated with an arrest of a family member (p. 331 table 3). He provides a few theories on why repression caused people to act irrationally, such as because personal contact with repressive organs would increase political disaffection and disregard personal costs (p.333).
[36]Ibid. 338

regime supporters who would otherwise prefer costless inaction to defend the regime.[37] Benefits offered to elites in attempts to regain their support for the regime further aggravated the public, with officials reporting that managers had difficulties dealing with workers who saw the privileges their managers enjoyed.[38] The RSFSR carefully chose what it would repress and where it would concede to avoid escalating the issues. The Polish Solidarity movement's success turned official attention to socioeconomic conditions. In a CIA report, Soviet government reactions to worker's protests were often positive, and they tried to implement "carrot-and-stick" policies to respond.[39] They wanted to publicize blue-collar promotions and institute new food distribution systems, but selectively arrest strike leaders.

The government negatively responded to protests by explicitly increasing repression of information.[40] They recognized that public knowledge of the regime's failures was a primary driver of popular dissent. Andropov launched an anti-corruption campaign which prosecuted a number of elite individuals. He aimed to quell elite dissent through punishments, persuade the public that the state was committed to root out misconduct, and create scapegoats for shortages. However, leaders exploited the campaign to attack political opponents,[41] and facets of directives meant to mitigate dissent exacerbated their root causes.[42]

The MHG's actions threatened the regime; in a memo to the CC CPSU, Andropov described measures the Committee of State Security took to begin their termination. In the letter, he describes these groups "inflict serious political damage"[43] and recognizes that their content caused people to question the USSR's sincerity regarding implementing the Helsinki Accord's Basket III provisions. These outcomes pressured the government into implementing Basket III.[44] To control the MHG, the USSR suppressed its members using imprisonment, hospitalization, and

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[37] Branislav Slantchev "The Authoritarian Wager"
[38] Central Intelligence Office of Soviet Analysis. SOVIET ELITE CONCERNS. 4
[39] Central Intelligence Agency. Dimensions of Civil Unrest in the Soviet Union. 21-23
[40] Ibid. 22
[41] Central Intelligence Office of Soviet Analysis. SOVIET ELITE CONCERNS. 4
[42] This is not to say it was ineffective or that it didn't meet its goals. For the most part, the campaign made good popular propaganda, and Andropov was able to dismiss over 1,500 enterprise directors for corruption or malfeasance. (Soviet Anticorruption Campaign)
[43] Andropov, Yuri, and R. Rudenko. "Memo From Andropov to CC CPSU, 'About Measures to End the Hostile Activity of Members of the So-called "Group for Assistance in the Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR,' 5 January, 1977." Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya. National Security Archive, January 5, 1977.
[44] Andropov, Yuri. "KGB Memorandum to the CC CPSU, 'About the Hostile Actions of the So-called Group for Assistance of Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR,' 15 November 1976." Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya. National Security Archive, November 15, 1976.

exile. It stated their work was anti-Soviet propaganda and untrue defamation.[45] Eventually, they forced the group and its offshoots to disband by 1982, but it reformed in 1989.[46] After the Helsinki Accords, overall dissident repression spiked,[47] likely fostering solidarity and increasing disaffection with the regime. In general, the MHG's publications led to a public culture of naming and recognizing the disconnect between all of Communism's and the state's promises, and the reality its people were living. However, the organization attracted mainly intellectual individuals rather than general workers.[48] The MHG couldn't sufficiently incentivize mass collective participation, so it had limited efficacy to cause change.

International Responses:

Informational dissent in the USSR was not to convince the West to be a savior, but to gain additional avenues for dissent and leverage additional constraints placed on the government. International responses played some part in Soviet dissent, insofar as international law and cultures could be co opted to facilitate domestic dissent. An offshoot of the MHG, the Psychiatric Abuse Working Group, researched and publicized the psychiatric repression in the USSR, which demonstrably brought international condemnation to the USSR for the practice.[49] The MHG assumed a legal watchdog stance and insisted they operated outside of the official system. They avoided immediate suppression because they were an international-facing group, so Andropov believed they weren't directly rallying the Soviet people.[50]

The West believed it had a much bigger part to play than internal Soviet documents indicate, with USSR response more worried about the US leveraging protestors' request for support to increase control over Soviet domestic affairs. International law isn't enforceable, so dissenters couldn't count on international aid. MHG's founder, Alexeyeva, even demanded the Helsinki Accords be withdrawn in 1987 because the USSR used the concessions in it to justify

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[45]Andropov, Yuri. "Yuri Andropov, Chairman of the KGB, Memorandum to the Politburo, December 29, 1975." Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya. National Security Archive, December 29, 1975. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21733-document-2.

[46] Central Intelligence Agency, Soviet Society in the 1980s: Problems and Prospects 32

[47] Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence "The Evolution of Soviet Reaction to Dissent" National Security Archive. July 15, 1977. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/23777-central-intelligence-agency-evolution-soviet-reaction-dissent-15-july-1977.

[48] Central Intelligence Agency, Soviet Society in the 1980s: Problems and Prospects. (SOV 82-10206X). December 1982. Print. 31

[49] Central Intelligence Agency, Soviet Society in the 1980s: Problems and Prospects.

[50] Andropov, Yuri. "KGB Memorandum to the CC CPSU"

its war, but the international community didn't make the Soviet government uphold its promises to its people.

Moreover, international support and condemnation was able to be propagandized and usurped by the state to delegitimize dissenters. The state could mark internationally-supported activists as spies, which both delegitimized them and facilitated their prosecution. The MHG's positioning allowed them to avoid repression, but decreased their direct influence on Soviet politics.[51] In letters to the US government, the USSR rejected US attempts to interfere in their affairs under the pretext of human rights. Invoking sovereignty denied America the ability to support dissidents in the USSR without delegitimizing those causes as a CIA plot. International attention and support had mixed effects on constraining the regime, and often backfired.

Music in the USSR:

The phenomenon of the Soviet Rock movement eventually became the hallmark of informational dissent in the RSFSR. Society-wide dissent requires mobilizing people whose primary goal is not solely rebellion. Music became the cultural product to rally the masses, and eventually set the soundtrack for the fall of the Soviet Union. Unlike other forms of dissent, the cultural impact of music incentivized broad participation in people who would otherwise comply with the regime. Artists wanted to write, produce, and share music not as a form of dissent, but because they loved it. Despite attempts to prevent non-regime music's spread, artists and audiences rapidly adapted to access it, which caused the government to waste massive amounts of resources trying to stop the phenomenon.

Magnitizdat was a form of *samizdat* involving recording and distributing non-state music, which spread Russian rock subculture underground. Despite having no public channels to broadcast, the band Akvarium topped published *Pravda* polls because of home record distributions. While originally influenced by Western groups like the Beatles, by the late 70's Soviet rock differentiated itself using its complex lyrics, commensurate with artistic traditions laid by Dostoevksy and Lermentov. Themes included alienation, corruption, freedom, and intolerance. New Wave lyrics were more indirect, simply depicting youth's lives as they were,

[51] Lynch, Allen. "A Policy Perspective on Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union." 367

which memorialized the absurdity of the reality the youth lived.[52] These artists provided an alternative to the state's romanticized propaganda of itself.

The regime's initiatives to contain rock music couldn't contain its effects. To create a space where they could monitor the evolving subculture, the KGB formed the Leningrad Rock Club in 1981, a 600-seat theater for bands.[53] Agents monitored the audience and lyrics, but artists used creative workarounds such as claiming their metaphors were about US policies in the Middle East instead.[54] The agents' quiet support fueled the club's success, because the Communist Party assumed passive control neutralized the club's threat. In July 1983, the Ministry of Culture launched a campaign against pop groups.[55] Diagnosing the issue as foreign influence, all English music was banned, which pushed domestic music into discotheques rapidly distributing Russian groups' messages.[56] Groups found loopholes in the laws that suppressed domestic non-state rock groups, such as using alternate labels like "contemporary youth musicians".[57] Eventually the loopholes were closed and rock was totally outlawed, but by then it was impossible for the USSR to contain music, from acoustic "apartment concerts", *kvartirniki*, to the distribution of home records.[58] The regime's inability to contain music publicly displayed its weakness. In an article published in the *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* the music critic Artemy Troitsky criticized outlawing rock groups as inefficient and recommended the government to work with them instead, and was summarily blacklisted from the entire journalism world.[59] The USSR couldn't reconcile the operational inefficiencies informational repression caused without self-contradiction. Culture bureaucracy's inefficiencies led to wasted resources, which limited economic and political efficiency.

After he took power in 1985, Gorbachev's *glasnost*[60] policy reversed his predecessor's anti-rock policies, setting the stage for a rising star. Debuting in 1982 and led by the rock legend Victor Tsoi, the band KINO rapidly rose in popularity, becoming a cult Soviet hero. Tsoi aimed

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[52] Bright, Terry. "Soviet Crusade against Pop." Popular Music 5 (1985): 135
[53]Maynes, Charles. "A Haven for Soviet Rock and Roll Is Long Gone but Its Music Still Resonates." NPR, 28 Aug. 2021
[54] ibid
[55] Bright, Terry. "Soviet Crusade against Pop.". 123
[56] Ibid. 141
[57] Troitsky, Artemy. Back in the USSR : The True Story of Rock in Russia. Print. Internet Archive. Boston : Faber and Faber, 1988.96. https://archive.org/details/backinussrtruest00troit/page/98/mode/2up.
[58]Lipovetsky, Mark et al. "The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture." Oxford University Press eBooks, July 14, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197508213.001.0001.
[59] Troitsky, *Back in the USSR : The True Story of Rock in Russia.* 98
[60] 1987

for public legitimacy outside of the underground, and called music "mass art of the people".[61] What set his music apart was the emotion in his voice, hope in his lyrics, and action in his messaging. Instead of sorrowful or cynical, his music was enthusiastic and hopeful. His art worked within the system, but exposed where it didn't meet its promises. His image was very honest, and unlike his contemporaries, he exhibited the belief that non-creative work was vital and fulfilling.[62] Despite focusing on the individual, he also respected the strength of the people. He publicly insisted that his music wasn't political, but his audience broadly interpreted it was. His early work spoke of the system without any explicitly political content. For example, the song Алюминиевые огурцы/"Aluminum Cucumbers" tells the story of the artist planting aluminum cucumbers in a field. It evidences one of the early themes of his works: the futility of state-sponsored activities for Soviet youth. His early songs' lyric's multiple interpretations minimized state suppression. Like many artists, his popularity meant that any suppression would be broadly publicized, so the regime couldn't do so unless it could mitigate backlash.

Tsoi was the ideal figure to mark the newest evolution of Soviet rock once *glasnost* began and rock's suppression ended. The government begrudgingly accepted rock, but the state still claimed a stronghold over people, culture, and dissent. However, in an interview Tsoi stated that he wouldn't participate in newly permitted official rock because he didn't "want people to think the world has really changed until it has."[63] He used his platform to demand the USSR kept its promises. Tsoi released the album Группа крови/"Blood Type", in 1988, which became considered "the major cultural event of cultural life" at the end of the Glasnost era.[64] It notably commented on the Afghanistan war, expressing Tsoi's anti-war views. Its title track is about the drafted Soviet soldier, with the chorus:

> "My blood type, on my sleeve/ My ID number, on my sleeve.' Wish me luck in my battle!/ So wish me/ Not to be left lying in the grass/ not to be left lying in the grass./So wish me luck/ So wish me luck"

The song's tone is somber, with a strong tempo. The soldier in Tsoi's song isn't portrayed as heroic, and his sacrifice is not willing nor noble, but obligated. The soldier doesn't believe the government is sending him to a battle he will win; his blood type and ID number are on his

[61] Anderson, Rebecca Diane. "Viktor Tsoi, Rock Star as Soviet Hero" 19
[62]Ibid. 84
[63]Ibid. 92
[64]Ibid. 79

sleeve to expedite processing casualties. He just wants to make it back, and asks for luck to do so. Tsoi himself dodged the Soviet-Afghan draft by getting psychiatrically diagnosed as unfit.[65] The war sowed anti-military views, and caused a disconnect between people and the state. This song, among others on the album, brought the reality of the "sacrifices" the soldiers made to the forefront of public consciousness. The public's awareness of a non-propagandized version of the war, especially after only recently learning about its full extent during *glasnost*, greatly increased dissatisfaction with the government. His art directly impacted the state's policies, and in an interview Gorbachev said that the song Перемен!/"Changes!" "reflected the nation's desire for change" when asked what sparked his reforms.[66] In an interview, Troitsky stated that the population at the time was deeply moved by the message but the immediate reaction was more lighthearted and that people just realized that they wanted change but not necessarily exactly how to achieve these changes.[67] Subtle messaging allowed the music to spread far enough to mobilize the population before the regime suppressed it.

However, Tsoi met his untimely death on August 15, 1990, just before the fall of the USSR. Investigations say he fell asleep at the wheel and collided with a bus at at least 130/km hour, instantly killing him and completely destroying his car. He hadn't had alcohol for at least two days before his death.[68] His death had a massive effect, and thousands went to his funeral. While speculative, had his death been a form of repression, then the effect only strengthened channels of non-state culture and coordination.

Overall, the collaboration between artists who produce music and the audience who access the medium makes music and media the most powerful form of protest in authoritarian systems. The publicity that artists gain, especially through building non-state pathways, constrains the state's ability to repress them. Music directly incentivizes all people to dissent because it is a cultural commodity, so has inherent short-term benefits for dissenters. Unlike other forms, which demand participation in exchange for nebulous future promises, such as for

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[65]Ibid. 100

[66] May, Jasper. "Viktor Tsoi : How a Post-Soviet Rocker Provided the Soundtrack to the Downfall of the USSR." Medium, 28 Feb. 2019,

[67] Troitsky, Artemy, interviewed by Mikhail Kozyrev, Артемий Троицкий о принадлежности Виктора Цоя к ЦРУ. Как группа «Кино» писала свои песни, April 15, 2014, tvrain. https://tvrain.tv/teleshow/kozyrev_online/artemij_troitskij_o_prinadlezhnosti_viktora_tsoja_k_tsru_kak_gruppa_kino_pisala_svoi_pesni-366963/

[68] "On This Day Rock Legend Viktor Tsoi Died." The Moscow Times, Aug 15, 2019.

the MHG journalists, or can only be done by certain groups, such as bureaucratic dissent, Soviet rock culture moved many people to rebel against the state because they wanted to.

Conclusion:

Eventually, economic inefficiency caused by the rents the state had to extract to provide private goods caused its downfall. As people began to protest in its final decade, the regime didn't have the resources to contain them. Protests were dangerous as they signaled the public's willingness to hold the regime accountable for its shortcomings and complicated the maintenance of public order.[69] The state's inability to repress dissent in its final decade exponentially weakened it. The USSR couldn't reconcile the failures that flamed discontent with the true state of the world.

[69] Central Intelligence Agency. Dimensions of Civil Unrest in the Soviet Union. vi

Modern Russia:

The Soviet Union fell in 1991, but governmental repression continues in modern Russia. Using conspiracy theories, Putin's government rewrites history to legitimize the regime and justify targeting opposition. However, rewriting history damages people's perceptions of the nation's past. Modern Russia is a nascent state, and nationalism maintains its cohesion after the transitions from imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Dissidents pose significant threats to his regime, especially in times of economic decline. Foreign agent laws legislate pathways to target opposition, but erode the regime's credibility by projecting an image that they can't control instability or are the cause of it. However, the legacy of informational dissent and audience mobilization under a musician continues.

Conspiracy Theories

Today, Putin's government is very reliant on conspiracy theories — claims that actors are trying to achieve malevolent ends that go against the most plausible explanation without sufficient credible evidence.[70] Conspiracy claims keep horizontal and vertical threats at bay by projecting a simple narrative of overarching events and an in-group out-group boundary; in Russia Putin manufactures a narrative that he fights against a nebulous "Western" shadow threat. Conspiracy theories in Russia today emphasize a powerful foreign enemy that influences society from behind-the-scenes, which requires its citizens to consent to state control so that the government can "rescue" them from the threat. Conspiracy theories build on non-violent repressive foundations from the USSR, especially regarding cultural cynicism and reflecting Andropov's anti-corruption campaign. By referring to a non-tangible threat, the people have to accept that they shouldn't try to influence government changes because an outside force is the real cause for people's discontent. Andropov's campaign's goals to create a scapegoat and appear to be fighting for the people are similar to the goals of conspiracy theory propaganda. Overall, governmental conspiracy theories in Russia today justify repression by marking dissidents as foreign enemies, which allows the government to break its contract to uphold its citizens' safety by claiming they aren't obligated to this group.

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[70] Radnitz *Revealing Schemes* 8

In his book Revealing Schemes, Scott Radnitz analyzes Putin's use of conspiracy theories using an approach that shows how leaders strategically use conspiracy theories to gain political advantages. His conclusion to these parts is first that politicians use conspiracy theories to maintain power and stability, but while they subvert state's institutions, their effects on the public often decrease political participation while bringing together anti-government collectives. Radnitz describes the proliferation of conspiracy theories under Putin as a unique[71] case in the Post-Soviet region, because as an autocratic ruler, Putin should be able to directly repress dissenters instead of pay the costs associated with the risks of relying on conspiracy theories. Some of the risks he describes are the following: that they erode trust in public institutions, reduce political participation, contribute to political alienation and reduce the capacity of citizens to hold their leaders accountable based on facts. These risks actually benefit the regime because they inhibit effective collective action. Cultural ennui was a cornerstone of non-violent Soviet repression, and increasing it further separates citizens from their government's decision-making.

Foreign Agent Laws:

In 2012, Russia adopted the law on foreign agents, officially titled "On Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding Regulating Activities of Noncommercial Organizations Performing Functions of a Foreign Agent," which regulated nongovernmental organizations' actions. In the following decade, the law was expanded to include virtually anyone and excludes these agents from many aspects of life, such as civil service and holding office.[72] The Russo-Ukrainian War caused a huge uptick in repression, and initiated mass designations of foreign agents. The MHG achieved the status of an interest group, which authoritarian regimes wouldn't normally permit, but Putin had to remit the freedom to organize as the war destabilized his regime. Despite consistently repressing the MHG, the group had stable representation in the State Duma and Putin awarded Alexeyeva a state award in 2017. However, Russia disbanded the MHG in 2023 after it published a statement condemning the invasion of Ukraine.[73]

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[71] I think that Putin had more opportunities to engage with conspiracies and had better networks to produce them. It possibly also faces more political competition now than it did in the USSR, causing the internal state to see itself as relatively competitive even though it is less competitive than its neighbors.

[72]"Inoteka: Data on "foreign Agents" and 'Undesirable' Organizations." Инотека, inoteka.io/ino/foreign-agents-source-en. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

[73]Tenisheva, Anastasia. "'Final Nail in the Coffin': Activists Lament Moscow Helsinki Group Closure." The Moscow Times, 26 Jan. 2023,

The law reflects the penal code in the USSR, and both are intentionally vague in order to allow the government to selectively apply them. The designation separates journalists from collaborators and audiences because news outlets refuse to work with them, and make all creators of content insecure and threatened. Overall, the laws shift in the last several years allows the government to apply repressive measures without legal justification. In fact, the State Duma admitted so much — one of the author Oleg Matveichev stated in an interview that "it is made in such a way that we can always declare a 'foreign agent' whoever we deem necessary"[74]
62% of Russians polled have a negative connotation of entities marked "foreign agents", and many have trouble differentiating between the phrase "foreign agents," "spy," and "fifth column.".[75] This confusion allows the state to justify oppression by erasing the line between criminal conduct and legal activities. Moreover, citizens who supported the regime now take issue with its unfairness.

The foreign agent laws have significant economic consequences. The label causes high risks of liquidation because companies struggle to attract funding or engage with the public, so suppresses the development of independent Russian companies. Because of the aforementioned erosion of trust caused by conspiracy theories, Russian people have no institutions to turn to. People have no free and sustainable agency.

Music in Modern Russia:

In Russia today, people look back on Soviet-era rock musicians fondly and align their national identity with these stars. KINO's music continues to signify non-partisan rebellion across the post-Soviet space. In 2020, DJ's in Minsk were assigned to play pro-Lukashenko tracks in Kiev Square during a planned rally for the oppositional candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, but played Перемен!/"Changes!" instead, and became media heroes but received 10 days' imprisonment.[76] In Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, the song's chorus is a popular chant. In 2014, Deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov from the United Russia party accused Victor

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www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/26/final-nail-in-the-coffin-activists-lament-moscow-helsinki-group-closure-a80053. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

[74] Krupskiy, Maxim. "The Impact of Russia's 'Foreign Agents' Legislation on Civil Society." *Fletcher Russia and Eurasia Program*, 1 Oct. 2023, sites.tufts.edu/fletcherrussia/the-impact-of-russias-foreign-agents-legislation-on-civil-society/.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Bayou, Céline. "The Revival of Russian Rock in the Post-Soviet Space." REGARD SUR L'EST, 13 Dec. 2020, regard-est.com/the-revival-of-russian-rock-in-the-post-soviet-space. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Tsoi of being a CIA agent who aimed to destroy the USSR. He claimed that the shifts in his later songs proved that these had been imported from Hollywood, rather than caused by the RSFSR's own shifting policies.[77] There is no evidence to support his claims.[78] However, these conspiracies destabilize national identity because so many people align themselves with Tsoi. Upon his death, the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported that "Tsoi is the last hero of rock."[79] He is not just a rebel, but a heroic icon. In the short term, people will realign with the Russian regime, but in the long term Russia will face the consequences of an unstable national identity. Moreover, subverting the story of Russia's hero will cause people to lose faith in the government's claims and search for another actor who they can trust to align with. In the case of this conspiracy theory, Fyodorov backtracked and claimed he never said anything about Tsoi.[80]

Groups such as the infamous Pussy Riot faced repression in the last decade. In 2012, this group entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and recorded themselves singing a song called "Virgin Mary, Mother of God, chase Putin out". They were arrested, and received a two-year sentence for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred."[81] They captured global media attention for a short moment, but their quick repression and the government's campaign to discredit them led their domestic image to have little organizing power. Their image is at best as counter-culture icons, so their work doesn't show systemic contradictions by playing within the rules like their Soviet counterparts did.

A massive amount of artists were added to the foreign agent list in 2023 for relatively minor actions — all artists had to conform with state expectation, go underground, or be exiled. The Justice Ministry added the singer Zemfira Ramazanova to the foreign agent list for speaking out against the Russo-Ukrainian war and holding concerts in foreign countries.[82] Like Tsoi, she is another one of the most revered artists from the USSR. Attaching the foreign agent claim to Zemfira erodes the regime's credibility and risks instilling a popular belief that the regime, not the enemy they manufacture, is the real destabilizing force. In an interview, Troitsky says that music no longer has the same power to influence change because it is no longer a new and contagious phenomenon.[83] Soviet Rock had a culture surrounding it that people wanted to

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[77]Borenstein, Elliot. "Spies in the House of Rock." Jordan Russia Center, 17 Apr. 2014
[78] To my best ability searching through the CIA archives.
[79] "On This Day Rock Legend Viktor Tsoi Died."
[80]Elliot Borenstein, "Spies in the House of Rock."
[81]Pinkham, Sophie, et al. "Pussy Riot in Translation." Dissent Magazine, 4 Feb. 2015.
[82]Popeski, Ron. Popular Russian Singer Zemfira Declared Foreign Agent by Government | Reuters, 10 Feb. 2023.
[83] Artemy Troitsky interviewed by Mickail Kozyrev

participate in, but since it's been around for decades now, it doesn't have the same effects. Cultural benefits are central to facilitate large-scale participation.

An interesting case to examine is Elizaveta Gyrdymova, known by her stage name Monetochka, a modern Russian pop artist. She was marked a foreign agent for speaking out on Ukraine as well.[84] Now, her livelihood depends on if she can rebuild her career using international tours, but she must avoid countries with extradition treaties with Russia. These punishments deter musicians from stepping out of line. However, people can still access her music on Youtube Music and Yandex. Her international concerts are packed with Russian fans today. Her lyrics follow in the Soviet rockers' tradition, with literary nuance using metaphors and depth of language, as well as an evolution to more explicitly revolutionary messaging once she didn't have to conform to Russian state expectations. Her song Это было в России/"That Was in Russia", is about the singer's nostalgic childhood memories, and in the chorus she repeats "that was in Russia/that was a long time ago". She contrasts how she remembers Russia with what it is today to show that it's worse. The metaphors that highlight the contradictions between the past and present subtly present a revolutionary message which people in Russia can access. In an interview, she elaborated on the lyrics, stating she misses "a country that doesn't exist now."[85] These messages can mobilize fans who live internationally but have power in Russia.

Overall, Russian musicians' repression weakens cultural expression in Russia, and damages national identity cohesion. While these actions delay a fall in general support during the Ukraine war caused by popular recognition that conspiracies are false, there will be long term consequences which will destabilize the regime in the future. Broadly, Russia's national identity is connected with its rich literary traditions, but the rise of conspiracy as a tool to erase the creators who produce artworks will eventually cause its identity to collapse.

[84]Sonne, Paul, and Alex Marshall. "For Russia's Pop Star Exiles, a Moral Stand and a Creative Climb."
[85]Ebel, Francesca, and Mary Ilyushina. Pop Star Monetochka Reminds Russians of Their Country's Lost Liberal Moment, 1 Sept. 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/01/monetochka-russia-song-viral-hit/. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Conclusion:

Generally, to overcome authoritarian regimes, people must be incentivized to overcome collective actions issues arising from the risks of blanket repression. Non-violent movements which incentivize short-term mass participation are the most effective to cause changes. Music and other cultural products are the best way to mobilize many people, because they disseminate information, which damage regimes' monopolies. Because authoritarian leaders rely on their population to provide the labor to produce private goods for the winning coalition to support the leader, actions which hinder the leader's ability to transfer goods destabilize the regime. The modern proliferation of foreign agent laws globally is cause for concern, because they suppress freedom of information and allow governments to avoid issues that affect their constituents. Even so, people's drive to congregate under cultural icons will be able to facilitate changes. Understanding the mechanisms which organize people prevents fatalism. Putin's regime strength lies in weak civil consciousness causing Russia's people to accept their fates, but the society proved that it has the capacity to demand accountability from its leaders. The question now is how to activate that latent potential.

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