REPRESSION IN POST-SOVIEF RUSSIA: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO DEMOCRATIZATION

by

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Abstract

Repression is a function of many types of states, employed from autocracies to democracies, and anything in between. However, transitional states, those between autocracy and democracy show significantly higher levels of repression than other states. In other studies, research has been done to understand what can be a limitation to repressive activity, and promote democratization. In the case of the post-Soviet state, there have been significant systemic issues that have stalled democratization and allowed it to avoid these limitations. Corruption, consolidation of power into one supermajority party, reliance on electoral manipulation, and passionate development of a national identity all contribute to this problem. As Russia pursues its goals of being a great power, it has exposed itself to globalization and moderating factors. In fact, Russia has accepted western principles on certain rights topics, and implemented positive policies domestically, and supported some human rights legislation at the UN. From this involvement in globalization, Russia may experience the transformative pressures it needs to overcome systemic and structural problems.
Repression in Post-Soviet Russia: Systemic Barriers to Democratization

1. Introduction

“Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated,” is a misquotation attributed to Mark Twain, in response to news reports identifying him as deceased, and in the case of Russia’s democracy the same may be true. Studies on repression have focused greatly on Middle Eastern, Central Asian, African, and Latin American nations, and related it to natural resources or colonial influences (DeMeritt and Young 2013; Oskarsson and Ottosen 2010). Political unrest against the autocratic states are high in these regions, as evidenced by the Arab Spring, rebel movements, and budgets that have funded the states’ focus on security and repression of dissidents, both democratic and extremists. However, the academic literature has little focused on Russia specifically as a repressive state, and the effect that may have upon democratic development in the federation. Russia’s developed economy, educated society, and reliance upon external partnerships and alliances creates a puzzle of how sustainable is the use of repression as a political tool. The Russian government, in its attempts to become a great power must balance the level of repressive actions foreign nations will accept, and internal pressures from its citizens, in order to maintain control of the state and continue to reap benefits of foreign partnerships. To take this to mean that democracy in Russia is doomed to fail, because the state has participated in repressive activities, is an exaggeration.

There are studies on repression and its general trends and characteristics that do shed light on how we can understand repression and its institutionalization in post-Soviet Russia. Davenport (2007) analyzes three factors that we can apply in Russia: the anocracy that comprises the Russian state is subject to the “more murder in the middle” theory of repression explaining its prevalence (Fein 1995); repression generally has inconsistent effects of curbing dissent; and
while transitional states have high levels of repression, they tend to reach a more peaceful resolution and eventually settle higher on a democratization spectrum (Davenport 2004). If these are true and applicable to Russia, then it provides general explanation of why Russia experiences repression and the tense struggle between its undemocratic past and current leaders, and the larger population and younger generations seeking democratization. This raises expectations that despite reliance upon it, repression is unsustainable, institutionalized democratic rights and processes can maintain momentum, and the outcome should be a more democratic Russia.

Anocracies also have shorter life spans according to findings by Knutsen and Nygård (2015), so the transition of the Russian state along the democracy continuum should have a defined end. There are paradoxes to these generalities in studying Russia, though.

Russia’s constitutional system has created variances in how repression manifests. Through a separation of powers in government, repressive tactics are not always meted out in a top-down manner from the executive branch. Legislative restrictions enacted by the democratically elected representatives and regional leaders are responsible for crackdowns by the state, and can represent rather popular actions with strong support among the population.

Media monopolization by the state and manipulation of elections can exert significant influence on the information the public receives and who the state can place into representative positions (Cox 2013; Harvey 2016). Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) propose that in studying why governments can remain resilient throughout the use of repression we should look at their internal support, even in manipulated manners, that props up these regimes.

As Russia has developed a post-Soviet economic model based on exporting goods, services, and commodities east and west, it is reliant on good relations with economic partners, though. Despite the state’s reliance on using domestic support and claims to legitimacy as
justification for continuing repressive behavior, a state interacting with the global market the way Russia is, will introduce it to moderating forces. Whether or not foreign companies act in their own accord to stop investment in Russia due to perceptions of human rights abuses, repression can motivate the companies’ foreign headquarter governments to enact sanctions or restrict trade, and motivate other nations to look for other trade routes around Russia. While the Russian state has made its crackdown on terrorism and corruption a top priority, it presents a double-edged sword, as ambitions lay beyond its international standing and ability to balance repression with development. Economic isolation and decline can also lead to more political extremism and isolation from the global community without ties for cooperation and common concerns between nations. Conversely, exposure through globalization can diffuse more democratic ideals and pressure the state into conforming to international norms (Li and Rueveny 2003). Repression’s institutionalization in Russia puts it at odds with the desire to become a great power. Becoming a great power requires cooperation across national boundaries, and expecting adherence to international norms. The state and regime have a vested interest in maintaining power, and crackdowns on rights and liberties mixed with physical integrity violations is at odds with aspirations for global leadership.

1.1 Repression theory

The idea of repression theory originally comes from research done on the funding of state violence against citizens in dictatorships, particularly in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America. States that displayed lack of democratization due in part to a lack of direct funding from citizens, or accountability to them, experienced repression (Ross 2001). In this theory, the state is not spending money on pacification through welfare of the citizens or modernization plans to continue the regime by popular approval. Instead, the state is focused on
armament of police and military to counter state security threats, which are used as excuses to oppress the populace (Ross 2001). This is the state’s means of ensuring both control and obedience over the society, as well as political stability and survivability of the regime. As states democratize, however, political threats trigger repressive reactions by the government, rather than more moderate responses (Fein 1995). As Fein (1995) found, being in transition increased these political tensions as the state attempted to organize and prioritize, taking count of who was allied with the regime and who was against it. Moderation in the use of power by the government are actions like allowing public protests, respecting a free and independent media establishment, and being sensitive to concerns of police militarization and surveillance. Repressive regimes change this dynamic, and utilize repression as a tool for political and social control to maintain survivability of the regime through the democratization process. This makes the process of using repression a two-fold problem: the state in transition needs a functioning government that has consolidated power and authority and commands respect; a state using repression can achieve this goal, but it erodes the democratic process of implementing positive changes through elections and change of leadership the nation needs for development.

1.2 Rentier theory

As a comparison to another theory in political economics, rentier theory would be insufficient to fully explain the dynamics of Russia’s post-Soviet development. As Mahdavy (1970) first proposed as an effect of oil rents and expanded by Beblawi (1987), there are two effects of the rentier state: tax is not collected on citizens or it is low enough that citizens cannot hold the government accountable; and the rents collected by the government from the natural resource industry can be used to effect the minimum social changes and welfare necessary so that the population is content with the regime. This has worked in the application of the Middle
East and Africa, where decades of political change had been suppressed through use of resource rents (Beblawi 1987; Almaz 2015). As in the case of Azerbaijan explored by Almaz (2015), the *rentier* effect relies upon the complementary *repression* effect, whereby the state employs some welfare improvements on a small population relative to Russia’s, but still suppresses dissent through violent means. In Russia, this is not the case, because of its economy based on many different sectors, a developed political system, and reliance upon foreign relations to attain some of its geopolitical goals. Russia also employs some democratic processes that rentier states do not, though they are heavily manipulated: election of leaders, public demonstration, a large media market, free-market economy. Rentier states on the other hand tend to be introspective and have underdeveloped economies, reliant upon mineral wealth.

1.3 Repression in post-Soviet Russia

The Russian state has been greatly focused on consolidating power across its vast geography, and this invites abuses of power when trying to quash opposition. Islamic extremist rebels in the Caucasus republics of Chechnya and Dagestan, and Former Soviet Union (FSU) states threaten resources and relations that are crucial to Russia’s economic security, and thus they must be brought under the central control of the federal government. The government must also contend with democratic activists, who existentially threaten the regime by questioning their policies and practices and sow discontent, and literally threaten the regime by attempting to install opposition candidates into elected positions. External threats like the European Union, United States, NATO, and China represent a multipolar world that Russia must deal with by balancing its ideals and values with political realities. The use of repressive methods like political violence and legislative restrictions on rights, freedoms, and democratic institutions reinforces
the regime’s authority and control, providing a convenient tool for the government to manage the tensions arising in society.

In Russia, the state was undergoing political and social changes after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and had already felt the effects of the CIS states leaving its sphere of influence. Weakened and vulnerable, both the government and civil society in Russia, under Boris Yeltsin’s measures as President, attempted to formulate liberal applications of political change and focus on the development of the country as a free market and a democratic society (Cox 2013). After extreme recession in the late nineties, the economy had to be reorganized for better growth and sustainability (Tsygankov 2013). Reorganization by Prime Minister and then President Putin improved budgetary outlooks and political power domestic and abroad, however democratic freedoms began a sustained decrease in the twenty-first century (Freedom House 2016). A byproduct of the moves to change how the Russian government functioned and served its citizens was the use of repression to obtain and maintain political power for the regime. It was fueled by an assertive focus in policy, positioning Russia as neither European or Asian, but a bridge between the two regions. Russia had to aggressively protect its culture, economy, and the state from threats to its power. As DeMeritt and Young (2010) explain, repression is one set of choices a state has to maintain order and punish dissent. So, the state began implementing more repressive policies to achieve its goals and consolidate power to maintain order.

Russia has a developed political system with democratic participation, a legislature, court system, and executive branch. However, even with these processes in place for governance, we still observe the eroding of democratic institutions and principles with increasingly repressive actions. The executive branch and ruling party United Russia, using legislative dominance, electoral manipulation, aggressive security forces, and national identity for repression, may not
be limited by constitutional restrictions on power, or influenced by foreign relations and sanctions. At least the effects may not be as powerful as they are symbolic in nations like the US or within the European Union. If the executive has no accountability directly to the people, or the legislature can also support and grant additional authorities to the executive, then legal limitations are basically meaningless. This is a common practice in the piecemeal approach practiced in Russia, where democratic rights and freedoms are slowly eroded (Petrov 2016).

Russia has a history of political repression from its past operations during the time of the Soviet Union, and has easily reinvested in the systems of repression like the police, military, and FSB under the guise of threats to the state. They have even legitimized repression with democratic methods like pushing laws that restrict rights and freedoms. The state has not invested in other systems like a robust civil society despite insistence by the west, and actively campaigns against groups promoting democratization (Levinson 2014). As noted by Petrov (2016), the sum of the overall actions used in repression are greater than their parts, for the purpose of keeping costs and consequences low. Russia also balances its methods based on urban and rural experiences, because of its massive geography it must contend with, and the differing values and perceptions of these peoples. As Russia seeks to expand its sphere of influence globally, it must contend with the external pressures of coercive diplomacy tools used by the west, economic negotiations to expand its economy, and internal opposition to certain policies.

2. Literature Review

Repression is viewed as a tool for non-democratic regimes to prevent the regime from facing challenges to its authority. Hard crackdowns like violations of physical integrity are punishment and deterrence on the opposition. Likewise, soft repression tactics like electoral manipulation, restrictions on freedom of the press, or creating administrative and legal
challenges for the exercise of political participation limit opposition parties from mobilizing effectively and garnering support. While we know that democratic states also use repressive measures to some extent, testing the powers and limits of authority, transitional states have perhaps one of the worst records for use of repression (Fein 1995). Transitional states are those on the continuum of democratization somewhere between a full dictatorship and a full democracy. As Fein (1995) describes, there is significant tension in society between competing groups in a transitional state, where as in those settled as dictatorships or democracies there is more guarantees and expectations of security. This is an interesting paradox, because in public discourse of Russia’s development since 1991 and the fall of the Soviet Union, we equate increased repression with failure in democratization. The opposite may be true, instead, and this is part of a natural development, and Russia is experiencing growing pains as it democratizes.

The significant western support thrown to the most liberal groups as the Soviet Union collapsed may explain why the west wants so badly to see a democracy rise out of the ashes. However, the radical liberalization experienced during the early 1990’s and attempts to fight off competing groups during a constitutional crisis pitted many opposing ideologies, with well-endowed and developed political parties, against each other (Cox 2013). Fein’s (1995) research points out that in these weak states, where power is contested, violations of rights goes up. The transitional Russian state is a prime breeding ground for this type of unconsolidated power, where even today, the established central government can feel threatened by political parties it views as challenging the status-quo, questioning the national identity and cultural norms valued by the state, and threatening national security with radical ideology like Chechen terrorists.

As Russia democratizes and changes the political structure of an expansive geographic region, this can also inform some of the repressive policies that have developed. Fein (1995)
notes that civil conflicts can influence an increase of repression when bringing together different ethnic groups. Russia is no stranger to this issue as it has struggled to completely unify the Caucasus regions under its authority, and has co-opted power with the semi-autonomous Republic of Chechnya and Republic of Dagestan (Parfitt 2011). These corrupt intermediaries and their failure to fully democratize and come under the full control of the central Russian government supports Fein’s (1995) view that transitional states experience higher levels of repression. These semi-autonomous republics also represent threats to national security by harboring extremists and challenge the authority of the state, increasing the use of repression by the central government until they are neutralized and out of transition.

Another ongoing factor we see playing a significant role in Russia’s post-Soviet repression are the dynamic of elections, and how this supports a state’s claims to legitimacy. In Davenport’s (1997) analysis of elections, they can serve the purpose of signifying to the international community that the nation is moving towards democracy, and that there is support for the regime. Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) describe these characteristics as claims to legitimacy, and are the avenue by which the state rebukes doubt that it acts without consent of the populace. Electoral manipulation is quite high and overshadows these claims (Treisman 2011), especially as Russia interacts more with the international community. If, as Tsygankov (2013) proposes, Russia is seeking a global leadership position as a great power, it will expectedly come under scrutiny for continued use of electoral manipulation while being a transitional state. However, as Davenport (1997) describes, national elections are crucial to the regime maintaining control, and subsequently implementing their policies for strengthening the central government and advancing Russia’s international standing.
Using manipulated elections is a Faustian bargain for a transitional state. During off years, the state can relax repression, because it has less to lose with no replacement of leaders slated for elections or challenges to power (Davenport 1997). In election years, the state must increase repression to re-legitimize its control, though, and spikes in repression and electoral manipulation become prevalent again (Davenport 1997). The state in this scenario needs control of the government to ensure survivability and advancing its policies, however, it erodes its legitimacy each time by employing repression to maintain electoral advantages. Davenport (1997) does conclude a contradiction to this hypothesis: elections, in the scope of all the political interactions of a state and the citizenry, only reflect a small section of time and activity, so states in his analysis relaxed repressive behaviors closer to elections, to give a better impression of legitimacy when the regime is reaffirmed. As we will see, though, Russia has consolidated power not just under the umbrella of the central government’s authority, but also has solidified political power in the United Russia party (Cox 2013), and thus must increase repression and manipulation of elections to ensure this party maintains control, not just the state and a democratic power (Treisman 2011). This disparity demonstrates that while Russia is democratizing in post-Soviet era, it is stalled in a state of electoral authoritarianism. It is stuck in a cycle of dependency that relies on the use of repression to keep the regime and party elected, but also to allow the regime to finish its policy goals that improve Russia overall.

How does this connect to other studies regarding rule of law, democratization, and repression? In a study by Keith, Tate, and Poe (2009), they look at whether institutionalization of rights in the nation’s constitution truly protects citizens from abuses of rights. To quote:

Our purpose is to investigate, as rigorously as possible, the ability of constitutional rights protections, judicial independence provision, and state of emergency regulations to
ameliorate state abuse of personal integrity – the right not to be imprisoned, tortured, killed or made to disappear because of your political affiliations or convictions (Keith et al 2009).

These are particularly important topics when looking at the situation of Russia, as we examine judicial independence and the use of state emergencies as avenues of repression. Regarding the institutionalization of rights and freedoms, they hypothesize that having these provisions codified by law reduces the use of repression, though by having any openings for how rights can be restricted leads to a path of continually increasing restrictions on rights and freedoms (Keith et al 2009). Further, they propose that a structured and independent judiciary are necessary to protecting the rights of citizens from government abuse, and institutionalization should guarantee rights and again lessen abuses (Keith et al 2009). Finally, they test the hypothesis for how states of emergency are used by regimes to limit the power of legislatures, and thus reduce barriers to political repression during the emergency (Keith et al 2009). Specific to this topic, and later in the exploration of how repression has been justified under states of emergency in Russia, is whether the legislature is dissolved, restricted, or legislators have unfettered access to their work (Keith et al 2009). An unrestricted legislature should be able to reduce rights abuses by its power and authority to counteract executive decisions, as it is accountable to voters.

Their results among the first variable, institutionalization of rights in a constitution, provide mixed or generally negative results. Keith et al (2009) support previous research that few rights have substantive effects on preventing abuses. In the second variable, regarding judicial independence, the findings are also mixed, suggesting that a judiciary that is a final arbiter is a positive influence on rights, though systemic problems can make a judiciary biased in support of
of a repressive government (Keith et al 1995). This is again important to note later in our study, as the executive branch in Russia does not directly infringe on the independence of the judiciary, however, it revises criminal standards to favor the regime’s position in trials (Petrov 2016). Finally, Keith et al (2009) find support to the hypothesis that states of emergency provide a repressive regime with a justification for rights abuses, and extended periods of time help normalize the use of repression and allow more abuses of rights.

We arrive at a culmination of several ideas, namely:

1. transitional states demonstrate more repressive behaviors (Fein 1995)
2. institutionalization of rights affects some repression (Keith et al 2009)
3. elections should be periods of limited repression (Davenport 1997)
4. claims to legitimacy provide a regime support when its authority to act by democratic mandate are questioned or coercively manipulated by external actors (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014)
5. an independent judiciary can be manipulated to be biased in the favor of the state (Keith et al 2009)
6. states of emergency can be used as justifications for implementing repressive policies and continuing them for extended periods (Keith et al 2009)

From this, I hypothesize that the post-Soviet Russian state has effectively avoided and sidestepped many of the limiting factors previously found in studies, because of systemic structural issues in its democratic development. Where previous studies found certain factors should be limiters of repression, instead, structural flaws in the way the post-Soviet state is organized evade these limitations. Through over-centralized power in one party that rubber stamps legislation, that party relying on electoral manipulation and increasing repression during
elections, and zealous pursuit of development goals and a national identity have evaded what were previously thought to be limiters of repression. However, in the advancement of its foreign relations and by way of globalization, the regime has exposed itself to external influences capable of restarting democratization to reach the peaceful outcome theorized by Fein (1995) and Davenport (2004). The increasing dependence on international partners to sustain economic growth and expand its sphere of influence as a great power make it vulnerable to moderating and coercive forces that positively influence respect for rights and diffuse democratic principles into society and the political system.


The constitutional crisis of 1993 precipitated many of the political dissatisfactions that empowered future repression. Following the creation and adoption of a constitution in 1993 may have sorted the Russian government into a federal system, with a balance of powers centrally between the president, legislation, and judiciary, however it vested potentially autocratic powers in the presidency, as argued by Cox (2013). While the constitutional crisis outlined by Cox’s (2013) analysis demonstrates that a strong central government is beneficial to a stable state, we also see how consolidating power within the presidency made repression easier. Because of the events of the later Nineties, which included a recession, the Russian people allowed strong government reforms and policy to create improvements at the cost of freedoms.

These types of shocks in the economy or other spheres of life can allow further concession from the people to the government. Tsygankov (2013) demonstrates how the dissatisfaction with a weakened Russian state was revitalized by the policy changes under the new president by 2000. Looking at economic data from the World Bank (2016), internally and
correlated with the findings of Tsygankov (2013) of dissatisfaction with state policies, the GNI of the Russian people was decreasingly rapidly (See Figure 1). Revitalizing the central government through party politics that created the United Russia party, and consolidating further powers under the president, was certainly popular (Tsygankov 2013). The economic data (World Bank 2016) and studies of popular approval ratings (Treisman 2011) show a positive relationship between the two.

[Figure 1 about here]

During this transitional period after 1991, the data from CIRI Human Rights Dataset seems to address impending issues of political repression. The CIRI data by Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay (2014) is a widely accepted method of objectively rating incidents of repression including political imprisonment, disappearances, torture, and death, and then ranking from 2 as uncommon to 0 as highly common within the given year (See Table 1). The Physical Integrity Rights Index, which is additive of the indicators, ranges on an inverted scale with 0 at the high end to 8 at the low end, following the same scale, where a higher value indicates less total occurrences of the repressive actions (Cingranelli et al 2013). The transition period measured before the constitutional ratification in 1993, beginning in 1992 ranked such occurrences like disappearances, killings, political imprisonment and torture as 0, 1, 1, 1 respectively (Cingranelli et al 2014). Disappearances during this time rank significantly high, being a common occurrence, though as explained as a limitation in the data is a lack of real knowledge in who, if anyone, took a person, for what purpose, to what location, or what their current state may be (Cingranelli et al 2013). However, across the timespan of CIRI data available at last publication in 2014, which for post-Soviet Russia ranges from 1992-2011, it can provide us with a reliable understanding of the trend in repression indicators.
So if this 1992 data were just an indication of the chaotic period as society transitioned, we should see values increase with the political stability over time. The CIRI data from 1993-1999 indicates that this was not an outlier of a politically chaotic time. Extrajudicial killings became common, with a score of 0, for five years between 1995-1999, and torture was ranked at 0 for six of the seven years in 1993-1999 (Cingranelli et al 2014). Repression as indicated by the CIRI data was becoming common place by the official security forces of the state.

2.2 Prime Minister Putin, the first two presidential terms, the second Chechen war, and the security state

Vladimir Putin was appointed Prime Minister in 1999 by President Yeltsin’s hand on the levers. While it is a parliamentary position with constitutionally limited power, this type of political engineering in the systems of government without the involvement of the citizens, is how autocratic shifts begin to happen (Cox 2013). Further, the threat to the state from rebel groups in the Caucasus was an opportunity for Prime Minister Putin to demonstrate a resurgent strength of the Russian state. Tsygankov (2013) characterizes this time in post-Soviet Russia as one of needing to escape the decline of the Russian economy brought on by Yeltsin’s policies, and confront its terrorist threat in the south with military strength. The Russian people looked to the state as a guarantor of its rights and freedoms, and also a symbol of its national identity (Tsygankov 2013). Through use of force in the Caucasus, Prime Minister Putin could demonstrate the capability of the Russian state to meet security challenges and protect its people (Vatchagaev 2008). Similarly, it projects the sense of national identity through a united Russian state, by preventing disregard for the central government and allowing extremist rebels to create autonomous states on the border regions (Tsygankov 2013; Vatchagaev 2008).
Riding the wave of popularity from this show of strength in the beginning of the second Chechen war, Prime Minister Putin was elected President in 2000. The idea of state security became an essential focus of his administration at this time. Tsygankov (2013) describes the support Russia showed the United States in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Like the idea of a national identity unifying Russia’s domestic policies around state security, the perception was that Russia shared a common threat it could help combat with other Great Powers (Tsygankov 2013). Anti-terrorist operations in the following years of the second Chechen war are a hallmark of the state security focus under President Putin. The security operations confronted the Bolshoi Theatre hostage crisis, apartment, subway, and airport bombings in the years following Putin’s two terms of 2000-2008.

Between this time of 1999-2004, Russia was facing outside pressures on its foreign policy. Despite the attempts at security cooperation on terrorism after 9/11 analyzed by Tsygankov (2013), Antonenko and Giegerich (2009) describe the increasing threat of NATO on Russia’s borders. Member states of NATO pushed the envelop on encroachment into Russia’s sphere of influence, by courting new members from Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic States (Antonenko and Giegerich 2009). Positioning of missile systems and deployment of troops and military exercises along the European border with Russia also portray a severe security threat to Russia (Antonenko and Giegerich 2009). Russia, seeking to maintain its advancement as a Great Power, sought further avenues of policy which drew it away from the west and bolstered the idea of a threat to the state’s security (Tsygankov 2013). These policy avenues have led to military modernization, economic cooperation with China, and another military engagement this time in Georgia over South Ossetia by 2008 (Tsygankov 2013).
Continuing policies that consolidated and expanded the powers of the executive required information dominance in Russia. As Cox (2013) notes, media was under pressure immediately in the first term of Putin’s presidency. What was enshrined in the constitution as a free press, was silenced through criminal charges and allegations of unpatriotic behavior (Cox 2013). During this time of media takeover, the regime could ensure only its message would reach the audience: one of constant security threats from the West, from terrorism, and dissent within the nation (Cox 2013). It was not just media empires that were brought under control of the regime using extraordinary powers of the president, but the economic landscape of Russia’s largest companies and industries was reshaped during this period.

Economic activity in a free-market, or at least in a regulated, yet not nationalized market, is free from the direct control of government actors. This is not the case within Russia, where Dresen (2012) describes the importance of the state-corporation to the durability of the regime. Rampant corruption, and again the use of wild charges to remove opposition from companies in order to nationalize them, has provided the executive branch with unparalleled access to the levers of Russia’s economic engine (Dresen 2012). Blank (2011) similarly finds that the economic future of Russia has been determined by a select few in the Kremlin’s sphere that are now in power of the largest corporations. Particularly important in this analysis, is a strategy in how repression is effected in Russia: concentrate power within an elite section of Kremlin cronies, link economic success to security of particular regions to make repressive actions justifiable, use the popular opinions from positive economic data to further validate the authority of those in power (Blank 2011; Dresen 2012). At this time, Russia’s primary revenue source of oil was threatened in Chechnya, which was a chance to use repression and brutal tactics: the threat of terrorism to the people of Russia if Islamic extremism spread (Mousavi 2010;
Vatchagaev 2008). As Ross (2001) found in his analysis, states with large resource revenue and in turn a security apparatus found themselves susceptible to repression in order to maintain regime stability and survival. Cox’s (2013) analysis closely matches a confluence of these events, from the ill-formed constitution, which vested too many powers within the executive, and the use of those powers to stifle opposition and repressive action to future security threats.

Economic improvement can be a strong motivator for the public to be supportive of its leaders’ policies. As Treisman (2011) lays out, in Russian political study, questions of approval ratings from Yeltsin to Putin have ranged on whether this is a projection of the Kremlin’s propaganda machine culturing the image of the president, or even a demonstration of the fear Russian citizens might have of voicing negative views of the president. Treisman’s (2011) study finds that is is a simple relationship between the state of the economy and the approval by the public of the leaders’ job at handling these challenges. The Treisman (2011) data are important to this study, because it implies also that the method by which the Kremlin achieves economic development is being approved by the population, too. As Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) noted, if the state has a legitimate claim to its use of repression, in this case to establish a stronger Russian state and secure the state against threats, then the public can be convinced that targeted use of repression is necessary.

Cox (2013) established that the political consolidation of power, now firmly held by the United Russia party, has given the president the ability to use broad and repressive actions to address security and economic issues. The positive improvement, as noted by Treisman (2011) and the World Bank (2016), show that it is not the type of policy that is important, but that it be effective and positive for the population. This created a positive feedback loop of the policies: they are effective, popular, and allow power to maintain within the presidency. The CIRI data
shows that from 2000-2008, the increased use of repression worsened, with little variation in the four indices (Cingranelli et al 2014). This is a further demonstration of the Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) hypothesis on domestic influences: the public has confidence in the government’s ability to improve their lives, and the repression is not spread across enough of the public to be a concerning threat, that there is not a viable control or enforcement method against repression. While there may have been improvement in the economy and stature of Russia under Putin’s first two terms (See Figure 1), the state of human rights in Russia decreased.

[Table 1 about here]

2.3 2008-2012: President Medvedev

As Cox’s (2013) article notes, there were missteps in the formation of the Russian constitution that made repression, autocracy, and authoritarianism more likely. The beginning of appointing successors in leadership, beginning with Yeltsin anointing Putin to succeed in the presidency, was one of those missteps (Cox 2013). This further corrupted the electoral process in Russia, according to Cox (2013), and followed with Putin selecting then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. As Cox (2013) notes, this allowed continuity with Kremlin policies, especially those which continued repression, but have proven popular (Cox 2013). Milanovic, Hoff, and Horowitz (2009) found that political alternation was essential to preserving a good foundation of democratic governance, as it made corruption less able to flourish. The idea supported by the Milanovic et al (2009) research, is that with new leadership and political parties changing power, corrupt officials and business are less likely to emerge, for lack of continuity in who controls government offices. What Cox (2013) found undermines the value of this in post-Soviet Russia, with a system built upon consolidation of power, and consistency in who holds office, and the party favored to win in local and regional elections. This is an important part of the development for repression to continue, and accelerate after Putin’s first two terms as President.
While during Medvedev’s tenure from 2008-2012 certain policies were shifted, as expected with a unique individual in power, others remained constant. As Mousavi (2010) notes, development of Russia’s energy security through control of pipelines from Asia and to Europe continued. Having a strong economic base is itself not representative or causative of repression, but the fact that as Mousavi (2010) analyzes, these pipelines pass through very tumultuous regions of the Caucasus. Baunov (2016) and Parfitt (2011) wrote on the use of a proxy government to administer the semi-autonomous Republic of Chechnya, under the head of Ramzan Kadyrov. While this type of state-sponsored government administration, and the use of oil funds could be likened to a rentier state, the Kadyrov government uses that money for repressive actions (Baunov 2016; Parfitt 2011). Treisman (2011) and the World Bank (2016) (See Figure 1) show continued support in their analysis and data, that the economic improvement benefited the country more than the consequences of repression.

Repression during this time became more engrained as a part of the political landscape in Russia. Torture maintained a fifteen-year streak of frequent use by Russian security, with a high value of 0 in the CIRI report, signifying its reliance by authorities to punish political opposition when they are arrested or imprisoned (Cingranelli et al 2013) (See Table 1). Disappearances, killings, and political imprisonments also worsened under President Medvedev, with rankings of usage trending downwards (Cingranelli et al 2013) (See Table 1).

So while there was a change in leadership, and a new variable was introduced, what did remain constant as Cox (2013) pointed out in her analysis, is the consolidation of power and consistency of policies within the United Russia party, acting both through the President’s broad security powers, and the Duma’s legislative legitimacy. Domestic politics and continuity play a much more important role in the use of repression by the Russian state. Acts authorized by the
parliament are informed by party identity and responsiveness to voters, while Cox’s (2013) analysis reinforces the hypothesis that choosing presidential successors corrupts the ability of priorities and policies to change.

2.4 2012-Present: Putin’s return to power and increased repression

While the CIRI data quantifying repression in Russia ends in 2011, we can still qualitatively assess the state of repression in Russia based on the laws passed during Putin’s third term. Levinson (2014) breaks down the situation of Russian society before and after 2012, because this was a significant date for post-Soviet Russian society and politics. This analysis ranges from the published opinions and actions of government officials, opposition figures, the general public, and civil institutions, so we receive a broad qualitative understanding of how society was transforming. First, Levinson (2014) gives us the events leading up to 2012 in election rigging and the dispersions cast upon the opposition and civil society. Levinson (2014) describes that there was first backlash in the 2008 elections, which provoked widespread protesting of results, and accusations of electoral fraud. What is notable about this, is that the government was responsive to the criticism, and even President Medvedev voiced support for validation of the election results (Levinson 2014). This shows how concerned the government was with its image and support among the population; they still required approval of the population to remain in power, and conceding to small investigations to appease critics showed willingness to govern responsibly.

However, as time progressed, the government sought to undermine the reputation of civil society institutions that had been instrumental in fomenting protest against the ruling party (Levinson 2014). Most importantly, the government still controlled the method of investigation and the results published later, which concluded that fraud was minimal, and the election results
valid (Levinson 2014). As noted, elections for Russians are perceived as a method to approve of the regime and ruling party’s methods, and their right to continue. If the population is satisfied with the economic improvements provided by the government’s actions, as Treisman (2011) surmised, then the regime maintains the legitimacy it needs according to Grauvogel and von Soest (2014). In this context, according to Levinson (2014), limitations and restrictions on power and abuse are not as important as the approval of the public in his findings. This is similar to both Peksen and Drury (2009) and Grauvogel and von Soest’s (2014) findings in domestic influences versus external pressures. In Russia, the former is outweighing effects of the latter. What Levinson (2014) did find as a countering force, is opposition groups’ ability to use the internet and social media to get its message out, and this created a dilemma for the government.

The dilemma created was that information counter to the regime’s message from civil society needed to be diminished in its respect by the population. Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow (2014) provide insight into the use of soft repression on civil society since 2012, based on the threats to the regime under the pretense of national interests and security. By using soft repression, or the parliament’s power to implement restrictions on political and public activity, they could manage threats to the state’s legitimacy. The authors follow a classical three tier classification of NGOs in Russia: “marionette organizations” loyal to the government and supportive of its agenda, grassroots NGOs that are small and locally funded, and traditional NGOs that are linked to large western organizations and external funding (Crotty et al 2014). Recall in the last group with linkage, that Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) noted that this increases vulnerability for the state to external pressures. Crotty et al (2014) found that there was a robust presence of all types of NGOs in Russia prior to the 2006 implementation of the original anti-NGO law, but there began to be a visible divide between the government’s policies and
human rights record, and the third group of NGOs. These externally supported and funded NGOs, as they note, are particularly important in studies on democratization, for keeping a check and balance on human rights abuses, they can bring money from richer western nations for important development goals, and these groups provide and independent source of information, separate from the government’s narrative (Crotty et al 2014). If the government is to continue its policies unimpeded and project the importance of state security and sovereignty, then it needed to impose restrictions on NGOs, especially foreign funded organizations. This is where the original 2006 law that became the notorious 2012 anti-NGO expansion was enacted (Crotty et al 2014). The anti-NGO laws were ostensibly about ending vulnerable links to foreign influences, and limiting the access to alternative information and resources than what the state officially provides.

The authors of “Post-Soviet Civil Society Development” have tracked the quantitative changes in NGO numbers and funding, as well as the qualitative changes in democratization and perception of foreign-agent registered NGOs. Their main focus is upon environmental NGOs (eNGO), for its past relative tolerance from the government, and perception of neutrality among the population, but in this sense it provides a clear picture of how far reaching the law is and the extent of its repression of democracy building (Crotty et al 2014). Their methodology was a simple interview of eNGOs, and the impact of the 2012 amendments on daily operations, funding, and registration of groups (Crotty et al 2014). What the authors found was a serious impediment and interference from the new registration policies imposed, because of the extent to which the government was trying to audit NGOs for foreign funding and cast dispersions on their reputation (Crotty et al 2014). This created a successful bureaucratic obstacle to the function of NGOs as an independent check and balance against the abuses of the government; the NGOs
most capable of surviving would only be in the marionette group (Crotty et al 2014). The soft repression Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) describe works very well in this situation: the state can use legal and administrative restrictions to impede oppositional NGO work.

There is also the competing view provided by the marionette group that the authors provide as contrast, which gives insight to the regime’s projection of why the law was necessary (Crotty et al 2014). In their opinion as a part of civil society and advocates for the government, civil society was growing out of control and threatening the independence of Russia (Crotty et al 2014). This is not an unsupported sentiment, as Tsygankov (2013) writes about the perception that the west was becoming unfriendly to Russia, and attempting containment to diminish their power. There is also the indication noted by Crotty et al (2014) that since protests against the regime were limited to Moscow and St. Petersburg means that opposition is limited to the regions with more western connections, and does not represent the overall population. The more serious implication though, is that by restricting NGOs that provide outside support for democratization, abuses and repression can continue.

As evidenced by a Foreign Policy report by Ryan Hoskins (2016), government restrictions on NGO activity on the basis of foreign interference and political reasons, has fuelled the growing HIV epidemic in Russia. Many of these health related NGOs, despite their foreign backing, were instrumental in providing necessary public health services, that the regime now paints as immoral, western encroachment on Russia’s culture (Hoskins 2016). Savva and Tishkov’s (2012) analysis relies on the importance that NGOs can have for peacemaking alternatives around national security issues, and defunding these groups undercuts the argument that the government is concerned with the reality of Russia’s national security, rather than creating an image of an emergency situation. NGOs provide crucial support in many areas
studies find, so to disregard their importance to stability and development of the nation just to paint them as undesirable foreign agents creates far-reaching consequences.

As Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) summarize in their findings when the state has strong claims to legitimacy and uses soft repression, it tends to survive because it both appeals to overall public sentiment without having to resort to widespread violence to achieve its goals. To test this on the issue of human rights issues Russia is trying to softly repress, let us compare it with a type of sanction strategy discussed by Peksen and Drury (2009): congressional sanctions. Congressionally enacted sanctions are meant to be narrow in scope and related to domestic concerns (Peksen and Drury 2009). One attempt at resolving human rights abuses is external pressures through sanctions, something NGOs in a nation might work on unless they encounter more restrictions. In 2015, the United States Senate passed the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Act, in honor of a Russian lawyer who exposed fraud in the Russian government. Magnitsky was arrested on charges of fraud himself by Russian authorities after making his accusations, and held in confinement while suffering from a fatal medical condition and denied care (Kramer and Shevtsova 2012). The law authorized the president to use the executive branch to impose sanctions against individuals accused of human rights abuses globally. It is more a symbolic gesture for external pressure when internal processes fail, and as Peksen and Drury (2009) analyzed of sanctions overall it was largely ineffective at influencing change. Because of the domestic influences to back up the actions by the state in restricting NGO activity, soft repression like silencing critics through administrative and legal challenges continues.

Recent developments in civil society do not give a positive impression of the state of repression at the time of writing. 2015 was the first full year of involvement in Ukraine by Russia and the entrance into Syria, with both foreign wars’ pretense given as counterterrorism,
national security, and protection of Russian people abroad (Lipman 2016). Lipman (2016), like Crotty et al (2014), finds similar perceptions about NGOs having to register as foreign agents, and the impact that has on their operations and popularity. Lipman’s (2016) analysis also focuses on the increasing violence against foreign-agent registered NGOs face, as well as private citizens that are perceived as embodying western culture and influence in a surge of Russian nationalism. This nationalistic movement is eroding the reputation of any outside group, and reinforcing the confidence in the regime as protectors of Russia’s identity and sovereignty (Lipman 2016). There are other similar legal changes happening within the last two years that help maintain the regime and drive repression.

2.5 Continued soft repression with legal and administrative changes

Petrov’s (2016) article describes the legal changes implemented in 2015 that rework the legal framework of Russia and create an atmosphere of perceived threats to national security. It is a continuation of the affront to NGOs and public resources seen before, with the parliament identifying actors that are oppositional to United Russia’s national identity and policies. The power and authority of security agencies and the judiciary has been dramatically increased, giving them broad powers to bring more crimes to jury trials, while decreasing the number of jurors in hearings (Petrov 2016). This change has helped in the prosecution of crimes and kept the opinion more favorable to the regime and prosecuting authority as security threats increase, and “the image of Russia encircled by enemies conveys the need to rally around the national leader,” the author says (Petrov 2016). Likewise, the check of regional authority saw undermining, with new selection procedures of local authorities, and increased thresholds for opposition candidates and parties to register for elections (Petrov 2016). However, Petrov (2016) notes that currently the extent of the regime’s willingness to manipulate elections is still limited
to public opposition and protests, and thus has provided some regional checks to the regime’s power. This manipulation and procession of repression as limited by public support as found by Petrov (2016) does lend credence to the notion that the government is still unwilling to participate in widespread crackdowns on rights and freedoms, and instead incrementally test the waters on what may pass and what will be rejected as extreme by the public.

2.6 Electoral authoritarianism and soft repression for regime survivability

Strong claims to legitimacy are essential to buffering the effects of sanctions and mitigate calls internally for regime change or reform (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). United Russia takes advantage of its past consolidation of political power and state-owned media (Cox 2013) to further manipulate elections and control the message of legitimacy. In a study of the 2011 parliamentary elections Harvey (2016) analyzes the types of electoral fraud used. These different tactics to manipulate elections in favor of United Russia and the structure of Russia’s political and civil institutions helps maintain the regime’s claims to legitimacy. Harvey (2016) found three types of electoral manipulation common in the 2011 elections, depending upon competitiveness: falsification of results, ballot stuffing, and extra-legal mobilization. Falsification of results was common when there was low competitiveness in the election (Harvey 2016). In this scenario, there is low risk of challenge and falsification of results does not require much resource input (Harvey 2016). In mid-level competitive races, United Russia and local extensions of the party can use more resources to improve election outcomes (Harvey 2016). And in very competitive races, the party may focus more of its resources to mobilize voters, or use tactics to de-mobilize opposition voters (Harvey 2016).

The regime reserves its resource intensive methods for higher-competitive races for several reasons. First, according to Harvey (2016) the ability to mobilize or suppress voters
requires intensive investment in patronage networks, money, time, and other resources. Second, requires compliance from legal and administrative actors who can disqualify opposition candidates or put in place impossible obstacles (Harvey 2016). Third, in a competitive race, where the regime stands a possible chance to lose and suffer damage to its image and claims to legitimacy (Harvey 2016). As Cox (2013) noted with the state’s early consolidation of corporate media, fewer independent outlets exist to challenge and verify electoral manipulation. With too much invested in a more fragile and illusory claim to legitimacy, serious challenges to the regime’s power are met with more intense repression.

There are limitations to the extent of the Kremlin’s power in more distant regions, because of the local elite’s power. Petrov (2016) found that there was an inverse relationship to the controllability of a candidate by the Kremlin, and the acceptance by local elites; the friendlier with the Kremlin the candidate was, the less support they had locally by regional leaders in other institutions. So this indicates that control and authority that the Kremlin has outside of the largest population centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg is still subject to more independent thought and opposition locally, and has thus led to the regime attempting to replace the old elites with friendlier Kremlin installments (Petrov 2016). They are frequently replaced, again, under the guise of unproven or suspicious allegations corruption and threats to national security, a pinnacle of repression and its implementation (Petrov 2016). This replacement method of elites extends into the security services and military, Petrov (2016) notes, to further consolidate power and control through the Kremlin and maintain loyalty to the regime. In all, though, Petrov (2016) found that repression continued in its gradual decline across Russia, with the increasing authoritarianism and control from the Kremlin and focus on state security in its policies, and this appears supported by Freedom House indicators (2016).
2.7 Emerging vulnerabilities

Freedom House’s (2016) “Freedom in the World” report for 2012 following many of the challenges in 2011 details the slide into more authoritarianism. 2011 was the first electoral referendum on United Russia’s handling of a major international conflict after the Georgia-Russian war, and contempt for the ruling party became a problem. The regime relies upon claims to legitimacy to rebuff external pressures (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014), though international observers consistently question and critique the electoral process (OSCE 2012; OSCE 2012; OSCE 2016). In its reports of election observations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has continually documented the increasing use of soft repression to control election challenges and even instances of violent, hard repression tactics to discourage opposition. If the regime can maintain control by leveraging its resource to maintain some true legitimacy from believers, and close gaps in holding a ruling majority in parliament by using repression, then the regime can successfully rebuff direct external pressures of sanctions to reform.

2.8 Assessing vulnerability through linkage and trade

So how does a state that effectively uses electoral authoritarianism and shore up domestic support change to reflect more westernized norms of democratization and human rights? Pulling from Grauvogel and von Soest’s (2014) study, the suggestion would seem to lay in exploiting Russia’s advancement in expanding its foreign and trade relations, and continuing democratization to escape the “more murder in the middle” cycle of the current state (Fein 1995). Russia is encountering two types of globalizing factors from external sources: coercive influences from the west through encroachment and interference in its sphere of influence and through sanctions, and trade alliances and economic development like the Shanghai Cooperation
Organization (SCO). Tsygankov (2013) has noted that Russia is more inclined to forge its own path against interference from the west, and the state’s ability to cultivate strong domestic support shields it from much direct sanctions impact (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). However, in expanding its sphere of influence, Russia makes itself vulnerable to other states that the west can leverage pressure against, particularly in trade. Take for example the issue of reigning in North Korea, and the failed attempts at leveraging sanctions on the country to stimulate reform, which failed (Stanton, Lee, and Klingner 2017).

In their analysis, the United States, the west in general, and even at the level of the UN, tried and failed to pressure North Korea with direct sanctions on the regime, and even development aid, which the terms of were continually violated (Stanton et al 2017). However, when the United States Treasury Department began a policy of prohibiting access to the US dollar system, which effectively cut off North Korea’s ability to make transactions through foreign banks housing their assets, there was indirect pressure through these non-North Korean institutions (Stanton et al 2017). Monetary policy through indirect actors that did business with North Korea made the nation susceptible, because of their need to go outside their borders to do these types of transactions. Inside their borders, the North Korean regime maintains the strong domestic legitimacy that make direct pressure on it ineffective (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). North Korea is not anywhere near a transitional state like Russia, and is not undergoing democratization, but it does demonstrate that vulnerabilities to encourage positive results exist.

Russia is becoming ever reliant on foreign relations, especially for its economic growth. Policies by United Russia to regulate and control their markets have been incredibly positive just looking at their World Bank economic growth data (See Figure 1). Export and import growth has weathered recessions, too, as indicated by data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity
OEC (2015) data also shows that beyond just Eastern and Central Asia in the SCO, western nations are equally important to Russia’s economy and foreign relations, with six of the top ten export destinations in 2015 and import originators being NATO allies (See Table 3 and Table 4). The complexity of trade relations and recent accession of Russia into the World Trade Organization (WTO) indicate that it cannot ignore the impact these countries will have on forcing possible policy changes in order to support its economic growth. As in the case of North Korea (Stanton et al 2017), it cannot be underestimated what impact the United States’ hegemony on international monetary networks has, and how it can be used as a coercive diplomatic tool.

Reading one of the first assessments encompassing tests of multiple effects of globalization on democracy by Li and Rueveny (2003), several avenues of linkage are noted. Globalization may promote democracy by simply increasing economic ties, which promote free markets and thus encourage liberalism in politics (Li and Rueveny 2003). Second, there is the proposition that business requires inherent stability and openness for attracting investment and promoting financial success and stability, which will be less capable in a system that is either corrupt, politically volatile, or state-monopolized (Li and Rueveny 2003). The third view is that more markets and competition change the economic policies that autocrats rely upon, and thus it erodes their power (Li and Rueveny 2003). Next, globalization promotes communication and trade of knowledge and culture, not just commodities, encouraging more democracy (Li and Rueveny 2003). The fifth hypothesis presented by Li and Rueveny (2003) is that decentralization
is necessary in a more open and connected society, removing control from authoritarian regimes and devolving power to other interested parties. Sixth, the dealing of property and money requires stricter adherence to rule of law and clearly defined ownership and regulation, which are characteristics of democratic societies (Li and Rueveny 2003). Finally, the seventh view of globalization is similar to the second, in that more democratic states surrounding autocracies diffuses those democratic policies and values (Li and Rueveny 2003). Despite the many approaches to how globalization is influencing democratization, what is a clear theme is that globalization and trade create linkage and vulnerability, which make the state exposed to external pressures (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). External pressures can help stimulate further movement along the path of democratization.

Russia is becoming ever more reliant on international trade and relations as it seeks to be a great power. This is very evident in its relations with the BRICS countries, supplying oil and gas to Asia and Europe, membership in the SCO, and even military positioning in the Black Sea, Ukraine (in Crimea), and Syria. As Libman and Obydenkova (2014) discuss, both the entire Russian federal state is more exposed to increased global ties, and regional governments are more linked to foreign powers. Specifically, they note that even the past Soviet economic system was built on interdependence of member states, though in that case the linkages were among like-minded political groups (Libman and Obydenkova 2014). What is also discussed in Libman and Obydenkova (2014) are the inefficiencies in continued trade with FSU states, and the diversification to new markets. In dealing particularly with the European Union, the central and regional governments must abide by western trade regulations, incorporate more efficient technologies, and they also become open to new companies investing in their markets (Libman
and Obydenkova 2014). So if Russia wants to expand its markets and sphere of influence, the west should exercise its well-established networks to exert pressure on Russia.

Direct coercive actions to punish Russia have become a feature of more recent policy by the west to control growing authoritarianism and souring diplomatic relations with the west. United States and EU sanctions in 2014 that increased restrictions on people linked to actions in Crimea and Ukraine, and business restrictions, did impact the Russian economy (Christie 2015). According to the NATO review by Christie (2015):

“There are three types of economic sanctions. The first restricts access to Western financial markets and services for designated Russian state-owned enterprises in the banking, energy, and defence sectors. The second places an embargo on exports to Russia of designated high-technology oil exploration and production equipment. The third is an embargo on exports to Russia of designated military and dual-use goods.’’

These are the types of multi-faceted sanction policies that can create impact and exploit vulnerabilities in Russia’s linkages. While the sanctions have negatively impacted Russia’s economy and weakened its ability to interfere outside its borders without acknowledging western expectations (Christie 2015), what remains unknown is whether this will affect political repression. Russian voters are responsive to economic indicators (Treisman 2011), and the next round of elections in 2018 for President, should provide new data on whether voters show increased opposition to the ruling party and Putin, and whether the government increases repressive tactics to control the field of candidates, manipulate votes, and suppress criticism, which is the historic trend. Coercive diplomacy may not be a smart policy response, though. If Grauvogel and von Soest (2014) are to be believed, the domestic legitimacy of United Russia, with added electoral padding from voter fraud, will simply negate these actions. Also, the data
indicates that Russia is coming out of recession despite recent low oil prices and a decline in trade after sanctions (Rapoza 2016).

2.9 Responsiveness to improving rights

As a transitional state, Russia is not fully opposed to improving human rights and working with international partners on tackling these issues. Human Rights Watch’s (HRW) most recent country analysis gives mixed analysis on which direction Russia takes on certain rights. In the instance of political association, conditions inside of Russia deteriorated (HRW 2016). However, in the international fight against child abduction and trafficking, Russia helped form positive policies to combat this (HRW 2016). It also enacted a law similar to the “right to be forgotten” legislation of the EU (HRW 2016), to allow certain information be removed from online search records, which can be regarded as useful for individual privacy and preservation of character. HRW (2016) also documents positive assessment by the UN Human Rights Council on improvements in disability rights and access in Russia. So the situation for rights and improvement in regard to certain segments of society does exist. However, Russia is a large geographic region, with systemic problems that impede the immediate and drastic democratization western observers would always like.

3. Conclusion

This thesis has hypothesized that while statistical data suggests there are limitations to repressive behavior by states, systemic barriers have developed that allow repression to flourish in post-Soviet Russia. The consolidating of power into a supermajority party in the legislature and in control of the presidency has granted unrestricted ability to govern with an iron fist. Corrupt practices endemic to the state and the singular belief in the current party’s goals and formulation of a national identity support the state in using repression to punish dissent. While
the party works to improve the economy and insert itself as a global leader, it struggles with the tensions present as a transitional state. What began as a rebuke of the excesses of liberalization without checks and balances has spiraled to a path of stalled democratization, as different interest groups vie for power. Without significant structural changes to how power is managed in the post-Soviet state, it may remain in a stalled position along the path to a full democracy.

Transitional states have inherent tension and struggles within their borders that foment repressive activities according to Fein (1995). The path to consolidate political power, realizing economic growth, and establishing a national identity are at odds with some western democracies, groups and watchdogs like the United States, the European Union, Human Rights Watch, or Amnesty International, which expect reprieve for oppositional powers to the state. Tsygankov (2013) noted that tensions increase with the west when there is coercive diplomacy and imposition of cultural values still at odds with traditional values of Russian culture. There is a large and chaotic atmosphere of differing political opinions, and the structure of consolidated power that has formed through the United Russia party makes it easier to repress views outside their norm. Cox (2013) indicated this through the process of corruption and consolidation that occurred in the late Nineties, and broader analysis by Keith et al (2009) supports this view overall. As the state learns that repression is an expedient method to exert control over social and political forces, it invites further abuse (Keith et al 2009). However, it doesn’t exclude the state from still having opportunities for democratization.

The Russian government's approach to repression has been based on popular approval from the public, using domestic legitimacy to justify its actions, while ignoring constitutional limits and international law. The government governs on the surface by consent of the people, through voter approval of their methods and support of the United Russia party, while
undermining the very rights guaranteeing the citizens' ability to self-govern and manipulating unfavorable election results. While the population favors improving economic development and combatting state security threats like terrorism and national defense, their concerns are used to enforce repressive actions like curtailing freedom of the press, preventing public assembly and protests, spying on citizens, imprisoning political opponents, and limiting the work of civil society groups. These are the states of emergency justifications Keith et al (2009) explored in their research, and how it can overpower democratic principles in the course of politics. What is believed to be in the best interests of the citizens is in fact turned against them to control their own political activities against the state.

Opposition candidates and parties have sought to counter at every turn these assaults upon their liberties, arguing in favor of a more open society, respectful of human rights. Opposition as a general idea among the populace is still a fragile notion, though. United Russia controls the supermajority of seats in the Duma and the presidency, and with their power has manipulated elections to maintain their control. What the opposition lacks to combat the declining human rights record of Russia is what United Russia has used as their greatest asset. Treisman (2011) has shown us that it is economic development and improvement that the population values, and concerns of democratization are secondary. There is a cost-benefit analysis, as rational people do, and if repression is the consequence for improved economic conditions, then it will continue to be indirectly approved in some manner. The opposition parties chiefly campaign on the records of corruption in the administrations of Presidents Putin and Medvedev, and the United Russia party in the legislature, but the data shows more inclination to positively receive the messaging of economic hope and prosperity (Treisman 2011).
The government has so effectively gained control of media, corporations, and elections that they control the message that is turned out to voters, so there is little ability for independent and critical voices to reach their audience or gain support. With absolute control of security forces, hard repression can be employed when soft repression fails to achieve the state’s goals, or opponents are beyond continued manipulation. Messaging by the opposition can be spun as unpatriotic, and the messengers painted as foreign agents (Cox 2013). The message of being able to effectively manage the economy and improve the lives of citizens, without needing to appeal to human rights improvement, is demonstrated to be the most effective tool for gaining widespread support. In an age of social media, even with the massive surveillance imposed on different platforms, the opposition to United Russia has shown ingenuity to turn out large demonstrations in urbanized settings and more rural regions that have some local loyalty to their elites, and so they may be capable of helping reverse the use of repression by holding more local officials accountable.

Respect for rule of law and dissent from critics is crucial to meaningful democratic governance. Constitutional limitations as a formality and obstacle to be maneuvered around contribute to a slide into authoritarianism, if the state is empowered to eventually disregard the opposition or not feel compelled to address any concerns. It is bolstered by the positive approval ratings for its effective economic policies, despite human rights abuses. The tactic of enforcing small amounts of repression on the most vocal opposition members also serves as a method to deter further spreading of criticism or open dissent (Fein 1995), as especially seen in NGOs. Overall, within Russia, there is a choice between two dynamics: legal limitations on abuses of power and seek a new method of economic improvement void of human rights violations, or see a steady decline into authoritarianism and autocracy. Structural issues in how power is
consolidated and vested in a tightly uniform system in the Russian state make these choices difficult to balance. International relationships to help foster changes in respect for human rights, and democratization through globalization demonstrate special ability to change this, though (Li and Rueveny 2003). This is quite important as Russia expands its geopolitical and economic borders, and will inevitably need to work and negotiate more robustly with powers in the west that will expect concessions in democratization.

Some questions remain unanswered by the current literature and should be expanded upon in future research. First, is this type of governance by consolidation of power and use of a security state a relic of the past from Soviet political institutions and culture? Or, has United Russia, empowered by a faulty constitution, found a capable governing method by which it can exchange rights and freedoms for economic prosperity, and increase governmental power? The second question’s answers may be found in part by the dynamics and study of post-Putin Russia, because a democratic country which has known its significant leader for almost two decades, and likely until 2024, is expected to undergo political changes should they transition out of power. This would be an interesting validation or example of disproving Davenport’s (2004) research on trends toward pacification in transitional states. If over time changes are not made to the political structure of how power flows in the Russian government, it may remain in this transitional state.
Appendix – Tables and Figures

Table 1: Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Repression Data, Years 1992-2011; lower values represent more hard repression.

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<freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/russia>
Table 3: Top Export Destinations, Russia, 2015

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Table 4: Top Import Originations, Russia, 2015

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<atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/rus/>
Figure 1: GNI Per Capita, Atlas Method, Years 1991-2015

Figure 2: Trade Balance of Russian Exports (light gray) vs. Imports (dark gray), Years 1995-2015

Works Cited


NATO. “NATO Members.” (2017) <nato.int/nato-welcome/index.html#members>


Savva, Mikhail V. and Valerii A. Tishkov. “Civil Society Institutions and Peacemaking.” 


