Policy Paper

Distance is Not a Shield

Russia's Transnational Repression since 2022

| Ivan U. K. Klyszcz |

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Cover page photo: A protester burns his Russian passport during a demonstration in Belgrade, Serbia, on 6 March 2022. Andrej Isakovic / AFP / Scanpix.

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Dr Ivan Klyszcz joined the ICDS as a Research Fellow in September 2022. Previously, he was a full-time doctoral researcher at the University of Tartu, where he obtained his PhD in International Relations. Dr Klyszcz's research is centred on issues of international security, namely, great power competition, the grand strategy of major powers, and Russian foreign policy. In recent years, Dr Klyszcz has investigated the drivers, methods, and impact of Moscow's global international relations — particularly with Africa, Latin America, and South Asia — and their implications for European strategy. In addition, he has studied Russian domestic politics, with a focus on centre-region relations, Chechnya, and the North Caucasus. Since 2019, he has published over 60 articles, including research reports, peer-reviewed articles, and policy memos, as well as delivered presentations at academic and policy conferences across Europe and North America. Dr Klyszcz has been quoted in international media such as *Al-Jazeera, BBC, France 24*, and *The Economist*. His work has been cited by peer researchers and attracted the interest of diplomats, governments, and major NGOs. Dr Klyszcz is a member of PONARS Eurasia and a frequent contributor to *Riddle Russia*.

List of Abbreviations

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSTO	Common Security Treaty Organisation
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
FSB	Federal Security Service (*Федеральная служба безопасности*)
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate (*Главное управление Генерального штаба ВС РФ*)
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organisation
KGB	Committee for State Security (*Комитет государственной безопасности СССР*)
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service (*Служба внешней разведки*)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Introduction

Since 2015, Zhanna Nemtsova, daughter of the late Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, has been living in exile. Continuing her father's legacy, Nemtsova has been advocating for democratic values in Russia from her base in Germany. Despite the distance and the impossibility of returning to Russia, in 2019, Nemtsova began to suspect that she was being spied on by the Kremlin. The target of these suspicions was Spanish journalist Pablo González. Independent-minded and well-travelled, González had an interest in Russian opposition politics, attending events and gatherings organised by Nemtsova and other Russian advocates abroad. At the time, Nemtsova's circle doubted her views on González.[1] Yet, on 27 February 2022, González was detained in Poland and later charged with espionage. According to Polish authorities, González — a Russian citizen whose real name is Pavel Rubtsov — is an intelligence officer of the Russian military who operated with special equipment and under instructions from the Kremlin. In August 2024, Rubtsov returned to Moscow as part of a prisoner swap.[2]

Like Nemtsova, Russian opposition politicians, independent journalists and civil society organisations (CSOs) abroad remain wary of the Kremlin's intelligence agencies despite not being based in Russia.[3] As a Russian journalist in exile, Roman Anin, said in 2024, "you can't be 100% safe."[4] Russia is not a democracy and has not been one at any point since 1991. Indeed, in the last thirty years, a civil society capable of checking the power of the Kremlin has not emerged in Russia. Despite positive developments at different moments — especially the early 1990s — the Putin era witnessed the Russian government dismantling the legal, political, and social conditions that would enable Russian CSOs to operate.[5] This evolution has produced a constant activist and journalist emigration from Russia since the 1990s that continues to this day.[6]

The present-day scale of emigration of activists and journalists is unknown. According to the October 2024 estimate by Dr Igor Gretskiy, the total Russian migration to the European Union induced by Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine stood at approximately 74 thousand.[7] An estimate from November 2023 places the total — including Europe and other regions — number of exiled Russian activists and CSO members and their families at between 10 and 15 thousand.[8] Russian media workers are estimated to number between 1 500 and 1 800.[9] As a result of this movement, new CSO and independent media projects were launched or relocated since 2022. According to a December 2023 tally, 120 Russian media organisations were either founded in exile or relocated from Russia since 2022.[10] Memorial — one of Russia's leading human rights CSOs — moved almost entirely abroad.[11] Transnational CSOs have either closed their in-Russia operations entirely or moved to act as external observers only — such as the Norway-based Bellona Foundation.[12]

1 Sarah Rainsford, "Russian activist speaks out in spy case after prisoner swap," *BBC*, 1 September 2024.

2 Anna Gielewska, "The Putin Magnet: the GRU spy and the women who loved him," *VSquare*, 12 October 2024.

3 Will Vernon, "'They're tightening the screws': Kremlin ups attacks on critics abroad," *BBC*, 4 August 2024. This analysis paper makes use of the term 'civil society' to refer to journalists, the non-governmental, non-profit organisations, and the individuals involved in them. In that sense, this analysis is agnostic towards the broader effectiveness (and indeed the lack thereof) of these individuals and organisations in creating a counterweight to state and state-controlled institutions or a self-standing, self-sustaining 'third sector' of Russian society. To reiterate, a real civil society has not emerged in Russia.

4 Liam Scott, "Even in exile, Russian journalists not '100% safe'," *Voice of America*, 15 August 2024.

5 "CSO Sustainability Index Explorer," CSO Sustainability Index, accessed in April 2025.

6 Igor Gretskiy, *Is There Life in the Desert? Russian Civil Society After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine* (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2023).

7 Igor Gretskiy, *New Russian Immigration to the EU: The Case of the Baltic States, Finland, Germany & Poland* (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2024), 8.

8 Maria Domańska and Stefan Ingvarsson, "Russia in exile," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, 15 November 2023.

9 "Sustaining Independence. Current State of Russian Media," *JX Fund*, November 2023, 4.

10 "Sustaining Independence," 5. See: Olga Dovbysh and Elena Rodina, "Russian independent journalism in exile: In search of relevance and resilience," *Russia. Post*, 12 August 2022.

11 Katia Patin, "Surviving Russia's control," *Coda Story*, 30 October 2023.

12 "In 2023, the Kremlin Worked to Dismantle Russia's Environmental Movement. Some of It Survived," *The Moscow Times*, 12 January 2024.

All these individuals and organisations have struggled to remain active while abroad. Indeed, Dr Gretskiy found that Russian activists in exile tend to reduce their activities due to the growing disillusionment with Russian opposition politics and the practical challenges of relocation.[13] By September 2024, Russian independent media in exile lost an estimated half of their website traffic since the peaks witnessed in 2022.[14] Lack of access to their audiences and supporters means CSOs in exile face diminished sources of support and fundraising.[15] Of 93 media outlets operating in exile, only 77 remained active as of November 2023.[16] The figure today (February 2025) might be lower. Reflecting on these and other trends in Russian politics, Micheal Kimmage and Maria Lipman argued in 2024, "The contemporary Russian 'opposition' has no apparent constituency. […] Even if the Putin regime collapsed and exiled opposition figures rushed home, they would struggle to secure power."[17]

Russian intelligence agencies are willing to dedicate considerable resources to the surveillance of Russian citizens abroad

Despite these limitations, the Kremlin does not consider the opposition in exile to be unworthy of attention. As Nemtsova's case reveals, the Russian intelligence agencies are willing to dedicate considerable resources to the surveillance of Russian citizens abroad. According to a Freedom House transnational repression database of 1 219 incidents documented between 2014 and 2024, the Russian government was the fourth largest perpetrator worldwide, being at the origin of 86 cases.[18] Given these circumstances, why does the Kremlin persecute Russian civil society abroad? What tools are at Russia's disposal, and what relationships is Moscow exploiting in its transnational repression campaign? This analysis provides an insight into the Kremlin's toolkit to repress Russian CSOs and journalists across borders, with a focus on the post-2022 period.[19] In its persecution of Russian civil society abroad, Russia violates the human rights of its targets and undermines the constitutional order of foreign states.

1. The Rationale

Several circumstances facilitate the Kremlin's campaign of repression across borders. For instance, the Kremlin's surveillance of Russians abroad relies on information technologies widely available in several countries. Changes in domestic legislation (e.g., the law on "fakes about the army") have led to a wider scope for extradition and coercion, direct and indirect. As of February 2024, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs contained over 96 thousand individuals on their wanted list.[20] Globalisation, information technologies, and the externalisation of repressive domestic legislation are factors that allow regimes worldwide to engage in transnational repression.[21]

Globalisation, information technologies, and the externalisation of repressive domestic legislation allow regimes worldwide to engage in transnational repression

[13] Gretskiy, *New Russian Immigration to the EU*, 19-20.

[14] "Locking Down the Windows," *JX Fund*, 25 September 2024, 21.

[15] Joanna Fomina, "Voice, exit and voice again: democratic remittances by recent Russian emigrants to the EU," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47.11 (2021): 2439-2458.

[16] "Sustaining Independence," 6.

[17] Micheal Kimmage and Maria Lipman, "Exiles Cannot Save Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, 18 September 2024.

[18] Relying on press reports, this can be considered a conservative estimate. Grady Vaughan, Yana Gorokhovskaia, Nate Schenkkan, "Ten Findings from Ten Years of Data on Transnational Repression," *Freedom House*, 6 February 2025.

[19] The term "Russian' refers to citizens of Russia, not the Russian ethnicity or Russian speakers.

[20] Jennifer Pahlke, "Scores of European decision-makers on Russia's wanted list," *Deutsche Welle*, 14 February 2024. See: Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (Yale University Press, 2017), 191.

[21] The following is based on Gerasimos Tsourapas, "'Global autocracies': Strategies of transnational repression, legitimation, and co-optation in world politics," *International Studies Review* 23.3 (2021): 621; Alexander Dukalskis, et al. "The long arm and the iron fist: Authoritarian crackdowns and transnational repression," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68.6 (2024): 1051-1079.

However, these enabling factors do not explain, on their own, the drive of the Russian government to engage in transnational repression. Does the Kremlin consider Russian civil society abroad a threat? There are certain indications that the activities of CSOs and journalists in exile are an irritant for the Russian government. For instance, in 2022, the Free Buryatia Foundation provided legal advice to 350 Russian citizens from South-East Siberia wishing to escape military mobilisation.[22] Then, in 2024, the Russian opposition in exile lobbied the EU not to recognise the results of that year's Russian presidential vote.[23] Despite censorship and media bans, independent Russian journalism abroad offers an alternative to state propaganda, both for residents of Russia and for audiences internationally.

These activities alone do not amount to a threat to the Kremlin. Yet, the Russian government tends to exaggerate the size of the challenge posed by civil society in exile. Indeed, the Kremlin in general and the Russian intelligence services in particular operate under the influence of what has been called the "chekist mindset" (*чекистское мышление*, also sometimes referred to as "Chekism"). Alluded to in KGB training manuals, the mindset is a type of strategic culture grounded on the ruthless worldview of the Bolshevik intelligence service, the CheKa.[24] Kevin Riehle defines the mindset as "constantly perceiving threats and seeking ways to mitigate them."[25] The chekist mindset has several features, all of them relevant to the topic of transnational repression: a paranoid view of society, an over-reliance on foreign conspiracy (including conspiracy theories) to explain national and international politics, and threat overestimation.[26] For example, to this day, the main successor to the KGB — the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) — has a Counterintelligence Service that investigates citizens who have had contacts with individuals abroad.[27] As historian Calder Walton argues, "Evidence of Western secret conspiracies [during the interwar period] left a burning impression in the hallways of the Kremlin that lasted throughout the Soviet era. Its echoes still reverberate there today."[28] For the Russian government, Vladimir Lenin's takeover of Russia in 1917 is seen as a case of successful foreign subversion with the support of the Russian opposition based abroad. This interpretation was alluded to by Russian ruler Vladimir Putin several times since 2022.[29]

When it comes to Russian civil society organisations in exile, there are indications that the Russian intelligence agencies — and the Russian government more broadly — consider them to be potential agents of western intelligence. This is not only made evident by the resources dedicated to transnational repression but also by views routinely expressed by Russian officials, connecting dissent with accusations of western (especially US) meddling. Indeed, state officials and government-controlled media have suggested that Russian CSOs and journalists in exile are controlled by western intelligence agencies. For example, on 2 August 2021, Sergey Naryshkin — the chief of Russia's civilian external intelligence agency, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) — suggested on Russian television that several Russian independent media are under CIA control.[30] More sensational still, a Russian disinformation narrative portrays the Russian

[22] Vlada Baranova and Tsypylma Darieva, "Russia's Ethnic Minorities in the Struggle against Cultural Imperialism," *Centre for East European and International Studies*, 5 May 2023; "'We Save Everyone': The Lawyers Helping Russian Soldiers Evade Service in Ukraine," *The Moscow Times*, 12 July 2022.

[23] Pyotr Kozlov, "Russia's Opposition in Exile Calls on EU Not to Recognize Putin's Election," *The Moscow Times*, 17 February 2024.

[24] CheKa is short for All-Russian extraordinary commission (Всероссийская чрезвычайная комиссия). On the strategic culture, see: Dimitri Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes: du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* [Russian strategic thought and culture: from the evasion of armed conflict to the war in Ukraine] (Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2024).

[25] Kevin Riehle, *Russian Intelligence. A Case-based Study of Russian Services and Missions Past and Present* (National Intelligence Press, 2022), 53.

[26] See Kevin Riehle, "Post-KGB Lives: Is There Such a Thing as a Former Chekist?," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 36, no. 2 (2023): 492-515; Paul Maddrell, "Compartmentalized Minds: The Communist Security Services' Understanding of the Western Espionage Threat to the Communist Bloc during the Cold War," *Intelligence and National Security* 36, no. 1 (2020): 51–71.

[27] Riehle, *Russian Intelligence*, 66.

[28] Calder Walton, *Spies: the epic intelligence war between east and west* (Hachette UK, 2023), 43.

[29] For example, "'Internal betrayal' in Russia: Transcript of Putin's address," *Al-Jazeera*, 24 June 2023.

[30] "«Bellingcat, „Проект", „Важные истории" — все связаны между собой, там сложная режиссура» ['Bellingcat, The Project, Important Stories are all connected, it's a complex production']," *Meduza*, 2 August 2021.

civil society organisations in exile today as a western-backed government in exile, waiting to depose Putin and the Kremlin.[31]

In addition to the enabling factors and the paranoid mindset of the chekists, there is also a degree of institutional inertia that preserved some of the Soviet capacity — specifically in terms of skills and tradecraft — for transnational repression. Despite a loss of personnel in the 1990s, much of the KGB staff continued to work for the new agencies, carrying with them the chekist mindset. Indeed, efforts to change the institutional attitude to the US and the west more broadly failed early on.[32] Both the FSB and SVR inherited the mission of external counterintelligence of the First Chief Directorate of the KGB (itself a Soviet successor to the CheKa), which extends to the surveillance of dissidents, including those residing outside Russia. More significant still, the KGB's Fifth Directorate — tasked with surveillance over Soviet intellectuals — was preserved into the FSB's Second Service, whose documented activities include the infiltration of Russian CSOs abroad.[33] These are just some examples; according to Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, the FSB has nine departments directly involved — to one extent or another — in transnational repression.[34] Institutional continuity lowers the costs of transnational repression as the Russian intelligence agencies retained some relevant capabilities from the Soviet era.

Institutional continuity lowers the costs of transnational repression as the Russian intelligence agencies retained some relevant capabilities from the Soviet era

2. Transnational Authoritarianism Toolkit

The Kremlin's persecution of Russian activists and journalists abroad covers the range of repression measures previously deployed against dissidents in the Soviet era, later directed against the Chechen diaspora and now the new Russian diaspora. This analysis of Russia's transnational authoritarianism toolkit focuses on some of these measures, namely, on coercion, assassination, delegitimising, blacklisting, coerced return, and surveillance.[35] These measures have an impact. A 2022 study on digital transnational repression found that its victims engaged in self-censorship and suffered from mental and emotional distress.[36] This applies to Russian activists and journalists. A 2023 poll of Belarusian and Russian media workers in exile showed that half of them have faced menaces and threats, surveillance, and cyberattacks from various sources.[37] Other measures part of the transnational authoritarianism toolkit — such as the co-optation of diaspora groups and measures to enhance the Kremlin's legitimacy abroad — are not explored here.

In the following, several figures of transnational repression are presented, though they all must be taken with caution. In most cases, these numbers are the result of surveying open sources or the press, so they must be taken as indicative and representing early estimates. Moreover, many victims might conceal their stories of repression for fear of speaking out. This can render certain figures below into conservative estimates.

2.1. Coercion

Intimidation — as a form of psychological coercion — is a common tool used by authoritarian regimes persecuting their (perceived)

[31] "DISINFO: The West has a government and parliament in exile to support those opposing Putin," *EUvsDisinfo*, 20 March 2024.

[32] Riehle, *Russian Intelligence*, 55.

[33] Sanshiro Hosaka, *Putin's Counterintelligence State: The FSB's Penetration of State and Society and its Implications for Post-24 February Russia* (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2022), 8-9.

[34] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "The Russian Way in Transnational Repression," *King's Centre for the Study of Intelligence*, 20 January 2025.

[35] Based on Tsourapas, "Global autocracies."

[36] Noura Al-Jizawi et al, "Psychological and Emotional War: Digital Transnational Repression in Canada," *Citizen Lab Research Report* No. 151 (University of Toronto, March 2022).

[37] "Survey of Exiled Media Workers Reveals Half Still Feels Threatened in Their New Home Countries," *Justice for Journalists*, 5 October 2023.

opposition abroad. The goal of coercion is to silence the opposition, namely, for them to cease the activities those in power perceive as threatening or hindering their policies. Russia's intimidation of activists and journalists abroad is commonplace and ranges from the use of bogus legal charges and fines to open threats.

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Since 2022, one of Russia's most common tools for intimidation has been raising charges *in absentia* for "extremism" or "justification of terrorism." The March 2022 amendments to the Russian Criminal Procedure Code, Articles 31 and 151, and Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code enable the Russian government to punish those Russian citizens whom the Russian police consider to be "discrediting the Russian army." According to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Russia, by the summer of 2023, over 7 thousand individuals were arrested on these charges, each facing up to 15 years of imprisonment.[38] A 2024 amendment to the law enables the Russian authorities to confiscate the assets of anyone receiving charges on any of these accounts. This impacts those who have emigrated and have any assets left in Russia.[39] Finally, Article 275 on those spying and seeking to overthrow the government (*государственная измена*) has been expanded several times since 2022 and is used to coerce Russian citizens inside and outside Russia.[40]

The 2012 law on "foreign agents" is both a tool of coercion and an instrument to delegitimise CSOs and journalists. The law was expanded in July 2022, and today, 40% of those detained under this law are journalists.[41] The law demands that those whom the Russian government designates as "foreign agents" must disclose their status in all public statements as well as regularly submit comprehensive reports about their activities and expenses to the authorities. Failure to comply leads to fines. The designation also bars foreign agents from holding public office and teaching roles, among other restrictions. According to the OVD-Info database on politically motivated criminal prosecutions, as of February 2025, there were 159 individuals persecuted on charges of foreign agents: 24 of them concerning individuals confirmed to be outside of Russia and 136 with location unknown.[42]

Cyberbullying, online harassment, and discrediting attempts through disinformation are also instruments used by pro-Kremlin actors to demoralise CSOs and journalists abroad.[43] For example, as of 2024, the Kremlin has expanded its use of so-called 'doxing' attacks (the non-consensual public release of an individual's private information) on dissidents in Russia and abroad. The most notable case is that of the Kremlin-aligned project Underside. Active since December 2021, Underside has been doxing Russian opposition figures, civil society members, and prominent Russians not aligned with the Kremlin for supposed "western connections," presumed to be treasonous. Underside proceeds by drawing from publicly available information as well as data obtained illegally, potentially through hacking operations carried out by Russian intelligence agencies.[44] In addition, Underside offers bounties for information on "western sympathisers," though the origin of these funds is unknown. Since its founding, Russian officials have referred to the Underside "investigations" to prosecute individuals and organisations, especially on charges of "extremism."[45] Generally, Russian activists and journalists based abroad are routinely targeted by cyberbullying, with the

[38] "Russia hits 'new low' with ban against discrediting army: Rights experts," *UN News*, 28 August 2023.

[39] "Russia's parliament approves property confiscation for spreading 'fakes' about army," *Reuters*, 24 January 2024.

[40] "Novaia narodnaia statia. Kogo i za chto mogut obvinit v "gosizmene" v Rossii teper," *Nastoiashchee Vremia*, 12 December 2024.

[41] "How Russia's Independent Media Survived 2023," *The Moscow Times*, 27 December 2023.

[42] Data on politically motivated criminal prosecutions in Russia, *OVD-Info*, accessed on 14 February 2025.

[43] "Press Freedom in Europe: Time to Turn the Tide," *Council of Europe*, 2024, 13-14.

[44] "Tales From the Underside: A Kremlin-Approved Hack, Leak & Doxxing Operation," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 22 August 2022.

[45] Mariya Omelicheva, "Russia's Doxing Campaign: An Expanding Trend in Extraterritorial Repression," *Russia Post*, 5 August 2024.

harassment campaigns organised by regional and central authorities in Moscow.[46]

Indirect coercion is also a common tactic of repression. Authoritarian regimes frequently threaten the family members of exiled opposition figures to blackmail those beyond their reach. This form of indirect coercion has been a commonplace repression tactic in Russia before and after 2022. This coercion can take many shapes, such as threats, fines, and arbitrary detentions.[47] The goal is to neutralise and demoralise a specific individual from continuing their opposition activities abroad. Among Russian exiled CSOs and journalists, at least 15 cases of indirect coercion have been documented by OVD-Info between March and June 2023.[48] The total sum is higher. In addition, several laws have been introduced to facilitate indirect coercion through property, such as the January 2024 law enabling the confiscation of property for the "defamation" of the Russian army.[49] Factions at the Russian Duma have proposed mandatory in-person property registration for individuals on the foreign agents list, demanding a potentially perilous return to Russia for many exiled journalists and CSO members.

The goal is to neutralise and demoralise a specific individual from continuing their opposition activities abroad

2.2. Assassination

The Kremlin has a long history of political assassinations abroad. Well-known cases include those of Leonid Trotsky, who was killed in Mexico City in 1943, and Aleksandr Litvinenko, killed in London in 2006. In the case of Russian CSO members and journalists abroad, claims of assassination attempts are controversial, with ongoing investigations and cases yet to be confirmed.[50] Nevertheless, on 13 January 2023, journalists Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan raised the alarm of the Kremlin's growing persecution of Russia's exiled CSOs, pointing to the possibility of attempts on their safety.[51] Soldatov has himself been on the Kremlin's wanted list since 2022. In recent years, only one known Russian intelligence officer has been tried and convicted for a murder carried out in the west.[52]

2.3. Discrediting

Russia's leadership and state-controlled media have routinely disseminated messages meant to harm the reputation and ultimately discredit and delegitimise any perceived opposition to the Kremlin, including CSOs and journalists based abroad. On 16 March 2022, Putin referred to those Russians who left the country as "traitors."[53] Similar statements are routinely made by other top Kremlin officials.[54]

The qualifiers of "foreign agent" and "undesirable" evoke Soviet-era labels, so they alienate CSOs and journalists from their audiences and supporters

Adding an individual or organisation to the "foreign agents" or "undesirable organisations" lists damages their reputation among Russian audiences. The qualifiers of "foreign agent" and "undesirable" evoke Soviet-era labels

[46] Noura Aljizawi, et al, "No Escape. The Weaponization of Gender for the Purposes of Digital Transnational Repression," *CitizenLab* Research Report 180 (2024), 27, 30.

[47] "Russia Targets Activists' Families as Efforts to Muzzle Dissent Spread," *The Moscow Times*, 15 November 2023. The largest fine as of October 2024 was towards US public broadcaster *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* for over 10 million euros. "European Court of Human Rights Issues Landmark Ruling in Favor of RFE/RL Against Russia", *RFE/RL*, 22 October 2024.

[48] Tally from OVD.info website as of December 2023.

[49] "Analysis: Russia ramps up pressure on media and journalists in exile," *International Press Institute*, 11 March 2024.

[50] Luiza Mchedlishvili, "Chechen blogger claims he 'staged own death' to fool Kadyrov," *OC Media*, 17 April 2023; Michael Weiss, "Blood Simple. Several Russian journalists and activists were poisoned in Europe," *The Insider*, 15 August 2023; "Who is Andrey Matus, the 'fixer' who reportedly gave Navalny's team info linking a Khodorkovsky ally to attacks on Russian dissidents?," *Meduza*, 26 September 2024.

[51] Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov, "Kremlin Crosshairs Focus on Exiles," *CEPA*, 13 January 2023.

[52] Pjotr Sauer, "Twenty years of ruthlessness: how Russia has silenced Putin's opponents," *The Guardian*, 27 August 2023.

[53] "Putin warns Russia against pro-Western 'traitors' and scum," *Reuters*, 16 March 2022.

[54] "Medvedev Rails Against West to Mark Russian Unity Day," *The Moscow Times*, 4 November 2022.

used to refer to spies, so they alienate CSOs and journalists from their audiences and supporters. A December 2022 poll by an independent pollster, Levada Centre, found that a third of Russian respondents think worse of an organisation when it is added to the foreign agents list.[55] According to the European Union, the foreign agents law "contributes to a systematic infringement of basic freedoms, and restricts civil society, independent media and the rights of political opposition in Russia."[56]

2.4. Blacklisting

To further undermine perceived opposition groups abroad, authoritarian regimes will attempt to block their return to the country as well as limit their access to the country's population in general. While discrediting seeks to harm the reputation of the perceived opposition abroad, blacklisting aims to block their access to society, sometimes without notification or public explanations. The Kremlin and the State Duma have publicly discussed several blacklisting measures, steadily implementing new ones. Members of the Russian government have, at times, called for the removal of the citizenship of Russians in exile. In November 2022, Putin submitted a law project on the subject that did not pass.[57] Still, individual cases of denaturalisation have been recorded. One of the most visible ones was that of Arshak Makinchyan, a climate activist who was stripped of his citizenship while living in exile.[58] In September 2022, Putin threatened those who acquired Russian citizenship with losing their status if they dodged the draft.[59]

While discrediting seeks to harm the reputation of the perceived opposition abroad, blacklisting aims to block their access to society

In December 2023, a court in Russia deprived from citizenship two individuals who allegedly avoided the draft by travelling abroad.[60]

Censorship of exiled media and CSOs is commonplace and has been ongoing since well before 2022. In addition to being a tool to discredit, the foreign agents law also adds to the Kremlin's authority to blacklist any perceived opposition. Indeed, the expanded laws on foreign agents only increased the authority of the Russian censorship agency, *Rozkomnadzor*.[61] Ostensibly a media watchdog, *Rozkomnadzor* was established in 2008, and it runs the country's media blacklist, including internet content. According to Russia's Prosecutor General, by August 2022, the Russian government had blocked over 138 000 websites with material relating to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many of which include media organisations founded or operating abroad.[62] Russian journalists in the new diaspora often depend on revenue from subscribers inside and outside Russia. As censorship and financial blacklisting measures accumulated, support from Russia-based subscribers has become weaker. Still, diaspora media organisations have adapted, finding technical means to circumvent censorship in Russia, and created audiences and sources of support abroad.[63]

2.5. Coerced Return

Regimes engaged in transnational authoritarianism will often pursue the extradition of opposition based abroad. Before and after 2022, there have been many cases documented of Moscow demanding the return

[55] "Массовое восприятие "иностранных агентов" [Mass perception of "foreign agents"], *Levada Tsentr*, 16 January 2023.

[56] Russia: Statement by the Spokesperson on labelling Meduza as "foreign agent," European Union External Action Service, 24 April 2021.

[57] "Putin Submits Bill to Denaturalize Anti-War Russians," *The Moscow Times*, 14 November 2022.

[58] "Climate Activist Arshak Makichyan Stripped of Russian Citizenship," *The Moscow Times*, 1 November 2022.

[59] "Russia Threatens Denaturalization for Draft-Defying Central Asians," *The Moscow Times*, 23 September 2022.

[60] "Суд впервые лишил гражданства РФ мигрантов, не вставших на воинский учёт [The court for the first time deprived of Russian citizenship of migrants who did not register with the military], *Svoboda*, 15 December 2023.

[61] The full name is The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (*Федеральная служба по надзору в сфере связи, информационных технологий и массовых коммуникаций*).

[62] "Russia Has Blocked 138K Websites Since Ukraine Invasion, Prosecutor Says," *The Moscow Times*, 8 August 2022.

[63] "RSF urges European governments to strengthen their support for independent Russian journalism, resilient but weakened by exile – new report," *Reporters Without Borders*, 7 December 2023.

of Russian citizens living abroad, though after 2022, these included charges of extremism and discrediting the army. Part of these requests are pursued by Russian diplomatic staff abroad, whom Moscow instructed to target outspoken Russians in exile.[64] In turn, this reveals the role of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in facilitating transnational repression.[65] Repatriation requests among countries formerly under Moscow's control tend to be accepted, while asylum claims from Russian citizens are routinely rejected.

Civil society and governments have mobilised against Russian extradition demands. Individuals and Russian CSOs based abroad have advocated for governments and international institutions to prevent these requests to Russia, as there is no guarantee that the human rights of those detained will be respected.[66] A March 2022 agreement among European Union ministries of justice determined that member states would not authorise the return of Russian citizens as called for by Moscow. Certain governments in Europe have gone a step further. For example, in 2023, the Italian Ministry of Justice intervened to stop the extradition of a Belarusian citizen residing in the country due to Russia's record of human rights violations.[67] Beyond these measures, the Russian government has reduced or stopped its consular services across Europe, compelling Russian citizens to travel to Russia for legal purposes.[68] This exposes them to detention and interrogation in the country, as well as to their devices being used for espionage.

A few cases of forced disappearances have been documented. These are cases where an authoritarian government uses special services or local collaborators to kidnap dissidents abroad to forcefully repatriate them without requesting extradition. In November 2023, reports emerged that Russian activist Lev Skoryakin appeared in a Russian prison after his disappearance in Kyrgyzstan, where he had applied for political asylum. Initially, Kyrgyz authorities refused to extradite Skoryakin at Moscow's request. According to Russian human rights organisation Memorial, Skoryakin was abducted from a Kyrgyz prison on 17 October and forcefully transferred to Russia the next day. Kyrgyz authorities arrested Skoryakin in February for allegedly participating in a Moscow protest in 2021.[69]

2.6. Surveillance

Like the Nemtsova case, Russian intelligence officers in the field and informants to the intelligence services have been infiltrating opposition circles, CSOs, and other venues. As mentioned above, this is a recurrent task of Russia's intelligence agencies, with a degree of institutional continuity from the Soviet era. Like in the Cold War, Russian embassies have provided cover to intelligence officers whose tasks involved, among others, monitoring the Russian opposition in the country where they were stationed. The 2022 expulsions of over 400 Russian intelligence officers under diplomatic cover severely diminished their capacity but did not extinguish it altogether.[70] Existing Russian representations, such as the Russian Permanent Mission to the EU, continue to be regarded as venues for Russian intelligence activities.[71]

Russian intelligence officers and informants to the intelligence services have been infiltrating opposition circles

Another element of surveillance is the coercion of CSO members and journalists into engaging in the surveillance of others in their circles. This coercion often takes place after detention. For example, Kirill Parubets — a Russian-born resident of Ukraine who volunteered for

[64] "Russia Targets Exiled Celebrities Who Criticize War – Bloomberg," *The Moscow Times*, 1 February 2024.

[65] Soldatov & Borogan, *The Russian Way.*

[66] "Appeal to the European authorities in the case of Alexei Moskalev," *Antiwar Initiatives*, 10 April 2023.

[67] "Italy steps up efforts to prevent extraditions to Russia," *Decode39*, 28 August 2023.

[68] For example, see: "Russian Embassy in Estonia halts processing of citizenship renunciation," *ERR News*, 19 January 2023.

[69] "Похищенного в Кыргызстане активиста Льва Скорякина вывезли в Москву и пытали в СИЗО-2 [Activist Lev Skoryakin, kidnapped in Kyrgyzstan, was taken to Moscow and tortured in pre-trial detention center-2]," *Memorial*, 3 November 2023.

[70] Dan Sabbagh, "Half of Russian spies in Europe expelled since Ukraine invasion, says MI6 chief," *The Guardian*, 21 July 2022.

[71] Espionage activities by diplomats at the Russian Permanent Mission to the EU, Parliamentary Question, European Parliament, 24 October 2023.

humanitarian causes in Ukraine — was detained upon returning to Russia in April 2024. With the goal of obtaining his personal documents to claim foreign citizenship, Parubets and his wife, Lyubov, travelled to Russia only to be detained shortly after their arrival. Parubets was accused of wishing to overthrow the state because of his volunteering in Ukraine. With the threat of life-long imprisonment, he was coerced by FSB officers into agreeing to spy on his circle of acquaintances. Notably, his communications were to be placed under covert surveillance by the FSB for them to monitor his exchanges with other individuals of interest to the services. Upon being released, Kirill and Lyubov Parubets fled Russia with a second, undisclosed passport, thus escaping the agency's grip.[72]

Beyond human sources, the Russian government exploits information technologies for surveillance purposes. Indeed, the FSB's Twelfth and Eighteenth centres are dedicated to cybersecurity, with a part of their activities oriented to monitoring the communications of Russians abroad who communicate with those in the country.[73] Russian technology companies have few resources or scope to block or deny Russian authorities from requesting information about their users. This has been a growing trend since 2022, and it applies to users abroad, too.[74] In August 2023, reports emerged that Yandex (also known as Russia's Google) shares data with the FSB, especially of its ride-hailing app Yango. Yango is available in Russia but also abroad, including in countries that have hosted many Russian citizens since 2022, including Armenia, Israel, Serbia, and the United Arab Emirates.[75] Moreover, some companies provide custom surveillance applications for the Kremlin. For instance, NTC Vulkan is a private company that is part of Russia's military-industrial complex. Since its founding in 2018, Vulkan has frequently exchanged expertise, personnel, and technical solutions with Russian intelligence agencies. Officially dedicated to information security, many of Vulkan's projects have been deployed for cyberwarfare.[76] Its surveillance applications can target dissidents abroad.

The Kremlin continuously invests in surveillance technologies, developing new capabilities for its security services

The Kremlin continuously invests in surveillance technologies, developing new capabilities available for its security services. The Russian police reportedly make widespread use of AI-assisted facial recognition systems to detain suspects, including politically motivated detentions. According to leaked government documents, the Kremlin plans to spend over 100 million dollars in 2024-26 to build an analysis centre for footage from all video surveillance systems in the country. Some of these technologies are exported abroad.[77] For example, Kyrgyzstan — itself hosting a significant number of Russian citizens — operates a camera system that detects and recognises individuals in international detention databases, including Russia's. Several detentions of Russian activists in Kyrgyzstan — including the Skoryakin case — reportedly happened due to their images being captured in the local camera surveillance system.[78]

3. International Connections

For authoritarian regimes such as Russia's, globalisation presents opportunities to evade sanctions, disseminate propaganda, and find resources to continue their aggressive foreign policy.[79] Similarly, there have been documented cases where Moscow seeks to exploit foreign governments and regional and international

[72] "«Агент поневоле». Как программист сорвал собственную вербовку ФСБ ['Agent at Will'. How a programmer foiled his own recruitment by the FSB]," *Pervyi Otdel*, 4 December 2024.

[73] Soldatov & Borogan, *The Russian Way.*

[74] Valeria Pozychanyuk & Irina Pankratova, "«ВКонтакте» со Степаном Ковальчуком, инструменты слежки для ФСБ и расследования по спутниковым снимкам ["VKontakte" with Stepan Kovalchuk, surveillance tools for the FSB and investigations using satellite images]," *The Bell*, 10 October 2023.

[75] "'User X with driver Y traveled from point A to point B'," *Meduza*, 8 August 2023.

[76] Nikolai Antoniadis et al, "A Look Inside Putin's Secret Plans for Cyber-Warfare," *Der Spiegel*, 30 March 2023.

[77] Ekaterina Venkina, "Russia: How the Kremlin is using AI to enhance video surveillance," *Eurasianet*, 4 June 2024.

[78] "«Извини, брат, мы тебя выдаем» ["Sorry, brother, we're giving you away"]," *Meduza*, 14 April 2024.

[79] Ivan U.K. Klyszcz, *How Russia Brings Its Aggression Against Ukraine to the Global South* (International Centre for Defence and Security, April 2023).

Organisation (founding year)	Members (as of June 2024)	Security Cooperation?
Commonwealth of Independent States (1991)	AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD,[86]RU, TJ, UZ	Yes
Collective Security Treaty Organisation (1992)[87]	AM, BY, KG, KZ, RU, TJ	Yes
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (1996)[88]	CN, IN, IR, KG, KZ, PK, RU, TJ, UZ	Yes
Eurasian Economic Union (2000)[89]	AM, BY, KG, KZ, RU	No

Table 1. Selected regional organisations with Russian participation. *Source:* Author.

organisations to persecute journalists and CSOs abroad. For example, Russia has been an INTERPOL member since 1990, and in recent years, it has become one of the countries whose government abuses INTERPOL Notices. Reportedly, Russia accounts for almost half of all Red Notices (a request for international law enforcement to locate and provisionally arrest a suspect, pending extradition) published in 2023. To mitigate such abuse, the organisation introduced in 2022 additional checks for Notices filed by Russia.[80]

Russia has signed several consultation and cooperation treaties on matters of security with many states and organisations (Table 1). However, Russia's launch of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to the country's partial isolation from the globalised economy and international politics. By June 2022, Russia had been suspended from 42 international organisations.[81] Similarly, over 1000 international companies have left Russia or significantly reduced their presence.[82] Other institutional links were broken, too. For example, the NATO-Russia Council existed first as a cooperation mechanism, then, after 2014, as a limited communication channel, finally to be closed in 2022 as a response to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine.[83] In other regions of the world, bilateral agreements on defence and security have been a tool for Moscow to expand its influence abroad. In some cases, treaties of legal mutual assistance facilitate the exchange of surveillance information on exiled Russian activists.[84] In addition, several governments have been accused of ceding to Moscow's pressure to cancel public appearances by opposition figures.[85] In the following, the cases of Kazakhstan and Serbia are analysed because of their relevance — both having received Russian emigres in the thousands since 2022 — and of their relatively close relationship with Moscow. These two cases reveal contradictions and the limits of Moscow's influence even among its long-standing partners.

3.1. Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia has come under scrutiny since 2022, as Astana's alignment with Moscow is uncertain. On the one hand, Kazakhstan's leadership has voiced their disagreement with Russia's invasion and has enforced certain international restrictions on Russia.[90] Indeed, Kazakhstan has a long-standing multivector foreign policy, directed towards diversifying contacts away from Russia. This policy has a security edge, too, as Russian officials and public figures have repeatedly expressed revisionist views towards the Russia-Kazakhstan border.[91]

On the other hand, regional integration between Kazakhstan and Russia is deep, as evinced by the multitude of treaties signed between the two countries, many of which have a security element (Table 1). In January

[80] Bill Whitaker and Aliza Chasan, "Interpol — the international police organization — accused of doing the "dirty work" of authoritarian members," *CBS News*, 28 January 2024.

[81] "Isolation. Russia ousted from 42 international fora," *BRAND Ukraine*, 2 June 2022.

[82] "Over 1,000 Companies Have Curtailed Operations in Russia—But Some Remain," *Chief Executive Leadership Institute*, 28 January 2024.

[83] "NATO-Russia Council," NATO, 1 September 2022.

[84] "Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to Share Data with Moscow on Anti-War Russians, Conscripts," *The Moscow Times*, 22 June 2023.

[85] Anton Trianovski, "Russia's New Threats to Exiles: Seized Assets and Forced Returns," *New York Times*, 1 February 2024.

[86] Suspended participation in 2022.

[87] Originally, the Tashkent Treaty Organisation, renamed in 2002.

[88] Originally, the Shanghai Five, renamed in 2001.

[89] Originally, the Eurasian Economic Community, renamed in 2014.

[90] "Kazakhstan Says Blocked Export of 106 Military Goods to Russia," *The Moscow Times*, 19 October 2023.

[91] Almaz Kumenov, "Russian nationalists again rile Kazakhstan by questioning its nationhood," *Eurasianet*, 15 December 2020.

2022, under the aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia led an intervention in Kazakhstan to assist the authorities in their crackdown on protests in the "bloody January" massacre. Over 200 people were killed, according to Kazakhstan's authorities.[92] Moreover, since 2022, Russian sanctions evasion schemes have used Kazakhstan territory and Kazakhstan-based companies to facilitate parallel imports, including of war materiel. Due to their membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), there are no border or customs checks between Kazakhstan and Russia.[93] In sum, Astana has not fundamentally shifted its relationship with Moscow since 2022 but has also sought to differentiate its foreign policy from Russia's aggressive outlook.

This double perspective — of cooperation with and diversification away from Russia — is reflected in Kazakhstan's attitude towards the new Russian immigration in its territory. Estimates of Russians arriving in Kazakhstan vary, but 100 thousand is the rough figure of those who have relocated to the country long-term since 2022.[94] For Russian exiled activists and journalists, there is unrestricted, visa-free travel between Russia and the member states of some of these regional organisations, making them frequent destinations for those wishing to escape the Kremlin's reach. However, the cooperation among the law enforcement agencies facilitated by these organisations means that security is often illusory.

The Cooperation among the law enforcement agencies means that security is often illusory

Kazakhstan, as a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), is among the signatories of the CIS Convention on legal aid. This Convention formalised obligations, refusals and demands for extradition (Articles 56-71), criminal persecution (Articles 72-77), and the obligation of the signatory states to share evidence to assist in criminal cases (Article 78).[95] As a result of this cooperation, the CIS operates an international wanted list among its members, facilitating detentions and extraditions. According to testimonies, the FSB operates freely among CIS members. The same applies to the CSTO, which engages in security and law enforcement cooperation in its charter (Article 7), including cooperation against transnational crime (Article 8), grounds for transnational repression.[96] For activists, journalists and CSO members in exile — from Russia or any other CIS member state — these legal instruments raise questions about the reliability of protection against politically-motivated charges.[97]

Indeed, Astana is mostly compliant with Russian orders of detaining members of Russian CSOs and activists for extradition, including on the grounds of the law on "fakes about the army." Crucially, most asylum applications by Russians in Kazakhstan are rejected.[98] Yet, in November 2023, two Russian citizens accused by Moscow of extremism were granted asylum-seeker status by Kazakhstan. In addition, Kazakh civil society has many times acted to prevent extradition cases of Russian dissidents. For example, in July 2024, anti-war activist Natalya Narskaya was released from a 12-month detention, awaiting extradition over her open criticism of the Russian army. Detained on charges of "inciting extremist actions," Narskaya received support from lawyers of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, preventing her extradition.[99] Similar patterns of qualified

[92] "Russia-Led Military Alliance Completes Withdrawal From Kazakhstan," *RFERL*, 19 January 2022.

[93] Alexander Yarashevich, Aleksandr Atasuntsev, and Robert Denis, "In 'False Transit' Loophole, Russia's War Machine Is Supplied Through Kazakh Companies and Belarusian Warehouses," *OCCPR*, 21 February 2024.

[94] Marsha McGraw Olive, "Relokanty: Is Russia's loss Central Asia's gain?," *Eurasianet*, 3 May 2024.

[95] UNHCR, *Convention on Legal Aid and Legal Relations in Civil, Family and Criminal Cases,* The Minsk Convention (UNHCR, 22 January 1993).

[96] CSTO, *Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization* (CSTO, October 2002).

[97] Amalia Zatari, "«Уехать не смог никто». Почему россияне оказываются в ловушке в странах ОДКБ ["No one could leave." Why Russians find themselves trapped in the CSTO countries]," *BBC Russian*, 28 June 2023.

[98] "'We're All Hostages Here': Wanted Russian Activists, Draft Dodgers Stuck in Legal Limbo in Kazakhstan," *The Moscow Times*, 13 September 2023.

[99] "Россиянка освободилась в Алматы из-под экстрадиционного ареста [Russian woman released from extradition arrest in Almaty]," *Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law*, 23 July 2024.

compliance can be seen in other Russian partners and members of the CIS, such as Kyrgyzstan.[100]

3.2. Serbia

Serbia's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been characterised as a "staged balancing act," as Belgrade pursues an intentionally ambiguous policy towards Russia.[101] For example, the Serbian government voted in favour of the United Nations General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's aggression. A 2023 leak suggested that Belgrade may have even discreetly delivered arms to Ukraine.[102] At the same time, Belgrade did not impose sanctions on Russia and has continued to engage with Russian officials since 2022. In 2024, Serbia received an arms delivery from Russia, as the country remains a customer of Russian military products.[103] Moreover, Serbia is allegedly among the countries that Russia has come to rely on to evade international sanctions, especially in the acquisition of sensitive technology. On 4 September 2024, a meeting between Putin and Serbia's Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin announced the removal of bilateral trade barriers.[104]

Despite the Serbian policy of ambiguity, Russian CSOs continued to operate in the country throughout the two years of full-scale war

Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and other members of the CIS, Serbia is not part of any regional integration organisation with Russia, so Belgrade does not have the same commitments to legal aid as those countries. Yet, concerns persist about the willingness of Belgrade to cooperate with Moscow by monitoring or even hindering the activities of the Russian journalists and CSOs.[105] The number of Russian citizens residing in Serbia as of 2024 is estimated to be 150 thousand.[106] Among them, there are Russian CSOs registered and based in Serbia. Rallies against Russia's war have taken place, attracting hundreds of participants in 2022.[107] In 2024, protests against Putin's fourth term attracted thousands.[108] Despite the Serbian policy of ambiguity, Russian CSOs continued to operate in the country throughout the two years of full-scale war.

Yet, the environment in Serbia has progressively deteriorated for Russia's exiled CSOs. Reportedly, Russian opposition figures operating in Serbia continue their activities in fear of the Russian FSB and local pro-Russia groups.[109] The year 2023 suggested that Belgrade's policy towards the exiled CSOs might be changing. One Russian CSO abroad, the Russian Democratic Society, saw in July 2023 several of its members denied entry into Serbia and rejected the extension of their residence permits, both on alleged grounds of national security.[110] While the activists were eventually allowed to return to Serbia, these were the first known cases of Belgrade's interference in the activities of these organisations. By 2024, additional cases of politically motivated expulsions were taking place in Serbia, targeting even long-standing Russian residents.[111]

[100] Nurbek Bekmurzaev, "Kyrgyzstan: Exiled Russians facing pressure for anti-war stance," *Eurasianet*, 13 March 2023.

[101] Florian Bieber, "Title: Serbia's Staged Balancing Act," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 7 August 2023.

[102] Jonathan Landay and Aleksandar Vasovic, "Exclusive: Leaked U.S. intel document claims Serbia agreed to arm Ukraine," *Reuters*, 12 April 2023.

[103] "Serbia receives another arms delivery from Russia despite international sanctions over Ukraine," *Associated Press*, 14 February 2024.

[104] President of Russia, "Встреча с Заместителем Председателя Правительства Сербии Александром Вулиным [Meeting with Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vulin]," The Kremlin, 4 September 2024.

[105] Pyotr Kozlov, "Activist's Ordeal at Belgrade Airport Signals Trouble for Anti-War Russians in Serbia," *The Moscow Times*, 15 July 2023.

[106] "The plight and hope of Ukrainian and Russian refugees in Serbia," *Euronews*, 21 February 2024.

[107] Nevena Bogdanovic & Dragan Kostic, "Russian Expats In Serbia Protest Ukraine War," *RFERL*, 25 December 2022. "Russian anti-war activists hold protest after activists face entry, residence problems in Serbia," *Independent*, 30 July 2023.

[108] Camila Bell-Davies, "'Crowds Can't Be Rigged': Thousands of Russians in Serbia Protest Putin's Re-Election," *The Moscow Times*, 17 March 2024.

[109] Sasa Dragojlo, "Russian Activists in Serbia Defy Fear to Campaign for Putin Rival," *Balkan Insight*, 26 January 2024.

[110] Pavel Fedorovsky, "Отказ в ВНЖ и запрет на въезд в страну. С чем сталкиваются антивоенно настроенные россияне в Сербии [Refusal of a residence permit and ban on entry into the country. What do anti-war Russians face in Serbia?]," Current Time, 3 August 2024.

[111] Iva Martinovic, "'Sad, Shameful, And Terrifying': Anti-

Conclusions and Recommendations

The transnational repression toolkit that the Kremlin employs to target its citizens abroad is wide, and the international connections exploited are many in number. The latent threat of repression, even while abroad, means that distance is no barrier against the Kremlin.

The latent threat of repression applies to Russians abroad as well as citizens from other states added to the Kremlin's wanted list

This applies to Russians abroad as well as those citizens from other states added to the Kremlin's wanted list. In persecuting these individuals and organisations, Russia is deploying the full transnational repression toolkit available to authoritarian governments worldwide. While cases of assassination remain controversial, cases of Russian transnational coercion, delegitimisation, blacklisting, coerced returns, and surveillance are routinely documented by human rights organisations and the press. Organisations, governments, and other institutions involved in thwarting Russian clandestine operations should consider the full span of the Kremlin's toolkit for transnational repression, as explored in this analysis.

Currently, the Kremlin is driven to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty, with other goals being secondary. Yet, the persecution of perceived opposition abroad is a long-standing feature of Russian politics and has remained so after 2022. Driven by a paranoid mindset and benefiting from institutional continuity in the repression of Russian citizens abroad, the Kremlin's growing assertive deployment of clandestine operations abroad should raise alarms concerning the safety and rights of Russian citizens in exile and other individuals on the Kremlin's wanted list.[112] This applies not only to cases of physical attacks but also cyberattacks and intimidation campaigns — as illustrated by the Underside doxing campaigns. Indeed, as researchers Marcus Michaelsen and Johannes Thumfart argue, digital transnational repression undermines the host country's authority and sovereignty. Digital resilience, counterintelligence, and sanctions are among the instruments available to respond to this threat.[113]

Governments and civil society of several host countries have thwarted Russia's attempts at extraditing or otherwise persecuting its citizens abroad. For example, in January 2024, Israeli diplomats prevented the deportation of the music group Bi-2 from Thailand to Russia.[114] Nominal allies of Moscow, such as Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, are inconsistent in complying with extradition cases, offering respite to Russia's CSOs and journalists abroad. Since 2016, INTERPOL has pursued a series of reforms and guardrails to prevent Russia from abusing its Red Notice system. As Russia continues to add its citizens and foreign citizens to its wanted list, we can expect that the Kremlin will continue to pursue critics abroad, regardless of distance. Therefore, those governments offering asylum or protection to Russian activists, journalists, or CSOs must consider the following recommendations.

Transnational repression is a persistent reality. As long as certain authoritarian states engage in the cross-border persecution of individuals, the risks associated with these activities will remain a continuous factor for national security and the rights of individuals. This concerns Russia and the new Russian diaspora, but also other targeted communities.

- Raise awareness in government and among the relevant non-governmental sectors. Focus on building capacities to identify repression and on avoiding the unintentional securitisation of the targeted communities and individuals.

- Establish an official definition of trans-national repression that encompasses its multi-faceted nature and its threat to both

War Russians Fear Expulsion From Serbia," *RFERL*, 13 February 2024.

[112] Ivan U.K. Klyszcz, "Shadow War: What Estonia and Poland Tell Us About Russia's Clandestine Operations in Europe," *Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy* policy brief 20, 4 July 2024.

[113] Marcus Michaelsen and Johannes Thumfart, "Drawing a line: Digital transnational repression against political exiles and host state sovereignty," *European Journal of International Security*, 8(2) (2023): 151-171.

[114] Ksenia Svetlova, "Russia is intimidating its expat celebrities in an attempt to silence them," *The Times of Israel*, 1 February 2024.

the human rights of the targets and the national security of the hosting society.

Protecting vulnerable individuals upholds national security. Several of the transnational repression tools used by the Kremlin breach the constitutional order of the countries hosting Russia's targets. Therefore, part of transnational repression is a law enforcement and counterintelligence issue.

Transnational repression is a law enforcement and counterintelligence issue

- Disinformation campaigns targeting vulnerable individuals affect the broader society and peddle Russian strategic narratives. A proactive stance to disinformation is necessary in general, including the protection of potential Kremlin targets.

- Several of the transnational repression tools used by the Kremlin can be used to target foreigners abroad, too. This includes surveillance tools; any vulnerabilities enabling Russia's transnational repression must be addressed proactively. For example, the technical vulnerabilities used for the surveillance of the new Russian diaspora can be used against others.

Cooperate with the new Russian diaspora for increased resilience. Not all responses to transnational repression must rely on law enforcement. Securitising the new Russian diaspora can backfire by closing potential areas of cooperation, especially in capacity building and providing resources and continued protection. Topics such as cybersecurity, protection against surveillance, and psychological support need to be included in the agenda, as they are all relevant to the Kremlin's transnational repression toolkit. Here, exiled CSOs and media outlets are key cooperation partners to engage.

- Focus on building trust. Treat the victims of transnational repression as such and not as latent security threats. Moreover, infiltration and surveillance can render many in the new Russian exile CSO and journalist community wary of open cooperation. Discretion and the involvement of non-law enforcement government bodies can help.

- Engage in triangular cooperation with the relevant international organisations.

- Provide funding for the CSOs and human rights organisations that monitor trans-national repression incidents.

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