

INFORMATION CENSORSHIP: A FEARFUL KREMLIN

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Recent changes to Russian domestic law regarding protesting and information sharing represent a fearful Kremlin. Russia's two major periods of government destabilization and collapse in the twentieth century were preceded by the easing of information and censorship laws.¹ Relaxing and abolishing information and censorship laws allowed the populations of the Russian Empire and subsequent Soviet Union means to organize outside government control. Such organization of the populations lead to mobilization cycles taking hold and dismantling the ruling regimes. Vladimir Putin and his regime have taken careful, calculated steps to suppress information and control the ability of the population of the Russian Federation to organize mass actions.² To assuage its fears of massive destabilization and regime collapse, Putin's Kremlin has committed itself to information repression.

The Russian Empire and the subsequent Soviet Union both resulted in regime failure and collapse in the twentieth century due to easing legal restrictions on protesting and information. Prior to each respective collapse, the state had undergone major reformations regarding information censorship, allowing for total freedom of speech and freedom of expression. These radical policy shifts were contrasted significantly against long periods of extreme social repression by the Tsarist and Soviet regimes. After policies were changed in favor of leniency, citizens of the Russian Empire and the subsequent Soviet Union were seemingly overnight granted the ability to communicate freely and organize outside state control.

The abilities of the populations of the Russian Empire and subsequent Soviet Union to communicate and organize outside state control resulted in the generation of mobilization cycles.³ Social tidal influences gained traction among a population previously barred from voicing grievances. News of populations' successes in addressing their respective grievances

spread to others, creating unrelenting waves of unrest within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.⁴ The ultimate result was the end of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.

Vladimir Putin has carefully implemented strict controls on information because he both recognizes and is fearful of its power to destroy governments, as evidenced by Color Revolutions in Russia's near-abroad and the Arab Spring.⁵ Since his inauguration in 2000, Putin has supported actions and legislation aimed at controlling traditional media, the internet, and limiting freedom of speech and expression for the population of the Russian Federation. He has, effectively, silenced all potential forms of opposition to his rule.⁶

It can be argued that the implementation of repressive policies regarding protesting and information is a manifestation of Putin's regime becoming emboldened by its consolidation of power. However, the considerable quantitative evidence presented by Mark Beissinger in his book, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, shows a clear linkage between state control of demonstration activity and demonstration proliferation.⁷ This data indicates free speech and free expression are threats to the regime's viability, which history has shown to be the case twice in the last century for Russia.

Without significant state control of protest activity and information sharing in place, the chance of regime collapse looms large over the Kremlin due to precedents set by history. It is not confidence that has and continues to drive the Kremlin's actions regarding protesting and information sharing; it is fear.

¹ Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1996), 45; Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58.

² Steven L. Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2015), 201-202.

³ Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 74-75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

⁵ Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia against the West and with the Rest* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2019), 267.

⁶ Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who owns Russia?* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014), 273-274.

⁷ Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 71.