



HAL
open science

Russia: The cunning of authoritarianism

Françoise Daucé

► **To cite this version:**

| Françoise Daucé. Russia: The cunning of authoritarianism. 2014. hal-00977603

HAL Id: hal-00977603

<https://hal.science/hal-00977603>

Preprint submitted on 11 Apr 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



TEPSIS PAPERS April 2014

Françoise Daucé

RUSSIA: THE CUNNING OF AUTHORITARIANISM

In December 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin marked the 20th anniversary of the Constitution by signing an amnesty which allowed for both the liberation of numerous common-law prisoners serving short sentences and the early release of the two Pussy Riot members sentenced to two years in a labor camp for staging an anti-Putin performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. At the same time, the Russian president granted a reprieve for Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former head of Yukos, who had spent ten years in jail on charges of embezzlement and tax evasion and, implicitly, for his support of opposition activists. These unexpected releases were generally perceived as the authorities' intention to improve their international image before the start of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games in February 2014. However, beyond this sporting-event and diplomatic deadline, they point to something deeper and address the issue of government practices in Russia today. In order to analyze these practices properly, one must both observe the Kremlin's – at times – contradictory decisions

Françoise Daucé

Lecturer, Blaise-Pascal University, Clermont-Ferrand, France

Keywords **Russia** **Civil Society** **Hybrid Regimes** **Authoritarianism** **Social Mobilization**

Electronic reference <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/TEPSIS>

Laboratoire d'Excellence

tepsis

Transformation de l'Etat
politisation des sociétés
institution du social

and focus attention on social practices in the country. This double focus allows for a deeper understanding of a regime resisting all forms of open debate and political alternation while being capable of generating support throughout the country. If one looks beyond the above-mentioned high-profile cases, this paradoxical oppression becomes clear in the light of the relations that have obtained between the government and social and civil activists since the early 2000s, and more particularly since Putin's controversial 2012 reelection. The two opposing actors are mostly engaged in controversies and conflicts but they also reach loosely defined forms of compromise based on a trade-off of government liberalities in exchange for renunciation of political offensive on the part of activists. These relations between the state and society rely on the government's forcible establishment of a civil consensus at the expense of partisan conflict. However, they are fragile and foster the emergence of radical forms of protest outside the system.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF REPRESSION

As demonstrators of the 2011-2012 Winter feared, Putin's reelection in March 2012 was followed by an outburst of authority that added to the already heavy illiberal record of the Russian executive. The newly elected Duma (the lower house of parliament) passed a series of oppressive laws limiting the right to demonstrate, reinforcing control of the media, and stigmatizing homosexuals. Along the same lines, the deputies passed the "Foreign Agent" law, which came to complement existing repressive measures against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This law required politically active foreign-financed advocacy groups to register with the Ministry of Justice and identify themselves under the infamous label of "foreign agents" (in other words, as "traitors to the homeland"). It stigmatized two aspects of social activism, namely participation in international cooperative operations and political activity (the term political being loosely defined and thus, open to any and all interpretations). The enforcement of this oppressive law involved inspection of Russian civil action groups by the Prosecutor's Office in the spring of 2013. The groups' by-laws and accounts were subject to audit by officers from the Ministry of Justice, the police, and tax services. Many of them received warnings and fines from law enforcement agencies. Some of the most active ones, as for instance the election monitoring organization Golos and the St. Petersburg human rights group Memorial, were subject to legal actions threatening their very existence.

And yet, at the same time, the government used softer forms of coercion. In 2013, at the height of the campaign against foreign agents, public funding was granted to the very same human rights organizations that were held under suspicion and inspected by the Prosecutor's Office. In August 2013, the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, which represents civil action groups before state authorities, published a list of presidential subsidies recipients. Among others, it includes Memorial (which received 10 million rubles – 200 000 euros – for the funding of four projects), the Moscow Helsinki Group (which needed funding for its project consisting in monitoring the reformation of the Interior Ministry), and For Human Rights (5 million rubles for its "Civic Ombudsman" project). Many other organizations benefitted from this aid (Sova Center, Nizhni Novgorod Committee Against Torture, Citizens' Watch, Agora, to name a few), and even the prosecuted Golos organization! This financing seems inconsistent with

the state's repressive policy. However, as Putin clearly put it at the time, "As for NGOs, [...] in so far as we introduce harsher working conditions for them, we must of course increase our own funding of their activities." (1) The Russian state was trying to substitute itself for foreign funding sources and making use of both oppression and financial support in its dealing with civil action groups.

This double game is not new. Since the early 2000s, Putin and his staff have readily asserted their support to civil society while steadily defining the latter as a "non-political" entity. They have aimed a large number of institutional initiatives at civil action groups, with the organization of a Civic Forum in 2001, the reinforcement of the presidential Human Rights Council in 2004, the creation in 2005 of the Civic Chamber, etc. In 2007, the Presidential Administration launched its own funding program directed to civil associations. Thus, the state offers financial support to these groups with the proviso that they renounce politics and international contacts. The process alternates between repression and integration of independent civil action groups into the Russian institutional framework and sows confusion within their ranks. On the one hand, they distrust the initiatives of an oppressive regime, while on the other, for efficiency's sake, they accept to sit in governmental bodies such as the presidential Human Rights Council and receive subsidies. This confusion leads to forms of compromise with the authorities.

THE OPPOSITION'S LIMITS

When Khodorkovsky met with journalists at Berlin's Checkpoint Charly Museum on December 22, 2013, a few hours after his release, he declared that he was not planning to be involved in politics: "I am going to engage in public work (obshchestvennaia deiatel'nost') [...]. The struggle for power is not for me now." (2) This prudent civic but apolitical position is in keeping with that of social and activist circles that have mobilized over the past years in Russia, more particularly during the protests of the winter of 2011-2012. During those events, human rights activists repeatedly insisted on the non-political character of their engagement. Their renunciation of political action was induced by contextual necessities. Democratic and liberal opposition parties have no longer been represented at the Duma since 2003. Their influence has been greatly reduced compared to that of the ruling party, United Russia, which rules over political life in Moscow and regionally. This renunciation is also due to the civic convictions of human rights activists. Vaclav Havel's death in December 2011, a few days after the elections denounced in Moscow's streets, gave the protesters the opportunity to reassert these principles. In an homage to him, they stated: "It is thanks to non-political politics (which today is also called "civic politics") that President Vaclav Havel allowed the Czech people to turn the socialist Absurdistan of his plays into a country of freedom

(1) Putin predlagaet uvelichit' finansirovanie NKO, esli budut priniaty novye popravki. Gazeta.ru, July 10, 2012. http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2012/07/10/n_2430161.shtml (retrieved on August 23, 2012).

(2) <http://itar-tass.com/politika/851407>.

and democracy within a very short time.” (3)

In the winter of 2011-2012, this non-political stand was taken over by organizers of the protest movement. The League of Voters, founded on the initiative of representatives of the media and cultural circles (among them Leonid Parfyonov, Boris Akunin and Yuri Shevchuk) asserted its non-political character: “We have no political objectives and will not support any party or candidate to the presidential election. We want to live in an honest country.” (4) As its rules and regulations state, “The league has no political objective. [...] The League’s symbols are a white ribbon, a white ring, and other white symbols. In Russia, white has become the symbol of civil society. It symbolizes cleanliness and honesty, peace and openness to dialogue. White is politically neutral, it is the combination of all colors.” (5) This profession of faith is evidence of the reticence of protest and activist circles to engage in political confrontation in Russia today.

Since the early 2000s, under the double influence of state injunctions and civic convictions, the de facto disappearance of partisan competition has led to unexpected regroupings in the public sphere. On the protesters’ side, the repeatedly asserted non-political character of the movement has led to the creation of opposition coordination councils bringing together activists with highly heterogeneous political backgrounds. Extreme-left partisans accepted to cooperate with representatives of the nationalist far right and with centrist liberals and democrats in the name of their common civic demands. However, these contradictory rapprochements eventually led to disempowerment. As a result, the Opposition Coordination Council, which grouped representatives of these movements elected after the demonstrations, dissolved itself in 2013 due to lack of agreement between its members.

A FRAGILE, STRAINED EQUILIBRIUM

In this context, as protest is unable to find expression through marginalized political parties, civil action groups subject to increasing state pressure, or through civic initiatives of opposition coalitions, it has to find new outlets. The most determined oppositionists try to invent original ways of voicing protest. Since the mid-2000s, the latter has been embodied by informal social movements (i.e., non-registered officially) bringing together social, national-heritage, or environmental activists on a local level. It has also found expression in a creative repertoire of cultural actions and politically motivated artistic performances. Pussy Riot’s punk prayer in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior belongs to this innovative political and radical trend. For the Kremlin, the first priority is

(3) Obshchestvo Memorial: pamiati Gavela. hro.org, December 19, 2011. <http://www.hro.org/node/12748?page=5>.

(4) Deklaratsiia o sozdanii ligi izbiratelei (Declaration on the constitution of the League of Voters). <http://ligaizbirateley.ru/pages/declaration.html> (retrieved on April 12, 2012).

(5) Pravila ligi (The League’s rules and regulations). <http://ligaizbirateley.ru/rules.php> (retrieved on February 7, 2012).

to repress these non-official and little institutionalized forms of protest because they do not play its game. When oppositionists step out of the cooperation scheme forced on them and the form of civility tolerated by the authorities (i.e., civic involvement in the name of civil society), they run the risk of suffering violent crackdowns and/or detention. Bolotnaya Square protesters experienced this as they were rounded up and brought to court on charges of public unrest during the rally of May 6, 2012, on the eve of Putin's inauguration.

Thus, the Russian authorities' generosity, with the release of political prisoners on the one hand and the funding of civil action groups on the other, is often seen by denigrators of Russian authoritarianism as a "cunning" or "hypocritical" plan to conceal the regime's authoritarian nature. Be that as it may, the numerous concessions made ahead of the Sochi Olympics must be taken seriously because they point to how complex the exercise of power is in Russia. The use of coercion and curtailment of liberties lead to fragile and limited forms of compromise between the authorities and society. They favor the emergence of a "civility of oppression" which gives precedence to civil society over electoral competition. This precarious balance between coercion and civility is a paradoxical combination often labeled as "hybrid." It is not specific to Russia and is part of the process by which authoritarian rule is restructured in certain contemporary states such as Morocco, Cuba, or China.

Manuscript completed in January 2014