



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; International Economics and Trade; Resource Security; India; Mexico; Russia

PUTIN'S ULTRA-REPRESSIVE REGIME

Under the rule of Vladimir Putin, repression in Russia has deepened dramatically, to levels not seen since Stalinist times, a new study by Russian exile media outlet Proekt has tallied. "[T]he number of people convicted on political charges during Vladimir Putin's most recent presidential term alone exceeded the figures recorded in the USSR under Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev," the report, entitled *2024: a Study into Repression Under Putin*, says. "About 116,000 people have been subjected to direct repression in Russia over the past six years. That's just the tip of the iceberg: if we take into account those who have been punished for disobeying law enforcers and 'violating COVID restrictions', the real scale of repression could actually be many times greater."

One of the Kremlin's key tools, the Proekt expose catalogues, is the weaponization of Russia's courts, designating officially-frowned-upon speech and conduct as "extremist" to enable its suppression. This strategy has had massive effects in recent years; as tallied by Proekt, "at least 4,667 cases under [such legal articles] were brought before Russian courts in 2018-2023," and "5,613 people were accused in these cases." One charge of particular note is the "disclosure of state secrets," which has seen a massive surge over the past half-decade – nearly rivaling the number of political dissidents tried for treason by the USSR at the height of the Cold War (1967-1974). Additionally, "anti-agitation" measures have been used to squelch speech at variance with the Kremlin's official line, likewise to great effect. "Between 2018 and 2023, more than 50,000 people have been repressed for speaking out," the Proekt study details.

All of this, of course, has been turbo-charged by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which has dramatically intensified official efforts to control the Russian population. Proekt notes that literally thousands of opponents of the war have been tried under charges ranging from the "public dissemination of knowingly false information about the Armed Forces" to the lesser "Discrediting the Armed Forces." (Proekt, February 22, 2024)

A FRESH FOOTHOLD FOR THE KREMLIN IN NORTH AMERICA

Russia is steadily expanding its presence south of the U.S. border, in Mexico, a new expose in *The Hill* has detailed. Today, Russia's diplomatic presence in the country (a total of 72 diplomats) is more extensive than its presence in the U.S. (46 personnel) or China (38 diplomats). It likewise dwarfs the number of Mexico's diplomats in Russia (10). Moreover, Russian media network *RT*, which is banned throughout most of Europe, can be found advertising across Mexico City on billboards and public transport "to appeal to Mexican consumers."

What lies behind this growing presence? At least some experts can hazard a guess: a long history of ideological alignment between portions of Mexican society and the Soviet Union, which has led some Mexicans to seek closer ties with Moscow today. That is a dynamic that gives the Kremlin a distinct advantage – and an opportunity. "Geopolitically, what the Russians want with Mexico is to drive a wedge between Mexico and the United States," says Dolia Estévez, a Washington-based Mexican journalist.

Most immediately, Russia is seeking to ensure Mexico's continued neutrality toward the war in Ukraine, a stance which ultimately benefits Moscow. Another factor may also be at play, however. This year, both Mexico and the U.S. will hold national elections, and the Kremlin has a long and conspicuous track record of interfering in such processes. As a result, worries are rising that Moscow's hand might be felt in Mexico's upcoming vote as well. (*The Hill*, March 17, 2024)

INDIA HAS SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT RUSSIAN OIL

Russia may be losing its largest energy partner. Over the past two months, India has ceased its purchases of Russian crude, dealing a significant blow to the Russian oil economy in the process. Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, India emerged as a significant consumer of Russian oil, with a 40% increase in imports as New Delhi has sought to take advantage of cut-rate Russian prices caused by Western sanctions on Moscow. But since earlier this year, Russia's *Kommersant* newspaper details, India has refused to buy Russian premium ESPO grade oil, and pared down its purchases of Sokol-grade crude as well. Additionally, billions of dollars of Russian oil profits are now stuck in India due to transfer restrictions imposed by the Reserve Bank of India. The cause for the slowdown – and potential rupture – appear to be disagreements over price, as well as Indian concerns about ongoing Western sanctions on Russia's oil sector, which may expand to include countries (like India) that have been seeking to take advantage of Russia's reduced market options. (*Newsweek*, March 15, 2024)