

Information Manipulation and Repression: A Theory and Evidence from the COVID Response in Russia

Based on BFI Working Paper 2022-101, [*“Information Manipulation and Repression: A Theory and Evidence from the COVID Response in Russia.”*](#) by Natalia Lamberova, UT-Dallas; and Konstantin Sonin, University of Chicago

Authoritarian regimes, seemingly well-equipped to implement restrictive measures, are ill-suited to deal with public health challenges; further, repression complements propaganda as more arrests allow to increase the extent of information manipulation.

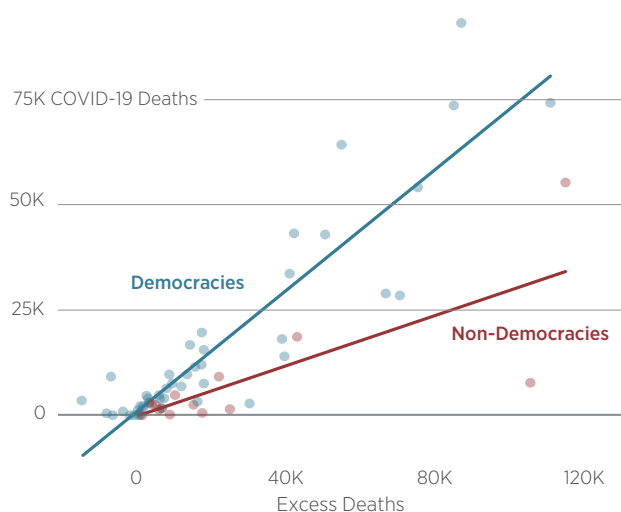
On the one hand, one might expect that authoritarian states would have an easier time managing a pandemic like COVID-19 given that the government could force compliance with mask and vaccine mandates, for example. On the other hand, authoritarian governments might take an opportunity like a pandemic to escalate oppression and increase control over society under the pretense of protecting public health. Indeed, studies

have shown that democracy and human rights worsened in more than 80 countries since the onset of COVID-19, especially in highly repressive states.

The authors examine the case of Russia to investigate these and related questions by studying regional variance in government response to COVID-19. Before describing the authors' findings, a brief note about how Russia governs itself. There are 85 regional parliaments in Russia led by governors that, since 2004, are no longer elected by citizens but are rather appointed by the central government (a change made under Putin). Though these regions share a similar culture, language, and history, they vary significantly in the capacity of elites to provide public goods and maintain order, in the strengths of civil society, and in the quality of political institutions.

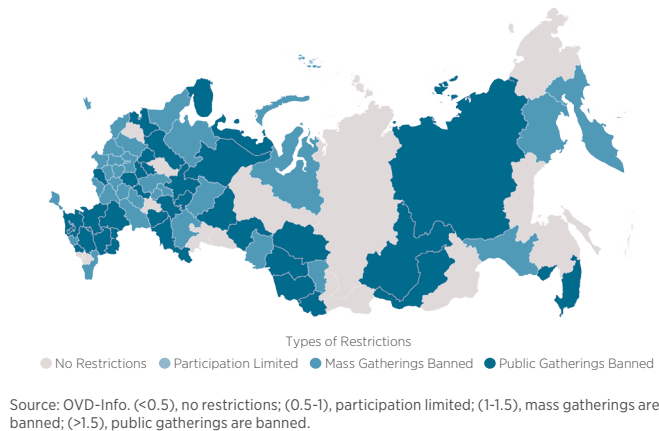
Any autonomy retained by regional governors is at the discretion of federal authorities. For example, in April 2020, governors were granted special authority to choose measures for preventing the spread of COVID-19 in their regions, which approached the pandemic in profoundly different ways. About 30 regions chose to impose electronic passes to leave the house. Only a few regions declared a force majeure (usually defined as an “act of god”), which allowed businesses to resolve lapsed contractual obligations, while in most cases regions labeled lockdowns as “non-working days,” making it harder for businesses to

Figure 1 • Relationship Between Excess Mortality and Officially Reported COVID-Related Deaths in Democracies and Non-Democracies



Note: This Figure illustrates that under-reporting of COVID deaths starts at the beginning of the pandemic and persists throughout. The blue line represents democracies ($y = 750 + 0.72x$) and the red line represents non-democracies ($y = -140 + 0.3x$). Source: (Kobak 2021) and authors' calculations; please see working paper for more details.

Figure 2 • Prohibition of Public Events in Russian Regions, September 2020



handle lapsed contracts. In addition, regions varied in the extent of information manipulation about the gravity of the COVID threat and the number of COVID-related prosecutions.

The authors examined the regional variation in government response to COVID-19 to determine whether and how the central government exploited the pandemic to maintain its grip on power. Their analysis of the data, along with the application of a theoretical model that examines the relationship between repression and informational control, finds that the government exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain its grip on power. Some specific findings include:

- Under-reported COVID-19 related deaths, a propaganda tool, reduced the citizens' willingness to comply with anti-pandemic measures, and therefore contributed to the pandemic harm. Thus, the authoritarian government's supposed advantage in providing the public good—i.e., implementing coercive public-health measures—was compromised by the government's own actions to enhance its power.

- While reports of COVID deaths are easily manipulated, aggregate mortality data are more reliable; likewise, the difference between the reported COVID deaths and excess mortality is a ready proxy for the government's information manipulation. See related Figure for an illustration of the relationship between excess mortality and officially reported COVID-related deaths in democracies and non-democracies.
- Information manipulation by Russian regional authorities is a function of Moscow's political control. Regions with a strong United Russia majority produce more information manipulation about COVID-related deaths, while regions with higher-quality institutions produce less information manipulation.
- Repression and informational control are natural complements to each other. Repressing those who are most skeptical of the regime allows the government to increase the volume of propaganda for the others. When the skeptics are repressed, their incentive constraint is relaxed, and the rest of the population receives more pro-regime information.

Bottom line: Information manipulation is complementary to repression; the quality of political institutions, the strength of the civil society, and the strength of political monopoly all influence the extent to which the incumbent government can engage in information manipulation and repression.

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