

## 1 Introduction

In 2011–2012, Russia witnessed massive rallies following the State Duma election, which many viewed as fraudulent (Bader et al., 2014; Enikolopov et al., 2012). Although electoral fraud was not a new phenomenon in Russian politics, the public's response to this particular instance was unprecedented in its scale, drawing a large number of participants and sparking protests across the country (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2013). Some observers celebrated this surge in participation as a step toward the emergence of a robust civil society in Russia, while others optimistically interpreted it as the dawn of a new era in Russian democracy, signaling a shift toward greater political rights and civil liberties (Cheskin & March, 2015; Robertson, 2013). Participants in these rallies articulated their demands, calling for fair elections, a free Russia, and the departure of Vladimir Putin.

While the 2011–2012 events sparked growing expectations for a democratic transformation in Russia, such change never materialized (Trenin et al., 2012; Wolchik, 2012). Following the 2012 presidential election, the regime responded with intensified repression and an array of new measures to contain public discontent. This period marked a significant infringement on civil liberties through its crackdown on opposition and the introduction of repressive legislation (Libman, 2017). Bolotnaya Square, which had emerged as a focal point for the 2011–2012 rallies, became a lasting symbol of political persecution, as many participants faced detention and criminal charges in the years that followed. The government enacted laws penalizing unauthorized mass gatherings, established website blocklists, and expanded the definitions of terms like state treason, espionage, and foreign agents. The situation was further exacerbated after the invasion of Ukraine, heralding a surge in propaganda, nationalist rhetoric, and redefinitions of what constituted criminal offenses.

Yet despite the regime's implementation of repressive measures, contentious events continued to play their role in Russia's political landscape. To ensure its dominance in contentious politics and respond to contentious claims, the regime continued to innovate its strategies. Major protests, including rallies against the annexation of Crimea in 2014, objections to the 2016 parliamentary election results, anticorruption demonstrations in 2017, and pension reform in 2018, coincided with extensive political changes in new regulations. Rosgvardia, an internal security army, became a direct instrument of presidential power, entrusted with the authority to suppress, detain, and prosecute (Galeotti, 2021). Presidential terms were extended, and opposition media slowly vanished as a result of the laws targeting undesired organizations and foreign agents. The mass rallies in Bolotnaya Square over the course of the 2010s

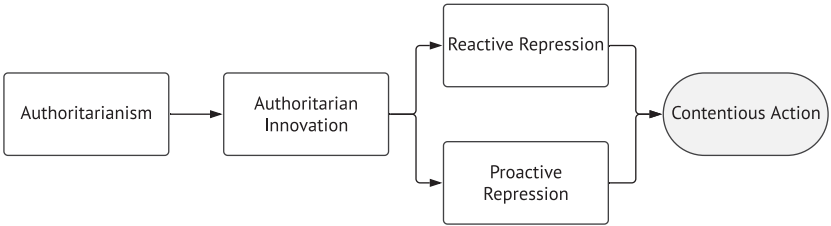
were replaced by individual pickets and more symbolic events.<sup>1</sup> Stripping citizens of their civil rights and opportunities to participate in politics, the regime consistently employed repression strategies exemplifying authoritarian innovation. It increased risks associated with protests and successfully reduced the number of citizens willing to openly express their disagreement with the authorities. The regime dramatically reshaped contentious politics and participation in Russia.

But how exactly did the regime change the nature of contention? Existing literature suggests that repression may be one of the key factors in reducing contentious action, while it may also paradoxically facilitate contention (Lichbach, 1987; Moore, 1998; K.-D. Opp, 1994). Even regimes classified as highly repressive are still prone to contentious events and must address them to different degrees. In Russia, despite the regime's attempts to intimidate and imprison participants following 2011–2012, contentious action persisted throughout the 2010s. It is worth noting that, even before 2011, the Russian regime was infamous for suppressing contentious action through force and eliminating opponents without any significant effort to conceal it (Daucé, 2014; Politkovskaya, 2012; Robertson, 2013). None of this prevented contention, and there is no evidence suggesting that repression alone was the primary driver for this change in the way people make claims against the state.

Recent literature on authoritarianism also indicates that the development of such regimes is not solely reliant on the use of force (Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Morgenbesser, 2020a). Instead, a variety of strategies employed in authoritarianism brings up another significant aspect that academic literature on contentious action overlooks. It is the notion that authoritarian regimes are not exclusively rigid, and for their survival, they may employ a combination of methods to remain in power and prolong their monopoly on politics – or innovation (Curato & Fossati, 2020; Morgenbesser, 2020b). Depending on the challenges that threaten them, authoritarian regimes may utilize diverse tactics and strategies to exercise control, even if they initially appear as concessions or the onset of democratization. The ability to confront and address these challenges determines the regime's survival and, therefore, necessitates constant adaptation of its attributes, such as repression.

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<sup>1</sup> The examples of such symbolic events include flower protests where people brought flowers to places with Ukrainian history, for example, monuments to prominent Ukrainians, as a display of solidarity with Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Rossman, 2022). Anti-war and anti-regime graffiti, arsons of military recruitment centers, and replacing supermarket price labels are other examples.



**Figure 1** The relationship between authoritarianism and contention.

The use of authoritarian innovation is crucial to the regime in the context of contentious politics. For example, while the Russian regime successfully contained the events of 2011–2012, it did not stop the use of repression in the subsequent years and did not simply employ the same strategies to disperse claim-makers. Instead, it employed concurrent and successive measures that went beyond individuals’ detention and political persecution. In an effort to prevent or at least control future contention, the regime gradually restricted various aspects of civil liberties using methods previously absent in Russian politics. Through changing specific elements of the political system, the regime gradually achieved its ends. The innovation encompassed a variety of strategies that evolved over time, introducing punishments for political participation, affiliation, actions, and, eventually, words published on social media or pronounced in private conversations. Together with the increase in violence, these measures enabled the regime to change how contention takes place, gaining more control over the range of issues that people make claims against and preventing more contentious events.

This Element explores how authoritarian regimes shape contention through innovation (Figure 1). The innovation here refers to repressive strategies employed by a political regime to infringe on civil liberties, thus changing contentious action and ensuring regime longevity. I analyze how authoritarian politics may either increase or decrease contention by violating democratic freedoms. The Element argues that innovation can be operationalized in terms of proactive and reactive repression, which refer to specific actions undertaken by the regime to deter citizens from participating in future contentious events or suppress ongoing contention. With this understanding of proactive and reactive forms of repression, I establish a causal link between them and contention. Specifically, I examine how innovative strategies may precipitate changes in contentious action and its repertoires. I then propose a theory that explains how a political regime may impact contention. Drawing upon authoritarian developments in Russia and its eighty-three federal subjects, I explore whether the

authoritarian regime has increased or, on the contrary, decreased contention federally and regionally over the time frame from the State Duma elections in 2011 until March 2023, one year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

This approach enables me to address several issues largely unexplored in contentious political literature. First, the proposed theoretical framework establishes the link between political regime and contention by defining continuous and subsequent infringements on civil liberties as the primary element that structures citizens' political participation and, therefore, contentious action. Second, I explore how actual individual policies and decisions may limit political participation. Instead of exploring regime classifications and their general attributes, I focus on specific strategies undertaken by a repressive rule over the 2011–2023 time frame. It allows me to take a closer look at how these strategies may lead to short- and long-term changes in the way people make claims against the state. Third, the *Element* explores the spatial and temporal distribution of contentious action. This examination of how regional contention changes geographically and over time in response to repressive strategies employed by the regime may shed more light on how contention is structured. Lastly, this research determines the role of always-evolving authoritarian institutions and policies in shaping contention. By analyzing the impact of consistent authoritarian innovation, this *Element* offers a novel theoretical framework for explaining how authoritarian regimes shape contention and how they can anticipate and preempt contentious actions.

The following section reviews existing scholarship that explores the relationship between authoritarian rule and contention. It highlights how previous studies have explored contentious actions in different political regimes and identifies gaps in our current understanding. Focusing on authoritarianism, this discussion moves toward the concept of repression, long considered one of the key determinants of contentious action. By drawing on literature discussing authoritarianism and repression, the concept of authoritarian innovation is introduced and conceptualized in the subsequent theoretical and empirical discussion of its relationship with contentious action.

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<sup>2</sup> Federal subjects are administrative units in Russia, composed of oblasts, autonomous oblasts, autonomous districts, krais, republics, and cities of federal importance. The title of a federal subject does not change its legal status in its relationship with the federal government; all of them are equally represented in the Federation Council. However, federal subjects may vary in their government structure, the presence of elected executives, and the composition of their parliaments. Any territories annexed by Russia during the war in Ukraine in 2014 and from 2022 onward are not recognized as Russian and are not included in the analysis in this *Element*.

## 2 Explaining Authoritarianism and Contentious Action

An extensive body of literature analyzes the factors that contribute to contentious action within Western democracies, characterized by political pluralism, competition, and protection of civil rights (Chen & Moss, 2018; Ong & Han, 2019). Decades of research have yielded a multitude of theories and concepts focused on explaining contentious action, its underlying mechanisms, and the reasons for its varied prevalence across societies (K. Opp, 2022; K.-D. Opp, 2009). As Goldstone (2016, 117) points out, contentious action in democracies is a complementary form of political participation, serving as a “normal adjunct to political party competition.” Contentious events are expected to draw attention to overlooked issues, thus prompting a state response to regain legitimacy among claim-makers (Goldstone, 2016, 107). Political opportunity structures (Eisinger, 1973; McAdam & Tarrow, 2018), individual motivations (Snow et al., 2018), and resource accessibility (J. D. McCarthy & Zald, 1977), along with various other theories (K.-D. Opp, 2009), have been utilized to explain contention across different contexts.

However, questions remained over whether this definition of contention and its contributing factors would change under conditions where freedoms such as speech and association are constrained, elections are not free and fair, censorship is ubiquitous, political persecution is commonplace, and the legal system lacks independence. Owing to an affinity – or perhaps unintentional bias – toward democracies in the field (Corduneanu-Huci & Osa, 2003; McAdam et al., 2012), there has been limited research on how specific characteristics unique to authoritarian regimes might shape contention in comparison to less restrictive systems on the democratic spectrum. While certain perspectives have been employed to explain the occurrence of individual instances of contentious action in authoritarian regimes, there is a need for a more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental processes leading to contention particularly when it comes to authoritarianism.<sup>3</sup> I begin addressing this gap by exploring and defining the specific attributes of political regimes that categorize them as authoritarian and linking them to the phenomenon of contentious action.

### 2.1 Participation and Contestation as Political Regime Attributes

Modern research and literature often categorize regime types based on a specific definition of democracy, with Dahl’s (1971) definition of polyarchy,

<sup>3</sup> These include the political opportunity theory (e.g., contentious events in El Salvador from 1962–1981[Almeida, 2003] and the Philippines and Burma in the 1980s[Schock, 1999]) and resource mobilization theory (e.g., Tunisia in 2010–2011[Breuer et al., 2015]).

based on the attributes of participation (inclusion) and contestation, being the most popular choice. Dahl identified seven institutions crucial for democracy, including the presence of elected officials, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, access to alternative sources of information, freedom of association, inclusive citizenship, and the right of citizens to directly or indirectly participate in the government. These attributes are discussed in-depth in the literature. While there is a general agreement on the significance of these particular regime attributes, ongoing discussions about how they should be conceptualized, measured, and aggregated have led to a variety of categorizations, each with its own conceptualizations of democracy and operationalizations of their attributes (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002).

Regime classification providers use various measures and introduce unique categorizations to explain different categories along the democratic spectrum. Some prefer to focus on binary classifications, distinguishing between democracy and nondemocracy (Carles et al., 2018), while others utilize continuous measures based on numeric scores (Coppedge et al., 2016). To explain the variation within democratic and nondemocratic regime types, some publications have zeroed in on institutional arrangements (Anckar & Fredriksson, 2019; Bjørnskov & Rode, 2019). In contrast, others have emphasized the presence of contested elections (Lührmann et al., 2018) and the role of political parties and civil liberties (Magaloni et al., 2013; Skaaning, 2021). When assigning scores to operationalize regime types, scholars often prioritize specific attributes over others; some use broader maximalist definitions of democracy encompassing numerous attributes (Freedom House, 2023; Marshall et al., 2010), while others limit their focus to the presence and conduct of contested elections (Anckar & Fredriksson, 2019; Bjørnskov & Rode, 2019) or the status of civil liberties (Skaaning, 2021). The measures employed by classification providers affect how a political regime is categorized, impacting whether it is labeled as a democracy or nondemocracy and consequently influencing research findings.

Despite difficulties in determining which practices contribute more to authoritarianism or democracy or whether they should all be weighed equally, the degree to which the attributes of participation and contestation are violated determines the level of democracy or authoritarianism. However, the measures of participation and contestation are also problematic. For example, while most authoritarian regimes conduct elections with differing levels of competitiveness, how they incorporate these practices into their politics can be problematic to discern. The mere presence of elections does not necessarily indicate whether a regime is more democratic, especially in scenarios where other attributes do not provide access to the political system and opportunities to impact the political process. As Glasius (2018) suggests, while modern

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regime classifications often emphasize elections as necessary to identify a political regime type, their importance can be overestimated in regimes lacking other democratic attributes.

However, what differentiates authoritarian regimes from one another is their institutions that ensure and restrict citizen participation in politics, including contention. These regimes deploy a variety of strategies to achieve political outcomes, including surveillance (for example, digital surveillance as a tool for repression and co-optation in China [Xu, 2021]), discrimination against particular groups of people (as seen with identity politics in Indonesia [Mietzner, 2020]), and physical violence (exemplified by the violent suppression of contentious events in 2017–2019 in Iran [Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020]). Thus, authoritarianism is fundamentally determined by such policies and actions that violate civil liberties and create regimes where citizens' decision-making is minimized for the benefit of the rule. Therefore, the Element posits that authoritarianism is defined as the practices employed by political regimes to manipulate accessibility to the political system and restrict citizen participation and contestation – essentially, repression – that further impacts contentious politics.

The field of contentious politics has yet to engage with these advancements fully. Issues related to regime categorization and the impact of specific regime attributes on contention are often overlooked. The selection of attributes that classify a regime as authoritarian is seldom addressed in detail and is often speculative. Instead, a regime type is assumed to be authoritarian without thoroughly examining the attributes that render it so and how these characteristics may influence contentious action. The concept of authoritarianism is not clearly defined, even though different authoritarian regimes employ distinct strategies to retain power, maintain political institutions (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Levitsky & Way, 2002), repress (Maddi et al., 2006), manipulate political opportunities (Osa & Schock, 2007), mobilize supporters, and respond to those making claims against the state (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020; Meyer, 2004). Literature on contentious action in authoritarianism, which focuses on specific geographic areas, often needs a more systematic understanding of these differences and their broader impact on contentious politics. Nevertheless, developments in the fields of political regime classification and democratization (Alvarez et al., 1996; Bjørnskov & Rode, 2020; Przeworski et al., 2000), as well as the ever-changing practices of authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013), make contributions to how the relationship between politics and contention is perceived. They enhance our understanding of how politics shape noninstitutional participation in contexts where contention is not merely a complementary resource for making claims



against the state but also one of the few available and dangerously risky tools for effecting political change.

## 2.2 Defining Contentious Action

How contention or contentious action is defined varies across the scholarly literature.<sup>4</sup> In this Element, the definition is drawn from Straughn (2005) and S. Tarrow (2022). It is a joint effort individuals undertake to confront authorities in response to official actions or policies. The term repertoire of contention refers to a limited set of routines learned, shared, and performed through a relatively deliberate process of choice and emerge from interaction and experiences of contentious action (Tilly, 1993, 264). These routines are limited to familiar claim-making methods previously used within society. They are derived from past experiences, interactions, and observations rooted in cultural and historical contexts. While repertoires of contention evolve, and newer methods may supplant obsolete routines, such changes are gradual and are influenced by various factors, including interactions with the regime.

This Element classifies any effort to confront the regime in furtherance of particular interests as contention. While some forms of contention may be more likely to provoke repression or concessions (e.g., physical violence against law enforcement officers versus nonviolent rallies against low wages), contention is generally considered risky regardless of intent. What constitutes a threat is subject to variation across regimes and can change according to authorities' discretion (Ortmann, 2023). Thus, even though environmental and labor protests are often perceived as less likely to face repression (for example, the selective approach to suppressing contentious events in China [Göbel, 2021]), the assumption remains that repression can be used during any contentious event irrespective of its intent.

## 2.3 The Impact of Repression on Contentious Action

Much of the literature on contentious politics in authoritarianism revolves around repression as one of the main attributes that shape contention in such regimes. In his seminal work, Moore (1998) refers to a major debate on the role of repression in reducing and increasing contentious action. He argues

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<sup>4</sup> Contentious action or contention is referred to by different scholars as protest (della Porta, 2011; K. Opp, 2022; K.-D. Opp, 2009; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2018), collective action, and dissent among others. Some definitions of contention and protest focus on particular attributes (e.g., Biggs [2015] focuses on the criterion of powerfulness, S. G. Tarrow [1989] prioritizes the component of disruption over violence. In contrast, Lipsky [1968] pays more attention to the component of reward, emphasizing the aim of claim-makers to obtain rewards from political and economic systems).



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that repression may both deter and spark dissident behavior, and both of these claims may be substantiated. Moore's statistical analysis gives credence to the rational actor model by Lichbach (1987), who suggested that an escalation in governmental repression could suppress nonviolent contentious action but simultaneously incite violence. Another critical observation by Lichbach (1987) refers to consistency in repression: consistent accommodative and repressive policies reduce contention, while inconsistencies increase it.

Drawing from the findings presented by Lichbach (1987), Gupta et al. (1993) modify his theory and put an emphasis on the dynamics of the relationship between repression and contention. According to the study, the way repression impacts contentious action depends on the nature of the regime. They further elucidate that the type of political regime determines the impact of repression on contention. Gupta et al. (1993) note that repression's nature varies significantly between democracies and nondemocracies, representing two opposite political systems. While democracies find solutions within the political process, nondemocracies can impose severe repressions on claim-makers without regard for human rights and other constraints present in democracies. These repressions place unbearable costs on claim-makers, thus preventing them from engaging in contentious action (Gupta et al., 1993).

Existing definitions and classifications of repression vary in scope. The body of work from the past decade suggests that modern authoritarian regimes use a blend of different tactics and repertoires to repress. Being an essential attribute of authoritarianism, repression inherently pertains to the violation of civil liberties. The variance in the repertoire of repression methods across regimes is clear, with a common understanding that repression can differ in intensity, technology, and scope (targeted or random). Siegel (2011, 997) defines repression as removing individuals from a social network through methods such as execution, imprisonment, or rendition. Such strategies allow the regime to deter citizens from participating in contentious events. Exploring collective action in Mexico, Trejo (2012) categorizes repression as targeted, moderate, harsh, lethal, or nonlethal, depending on its strength, direction, and method. Similarly, Loveman (1998) examines collective action in Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, categorizing repression based on its extent and intensity, and acknowledges the presence of "extralegal forms of repression" (Loveman, 1998, 509). However, Moss (2014, 262) critiques the focus on the relative severity of repression and its impact on the volume of contention, arguing that this perspective does not adequately explain contention within repressive environments.

Measuring repression is challenging in modern authoritarian regimes that prefer a variety of indirect methods and mimicry over overt violence. This issue is especially pertinent when repression refers not directly to the use of force

but to a set of preemptive measures to achieve authoritarian ends. While the scope of repression can be quantified and measured by the number of instances of violence, political persecutions, and prisoners, it is problematic to measure repression when it is proactive or data availability is insufficient. A similar argument is presented by Moss (2014, 263), who refers to a body of literature on repression and contentious action, pointing out that softer techniques such as channeling, silencing, and surveillance effectively “attenuate activism.” Drawing on a study of repression and collective action in Jordan, she concludes that these methods allow the regime to maintain a “veneer of liberalism” (Moss, 2014, 263) while undermining claim-makers, yet often remaining unaccounted for in traditional data sources, complicating their analysis.

Due to the increasing sophistication of strategies employed by authoritarian regimes to maintain longevity, understanding these methods becomes crucial. These regimes develop elaborate strategies to prevent citizen engagement in activities deemed potentially threatening, moving beyond direct repression to employ preventive measures (Tertychnaya, 2023). For example, Ritter and Conrad (2016) highlight that the presence of dissent does not necessarily lead to direct repression, as regimes may opt for preemptive tactics instead. This approach forces regime opponents to self-censor in anticipation of a repressive response, thereby making them act more cautiously and decreasing threats to the regime.

Horvath (2011) focuses on how the threat of revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia spreading to Russia pressured the Kremlin to develop preventative strategies, such as increasing control over the NGO sector, creating the state-sponsored Nashi movement, and promoting the ideology labeled as sovereign democracy, portrayed as a response to foreign threats. These measures strengthened the regime’s control over the opposition. In studying the impact of repression on public opinion, Tertychnaya (2023) posits that preventative repression, such as requiring authorization before holding a rally, impacts the opposition’s ability to garner the necessary support. It also allows the regime to increase the costs of participation and prevents the opposition from attracting more supporters. Additionally, Tertychnaya (2023) notes that modern authoritarian regimes also use tactics that involve limited coercion against the opposition but implement restrictions and legislation to limit the rights of participation in rallies and other activities to specific groups of citizens. By using targeted forms of restrictions to prevent particular actors from engaging in contentious politics and investing efforts to discredit them in the eyes of the public, they aim to limit the growth of such groups.

Following these developments in the literature, this Element defines repression as restrictive measures employed by the regime to reduce access