

# "This Rally is not Authorised": Preventive Repression and Public Opinion in Electoral Autocracies

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## Abstract

Does preventive repression dampen or does it bolster mass support for groups that dissent despite obstruction? While a large literature recognizes the importance of preventive repression for authoritarian stability, we know very little about its effects on public opinion. To gain traction on this question I draw on evidence from an original survey experiment and unusually detailed data on unauthorised and authorised protest from Russia. I show that when the authorities engage in preventive repression, such as when they deny protest permits, activists' ability to generate support is compromised. Preventive repression also conditions the effect of demonstrator and police tactics on public opinion. These effects, however, are contingent on prior beliefs about the authorities and the law. Findings, which provide the first causal test of the mass opinion effects of preventive repression, expand understanding of the consequences and audiences of repression and have implications for studies of authoritarian resilience.

**Keywords:** Preventive repression, authoritarian politics, public opinion, Russia

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# 1 Introduction

Understanding the effects of protest on public opinion is crucial to establishing the conditions that underpin social movement success, electoral, and political change (e.g. Wasow, 2020; Lohmann, 1994). Existing research agrees that in democracies and non-democracies the tactics adopted by demonstrators and the authorities play a critical role in shaping mass opinion and focuses on how activists and the authorities interact *during* street protests (e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Wasow, 2020; Davenport et al., 2019). Yet the interaction between activists and the authorities typically begins, and is publicly observable, before demonstrators take to the streets. While seldom effective at preventing protests, strategies of preventive protest repression, such as prohibitions of assembly, are used in anticipation of dissent around the world. For example, in 2018, 84% of non-democratic regimes had laws that allowed them, among other things, to pre-emptively hinder peaceful assembly, up from 62% fifteen years prior (Skaaning, 2019). Despite the importance of preventive repression and protest for authoritarian stability and democratization (e.g. Svobik, 2012; Robertson, 2011), our understanding of the effects of preventive repression on targeted groups' ability to generate support remains limited. By focusing on activist-state interactions during protests, analyses of protest effects on public opinion typically fail to account for processes that occur in their lead-up.

My main argument is that beyond its well-documented effects on dissent and responsive repression (e.g. Ritter and Conrad, 2016; Truex, 2018), publicly observable preventive repression has a series of indirect effects on public opinion. Strategies of preventive repression, I propose, may influence activists' ability to generate mass support and could condition the effect of demonstrator and police tactics, and interactions, on public opinion. This argument implies that preventive repression may yield substantially more than simply stifling dissent, or increasing the costs of mobilization, conventionally understood as its primary objectives (e.g. Sullivan, 2016; Dragu and Lupu, 2018*a*). Publicly observable strategies of preventive repression are a broader instrument of authoritarian control and may be used to shape the views and subsequent behaviours of persuadable citizens. As existing research reminds us, by compromising activists' ability to generate popular sup-

port, contemporary autocrats may not only undermine participation in unfolding events, but could also prevent mass defections to the opposition (e.g. Aytaç et al., 2018; Croke et al., 2016; McAdam and Su, 2002; Tertytchnaya, 2019; Hale and Colton, 2017). When protests – the most consequential action individuals can undertake to influence democratization – fail to bolster support for activists, the prospects for successful collective action and political change are compromised.

I explore arguments using evidence from the effect of protest authorisations on support for activists. The legal requirement to obtain the authorities approval ahead of a protest contrasts sharply with protest notification procedures used to inform the authorities of an upcoming protest without the need to obtain authorisation. While seldom effective at preventing protests from happening, protest authorisations impose restrictions on protest behaviour and serve to criminalise peaceful events. Organising, or participating in unauthorised protests, those that go ahead without a permit, is in several contexts illegal and carries punishments ranging from fines to imprisonment (Freedom House, 2015; Rajah, 2012). Indeed, in recent years, activists around the world, from Puerto Rico, Kenya, Chad, Turkey, Russia, Singapore and Hong Kong, among others, have noted that protest permit requirements are increasingly used to justify their arrest (State Watch, 2013; Freedom House, 2015, p.9, 39).<sup>1</sup>

Existing protest and public opinion data are poorly suited to empirically testing expectations about the effect of protest authorisations, as a specific strategy of nonviolent preventive repression, on public opinion. Comparative protest-event datasets do not document whether protests are authorised or not. Public opinion surveys do not differentiate between attitudes towards authorised and unauthorised events either. To empirically explore theoretical expectations, I therefore collect and analyse novel protest-event and survey data from Russia, one of the world’s largest electoral autocracies. A factorial experiment allows me to causally assess how information about the status of protests, whether authorised or not, influences public opinion directly and conditional on violent

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<sup>1</sup>Protest permits have been used as tool of political control across regimes. During the Civil Rights movement, for example, activists would be denied parade permits because of the content of their protest. A ban on protest was subsequently used to justify organizers’ arrest. For example, Civil Rights’ movement leaders, including Martin Luther King, were arrested for demonstrating without a permit in December 1961 in Albany, Georgia, and later on Good Friday, April 12 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama.

and non-violent demonstrator and police tactics. Using unusually detailed data on authorised and unauthorised protests taking place on the same day across Russia, coupled with a nationally representative survey of public opinion fielded only weeks after the events, I also explore whether support for activists changes as a function of preventive repression and protests taking place nearby. This design has additional advantages, as it allows me to explore how preventive repression impacts mass support for activists while holding protest organizers and grievances constant.

To preview the findings, I find that respondents report lower support for activists who participate in unauthorised, as opposed to authorised, events. In the survey experiment, the negative effect of the preventive repression treatment is comparable in magnitude to that of the ‘violent demonstrators’ treatment. Second, I show that the effect of preventive repression on public opinion is not homogeneous across the population, but contingent on respondents’ prior beliefs about the legitimacy of the law and the authorities. Preventive repression only shifts the views of ‘persuadable’ respondents, those who think that activists should follow the law and obey the authorities’ decisions, even when they disagree with them. Third, I show that preventive repression conditions the well-studied effect of demonstrator and police tactics on public opinion (e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Maintaining an image of nonviolence against a violent challenger - such as when demonstrators are peaceful but the police make arrests - bolsters supports for activists when protests are authorised but not when they are not. Tests using observational data lend support for the experimental findings.

This work joins several studies in revisiting the impact of non-violent, legal repression in non-democracies (e.g. Moustafa, 2014; Jones, 2020). While existing research agrees that the law is integral to the repression of social movements, claims about the impact of non-coercive repression in authoritarian regimes often rely on assumptions about public opinion that have not been directly tested at the micro-level. The paper’s principal contribution is to show how protest authorisations, a strategy of non-violent preventive repression, influence support for activists and condition evaluations of demonstrator and state interactions – a central focus of research in contentious politics and conflict more broadly (e.g. Davenport et al., 2019; Lupu and Wallace, 2019; Lohmann, 1994). Findings

call for greater emphasis on processes that occur in their lead-up to protest, and draw attention to preventive repression as a strategy that may shape the opinion effects of dissident-state interactions, and in doing so, to influence the prospects for successful collective action more broadly.

At the same time, this research expands understanding of the various consequences and audiences of preventive repression. While existing scholarship focuses on the direct effect of preventive repression on dissent and responsive repression (e.g. Ritter and Conrad, 2016; Waddington, 1992; Sullivan, 2016), this work emphasises the indirect effects of preventive repression on public opinion. The audience of preventive repression in this context, which includes protest bystanders, is broader than traditionally assumed by studies of preventive repression as a strategy that is intended to achieve direct deterrence and ought to be carried out in the dark (e.g. Dragu and Przeworski, 2019; Truex, 2018). Strategies of preventive repression that use the language of the law, this research implies, may like strategies of propaganda, also influence mass beliefs about the opposition, blurring the boundaries between propaganda as a tool of persuasion and repression as a tool of fear (e.g. Guriev and Treisman, 2019).

To the best of my knowledge, this work provides the first experimental test of the direct and conditional effects of preventive repression on public opinion in a nondemocracy, where most protest restrictions and assembly rights' violations take place. The experimental design also allows us to causally test whether various combinations of demonstrator and police tactics produce different public opinion responses. This is an important contribution to the study of dissent more broadly, as existing research on the public opinion effects of protest in democracies and nondemocracies has relied mainly observational data (e.g. Wasow, 2020; Enos et al., 2019; Tertychnaya, 2019). Research on the effects of responsive repression and demonstrator arrests in nondemocracies also rarely distinguishes between the causes of arrests, whether stemming from demonstrator-imitated violence, or the police arbitrary arresting peaceful demonstrators, something that the framing experiment allows to disentangle. Finally, tests using observational data are among the first to empirically combine information on preventive and responsive and repression in a single empirical framework.

I proceed as follows. The next sections describe gaps in our understanding of the mass opinion effects of preventive repression and discuss protest authorisations as a strategy of preventive repression. I move on to present my central argument about how preventive repression may impact mass evaluations of activists who dissent despite obstruction.

## 2 Preventive Repression in Electoral Autocracies

Strategies of preventive repression, autocrats' first line of defence against threats, are used in anticipation of dissent and are distinct from strategies of responsive repression, used after dissent is observed (e.g. Ritter and Conrad, 2016; Dragu and Przeworski, 2019). To date, most of the literature on preventive repression in authoritarian regimes focuses on strategies of preventive repression that rely on coercion and violence and understands preventive repression as an activity ought to be carried out in the dark. Indeed, targeted assassinations, unlawful imprisonments ahead of focal events, or torture used to impede potential opponents from challenging the authorities, are rarely intended to be obvious to the public (e.g. Sullivan, 2016; Truex, 2018). For example, to keep preventive repression and dissent out of public sight, Stalin's NKVD not only refrained from publicizing arrests, but also deliberately attempted to hide them, arresting people in the middle of the night. As Dragu and Przeworski (2019) remind us, "repression is most effective when it is invisible" [p.85]. These views reflect conventional understanding of preventive repression as a costly strategy whose primary aim is to achieve direct deterrence, the demobilization of the regime's challengers. By keeping repression and dissent out-of-sight, the authorities can avoid mass and elite anger and backlash.

However, the practice of preventive repression in contemporary electoral autocracies is often at odds with this view. To begin with, several strategies of preventive repression involve limited coercion. For example, contemporary autocrats increasingly use the law and parliament-approved legislation to limit the public spaces available for protest and prevent groups from taking to the streets (e.g. Moustafa, 2014; Bakke et al., 2020; Buyse, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Restrictions on assembly are one of the most common strategies of preventive

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<sup>2</sup>The law is used to stifle opposition beyond the streets as well. Recent research, for example, shows

repression today, affecting as much as two thirds of the world's population (Civicus, 2020). These and similar strategies can be described as channelling – activities meant to affect the forms of protest available, yet unrelated to the use of force (Earl, 2003, 2011). Second, several strategies of preventive repression are intended to be obvious not only to dissidents but also to the public. For example, the authorities deliberately publicize their decision to deny protest permits or to label non-governmental organizations as foreign agents in order to hinder their activities (e.g. Buyse, 2018). Finally, several of these strategies only create weak deterrence incentives and are seldom effective at preventing protest. While protest laws allow the authorities to ban protest for example, they do not typically allow them to also pre-emptively arrest individuals rumoured to help organize or to participate in upcoming unauthorised events.

That preventive repression and defiant protests are obvious implies that they can independently or jointly influence their observers' views about the authorities and their challengers (Lohmann, 1994; Frye and Borisova, 2019). To date, however, our understanding of the effect of preventive repression on public opinion in general, and on targeted groups' ability to generate support in particular remains limited. Given contemporary autocrats' growing reliance on preventive repression (e.g. Dragu and Lupu, 2018*b*) and the importance of protest for authoritarian stability (e.g. Magaloni, 2010; Lohmann, 1994; Kuran, 1997), this gap in our understanding of the mass opinion effects of preventive repression is problematic. As already noted, a reciprocal relationship between social movements, electoral, and political change exists in democracies and non-democracies alike (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010; Smyth and Soboleva, 2016). Understanding under what conditions preventive repression bolsters or conversely undermines activists' ability to generate support is of paramount importance as we try to better understand how the opposition may gain support in repressive regimes, and how repression used in anticipation of dissent shapes the prospects for successful collective action and democratization in contemporary electoral autocracies.

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how autocrats use courts and the law to silence their opponents among the elites (Shen-Bayh, 2018).

## 2.1 Protest Authorisations as a Strategy of Preventive Repression

Social movement scholarship has created the theoretical space for studying protest permits and authorisations as a strategy of non-coercive repression (e.g. Earl, 2003; McCarthy and McPhail, 1998). In the section that follows, and as a starting point for theorizing into the indirect effects of preventive repression on public opinion, I review research on the effect of protest authorisations and preventive repression on protest, responsive repression, and media coverage. Building on this discussion, I move on to formulate expectations about the effect of protest authorisations on public opinion.

To begin with, existing research recognizes that protest authorisations impose an additional layer of control upon social movements and serve to criminalize events that go ahead without approval (e.g. King, 2013; McPhail et al., 1998). To secure a permit, activists may be forced to accept restrictions on the time, manner, and location in which they can demonstrate. And, as already noted, organising, or participating in unauthorised protest is in several contexts illegal and punishable by law, independent of whether demonstrators go on to adopt violent or peaceful tactics (Freedom House, 2017).

Second, while seldom effective at preventing protests, protest authorisations can influence the types of groups that take to the streets. As Ritter and Conrad (2016) remind us, groups that dissent despite obstruction typically have greater resolve and a higher threshold for violence than those deterred by preventive repression. In this context, groups organizing, or participating in unauthorised events may be more determined to challenge the status quo than those who choose to revise their protest permit, continue negotiations with the authorities, or stay at home. Indeed, in contexts where opportunities to protest are available, including democracies and the majority of electoral autocracies, activists may organise or participate in unauthorised protests for a number of reasons. For example, the decision to stage unauthorised protests may allow organisers to draw media coverage and to generate greater awareness of their demands. According to McCarthy and McPhail (1998), "when a group refuses to ... negotiate the details of the time, place, and manner of protest, it engages in disruptive behavior that is more likely to call attention

to the protest than if it had quietly abided by institutional rules" [p.119].

Third, preventive repression could set in motion violent dynamics (Waddington, 1992). Groups of higher resolve, those that take to the streets without a protest permit, may be more likely to adopt violent tactics than others. In contexts where preventive and responsive repression are used as complements, the probability of violent escalation and arrests may also be greater during unauthorised, compared to authorised protests, independent of whether demonstrators are violent or not.

Finally, preventive repression may shape how protests are covered in the media. From Russia to Hong Kong and Singapore, news that upcoming rallies are unauthorised is not kept in the dark but receives coverage in domestic and international media alike.<sup>3</sup> It is especially common for state-controlled outlets in authoritarian regimes to describe unauthorised protest as ‘illegal and disruptive’, in a way that helps amplify the authorities’ narrative and justify their actions (Smirnova and Chedov, 2019).

### 3 Theoretical Expectations

Building on the previous section, I consider how authorisation requirements may influence attitudes towards activists both directly, and conditional on demonstrator and police tactics. I propose that alongside concerns about the legal status of unauthorised protest and legal compliance, mass evaluations of defiant activists may depend on the tactics chosen by demonstrators and the police, or indeed, the interaction between them.

#### 3.1 Preventive repression, the law, and public opinion

As research across subfields reminds us, the (perceived) legality of demonstrators’ tactics is an important criterion shaping support for dissident groups (Davenport et al., 2019; Lupu and Wallace, 2019; Babluis, 1973). In the context of unauthorised protests, concerns about legal compliance may increase hostility towards activists who elect to either organize, or to participate in activities that violate the law. Indeed, legal repression, often

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<sup>3</sup>As already discussed, the authorities also typically publicize their decision to deny a permit, sometimes days ahead of an event.

considered as a legitimate form of social control, has the potential to dampen mass support for activists more effectively than brutal force or coercion (Barkan, 2006; Moustafa, 2014). Isaac Bablus, for example, who describes legal repression as ‘repression by formal rationality’, suggests that legal methods may delegitimize the claims and grievances of protest participants (Bablus, 1973). For other scholars, strategies of legal repression used in response to dissent, such as criminal prosecutions of activists and hearings, may also serve to attach negative associations to the character, nature, or reputation of targeted groups, compromising their ability to generate broad-based support (Boykoff, 2007; Shriver et al., 2018).

Legal repression used in anticipation of dissent may also dampen support for activists even before they have had the opportunity to take to the streets. Protest bystanders concerned with legal compliance, for example, may think of groups that engage in unauthorised protest as having little respect for the rule of law, independent of whether they adopt violent or nonviolent tactics. According to a similar argument, protest tactics designated as illegal may fall outside a country’s ‘repertoire of contention’ – the set of designated protest tactics citizens find to be ‘familiar, just, natural, and right’ (Tilly, 1978). Indeed, as prior research reminds us, when groups select tactics typically seen as unacceptable, they are more likely to be viewed unfavourably and to face greater challenges in eliciting mass support (Tilly, 1978; Crozat, 1998; Davenport et al., 2019).<sup>4</sup> In sum, we may expect that, controlling for demonstrator and police tactics during protests, protest authorisations could serve to dampen mass support for activists who participate in unauthorised events.

Yet, to the extent that the ‘persuasive’ power of legal repression depends, in part, on individuals’ concerns with legal compliance or on normative beliefs about the law, we may also expect preventive repression in nondemocratic regimes to backfire, bolstering rather than undermining support for dissident groups. Indeed, legitimacy beliefs, elsewhere defined as “conviction that it is right and proper to accept and obey the authorities

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<sup>4</sup>Exploring the origins of contention repertoires in electoral autocracies falls beyond the scope of this work, yet constitutes a fruitful avenue for future research. We can assume that in democracies and non-democracies, laws and legacies influence which protest tactics are typically seen as acceptable. According to Tilly (1978) for example, the designation of acceptable tactics is the product of historical experiences, legislation, and restrictions.

and abide by the requirements of the regime” (Easton, 1975, p.451), are not uniformly distributed across, or within authoritarian regimes. Like in democracies, differences in normative support for the law in electoral autocracies stem from differences in individuals’ ideology (e.g. Bartels and Kramon, 2020), partisanship (e.g. Barwick and Dawkins, 2020), or personal experiences with the authorities (e.g. Levi, 1997). Individuals who question the legitimacy of the law and feel that strategies of legal repression reflect the subordination of the law to politics (Nonet and Selznick, 2009, p.18) may not withdraw support from activists who participate in unauthorised and illegal events. Information about preventive repression may prompt these individuals to report lower support for the authorities and higher support for targeted groups instead (e.g. Hess and Martin, 2006).

These alternative sets of expectations warrant the testing of hypotheses that are sensitive to both sets of possibilities: controlling for demonstrator and police tactics, preventive repression may undermine, or conversely bolster support for activists who dissent despite obstruction. We may also anticipate that the effect of protest authorisations on public opinion will not be homogeneous across the population, but rather contingent on citizens’ prior beliefs about the legitimacy of the law and of the authorities.

### **3.2 Demonstrator and police tactics**

The effect of preventive repression on public opinion may also depend on the tactics demonstrators and the authorities use during street protest.

According to an argument, the extent to which preventive repression dampens mass support for activists may be greater when demonstrators or the police use violent, as opposed to nonviolent tactics. Anticipated, or realised opposition violence, existing research shows, especially when perceived as unjustified, may trigger concerns about safety and security among bystanders (Merolla and Zechmeister, 2009, p.44) and could foster perceptions of activists as ‘extremists’. Indeed, as Suzanne Lohmann observes, ‘extremist’ turnout may prevent citizens with more moderate preferences from joining protests, or from supporting activists, their leaders, or demands (Lohmann, 1994, p.53). In line with research that finds opposition violence to strengthen acceptance of government restric-

tions on civil liberties (e.g. Davis and Silver, 2004), opposition violence may also serve to validate the authorities' decision to ban a protest for fear of violent escalation, in a way that serves to further erode support for demonstrators. Violent police tactics, including demonstrator arrests may have a similar effect. By heightening spectators' anxiety (Branton et al., 2015), arrests can powerfully convey the threat posed by unauthorised rallies and dampen support for activists. Finally, when preventive and responsive repression are used as complements, onlookers may come to think of unauthorised protest as more dangerous than authorised ones, and demonstrator arrests as predictable and avoidable, in a way that undermines sympathy for their organisers and participants.<sup>5</sup>

According to an alternative hypothesis, however, violent opposition tactics and arrests may bolster rather than undermine support for activists who dissent despite obstruction. As existing research reminds us, the public may be more likely to approve of opposition violence when it comes as a response to a repressive challenger. In the context of unauthorised protest, groups that use violent tactics may be seen as adopting an equivalent, and even justified, response to an already repressive challenger (Lupu and Wallace, 2019, p.415). In a similar vein, demonstrator arrests may serve to reinforce mass beliefs about the resolve of activists. Arrests in this context may decrease support for the authorities and encourage protest bystanders to side with groups unfairly victimized both in the lead-up to, and, during protests.

The preceding discussion suggests that the effect of preventive repression on support for demonstrators may depend on demonstrator or government tactics. Yet, the mass public does not observe the tactics of each party in isolation. Indeed, it is the interaction between activists and the authorities that shapes how protests impact opinions (e.g. Davernport et al., 2019). Protest bystanders, existing research shows, are more likely to side with dissidents when nonviolent resistance is met with violent repression (e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). According to Wasow (2020), when peaceful demonstrators are met with state violence, they are better able to attract favourable media coverage and generate mass support their demands. In a similar vein, Hess and Martin (2006) show that when

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<sup>5</sup>The coverage of unauthorised protest in state-controlled outlets can also be expected to amplify concerns with the legality of demonstrators' actions, serving to further undermine support for activists.

repressive action is directed against non-violent challengers, it is more likely to trigger anger against the authorities, bolstering support for dissident groups. In line with the previous discussion, I therefore propose that the mass opinion effects of preventive repression may depend on the interaction between activists and the authorities. For example, if preventive repression serves to shape perceptions of unauthorised protest as ‘illegal’ and unjustified, retaining an image of nonviolence in response to a violent challenger, such as when demonstrators are peaceful and the police make arrests, may only bolster support for activists when protests are authorised, not when they are not. Empirically examining whether preventive repression conditions the effects of demonstrator and police tactics on public opinion constitutes an important contribution to research on social movements and dissent more broadly.

## 4 The Russian Case

Contemporary Russia has many features in common with other illiberal regimes, making it a helpful setting for research on how protest authorisations influence attitudes toward activists. Protest legislation in Russia, revised initially after the large electoral protests of 2011-12, is restrictive and requires protest organisers to obtain authorisation for the majority of events with more than a single participant. Protest applications are submitted to the local administrations a given number of days before an event is scheduled to take place. While notifications are being reviewed, it is illegal for organizers to spread information about the event. Having reviewed an application, the authorities can agree for an event to take place in the location and time indicated by organizers or refuse to issue a permit, inviting organisers to revise their application and suggesting alternative locations, routes, or times for the protest. Finally, while protest organizers can, and often do ignore the authorities’ decisions, unauthorised protests are according to the law illegal.<sup>6</sup> The organizers and participants of unauthorised events may face sanctions ranging

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<sup>6</sup>The protest permit system was used as a tool of political control during the last years of the USSR as well. Local authorities, tasked with reviewing protest permits, arbitrarily banned demonstrations based on their content. In the USSR and contemporary Russia, the language used to justify a ban on protest, with reference to ‘threats to public order and to the safety of citizens’ was very similar as well (Beissinger, 2002, p.337-8).

from fines to prosecution and detention. Monetary fines for participating in unauthorised events have increased sharply in the last decade (Smirnova and Chedov, 2019).

For several years, permits for political protest have faced the highest rejection rate in Russia (Freedom House, 2015). Permits for nation-wide protests, those scheduled to take place on the same day across multiple locations are also more likely to be rejected than permits for isolated protests (Smirnova and Chedov, 2019). What is more, protest authorisation denials typically spike ahead of elections. Evidence assembled for this project from the opposition website namarsh.ru suggests that 1 in 3 protests taking place in Russia in 2017 – a year of municipal and regional elections and campaigning ahead of the March 2018 presidential election – did not have the authorities’ permission to go ahead in the location or time proposed by organizers (see Figure 2 in the Appendix). The share of unauthorised protests declined sharply and remained around 10% after the March 2018 election.

Additional features of Russia’s protest authorisation process are worth noting. First, the outcome of the protest review process is typically communicated to protest organizers and the public. Ordinary citizens may find out about upcoming unauthorized events through the local authorities’ websites, regional and national media, or even from street banners placed in prominent city squares to inform citizens that upcoming events have not secured a permit. Russia is not unique in this regard. During the anti-extradition bill protest in Hong Kong, for example, the authorities also publicized their decision to deny protest permits. Second, the Russian authorities appear to use preventive and responsive repression as complements. In recent years, arrests have been consistently more likely during unauthorised, as opposed to authorised events (Smirnova and Chedov, 2019). Third, while non-systemic opposition groups are more likely to face preventive repression than others, they are not the only ones targeted. For example, while permits submitted by members of the non-systemic opposition - left-wing and liberal groups not represented in the state Duma - made up approximately 1 in every 3 rejected permits throughout 2017-18, protest authorisation requests submitted by civil society groups and local activists were also rejected (Appendix Figure 3). Ethnic republics like Bashkortostan, Udmurtia, and Tatarstan, which saw growing mobilization in support of minority languages during

this period shared some of the highest protest permit rejection rates in Russia (Yusupova, 2019).

## 5 Research Design

To empirically test theoretical expectations I combine experimental and observational data. I introduce them below.

### 5.1 Experimental Design

In the experimental part of the study, which involves a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design, respondents randomly assigned to eight experimental groups were presented with information about the status of protests (authorised or not), opposition tactics (violent or nonviolent), and police responses to protest (involving arrests or not). The survey experiment I rely on was embedded in a nationally representative survey of public opinion conducted face-to-face, in respondents' homes, between September 25-30, 2020.<sup>7</sup> The sample comprised of 1605 voting-age respondents. The survey, described in detail in Appendix A1, was implemented by Levada Market Research, Russia's most reputable public opinion firm.

The experimental prompts read as follows: "Imagine the following scenario: Somewhere in our region, protest organisers submitted a protest permit request to the local authorities.

- *Preventive Repression:* The authorities authorised / did not authorise the meeting. Participation in authorised/ unauthorised protest is allowed by the law/ is against the law.
- *Activist Tactics:* The participants of this meeting were peaceful/ some of the participants of the meeting engaged in clashes with the police.

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<sup>7</sup>In Russia, the national lockdown imposed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic had eased in May 2020, and public opinion firms resumed face-to-face interviews in August 2020. In Appendix A.1.1, I discuss how the pandemic may have impacted findings. In Appendix D.2, I also compare this study's findings to research conducted in March 2020, before any restrictions were imposed, and show that results are unchanged.

- *Responsive repression:* The police did not make any arrests / arrested several demonstrators."

Subsequently, respondents were asked to report whether they support, or approve of the activities of each party discussed in the scenario. The language was standard: "To what extent do you personally approve, or do not approve of the activities of: (i) members of the local administration who authorised/ did not authorise the meeting, (ii) the protest participants; (iii) the police. I recode responses into a 5-point scale so that higher values denote greater support for each party. The activist approval item represents the main outcome of interest.<sup>8</sup> Respondents were also asked whether they believed that participation in meetings like the one described carries risk for the safety of demonstrators. Responses to this question also range on a 5-point scale, with higher values denoting greater support for the view that protest participation carries risks.

To measure normative support for the law, I use an item that asks whether respondents believe that 'protest organisers and participants must follow the law in all circumstances, even when they disagree with the authorities' decisions'. As existing research reminds us, merging normative assessments of the law and of the authorities is generally unproblematic in contexts where the authorities powerfully represent the law (Jackson et al., 2012, p.4). In these settings, the obligation to obey the authorities and the obligation to obey the law are intertwined (Tyler, 2013). Respondents were also asked how they voted in the most recent presidential election and whether they approve activities of the Russian President and of other prominent opposition figures.

Several features of the experimental design are worth noting. First, all groups were told that protest organisers submitted a permit request. Had respondents simply been told that an event was unauthorised, it would have been unclear whether this was because

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<sup>8</sup>Respondents were also asked if they 'support similar protests and are willing to participate in them'. They could report that they (i) do not support such protest and are unwilling to participate, (ii) are supportive of similar protest yet are unwilling to participate, and, finally, (iii) that they support protests and would be willing to take part. I recode responses into a dummy that takes a value of one if respondents support similar events, independent of whether they are willing to demonstrate or not, and zero otherwise. Models using this outcome yield results consistent to the main outcome of the study, support for activists. I report them in Appendix D.1. Causal mediation analysis suggests that approximately 35% (20-68%) of the overall effect of preventive repression on support for similar protest is channelled through evaluations of demonstrators. This underscores the importance of mass beliefs about activists in explaining dissent decisions and support for protest more broadly.

organisers applied for a permit which was rejected, or because they did not try to secure a permit. Second, the statement that authorised/unauthorised protests are in line with/against the law was meant to clarify and intensify the treatments, and reflects information citizens typically receive about unauthorised protest through the media.

Third, and in line with prior research, I did not name a specific activist group (Lupu and Wallace, 2019, p.417). Respondents, however, could infer that activists whose protest permits were denied were either members of the non-systemic opposition, or that they were expressing anti-government views. The explanation that the inferred content of protests is the primary driver of the outcomes we observe, however, is not consistent with broader patterns in the data. For example, that the effect of the preventive repression treatment is consistent across regime voters and not, cuts against this explanation (Figure 7, Appendix C.2). Arguably, opposition supporters would be less likely to report lower support for the participants of unauthorised protests because they oppose groups expressing anti-government grievances. Second, if the inferred content of protests, or inferred identity of protest organisers was the key driver of attitude change, it would reduce our ability to detect any differences between experimental conditions. As shown below, evaluations of activists participating in unauthorised protests change as a function of the tactics they adopt. Finally, in an earlier round of this study, described in Appendix D.2, respondents were explicitly told that protest were political. Results are unchanged.<sup>9</sup>

## 5.2 Observational Data

While random assignment to treatment is the key strength of the experimental design, one of its key limitations concerns external validity. I therefore complement experimental findings with evidence from detailed data on authorised and unauthorised protests, which I couple with a nationally representative survey that was in the field only days after these events. Leveraging geographic variation in the type of protests (authorised/unauthorised,

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<sup>9</sup>A conjoint survey design was not possible in this context, as some of the questionnaires were completed by Levada enumerators on paper. For this work, ensuring a nationally representative sample was more important than administering a conjoint experiment in an online survey. Online survey samples in Russia generally perform very poorly at reaching respondents over the age of 65, and therefore pose additional challenges.

with/without arrests) that took place across Russia during a national day of protest, June 12, 2017, I test whether support for activists changes as a function of protests taking place in one's locality. Protest data, described in detail in Appendix A.2, come from a collaboration between Meduza, an online news aggregator and OVD-Info. In the dataset, each entry is accompanied with information about the location and type of a protest, protest turnout, and arrests. Opinion data come from a nationally representative, face-to-face survey of Russian voting-age voters also fielded by the Levada Centre in July 2017.

In addition to providing a test for the external validity of the experimental findings, the design allows me to hold protest organisers and grievances constant. Protests taking place on June 12 across Russia were organised by the same opposition groups, Alexei Navalny supporters, to condemn government corruption. Exploring whether support for the same group, in the context of protests taking place on the same day and with the same demands, changes as a function of preventive repression alleviates several threats to inference.

The data available, however, do not allow us to disentangle whether demonstrator arrests were caused by activists using violent tactics or instead by the police arresting peaceful demonstrators. Another concern with observational data is endogeneity, as protest authorisations could be associated with local public opinion. For example, if the authorities were more likely to deny permits in places where activists enjoyed lower support to begin with, findings about the impact of protest authorisations on public opinion may be spurious. To partly address such concerns, I examine whether local opposition support, proxied with the presence of an office for Navalny's 2018 presidential campaign in a locality, predicts protest status or arrests in June 2017 and find that it does not (Appendix C.3).

Before presenting the results, it is reasonable to ask whether survey respondents felt free to answer questions honestly. While conclusively addressing questions about desirability bias is not possible with the data available, existing studies suggest that survey respondents in Russia answer honestly and openly, even to sensitive items (e.g. Frye et al., 2017; Frye and Borisova, 2019). Reassuringly, in the 2020 and the 2017 surveys, the non-

response rate is not greater among wealthier, better educated, or urbanite respondents – groups elsewhere shown to self-censor more than others (Robinson and Tannenber, 2019). In the survey experiment non-response rates do not vary as a function of treatment assignment (Appendix A.1.2). In the 2017 survey, non-response is not higher in localities with unauthorised protest or places with arrests either. Substantively, two points are worth noting. First, if preventive repression creates incentives for citizens to falsify their preferences, it may exacerbate autocrats’ informational problem, making it more difficult for the authorities to gauge the levels of support activists enjoy. Yet, polls showing that the organisers and participants of unauthorised rallies enjoy low support may also hinder protest participation among moderates, and help bolster authoritarian stability, at least in the short-term.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Survey Experiment

To provide a causal test of the effect of preventive repression on public opinion, I begin by assessing whether individuals randomly assigned to receive information about unauthorised protests, those in the preventive repression treatment group, report lower or higher support for activists than respondents who received information about authorised events, assigned to the control group. An advantage of this design is that because treatment and control groups receive additional information about activist and police tactics, observed changes in attitudes cannot be due to respondents’ expectations about the tactics activist and the police are more or less likely to adopt when protests were authorised and when they were not. For comparison, I also examine how the size of the preventive repression treatment compares to the other two treatments, regarding demonstrator and police tactics. The three values presented in Figure 1 rely on three different models that assess differences in attitudes between each of the treatment and control groups.<sup>10</sup> Results for

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<sup>10</sup>While the experimental groups are comparable when we consider balance across possible attitudinal confounders, such as attitudes toward the law, there is some imbalance when it comes to the gender of respondents (Table 6, Appendix C.1). As such, and to improve efficiency, the analysis includes standard demographic controls – age, gender and education. Results are unchanged if we only control for gender,

all figures shown in the manuscript are presented in Appendix B.

The ‘unauthorised protest’ coefficient suggests that on average, respondents report lower support for activists participating in unauthorised (2.9, [95% CI: 2.8, 3.09]), compared to authorised events (3.2, [3.1, 3.4]). The size of the preventive repression treatment is comparable in magnitude to that of the violent opposition treatment. Support for demonstrators who engage in clashes with the police is also around 2.9 [95% CI: 2.85, 3.04], considerably lower than support for peaceful activists. Finally, information about police arrests does not shift respondents’ views of activists. While the arrest coefficient is negative, it does not reach statistical levels of significance.

These findings have several implications. First, they suggest that non-coercive strategies of preventive repression may undermine activists’ ability to generate mass support. Second, evidence that violent opposition tactics dampen support for activists underscores the importance of nonviolence resistance even in regimes with truly repressive institutions, like contemporary Russia (e.g. Wasow, 2020; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Finally, results imply that protest bystanders do not necessarily hold activists responsible for police arrests. Jointly, the violence and arrests treatments suggest the need for additional theorizing into the public opinion effects of responsive repression.<sup>11</sup>

### **6.1.1 Preventive Repression and Normative Support for the Law**

Do normative beliefs about the need to obey the law shape responses to preventive repression? While analysis based on the full sample and presented in Figure 1 does not provide evidence of backlash, the theoretical discussion suggests that such a response may be more likely among respondents who doubt the legitimacy of the law and of the authorities. To empirically investigate this expectation, I split the sample into two groups: respondents who ‘strongly, or somewhat’ agree with the statement that protest organizers and participants should unconditionally obey the law (62% of respondents) and those who

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or introduce additional covariates.

<sup>11</sup>It is, however, worth acknowledging that citizens in electoral autocracies rarely have access to information about which party initiated the violence during protests. State media typically blame activists, and not the police, for clashes during protests, ensuing violence, and arrests.

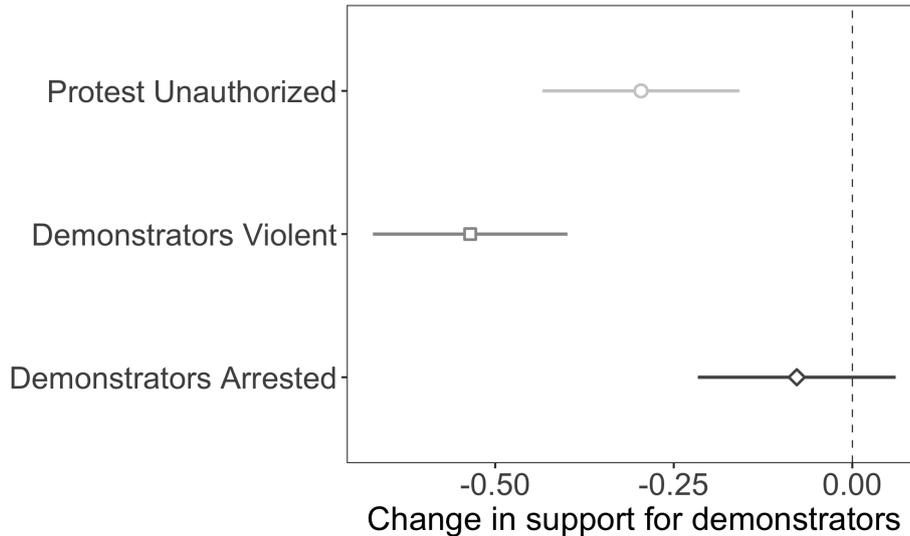


Figure 1: **Change in support for demonstrators.**

This figure plots the difference in support for demonstrators for each of the treatment versus control groups. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

disagree.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 2 replicates the main analysis, which examines the direct effect of each treatment on support for activists, for each of these two groups of respondents. The left-hand plot of Figure 2 suggests that, in line with expectations, the preventive repression treatment influences the views of respondents who think that the law should be obeyed. In this group of respondents, support for demonstrators is approximately half a point lower when protests are unauthorised compared to when they are authorised [-.46, 95%CI (-.64, -.29)]. The preventive repression treatment does not sway the views of respondents who doubt the legitimacy of the law. Yet, as the middle plot suggests, respondents who question the credibility of the law, just like their counterparts, report lower support for activists who adopt violent tactics. Finally, and in line with earlier findings, neither group responds to information about demonstrator arrests.

<sup>12</sup>The normative support for the law item is not just a proxy for prior vote or partisanship. A majority of respondents across voter groups agreed that activists should obey the law, ranging from 70% among Putin voters, 60% among those who abstained in the 2018 election, and 56% among opposition supporters. What is more, 1 in 2 Navalny supporters (20% of the sample) also agreed that activists should obey the law without exception. This implies that, at the time of the survey, the law still enjoyed some normative support across voter groups. Respondents who agreed that the law should be obeyed unconditionally were less likely to suggest that unauthorised protests are an acceptable way for citizens to express grievances. Controlling for standard demographic controls, differences in the probability that these two groups of respondents would find unauthorised protest acceptable were around. -.15, (-.20, -.10). Non-violent action, as one of the core principles of the Soviet dissident movement (e.g. Kozlov, 2020), may have broadly shaped perceptions of unauthorised and violent protest as undesirable in contemporary Russia.

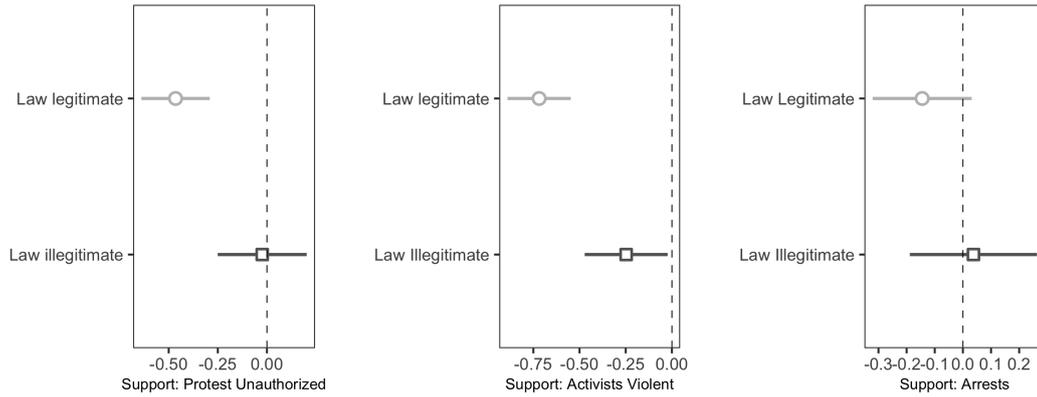


Figure 2: **Preventive repression, violence, and arrests conditional on beliefs about the law.** This figure plots the difference in support for demonstrators when protests are unauthorised and when they are not (left-hand plot), when activists are violent and not (middle-plot), and when the police make arrests and not (right-hand plot) for respondents who think that the law should be obeyed and those who do not. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Evidence that preventive repression does not sway the views of citizens who question the legitimacy of the law implies that within electoral autocracies, but also across regimes, the mass opinion effect of protest authorisations as a form of legal repression may be contingent on the distribution of prior beliefs about the legitimacy of the law and the authorities. While the Russian case provides no evidence of backlash – respondents who question the legitimacy of the law do not report higher support for activists – evidence presented here points to what may be the Achilles’ heel of several strategies of repression that use the law as a tool of control. They imply that as the share of ‘persuadable’ citizens in a country shrinks, the ability of non-violent repression to elicit a response desirable to the authorities may be compromised. I return to this point in the discussion.

### 6.1.2 Preventive Repression, Demonstrator, and Police Tactics

I continue the analysis by examining whether the effect of preventive repression is conditional on the tactics demonstrators and the authorities adopt during protests. In Figure 3, I present the effect of the preventive repression treatment when activists use violence and when they do not (left-hand plot), as well as when the police arrest demonstrators and when they do not (middle plot). The experimental design also allows me to estimate whether the effect of preventive repression is conditional on four possible combinations

of demonstrator and police tactics: both parties being either peaceful (demonstrators are nonviolent and the police make no arrests), or violent (demonstrators engage in clashes and the police make arrests), and one party being violent while the other party is not (when peaceful demonstrators are met with arrests, or when demonstrators are violent and the police makes no arrests).

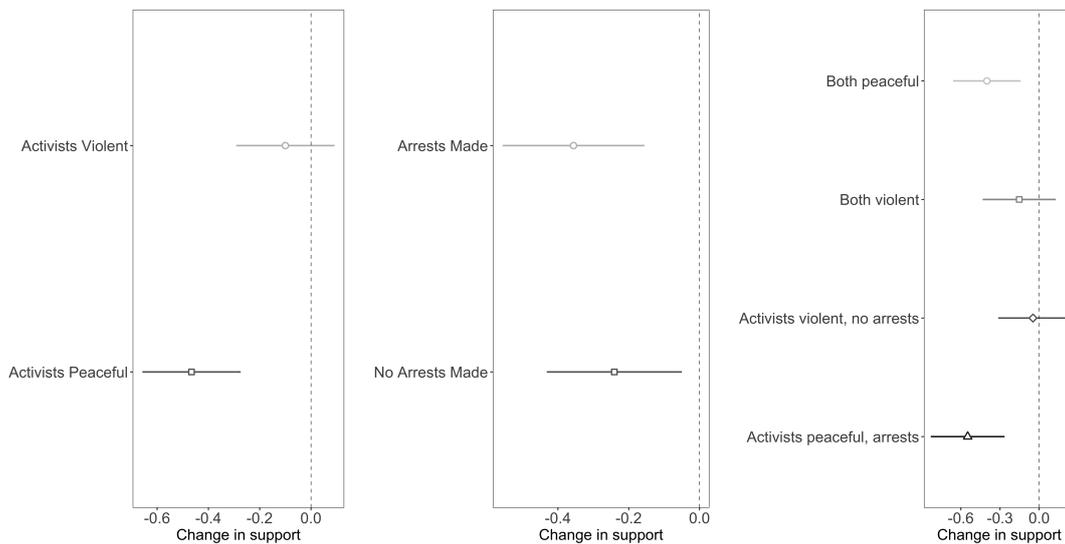


Figure 3: **Tests of conditional effects of preventive repression.** This figure plots the difference in support for demonstrators when protests are unauthorised and when they are authorised for each of the demonstrator and police tactics sub-samples. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

The left-hand plot of Figure 3 suggests that the effect of preventive repression is conditional on demonstrator tactics. Preventive repression undermines support for peaceful activists, yet does not shift assessments of demonstrators who adopt violent tactics. Support for peaceful demonstrators participating in unauthorised protests is approximately half a point lower [-.47 (-.66, -.27)] than it is for peaceful demonstrators who participate in authorised events. The middle plot suggests that activists participating in unauthorised protests enjoy lower support than activists in authorised protests both when events are met with arrests and when they are not. The right-hand plot, which considers the combination of demonstrator and police tactics further suggests that preventive repression dampens peaceful demonstrators' ability to generate support both when activists face arrests [-.40, 95% CI (-.66, -.14)] and when they do not [-.55, 95% CI (-.83, -.27)]. Support for demonstrators who use violent tactics does not change as a function of preventive

repression neither when the police make arrests, nor when they do not. In sum, these findings imply that preventive repression used in the lead-up to protest may compromise peaceful activists' ability to generate support.

We can also ask whether the public opinion effects of opposition and police tactics depend on the use of preventive repression. To answer this question, Figure 4 explores whether the effects of activist and police tactics differ across the authorised and unauthorised protest sub-samples. The left-hand plot of Figure 4 suggests that the extent to which violent opposition tactics dampen support for activists is greater when protest are authorized  $[-.71 (-.90, -.51)]$  than when they are not  $[-.36, (-.55, -.17)]$ . While the confidence intervals of the two point estimates overlap, differences in the effect size of the violent treatment imply that preventive repression may have the potential to justify the use of opposition violence, perhaps perceived as an appropriate response to an already violent state. Additional work should disentangle this relationship, asking specifically respondents to assess whether, and how justified, they find violent tactics to be. In line with earlier findings, the middle plot of Figure 4 suggests that police responses to protest do not influence support for activists. Finally, the right-hand plot of Figure 4 explores whether maintaining an image of nonviolence in response to a violent challenger helps activists generate greater support compared to when activists are violent and the authorities are peaceful. I explore whether nonviolent resistance bolsters support for activists confronted with a violent opponent both when protests are authorised and when they are not.

Results imply that when protests are authorised, activists are able to elicit greater support when they are peaceful and the police are violent than when the opposite is the case. Differences in support for activists across the two groups are approximately a whole point large (95% CI: .98, .43).<sup>13</sup> When protests are unauthorised, however, maintaining an image of nonviolence in response to a violent challenger no longer bolsters support for activists. Support for demonstrators is indistinguishable when activists are peaceful and the police are violent on the one hand and when demonstrators are violent and the police

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<sup>13</sup>This conclusion is supported in the full sample as well. Support for demonstrators is approximately half a point higher when demonstrators are peaceful and the police are violent, compared to when activists are violent and the police are peaceful  $[.45, (.26, .65)]$ .

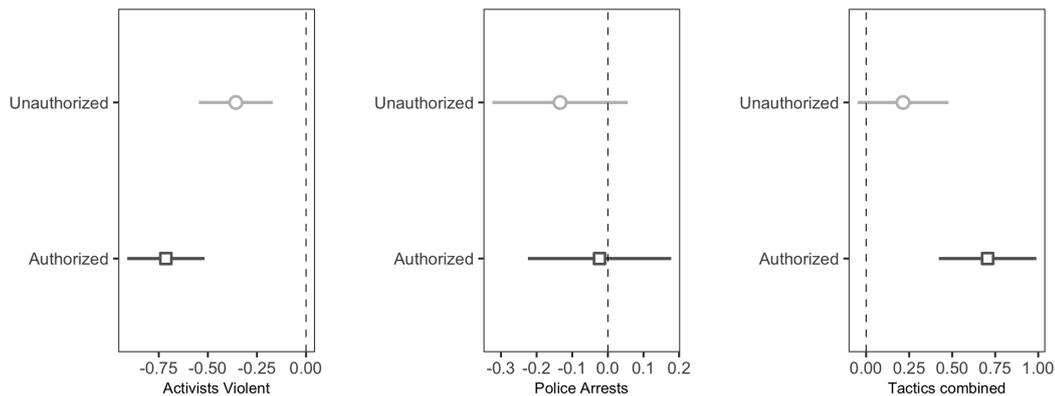


Figure 4: **Activist and police tactics conditional on preventive repression.** This figure plots the difference in support for demonstrators for different activist and police tactics when protests are authorised and when they are not. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

are peaceful on the other. What is more, when peaceful demonstrators participating in unauthorised protest are arrested, the support they enjoy is similar to the support of violent demonstrators who face arrests (-.18, 95% CI: -.45, .08) and who do not (-.21, 95%CI: -.47, .05). Table 5 in the Appendix reports the results. Altogether, this analysis helps nuance findings regarding the effect of demonstrator and police interactions on public opinion.

### 6.1.3 Causal Mediation Analysis

The previous sections explore the conditions under which preventive repression shapes support for groups that dissent despite facing preventive repression. Additional analysis may allow us to explore why individuals update their evaluations of activists the way they do. As discussed in the theory section, preventive repression may generate frustration either with the authorities tasked with granting authorisations, or with demonstrator arrests. Negative evaluations of the authorities, whether of the city administrations tasked with granting permits or of the police, may in turn, serve to bolster support for groups that face preventive repression. Respondents can also be concerned with the levels of threat facing demonstrators. Information about unauthorised protests may increase concerns about safety and security, compromising activists' ability to generate support. Each of these factors - evaluations of the local authorities, of the police, and threat assessments -

may be mediating the overall effect of preventive repression on support for demonstrators.

For each of these three mediators, I separately decompose the total effect of preventive repression into two component parts. The first, the average causal mediation effect (ACME), represents the average change in support for activists through changes in assessments of the authorities, the police, or threat levels, when protests are unauthorised and when they are authorised. The second part, the average direct effect (ADE) describes how support for activists would be affected if the status of an event changed, but each of the mediators did not. I report results in Appendix B.0.2.

Results that use evaluations of the authorities as a mediator first indicate that preventive repression undermines not only support for demonstrators, but also for the authorities. Support for the authorities that deny permits is almost a whole point lower than it is for authorities that allow protest instead. This finding is in line with work by Frye and Borisova (2019) who also find protest authorisations to bolster support for the Russian authorities. Evaluations of local authorities account approximately for half of the total effect of preventive repression on support for activists (53%). The ACME of preventive repression that works through evaluations of the authorities is negative and around  $-.16$   $[-.31, -.11]$ . The average direct effect of preventive repression on support for activists is also negative, around  $-.14$ , and reaches significance at the 90% level. This suggests that evaluations of the authorities are an important channel through which preventive repression affects support for demonstrators. Yet, results run contrary to expectations that preventive repression may exacerbate frustration with the authorities, and in doing so, to bolster support for activists facing repression. Finally, while preventive repression increases support for the statement that ‘participation in protest is threatening for demonstrators’, assessments of threat facing activists mediate only a small part of the overall effect of preventive repression on the outcome of interest, about 2%. Evaluations of police responses to protest do not mediate any of the overall effect of preventive repression on support for demonstrators.

## 6.2 The June 12, 2017 protests

Here, I link responses to a nationally representative survey of voting-age Russians fielded between July 23-27 2017 to the type of protest taking place in respondents' locality a few weeks prior, on June 12th, 2017. The protests, which coincided with 'Russia Day', were organised by Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation across 207 localities in order to condemn government corruption. On the day, between 50-98 thousand demonstrators took to the streets. Approximately 1700-1805 of them were arrested. The content of the protest, focusing on the need to fight government corruption, enjoyed broad support across society. Asked in March 2017, 80% of Russians reported that corruption had either significantly, or fully permeated the Russian government. 65% of them agreed that corruption is 'totally unacceptable'.<sup>14</sup>

The Levada survey of July 2017 asks respondents to what extent they support the participants of the June 12 protest. I recode responses on a scale from 1-5 so that higher values denote greater support. Approximately 40% of respondents reported to 'fully, or somewhat' approve the participants of the June protests. The analysis presented in Table 1 below also includes individual-level controls, including gender, age, age squared, education, and vote behaviour in the most recent parliamentary election. The vote item takes the value of zero if the respondent indicates that she voted for one of the opposition parties, one if she voted for the ruling regime party, United Russia, and two if she abstained. To help reduce the threat of omitted variable bias from unobserved regional characteristics and account for the fact that several localities are within the same region, the analysis also introduces region fixed effects.

The key independent variable used in Model 1 is a three-point interval that captures whether a protest took place in respondents' locality, whether city or village, and the protest's type.<sup>15</sup> This variable takes a value of zero if respondents live in areas with an authorised protest, taking place in the locations and times indicated by protest organisers (approximately 10% of respondents) and one if respondents live in areas with

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<sup>14</sup>See: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/04/21/corruption/>

<sup>15</sup>As discussed, opposition strength does not predict authorisation patterns and arrests in the context of the June protests. See Appendix Table 7.

unauthorised events (42% of respondents).<sup>16</sup> Respondents in places with no protest (48% of the sample) are assigned a value of two. The main independent variable in Model 2 further disaggregates protest type combining information from protest authorisations and arrests. This is a five-point interval which takes the value of 1 if respondents live in areas with authorised protest without arrests, cities such as Pskov or Ekaterinburg (7% of respondents), 2 if respondents live in areas with authorised protest with arrests, places like Perm and Stavropol (2% of respondents), 3 and 4 when respondents are in places with unauthorised protest without and with arrests respectively (approximately 21% of respondents live in each of these regions), and 5 when respondents live in places without any protest. In both Moscow and St Petersburg, Navalny strongholds, the protests were unauthorised and hundreds of demonstrators were arrested. In other places, such as Kolomna in Moscow oblast and Ishimbay in Bashkortostan, protests were unauthorised yet demonstrators did not face arrests.

Results reported in Table 1 are consistent with experimental findings. Model 1 suggests that demonstrators enjoy lower support in areas with recent unauthorised as opposed to authorised protest. Support for the participants of the June 12 protest, measured on a 5-point scale, is around 2.82 in places with unauthorised events, 3.03 in places with no protest, and 3.24 in areas with authorized events. Model 2 presents a similar picture. Once more, the comparison between peaceful authorised and unauthorised protests implies that preventive repression may undermine activists' ability to generate support. While support for demonstrators in places with authorised protest not facing arrests is around 3.3 [95% CI: 2.9-3.7], it drops to around 2.7 [95% CI: 2.45, 2.9] in places with similar unauthorised protests. As anticipated, regime voters, and even respondents who abstained in the most recent parliamentary election, report lower support for activists than oppositions supporters.

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<sup>16</sup>I also disaggregate respondents to areas where events were fully authorised and not, and partly (un)authorised. Such events took place on the day indicated by organizers, yet at different times or locations. Results are unchanged. They suggest that demonstrators enjoyed higher support in places where protests were fully authorised compared to places where they were not.

Table 1: **Local protests and support for demonstrators**

	Support for Demonstrators, OLS models	
	(1)	(2)
<i>Authorized protest</i>		
Unauthorized	-0.435*	
	(0.243)	
No protest	-0.213	
	(0.215)	
<i>Authorized/No Arrests</i>		
Authorized/Arrests		-0.613*
		(0.354)
Unauthorized /No arrests		-0.642**
		(0.250)
Unauthorized/ Arrests		-0.284
		(0.260)
No protest		-0.329
		(0.215)
Age	0.006	0.006
	(0.012)	(0.012)
Age square	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Female	-0.060	-0.059
	(0.058)	(0.059)
Education	-0.034**	-0.035**
	(0.016)	(0.016)
UR voter	-0.435***	-0.434***
	(0.098)	(0.098)
Abstained	-0.177***	-0.187***
	(0.082)	(0.082)
Constant	3.801***	4.021***
	(0.399)	(0.395)
Oblast FE	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,602	1,602
R <sup>2</sup>	0.164	0.170

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## 7 Discussion

Why have protest authorisations been apparently effective at dampening support for activists in Russia, and how far is the argument likely to travel?

As findings show, beliefs about the law and the authorities influence the extent to which preventive repression, as a strategy of legal, nonviolent preventive repression, shapes opinions. ‘Persuadable’ citizens, those who update their assessments of activists in response to information about preventive repression, think that it is important to obey the law unconditionally and that unauthorised protests are unacceptable. This implies that prior beliefs about the law, which vary considerably across authoritarian contexts, may meaningfully predict responses to unauthorised protest and strategies of legal repression beyond Russia. Protests that go ahead without a permit may be more likely to alienate public opinion in electoral autocracies like Thailand or Venezuela, where, according to the 2016 International Social Survey Programme, 78 and 88 percent of respondents reported that citizens should obey the law without exception.<sup>17</sup> The ability of legal forms of repression to dampen support for targeted groups may be compromised in places like contemporary Turkey, where just 51% of respondents report that the law should be obeyed unconditionally.

Of course, beliefs about the legitimacy of the law, or perceptions of unauthorised protest as unacceptable are not reproduced in a vacuum. To reinforce hostility towards unauthorised protests, their participants, and organisers, the authorities in Russia ensure that the media provide hostile coverage of protests. A key message in the coverage of unauthorised protest in state-controlled Russian media is that, even though opportunities to protest remain available to all groups, activists elect to stage unauthorised protests in order to maximize disruption and attract international coverage (e.g. Smirnova and Chedov, 2019). While state control over national outlets is widespread in authoritarian settings, the negative effect of unauthorised protest on public opinion may be more subdued in places where independent media can more easily challenge the government’s rhetoric. As Pop-Eleches and Way (2020) have recently shown, where alternative media

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<sup>17</sup>For comparison, this view was shared by approximately 60% of Russian respondents, above the survey average of 53%.

is present, protest repression less likely to undermine support for the opposition. Future research should systematically explore differences in the coverage of authorised and unauthorised protests and how this impacts attitudes, something that this work has not been able to address.

The availability of protest opportunities may also help sustain beliefs about the legitimacy of the law and lend credibility to the narrative that activists elect to stage unauthorised events as to maximize disruption. Indeed, in recent years, the Russian authorities had been typically mixing their strategies – granting the same organisers permits for some events while denying them for others. During the Moscow election protests of 2019, for example, the Mayor’s office rejected some protest requests but approved others submitted by the same organizers. Accused of violating the right to freedom of assembly, the authorities emphasised that opportunities to protest lawfully remained available to the opposition. In places where the authorities always deny permits, unauthorised protests may be viewed not as a strategy chosen by groups with little respect for the law in order to maximize disruption, but rather as the only way available for the opposition to communicate grievances. Indeed, in places like contemporary Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, where less than 10% of annual protest are authorised, taking to the streets without a permit may be seen as the only avenue for groups to express their demands.

Yet, the more the authorities abuse the law, the more likely that protest authorisations, or legal strategies of repression, will fail to elicit a response that is desirable to the authorities. When the law is perceived as an instrument of repression, the levels of normative support it enjoys may be compromised, and the share of ‘persuadable’ citizens in a country could shrink. What is more, while the main outcome of this study is support for activists, the mediation analysis suggests that permit denials also dampen support for the authorities. Additional analysis shows that preventive repression does not undermine the negative effect of arrests on evaluations of the police either (Appendix Table 5). Police violence, common during unauthorised events, is thus another way in which protest authorisations may serve to erode support for the ruling regime as much as they could serve to dampen support for its rivals.

## 8 Conclusion

The significance of preventive repression and protest for authoritarian stability is an important subject of debate among scholars of comparative politics and conflict studies. An influential scholarship agrees that protest success in electoral autocracies often depends on activists' ability to gain the support of bystanders, appealing to constituencies beyond their core supporters (e.g. Lohmann, 1994). Activists' ability to generate popular support not only enhances the prospects for successful collective action, but also strengthens the opposition's electoral performance, generating optimism about the prospects for political change. The central argument of this work is that processes that occur in the lead-up to protest, specifically legal strategies of preventive repression that are obvious to activists and protest bystanders, may meaningfully impact dissident groups' ability to generate support.

With the benefit of an original framing experiment and rich survey and protest-event data, I have explored the effect of preventive repression on support for activists. Using a factorial design that manipulates information about the status of protests, demonstrator, and police tactics, I have shown that preventive repression dampens peaceful activists' ability to generate support and that it conditions the effect of demonstrator and police tactics on public opinion. What is more, results suggest that preventive repression only shapes the views of citizens who think that it is important to obey the law and follow the authorities' decisions. Findings that rely on observational data paint a consistent picture.

Jointly, these findings imply that the audience of preventive repression in non-democracies may be broader than conventionally assumed by studies of preventive repression as a strategy that allows dictators to deter opposition while keeping repression itself out-of-sight. By using the law to ban demonstrations, nondemocratic governments could undermine targeted groups' ability to generate mass support, dampening the prospects for successful collective action. Strategies of publicly observable, non-coercive protest repression impact not only opposition activists and their supporters, but also protest bystanders - people who would see or hear about unauthorised events, and accordingly form perceptions about activists and the defiant opposition.

These findings have implications for research on what motivates autocrats to engage in preventive repression in the first place. The observation that preventive repression may allow autocrats to undermine support for the opposition may help explain why regimes with the capacity to stifle dissent sometimes adopt preventive repression strategies that only create weak deterrence incentives, and are deliberately designed to be obvious. However, more theoretical work is needed to establish the conditions under which visible manifestations of opposition do not represent ‘failures’ of repressive regimes (e.g. Dragu and Lupu, 2018a), but rather reflect a deliberate strategy that allows incumbents concerned about public opinion to manipulate beliefs about their opponents.

Implications also follow for the scholarship on protest management in authoritarian states. While existing research focuses on autocrats’ decision to permit protest or not (Lorentzen, 2013; Sangnier and Zylberberg, 2017) and studies how autocrats manage other sources of contention such as elections (e.g. Simpser, 2013; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009) relatively less is known about the various legal strategies autocrats who allow protest may use to regulate them. As growing evidence suggests that contemporary autocrats’ reliance on non-coercive repression has increased (e.g. Dobson, 2012; Guriev and Treisman, 2019), further investigating the consequences of nonviolent preventive repression on dissent, responsive repression, and public opinion represents a fruitful avenue for future research. What is more, given the diverse consequences of protest authorisations, it appears useful for protest-event catalogues to record whether protests are authorised or not. Comparative data on preventive and responsive repression will allow additional theorizing on the conditions under which regimes use these strategies as complements rather than substitutes (e.g. Ritter and Conrad, 2016).

In closing, this article’s findings show that by using protest authorisations as a strategy of preventive repression, nondemocratic governments may undermine activists’ ability to generate mass support. This work constitutes one of the first attempts to causally study the effect of preventive repression on public opinion in nondemocracies, with implications for research on protest management and studies of how authoritarianism is contested in the streets.

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