

# Russia's Power Diagonal

*by Yauheni Kryzhanouski*

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**'Prevent disorder' is the motto of Russian power, justifying all forms of repression and establishing a partly decentralized system of domination through fear at the hands of local mobs.**

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Reviewed: Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, *La verticale de la peur. Ordre et allégeance en Russie poutinienne*, Paris, La Découverte, 2023. 240 pp., €19.

In June and July 2023, a trial took place in Moscow's Golovinski District Court. The defendant was Oleg Orlov, a seventy-year-old human rights activist and a leading figure in the civil rights organization Memorial. He was accused of "public actions aimed at discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation, which protect the interests of the Federation"—the same charge faced by many other Russian intellectuals, dissidents and activists. His alleged crime was the publication of a Facebook post entitled "They wanted fascism, they got it." The article had first been published in French on the [Médiapart website's blog](#)<sup>1</sup>. As a repeat offender, Orlov was facing a three-year prison sentence. The prosecution relied heavily on a linguistic assessment carried out by two experts of dubious reputation: mathematics teacher Natalia Kriukova and translator Aleksandr Tarasov. The former concluded that the post was "propaganda", while the latter felt that, to discredit the Russian army, the human rights defender had resorted to "stereotypes", in particular by stating that "military action should not affect the civilian population and infrastructure" and that "any state whose ideology and policies are tantamount to fascism constitutes a threat

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<sup>1</sup> Oleg Orlov, « [Russie : 'ils voulaient le fascisme, ils l'ont eu'](#) ».

to other countries". Despite the ridiculous nature of these accusations, there was little doubt as to how the trial would turn out.

Oleg Orlov's trial is just one example of a judicial repression that has been stepped up considerably since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even more so since the start of a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. A wide range of actors were involved in this judicial procedure: police and prosecution bodies, of course, but also other officially more autonomous actors: judges, experts and activists from the "Veterans of Russia" movement who testified against Orlov. The trial was part of a broad repertoire of instruments used to control society, including extra-judicial violence, blackmail, intimidation, economic coercion, censorship of information and so on. These instruments have a wide range of targets: political opponents, of course, but also gay people and other individuals and groups who do not conform to the standards of so-called "traditional values", iconoclastic artists, religious or anti-clerical communities, "foreign agents" of the "collective West", corrupt officials, drug addicts and criminals. There is, however, a structuring factor that encompasses these different phenomena and organizes them into a single system: these repressions are justified by the preservation of order, or rather by protection against disorder.

The question of order and domination is at the heart of this recent book by Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, an acknowledged expert on Russia and issues of violence in the country, be it at the hands of the state or non-state actors<sup>2</sup>. The book is a far cry from the usual caricatures of the Russian political system as an omnipotent power wielded by an indivisible and sometimes "totalitarian" state. Relying on a number of field research projects carried out by the author over more than ten years (on the police, criminal justice, the fight against corruption, privatization and vigilantism), the author succeeds in offering a vision of Russian society and the Russian state that links the vertical and horizontal dimensions of power, control, order and fear in a kind of diagonal vision of domination. And this vision is dynamic, as it follows the gradual formation of the Russian state and the construction of the current political system since the early 2000s.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, *Policing Economic Crime in Russia. From Soviet Planned Economy to Privatisation*, London, Hurst Publishers, 2011 ; Jean-Louis Briquet and Gilles Favarel-Garrigues (eds.), *Organized Crime and States. The Hidden Face of Politics*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 ; Gilles Favarel-Garrigues and Laurent Gayer, *Proud to Punish. The Global Landscapes of Rough Justice*, Redwood City, CA, Stanford University Press, 2024.

## "Dictatorship of the law" and its many uses

The core concept is the dictatorship of the law, defined as "the means of ensuring political domination by orienting judicial procedures and decisions in favor of power" (p. 27). Proclaimed in July 2000 as the official doctrine of Putin's nascent system, it primarily serves in practice as a justification for the exercise of political domination by elites from *siloviki* (law enforcement) circles—domination through law, but also legitimizing other forms of "disorder prevention", such as extrajudicial physical violence, blackmail (of striking importance), the publication of compromising information (*kompromat*) and intimidation.

The system is partially decentralized, relying as it does on the participation of heterogeneous and relatively autonomous actors, "the regular springs of the exercising of power" (p. 15). Current or converted secret service professionals and *siloviki*, bailiffs and private debt collectors, *kompromat* manufacturers, judges and prosecutors, parliamentarians, provincial governors and mob bosses (often also converted to politics), neo-Nazis, militants of "patriotic movements", traditionalist activists who lay claim to the heritage of the Cossacks and other self-proclaimed vigilantes, all profit in their own way from the "dictatorship of the law" and the political and economic opportunities it offers. This is a true biosphere of domination, with its own hierarchy, division of labor and operational rules.

The book is divided into four chapters, each highlighting a different facet of this system. The first introduces the "dictatorship of the law", designed to reinforce the "vertical of power", i.e., to contribute to the concentration, arrangement and hierarchization of the various forms of power (political, economic, repressive, violent, intimidatory) following Vladimir Putin's accession to the country's presidency and, consequently, the appointment of former KGB-FSB members to key state posts<sup>3</sup>. Due to favorable domestic and international conditions, in the 2000s the justification for the vertical dimension of the dictatorship of the law was based on financial supervision and the suppression of corruption. Three key resources fuel the dictatorship of the law: "access to compromising information, to loyal media and to unscrupulous magistrates" (p. 60). Repression has not been widespread under Putin, at least before

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<sup>3</sup> On this subject, see the work of Russian investigative journalists Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, in particular *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State the Enduring Legacy of the KGB*, New York, Public Affairs, 2010.

2022, but more targeted and forceful, serving above all to make blackmail and intimidation more credible. Fear remains far more effective than violence.

The second chapter shows how different actors deal pragmatically with the dictatorship of the law on a daily basis. Drawing on several examples, it highlights the social effects of this system: the consolidation of public-private links (imbrications, collusions) and the commodification of coercion (particularly through economic predation), the "decentralized forms of domination" (p. 83) in which presidential power arbitrates disputes between holders of different forms of power, and the strategic uses of the war on drugs.

In the third chapter, we learn that the dictatorship of the law also favors (and is consolidated by) the situation in which "all the key players in the Russian political game vie to maintain or restore order in the country" (p. 145). Be they real opponents (such as Alexei Navalny) or façade ones (political parties represented in the Duma), or even United Russia politicians, we systematically find in their discourse and actions attitudes that emphasize the primordial importance of security issues and solutions, with one-upmanship sparked by the competition between these actors in the political field. The vigilantism of impromptu doers of justice (who make a living by monetizing the videos of their often violent interventions on social networks) is another means of putting security intransigence into practice.

The fourth and final chapter shows how this vertical and horizontal system of the dictatorship of law produces coalitions of public and private agents who target actors deemed to pose a threat to order in Russia: opponents, NGOs and other "liberals", migrants, Westerners and gay people. In their staged battle against these external and internal threats, the dominant players in the political arena are backed by numerous autonomous auxiliaries to power: patriotic movements, vigilantes and other entrepreneurs of both morality and violence.

The result is an invaluable and highly complex picture of the Russian political system, which relies not only on "traditional" coercive institutions (forces of law and order, justice, secret services), but also on social mechanisms. The actors who enable the reproduction and relatively autonomous functioning of this diagonal system of fear are characterized by their multipositionality: they remain close to the authorities, sometimes reconverted to local, parliamentary or other institutional responsibilities, while at the same time maintaining ties with traditionalist, xenophobic and conservative social movements.

The book concludes by offering a number of avenues for comparative study: it invites us to draw parallels between the author's conclusions on governing through fear in Russia and other political contexts such as "in Turkey under Erdogan, in Brazil under Bolsonaro or in India under Modi" (p. 195). This provides a much-needed perspective. However, the study could also benefit from a closer comparison with neighboring Belarus, for example, where we find certain homologous aspects of this system of societal administration, such as the spectacular and theatrical nature of the "fight against corruption", the systematic "purging" of political and economic leaders in the name of law and order, the measured and targeted repression of opponents, and the role played by capitalism in controlling society under authoritarian rule. At the same time, other mechanisms, such as the dramatic action taken by vigilantes and other patriotic movements, are used much less frequently. This does not prevent the horizontal dimension of control from being present in more insidious forms, relying on self-censorship and micro-pressure, such as the risk of dismissal or administrative bullying should tacit socio-political rules be transgressed<sup>4</sup>.

The analysis could also be complemented by a discussion of the less active participants in this system of government through fear: for example, school principals, managers of art institutions (museums, galleries, concert halls), and journalists<sup>5</sup>, who submit to this system and reproduce it passively, out of precaution and self-censorship. More generally, the reader cannot help but draw parallels with phenomena underway in Western societies, particularly as some of the aspects described are historically and epistemologically associated with Western contexts. In fact, one of the book's strengths is that it uses these Western tools of analysis to understand Russian society: hybridization and public-private collusion, the horizontal dimension of control, the commodification and privatization of legitimate physical violence, crusades led by moral entrepreneurs, and multi-positionality as a resource in struggles for social domination, and the escalation of security measures in political

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Yauheni Kryzhanouski, "Managing Dissent in Post-Soviet Authoritarianism. New Censorship of Protest Music in Belarus and Russia, 2000-2018", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 74, N° 5, June 2022, pp. 760-788 ; Yauheni Kryzhanouski, « 'La censure est d'autant plus efficace qu'elle est interdite'. (Post-)censure de la musique contestataire en Biélorussie et en Russie », *Communications*, n°106 (1/2020), pp. 131-143.

<sup>5</sup> On this subject, see the work of Françoise Daucé, for example « Épreuves professionnelles et engagement collectif dans la presse en ligne à Moscou (2012-2019) », *Le Mouvement Social*, vol. 268, no. 3, 2019, pp. 101-116; « Éprouver le Politique dans un Média Russe. La Délicate Élaboration des Nouvelles en Conférence de Rédaction », *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, vol. 48, no. 3-4, 2017, pp. 159-182; Ivan Chupin and Françoise Daucé, « Par-delà la contrainte politique ? La banalité des bifurcations dans les carrières journalistiques en Russie contemporaine », *Réseaux*, vol. 199, no. 5, 2016, pp. 131-154.

competition. In this respect, a more systematic and explicit comparison with Western contexts could serve to "de-exotize" the Russian political system and society.

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