

Collective Punishment: Pressure on Family Members of Political Opponents in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract

Modern systems of political repression increasingly extend beyond direct action against individuals who publicly express dissent. An expanding body of evidence suggests that state pressure may also target family members who themselves have not engaged in unlawful or political activity. This article examines the phenomenon of indirect political coercion through pressure exerted on relatives of political opponents, journalists, anti-war activists, and individuals who have left the Russian Federation following political persecution.

The study argues that pressure on family members performs several institutional functions simultaneously: increasing psychological costs of dissent, encouraging self-censorship, discouraging emigration, and creating incentives for political conformity. Particular attention is devoted to informal administrative practices, including repeated police visits, questioning of relatives, involvement of child welfare authorities, searches of family residences, and threats concerning parental rights. Although many of these actions formally remain within existing legal procedures, their cumulative effect transforms family relationships into instruments of political pressure.

The article further examines the psychological consequences of such practices for entire families, including forced migration, chronic anxiety, family separation, and difficulties of adaptation abroad. It concludes that collective pressure on relatives represents an increasingly important mechanism of contemporary authoritarian governance because it expands the perceived risks of political participation beyond the individual actor.

Keywords: political repression; collective punishment; family members; authoritarian governance; Russia; forced migration; child protection authorities; political persecution; psychological coercion; adaptation of political emigrants.

1. Introduction

Political repression has traditionally been understood as a process directed against identifiable individuals who publicly challenge state authority. Arrests, criminal prosecutions, administrative

sanctions, imprisonment, censorship, and restrictions on political participation have long been recognized as the principal instruments through which governments suppress dissent.¹

Yet contemporary authoritarian systems increasingly employ a broader strategy. Rather than limiting coercion to politically active individuals, pressure extends to members of their families. Parents, spouses, children, siblings, and other close relatives become indirect participants in conflicts in which they themselves played no active role.²

This transformation changes the nature of political repression. Instead of targeting only political behavior, coercive institutions begin targeting social relationships. Family itself becomes an object through which political influence is exercised.³

This article examines this phenomenon in the context of the Russian Federation following the significant expansion of political repression after 2020 and particularly after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.⁴

Despite extensive scholarship on political repression, considerably less attention has been devoted to the experiences of family members who become indirectly involved in political conflicts despite having taken no active part in public opposition. Existing research has traditionally focused on criminal prosecution, restrictions on political participation, censorship, imprisonment, and forced migration.⁵ By comparison, the cumulative social consequences experienced by relatives remain relatively underexamined. This article seeks to address that gap by analyzing family pressure not as an isolated humanitarian concern but as an institutional mechanism influencing political behavior through private social relationships⁶.

Rather than focusing solely on criminal prosecutions, the article investigates a wider spectrum of institutional practices directed toward relatives of politically active individuals. These include repeated police visits, interrogations of parents, searches of relatives' homes, contacts by child welfare authorities, administrative intimidation, and threats concerning parental rights.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

² Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Igor Leonov, "When Everyone Pays the Price: Collective Reputation and the Spread of Distrust in Professional Communities," SSRN, June 6, 2026, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=6891778>

³³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 195–228; Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁴ Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁵ Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Samuel A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia*.

⁶ Igor Leonov and Yurii Savchuk, "Institutional Fear and Self-Censorship as Mechanisms of Social Adaptation in Highly Regulated Political Systems," SSRN, May 14, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6767778>

Although each measure may appear legally independent, together they create a coherent system of indirect coercion whose primary objective is not legal accountability but behavioral control.

The central argument of this article is that pressure on family members should be understood not as isolated misconduct by individual officials but as an institutional mechanism that substantially increases the effectiveness of political repression by transforming private family relationships into instruments of state pressure.⁷

2. Research Design and Methodological Approach

Research addressing political repression encounters a methodological difficulty that is less pronounced in many other areas of the social sciences. The processes under examination are frequently characterized by incomplete documentation, unequal access to official records, legal restrictions affecting information, and substantial differences between institutional procedures and the way those procedures are experienced by individuals. As a result, questions central to everyday social life cannot always be answered through quantitative measurement alone.

The present study therefore adopts a qualitative analytical design. Its objective is not to estimate the prevalence of indirect pressure on family members or to determine its statistical frequency within the Russian Federation. Such an undertaking would require access to comprehensive governmental records that are unavailable for independent scholarly examination. Instead, the purpose of this research is to identify recurring institutional patterns appearing across multiple documented cases and to develop an analytical framework capable of explaining their broader social significance.⁸

The empirical material considered in this study consists of several complementary categories of evidence.⁹ These include publicly available judicial materials where accessible, legal documents prepared during asylum proceedings, statements by attorneys representing politically active individuals, witness testimony, interviews published by independent media, reports produced by human rights organizations, and academic literature addressing political repression, forced migration, institutional trust, and family sociology. Rather than treating each source as independently conclusive, the analysis focuses on recurring similarities that emerge across different forms of documentation.

⁷ This article uses the concept of collective pressure in a sociological rather than a formal criminal-law sense. It does not suggest that Russian law expressly establishes collective criminal liability for relatives. The analysis concerns the cumulative social and psychological consequences of institutional actions directed toward family members

⁸ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018); John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁹ The methodological strategy employed in this article combines documentary analysis with qualitative interpretation of recurring institutional patterns across multiple independent sources. See Denzin and Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

This methodological choice reflects an important distinction between event-oriented and pattern-oriented research. Individual cases inevitably differ in chronology, political circumstances, legal qualification, and personal history. A qualitative approach does not seek identical facts. Instead, it examines whether different cases reveal comparable institutional dynamics despite variations in their immediate circumstances. The analytical unit is therefore not the individual event but the recurring mechanism through which institutional pressure extends beyond the original subject of official attention.

The study also recognizes several important limitations. The internal decision-making processes of governmental institutions remain largely inaccessible to independent researchers. Consequently, the analysis presented here does not attempt to determine whether recurring patterns necessarily result from centralized coordination, common administrative practice, organizational culture, or independent decisions reached by separate officials operating under similar institutional incentives. The available evidence does not permit definitive conclusions regarding internal governmental organization, and no such conclusions are advanced.

A second limitation concerns the nature of available documentation. Cases reaching public attention are unlikely to represent all instances of indirect pressure. Families who successfully avoid publicity, choose not to document their experiences, or remain within closed social networks inevitably remain underrepresented in publicly accessible material. The purpose of the present research is therefore conceptual rather than statistical. It seeks to explain how indirect family pressure functions where documented evidence permits systematic analysis.

This distinction influences the interpretation of the findings presented throughout the article. The conclusions should not be understood as quantitative generalizations applicable to every politically sensitive family in contemporary Russia. Rather, they constitute an analytical model derived from documented cases exhibiting recurring institutional characteristics. Future comparative research may test the broader applicability of this framework across different political systems and historical contexts.

3. From Individual Responsibility to Collective Consequences

Modern legal systems are generally built upon the principle that responsibility is personal. Criminal law, administrative sanctions, and civil liability are ordinarily directed toward the individual whose conduct allegedly violated legal norms. Family members are not expected to bear legal consequences merely because they are related to someone accused of political or criminal misconduct. This distinction has long been regarded as one of the defining characteristics separating the rule of law from systems of collective responsibility.¹⁰

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

The practical operation of political repression often follows a different logic.

Where direct punishment alone fails to alter behavior, institutions may expand the circle of pressure without formally expanding criminal liability. The objective is no longer limited to influencing the individual under investigation. Instead, the surrounding social environment becomes part of the coercive process.

Among all social relationships, the family occupies a unique position. Parents cannot easily ignore threats directed toward their children. Adult children remain emotionally connected to elderly parents. Spouses frequently become responsible for legal assistance, financial support, and everyday survival after arrests or forced migration. The closer the relationship, the greater the psychological leverage available to institutions seeking compliance.

For this reason, relatives often become indirect participants in conflicts they neither initiated nor controlled.

Importantly, this process rarely requires illegal actions. A police officer may formally conduct a preventive visit. Child protection authorities may request information concerning minors. Investigators may summon parents for questioning. Local officials may inquire about the whereabouts of family members. Each measure can be presented as an isolated administrative procedure.

The experience of the affected family is entirely different.

Events that appear unrelated in legal documents begin to merge into a continuous pattern. One visit follows another. Questions become increasingly specific. Officials demonstrate detailed knowledge of the family's private life. Conversations gradually shift from gathering information toward communicating expectations. At that stage, the formal purpose of individual procedures becomes less significant than their cumulative psychological effect.

Pressure therefore develops not through one dramatic act but through repetition.

Repeated contact produces uncertainty. Uncertainty generates anticipation. Anticipation gradually transforms ordinary family life into a permanent state of vigilance. Telephone calls acquire new meaning. Unexpected visitors become a source of anxiety. Every communication from authorities raises questions that cannot immediately be answered.

The mechanism is remarkably efficient precisely because much of it remains informal. Formal accusations require evidence, procedural safeguards, and judicial review. Informal pressure often requires nothing more than continued institutional presence.

Under such conditions, family members begin adjusting their own behavior long before any legal decision is made. Some reduce public activity. Others avoid communication with journalists or human rights organizations. Some attempt to persuade politically active relatives to remain

silent, not because they disagree with their views, but because they fear additional consequences for the family.

In this way, coercion extends beyond the original target without formally expanding the boundaries of prosecution.

The family itself becomes the medium through which political pressure continues to operate.

Every political system seeks to influence behavior. Democratic institutions usually rely on persuasion, elections, judicial review, and public accountability. Authoritarian systems possess the same objective but employ a different set of instruments. Their effectiveness depends not only on the capacity to punish but also on the ability to shape expectations before punishment becomes necessary.

This distinction deserves attention.

A prison sentence imposed after a political protest affects one individual. The expectation that similar consequences may extend to parents, spouses, or children affects many more people who never participated in political activity themselves. The anticipated cost of dissent therefore becomes substantially higher than the formal legal sanction alone.

The family occupies a particularly important place in this process because it represents one of the few social institutions built upon long-term emotional obligations rather than contractual relationships. Individuals may change employers, political organizations, or places of residence. Family relationships cannot be altered with similar ease.

Pressure directed toward relatives therefore produces effects that direct sanctions frequently cannot achieve.

An activist may be prepared for arrest. A journalist may anticipate prosecution. A lawyer may expect professional retaliation. Few, however, are psychologically prepared to watch elderly parents repeatedly questioned by investigators or to receive reports that child welfare authorities have begun visiting family members.

At that point the decision confronting the politically active individual changes fundamentally.

The question is no longer whether personal sacrifice is acceptable.

The question becomes whether relatives should bear consequences for choices they never made.

This distinction alters both individual decision-making and institutional strategy.

When family members become involved, political participation acquires an additional moral dimension. Individuals begin evaluating not only risks to themselves but also possible consequences for those who depend upon them or whom they feel obligated to protect. The resulting calculations frequently produce restraint even where ideological commitment remains unchanged.

Such outcomes illustrate an important characteristic of indirect coercion.

Its success does not depend upon the number of criminal convictions ultimately obtained.

Success is achieved when anticipated pressure changes behavior before legal intervention becomes necessary.

For this reason, informal institutional practices deserve as much analytical attention as formal criminal proceedings.

Repeated administrative visits, requests for information, interviews with relatives, inspections by social agencies, and similar activities may appear insignificant when examined separately. Their cumulative impact, however, extends far beyond the immediate administrative purpose of each action.

The institutional message becomes increasingly clear without ever requiring explicit articulation.

Authorities possess the ability to enter private life whenever they consider it appropriate.

Once this understanding becomes established, many families begin regulating themselves.

Some discourage relatives from speaking publicly. Others avoid participation in civic initiatives. Communication with journalists becomes less frequent. Social media activity declines. Public criticism gradually disappears, not necessarily because opinions have changed, but because the perceived cost of expressing those opinions has increased.

From an institutional perspective, this represents an efficient outcome.

No additional criminal proceedings are required.

No further convictions become necessary.

Behavior has already been modified.

The mechanism therefore operates through anticipation rather than punishment.

Understanding this distinction is essential because it explains why relatively limited administrative actions may produce disproportionately large political effects. Their significance lies less in immediate legal consequences than in their ability to reshape expectations inside thousands of ordinary families simultaneously.

Political coercion is commonly described through the relationship between the state and the individual. This perspective is understandable because criminal prosecution, administrative liability, and judicial proceedings are directed toward identifiable persons whose names appear in investigative files and court decisions. Such an approach, however, explains only the visible portion of a much broader institutional process.

Outside official documents exists another sphere that rarely becomes the subject of legal analysis. Every politically active individual is embedded within a network of personal relationships. Parents continue living in the same neighborhoods where they have spent decades. Children attend schools, receive medical care, and depend upon adults for protection. Spouses maintain employment, communicate with relatives, and attempt to preserve ordinary family life even when political events begin to dominate everyday existence. None of these people necessarily participate in political activity. Nevertheless, their connection to one politically visible individual changes the way institutions interact with them.

This transformation does not usually begin with dramatic events. There is often no immediate arrest of family members, no public accusations, and no formal recognition that relatives themselves have become objects of institutional attention. Instead, the first indications appear gradually. A local police officer unexpectedly visits elderly parents. Investigators request information that could easily have been obtained from official records. Representatives of social services begin asking questions unrelated to their ordinary responsibilities. Educational institutions suddenly demonstrate unusual interest in family circumstances. Each encounter appears insignificant when viewed independently. Together they create a different reality.

The cumulative nature of these contacts deserves particular attention. Families rarely perceive individual administrative actions as isolated events. Human experience does not divide life according to institutional jurisdictions. Parents do not distinguish between an inquiry made by an investigator, a conversation initiated by a local police officer, or questions asked by child welfare authorities. They experience all these interactions as manifestations of a single process whose boundaries remain uncertain and whose future trajectory cannot be predicted.

Uncertainty itself becomes one of the principal instruments of pressure.

Unlike imprisonment, uncertainty has no fixed duration. It is impossible to determine when official interest will end, whether additional visits should be expected, or whether the next conversation will remain informal. This absence of clear limits gradually alters daily behavior. Families begin anticipating institutional intervention even when none occurs. Telephone calls interrupt ordinary routines. Unexpected visitors immediately provoke anxiety. Discussions inside the family increasingly concern not future plans but possible risks.

Psychological adaptation follows a predictable pattern. Individuals attempt first to interpret isolated events as coincidence. As similar encounters accumulate, coincidence becomes increasingly implausible. Eventually, many families abandon the search for rational explanations and instead reorganize their lives around the expectation that further institutional attention is inevitable.

From the perspective of political governance, this mechanism possesses an important advantage. Institutions need not employ continuous coercion. The expectation that intervention remains possible often produces the desired behavioral changes without requiring additional

administrative measures. Families begin limiting public communication, discouraging political participation, avoiding journalists, reducing social media activity, and distancing themselves from individuals already associated with political controversy. Self-restraint emerges not because beliefs have changed, but because uncertainty has become incorporated into ordinary life.

The distinction between punishment and anticipation therefore becomes fundamental. Political repression is commonly measured through arrests, convictions, or prison sentences because these outcomes are visible and statistically measurable. The broader social consequences frequently remain outside quantitative analysis. Yet institutions capable of reshaping behavior before formal sanctions become necessary may exercise greater influence than those relying exclusively upon criminal prosecution. Understanding this broader process is essential for explaining why indirect pressure directed toward relatives has become an increasingly effective component of contemporary authoritarian governance.

4. The Social Dynamics of Indirect Coercion

One of the least studied aspects of political repression concerns the way institutional pressure moves from one individual to another without any formal transfer of legal responsibility. Courts sentence individuals. Investigators question specific witnesses or suspects. Administrative agencies communicate with identifiable citizens. Officially, every action remains directed toward a particular person. Human experience, however, follows a different logic.

Families rarely perceive institutional intervention as a collection of independent legal procedures. A summons delivered to one member of the household immediately becomes a source of anxiety for everyone living under the same roof. A search conducted in the apartment of elderly parents is not experienced exclusively by the property owners. Adult children living hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away frequently describe the event as if it had occurred in their own homes. Emotional proximity alters the boundaries within which state action is experienced.

This observation deserves closer examination because it illustrates an important distinction between legal responsibility and psychological responsibility. Legal systems generally recognize only the former. Psychological experience recognizes neither geographical distance nor procedural status. Parents often suffer long before any legal consequences affect their children. Adult children experience guilt for difficulties imposed upon aging parents even when they possess no ability to influence institutional decisions. Spouses frequently become overwhelmed by a persistent feeling that every public statement, interview, publication, or legal appeal may expose the rest of the family to additional pressure.

The resulting emotional burden cannot be explained solely through fear of punishment. Fear usually concerns identifiable consequences. Psychological transfer operates through uncertainty. Individuals rarely know whether institutional attention has reached its final stage or merely

begun. Every new contact with authorities acquires symbolic meaning because it may indicate further escalation while providing almost no reliable information about what may happen next.

Uncertainty therefore reshapes ordinary family communication. Conversations that previously concerned employment, education, health, or future plans become dominated by risk assessment. Parents ask whether it is safe to continue speaking by telephone. Children begin avoiding political discussions even within the family. Decisions about travel, employment, social media activity, and communication with journalists become subjects of collective deliberation rather than personal choice. Political pressure gradually enters domains of life that previously existed entirely outside politics.

This transformation produces another consequence that deserves attention. Family members increasingly assume responsibility for protecting one another, even when no one explicitly asks them to do so. Parents attempt to shield their children from disturbing information. Adult children withhold details of ongoing investigations to prevent elderly relatives from worrying. Spouses edit their own behavior in order to reduce anxiety experienced by the other partner. The family begins functioning less as a community organized around everyday life and more as a system continuously adapting to external institutional uncertainty.¹¹

Such adaptation frequently carries long-term costs. Emotional exhaustion accumulates gradually rather than appearing after a single traumatic event. Continuous anticipation of possible intervention requires sustained psychological effort. Unlike acute trauma, which is associated with a specific episode, prolonged uncertainty may continue for months or years without any identifiable conclusion. During this period individuals often report sleep disturbances, chronic anxiety, difficulty concentrating, irritability, depressive symptoms, and persistent feelings of insecurity even after leaving the country in which the original events occurred.

The significance of these observations extends beyond psychology. From the perspective of institutional governance, the transfer of pressure through family relationships dramatically expands the reach of state influence without requiring a proportional expansion of coercive resources. A relatively small number of administrative actions directed toward selected individuals may indirectly affect dozens of relatives, close friends, and colleagues. The practical consequences therefore exceed the immediate legal scope of each official intervention.

Seen from this perspective, family pressure should not be understood merely as an unintended side effect of political investigations. It performs a distinct institutional function. By increasing the anticipated personal cost of civic participation, it influences future decisions made not only by those already under scrutiny but also by people who observe these experiences from within their own families and communities. The resulting effect reaches far beyond the original investigation and becomes part of a broader system of informal behavioral regulation.

¹¹ Igor Leonov and Yurii Savchuk, *Institutional Fear and Self-Censorship as Mechanisms of Social Adaptation in Highly Regulated Political Systems* (SSRN, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6767778>

Political pressure directed toward families is frequently interpreted through the actions of individual institutions. Police officers conduct interviews. Investigators issue summonses. Child welfare authorities communicate with parents. Educational institutions request information concerning children. Local administrative officials perform routine inspections. Examined separately, each organization appears to pursue objectives falling within its formal legal competence.

This fragmented perspective explains administrative procedures but does not fully explain lived experience.

Families rarely encounter these institutions as independent actors. They encounter them sequentially. A visit by one agency is followed by contact from another. Questions asked by different officials appear unrelated in legal terms but remarkably consistent from the perspective of those receiving them. The cumulative result is the emergence of a single psychological reality despite the absence of any formally declared coordination.

Whether direct institutional coordination exists in every individual case is less important than the perception created by repeated interactions.

Social experience develops through patterns rather than through legal classifications. When elderly parents receive visits from local police officers, are later contacted by investigators, and subsequently communicate with child welfare authorities, they seldom interpret these events as isolated administrative coincidences. Instead, they begin viewing them as different manifestations of continuing official attention directed toward the same family.

This process illustrates an important feature of contemporary governance. Institutional influence may emerge through accumulation rather than through centralization. Even where every official acts strictly within the scope of his or her organizational authority, the combined effect may substantially exceed the intended consequences of any individual action.

The significance of this cumulative effect extends beyond administrative practice. It reshapes expectations about the relationship between citizens and public institutions. Agencies that ordinarily perform unrelated functions gradually become associated with a common experience of uncertainty. Over time, institutional diversity disappears from the perspective of affected families. What remains is a generalized perception that the state, regardless of which office is involved on a particular day, possesses continuous access to private family life.

This transformation alters the social meaning of institutions themselves.

Child protection agencies, for example, ordinarily exist to safeguard children's welfare. Police officers are expected to maintain public order. Investigators are responsible for examining alleged criminal conduct. These institutional mandates perform important functions in every modern state. Their public legitimacy, however, depends upon citizens perceiving them as politically neutral.

Once families begin associating these institutions with political pressure rather than their primary statutory purposes, public trust inevitably changes. Parents become reluctant to seek assistance from agencies that they increasingly perceive as potential instruments of political influence. Ordinary administrative interaction acquires emotional significance extending far beyond its formal legal purpose.

The consequences of this institutional convergence are not limited to politically active individuals. Neighbors observe repeated official visits. Extended family members become aware of continuing administrative attention. Professional colleagues recognize emerging risks associated with maintaining close relationships. Gradually, the perceived boundaries of political consequences expand beyond those directly involved.

From a sociological perspective, this represents one of the defining characteristics of indirect repression. The objective is achieved not only through actions directed toward the original subject of institutional interest but also through the broader redistribution of uncertainty across an individual's social environment. Political influence therefore extends through ordinary administrative structures without necessarily requiring extraordinary legal mechanisms.

Political systems differ in ideology, constitutional design, and institutional structure. They differ far less in one practical objective: reducing behavior perceived as threatening to political stability. The methods chosen to achieve this objective depend not only on legal authority but also on available administrative resources. Large-scale surveillance, continuous criminal prosecution, and extensive imprisonment are expensive. They require personnel, financial support, judicial capacity, and long-term organizational commitment.

Indirect pressure operates according to a different economic logic.

Once the probability of consequences extends beyond the politically active individual, the number of people influenced by a single intervention increases substantially. An interrogation of one parent may alter the decisions of several adult children. A visit to elderly relatives may affect an entire family network. Administrative attention directed toward one household may quickly become known among neighbors, colleagues, and friends. Information spreads through ordinary social communication much faster than formal legal decisions.

This multiplication effect deserves attention because it changes the relationship between institutional effort and political outcome. A relatively small number of official actions can generate a much broader behavioral response than would be expected if only the direct recipients were affected. Institutions no longer rely exclusively on punishment itself. They increasingly rely on observation of punishment and anticipation of its possible extension.

The effectiveness of this mechanism depends upon several characteristics of family life. Family relationships are usually long-term, emotionally significant, and difficult to replace. Individuals frequently accept personal risk when acting according to deeply held convictions. The same individuals often become considerably more cautious when they believe that parents, spouses, or

children may experience adverse consequences because of those convictions. Responsibility toward relatives introduces considerations that extend beyond personal courage or political commitment.

This does not necessarily mean that people abandon their beliefs. More often, they alter their behavior while preserving those beliefs. Public statements become less frequent. Participation in civic initiatives declines. Journalists postpone publication of sensitive material. Researchers avoid politically controversial subjects. Lawyers decline certain cases. Social media accounts become inactive or disappear entirely. None of these decisions requires a formal prohibition. They emerge from individual calculations shaped by perceived risks to other people.

For this reason, indirect coercion should not be understood simply as an extension of punishment. It functions primarily as a mechanism influencing future decision-making. The objective is preventive rather than retrospective. Institutions need not respond to every act of dissent if they succeed in persuading others that similar actions may expose their families to prolonged uncertainty.

The broader social consequences extend beyond those directly involved. Communities gradually internalize new expectations concerning acceptable public behavior. Political caution begins to appear prudent rather than imposed. Silence increasingly resembles ordinary social adaptation rather than the product of external pressure. At this stage, institutional influence becomes partially self-sustaining because citizens themselves begin reproducing the behavioral norms that pressure originally sought to establish.

The distinction between fear and adaptation is particularly important. Fear usually implies an immediate emotional reaction to a recognizable threat. Adaptation describes something more enduring. Individuals reorganize daily routines, professional plans, and personal relationships in response to an environment they no longer expect to change in the near future. Over time these adjustments become habitual. New patterns of behavior are no longer experienced as extraordinary precautions but as ordinary features of everyday life.

From the perspective of social analysis, this transition marks the point at which indirect pressure ceases to be merely a collection of administrative practices. It becomes part of the institutional environment within which families make decisions about employment, education, migration, civic participation, and communication. The political significance of this transformation lies precisely in its invisibility. Unlike arrests or criminal convictions, changes in everyday behavior rarely appear in official statistics. Yet they may represent one of the most consequential outcomes of contemporary systems of political control.

5. Institutional Evolution of Family Pressure in Contemporary Russia

The analytical framework developed in the preceding sections provides a conceptual basis for examining indirect coercion through family relationships. The Russian experience following the

expansion of political repression during the past decade offers an opportunity to observe how these mechanisms appear within a contemporary institutional environment.

Political repression in Russia has traditionally been examined through criminal prosecutions, restrictions on public assembly, censorship, and limitations imposed upon political organizations and independent media. These developments have been documented extensively by legal scholars, journalists, and international human rights organizations. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the gradual expansion of institutional pressure beyond politically active individuals toward members of their families.

This expansion did not occur through the creation of a single new institution or through explicit legislative recognition of collective responsibility. Instead, it appears to have developed incrementally through existing administrative structures. Institutions possessing distinct statutory responsibilities—including investigative bodies, law enforcement agencies, local administrations, educational organizations, and child welfare authorities—became increasingly present in situations involving politically sensitive families. Although each institution continued operating within its own formal sphere of competence, affected families frequently experienced these interactions as components of one continuing process.

The period following February 2022 appears particularly significant in this respect. The rapid increase in criminal investigations related to anti-war expression, public criticism of governmental policy, independent journalism, and online publications substantially expanded the number of families entering direct contact with state institutions. As political investigations became more frequent, reports describing repeated communication with relatives likewise became increasingly visible in legal documents, media reporting, witness testimony, and asylum proceedings.¹²

An important feature of this development concerns the diversity of institutional pathways through which family pressure may emerge. In some documented cases, investigators contacted elderly parents while attempting to establish the whereabouts of politically active relatives. In others, local police officers conducted repeated preventive visits that formally remained outside criminal proceedings. Some families described communication initiated by child welfare authorities, educational institutions, or municipal administrations after politically sensitive events involving one member of the household. Although the factual circumstances differed considerably from case to case, the resulting social experience displayed notable similarities.

Another characteristic deserving attention is the gradual transition from direct legal intervention toward administrative continuity. Earlier studies of political repression frequently concentrated on visible events such as arrests, searches, prosecutions, or convictions. Contemporary accounts increasingly describe processes unfolding over extended periods through repeated institutional

¹² Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Russia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025); United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Russian Federation* (2024).

contact rather than singular acts of coercion. The cumulative effect of these interactions often becomes more significant than any individual administrative measure considered separately.

This transformation has important implications for understanding political adaptation. Families no longer respond exclusively to completed legal actions. They increasingly respond to expectations created by continuing institutional presence. Repeated visits, requests for information, interviews, administrative inquiries, and informal conversations contribute to an environment in which uncertainty itself becomes a durable social condition. The distinction between active investigation and anticipated intervention gradually loses practical importance from the perspective of those experiencing these processes.

The Russian experience therefore illustrates a broader institutional development. Political influence increasingly extends beyond the direct application of legal sanctions into areas of everyday social life where family relationships, educational institutions, local administration, and public services intersect. This evolution does not replace traditional mechanisms of political repression. Rather, it complements them by expanding the range of institutions through which political consequences may be experienced.

Understanding this institutional evolution provides the empirical context necessary for examining the recurring forms of family pressure discussed in the following section.

6. Patterns of Family Pressure

Individual cases often appear unique when examined in isolation. Each family has its own history, political circumstances, professional background, and sequence of interactions with public authorities. For this reason, legal proceedings usually focus on the specific facts of one person's case. Social research pursues a different objective. Rather than asking whether two events are identical, it asks whether they reveal recurring institutional patterns.

Viewed from this perspective, reports published by journalists, testimony presented in asylum proceedings, documentation collected by human rights organizations, and interviews conducted with political emigrants reveal a striking degree of structural similarity. Although the individuals involved differ considerably in age, profession, region of residence, and political activity, descriptions of pressure directed toward their relatives frequently follow comparable trajectories.

The recurrence of these trajectories does not by itself establish centralized coordination. Similar institutional outcomes may arise through common administrative practices, shared organizational culture, comparable risk assessments by public officials, or explicit coordination between agencies. Distinguishing among these explanations requires evidence that often remains inaccessible to independent researchers. Nevertheless, recurring behavioral patterns remain analytically significant regardless of the administrative mechanisms that produce them. Their consistency allows classification.

The material examined for this study suggests four recurring forms of indirect pressure. These forms should not be understood as rigid categories. In practice they often overlap, reinforce one another, and appear sequentially rather than simultaneously. Together, however, they describe the principal pathways through which political pressure extends from one individual to the broader family environment.

6.1 Pressure Through Elderly Parents

Among all relatives, elderly parents occupy a particularly vulnerable position. Their age frequently limits mobility, access to legal assistance, and ability to withstand prolonged psychological pressure. Many continue living at long-established addresses known to local authorities, making them easily accessible for repeated administrative contact.

Unlike politically active adult children, elderly parents often possess little experience interacting with investigative bodies or defending themselves against institutional pressure. Unexpected visits from police officers or investigators therefore carry considerable psychological weight. Even when conversations remain formally polite, repeated official attention may produce persistent anxiety because older individuals rarely possess sufficient information to distinguish routine administrative procedures from the initial stages of criminal investigation.

Another characteristic repeatedly appears in accounts provided by affected families. Parents are frequently placed in a position where they are expected to become intermediaries between public authorities and their adult children. Officials may request information concerning whereabouts, methods of communication, employment, or travel. They may also encourage parents to persuade family members to return, cooperate with investigators, or discontinue public activities. Whether such requests are framed as advice, recommendations, or informal conversations, they redefine the relationship between parent and child by introducing institutional expectations into what had previously been a private family bond.

The consequences extend beyond the immediate encounter. Adult children living abroad often describe feelings of responsibility that exceed concern for their own legal situation. Knowledge that aging parents continue receiving official visits may influence decisions concerning public advocacy, academic publications, participation in conferences, communication with journalists, or cooperation with human rights organizations. Pressure directed toward parents therefore frequently achieves its primary effect through the emotional response of children who are no longer physically present in the country.

This observation highlights an important feature of indirect coercion. Physical distance does not necessarily reduce institutional influence. In some circumstances it strengthens it. Individuals who have already left the country may possess limited ability to protect elderly relatives while remaining acutely aware that continued public activity could expose those relatives to additional attention. Geographic separation thus creates a condition in which responsibility persists while practical capacity to intervene largely disappears.

6.2. Pressure Through Children and Child Welfare Institutions

Among the patterns identified in this study, institutional attention involving minor children occupies a distinct position. Unlike contacts with elderly parents or spouses, actions connected with child welfare affect one of the most fundamental dimensions of family life. They introduce uncertainty into the relationship between parents and children themselves, thereby transforming political pressure into a question of parental responsibility.

In most legal systems, agencies responsible for child protection perform an essential public function. Their purpose is to safeguard children from neglect, violence, exploitation, or other circumstances threatening their well-being. Public confidence in these institutions depends upon the expectation that intervention is guided exclusively by the best interests of the child rather than by considerations unrelated to child welfare.¹³

The analytical difficulty begins when political conflicts and family oversight become interconnected.

Parents who have experienced political pressure often describe contacts with child welfare institutions differently from families encountering those institutions in ordinary social work. The concern expressed in their testimony is not limited to the immediate administrative procedure. Rather, it concerns the broader context within which such contacts occur. When visits by social workers follow police interviews, investigative inquiries, or other forms of official attention directed toward politically active family members, they are no longer interpreted as isolated administrative events. They become part of a wider pattern whose meaning extends beyond the formal purpose of any individual institution.

This shift in perception has important consequences. Parents generally regard themselves as personally capable of accepting significant risks in defense of their convictions. Their calculations change considerably when those risks appear capable of affecting their children. Decisions concerning public activity, communication with journalists, participation in academic conferences, cooperation with human rights organizations, or publication of politically sensitive material are increasingly evaluated not only in terms of personal consequences but also through the possibility—whether real or merely perceived—that institutional attention may extend toward the family.

Such concerns need not culminate in formal legal proceedings in order to alter behavior. The possibility that child welfare authorities may request information, initiate inquiries, or maintain continuing contact is often sufficient to influence parental decision-making. The uncertainty surrounding the threshold for institutional intervention becomes part of everyday family life.

¹³ Jill Duerr Berrick, *The Impossible Imperative: Navigating the Competing Principles of Child Protection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Parents begin asking themselves not whether action has already been taken, but whether future actions remain possible.

From a sociological perspective, this mechanism differs fundamentally from direct punishment. Criminal sanctions are retrospective. They respond to conduct that has already occurred. Family-centered pressure is prospective. Its principal effect lies in shaping future decisions by introducing additional variables into the process of risk assessment. Parents become responsible not only for evaluating potential consequences to themselves but also for estimating uncertain consequences that may affect individuals entirely dependent upon them.

Children themselves frequently remain unaware of the political processes unfolding around them. Nevertheless, changes in family routines gradually become visible. Conversations become more cautious. Certain topics disappear from ordinary discussion. Parents avoid answering unexpected telephone calls in the presence of children. Decisions concerning school, travel, residence, and communication with relatives increasingly reflect considerations that children cannot fully understand. The political environment therefore enters childhood indirectly, through alterations in the emotional atmosphere of the family rather than through explicit political discussion.

The long-term implications extend beyond individual households. When sufficient numbers of families begin making comparable adjustments, institutional influence reaches domains that ordinarily remain outside formal politics. Child-rearing practices, educational choices, migration decisions, and patterns of social interaction gradually incorporate expectations formed under conditions of prolonged uncertainty. The result is not merely the protection of children from perceived risks, but the reorganization of family life around the anticipation of possible institutional intervention.

This observation suggests that the significance of child welfare institutions within politically sensitive environments cannot be evaluated solely through statutory authority or formal legal procedures. Equal attention should be devoted to the meanings families attribute to institutional contact. Where political pressure has already become part of lived experience, identical administrative actions may produce profoundly different social consequences than they would under ordinary conditions. Understanding these subjective perceptions is therefore essential for explaining why institutions originally established to protect children may, in certain political contexts, become associated with broader systems of indirect coercion.

6.3. Pressure After Emigration

One of the more distinctive developments observed in recent years concerns the continuation of institutional attention after politically active individuals have left the country. At first glance, migration would appear to reduce the effectiveness of domestic administrative measures. Physical distance limits the possibility of direct intervention, and individuals residing abroad

often become subject to a different legal jurisdiction. Nevertheless, available evidence suggests that emigration does not necessarily terminate the relationship between politically active families and state institutions in their country of origin.¹⁴

The explanation lies in the fact that migration rarely relocates the entire social network. Parents frequently remain in their original place of residence. Extended families continue to occupy the same homes, maintain the same telephone numbers, and interact with the same local authorities. Property, financial obligations, medical care, and long-established personal relationships often remain concentrated in the country of origin long after the politically active individual has departed.

Under these conditions, geographical distance changes the form of institutional influence rather than eliminating it. Direct interaction with the original subject of official interest may become less frequent, while communication with relatives acquires greater significance. Information concerning an individual's activities abroad, place of residence, publications, public appearances, or professional contacts may continue to attract institutional attention through family members who remain accessible within the domestic administrative system.

An additional consequence of emigration deserves consideration. Families living abroad frequently assume that departure from the country has resolved the immediate danger. When subsequent contacts with relatives demonstrate continuing official interest, migration itself ceases to represent a clear boundary between past and present. Political pressure is no longer experienced as something left behind. It becomes a continuing condition extending across national borders through family relationships that migration cannot dissolve.

This continuity has important implications for adaptation. Political emigrants commonly describe uncertainty not only regarding their own future but also concerning the well-being of relatives who remain behind. Decisions about professional activity, public advocacy, academic research, media participation, or communication with international organizations are therefore influenced by circumstances developing in another country, beyond their practical ability to control. Emigration alters the geography of pressure without necessarily reducing its psychological reach.

6.4. Pressure Through Public Visibility

Not every politically active individual becomes the subject of equal institutional attention. Available evidence indicates that the intensity of indirect pressure often increases as public visibility expands. Journalists, researchers, lawyers, civic activists, public speakers, and individuals whose work reaches wider audiences frequently report that institutional attention extends beyond their own activities to include people closely connected with them.¹⁵

¹⁴ Freedom House, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021); Dana M. Moss, *The Arab Spring Abroad: Transnational Activism and Authoritarian Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

Public visibility changes the institutional context in two important respects. First, publications, interviews, conference presentations, social media activity, and professional collaborations create publicly accessible records of an individual's views and activities. Second, they increase the symbolic significance of that individual. A public statement does not merely express a personal opinion; it also becomes part of a broader public discussion. Institutional responses may therefore seek not only to influence one speaker but also to discourage similar activity among others occupying comparable professional roles.

Indirect pressure assumes particular importance under these conditions. Public figures often anticipate legal criticism directed toward themselves. They are usually less prepared for consequences affecting family members who have played no role in producing public work. The prospect that relatives may become subjects of administrative attention introduces considerations extending far beyond professional responsibility.

Academic publications illustrate this dynamic particularly well. Research addressing politically sensitive topics may continue circulating long after its initial publication. Unlike a public demonstration or a single interview, scholarly work remains permanently accessible, can be cited by others, translated into additional languages, and incorporated into future discussions. The temporal dimension of academic communication therefore differs substantially from many other forms of civic participation. Institutional attention, where it occurs, may likewise extend over longer periods.

From a sociological perspective, this illustrates a broader transformation in the relationship between knowledge production and political authority. Research is traditionally evaluated through standards of evidence, methodology, and scholarly debate. Where political considerations begin influencing responses to academic work, researchers may gradually alter not only what they publish but also what they choose not to investigate. The resulting limitation is difficult to measure because unpublished research leaves almost no empirical trace. Yet its cumulative effect may shape entire fields of inquiry by narrowing the range of questions that scholars are willing to pursue.

7. Rethinking Collective Responsibility

The phenomenon examined in this study raises questions extending beyond political repression itself. It challenges long-established assumptions concerning the relationship between legal responsibility, institutional authority, and family life. Contemporary legal systems generally reject the principle of collective punishment. Responsibility is presumed to belong to the individual whose conduct allegedly violates the law. This principle remains one of the fundamental distinctions separating modern constitutional governance from historical systems in which families, clans, or entire communities could be sanctioned for the actions of one person.

The experiences analyzed in this article suggest that the practical consequences of political pressure may develop according to a different logic. Formal legal responsibility may remain individual while psychological, social, and economic consequences gradually extend far beyond the original subject of institutional attention. The distinction is significant because it reveals that collective effects do not necessarily require collective legal liability.

This observation encourages a reconsideration of how collective responsibility should be understood in contemporary political environments. Traditionally the concept referred to legal doctrines explicitly assigning liability to groups. Such practices are comparatively easy to identify because they appear in legislation, judicial decisions, or administrative regulations. Indirect pressure operates differently. It often leaves formal legal principles untouched while producing outcomes that many affected families experience as collective in practice.

The difference is more than semantic. Legal analysis generally evaluates institutional behavior through statutory authority and procedural compliance. Sociology examines how institutions are experienced by those interacting with them. These perspectives do not always produce identical conclusions. A sequence of administrative actions may satisfy formal legal requirements while simultaneously generating a broader perception that an entire family has become the object of continuing institutional attention. Neither perspective is necessarily incorrect. They describe different dimensions of the same process.

Recognizing this distinction expands the analytical framework available to researchers. Rather than asking only whether particular administrative measures were lawful, it becomes equally important to ask how combinations of individually lawful actions influence family decision-making, perceptions of security, and patterns of civic participation. The cumulative effects may prove socially significant even where each isolated action appears legally unremarkable.

This shift in perspective also has implications for the study of political behavior. Political participation is often analyzed as the product of ideology, personal values, organizational affiliation, or expected legal consequences.¹⁶ Less attention has been devoted to the role of family obligations as an independent variable shaping civic engagement. Yet the material examined here suggests that individuals frequently adjust public behavior not because their political convictions have weakened, but because responsibility toward relatives becomes a dominant factor in assessing future risks.

Such decisions are often interpreted as evidence of declining political engagement. An alternative interpretation deserves consideration. Reduced public activity may reflect not diminished commitment but increased concern for the well-being of family members. The distinction matters because identical observable behavior may arise from fundamentally different motivations.

¹⁶ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

The findings presented here also contribute to broader discussions concerning authoritarian resilience. Much of the existing literature explains institutional stability through legal restrictions, control over information, electoral management, or coercive capacity. These factors remain important. At the same time, the analysis presented in this article suggests that the family itself may constitute an underexamined element within the architecture of political control. Where institutional pressure extends into private relationships, governance acquires an additional layer operating largely outside formal political arenas.

This observation should not be understood as applying exclusively to one country or one historical period. The analytical framework developed here is intended to assist comparative research rather than produce country-specific conclusions. Similar mechanisms may emerge wherever political institutions acquire the capacity to influence behavior through family relationships instead of relying exclusively upon direct sanctions against politically active individuals. Comparative investigation across different jurisdictions therefore represents an important direction for future research.

Ultimately, the significance of family pressure lies not only in its immediate consequences for those directly affected. Its broader importance arises from the way it alters the boundaries between public authority and private life. Once political conflict enters the family, decisions previously regarded as personal—raising children, caring for elderly parents, choosing a profession, publishing research, or participating in public discussion—can no longer be understood solely as private matters. They become embedded within a wider institutional environment in which political expectations increasingly shape ordinary social relationships.

8. Conclusion

This study examined indirect pressure exerted on family members of politically active individuals as a distinct mechanism of contemporary political control. Rather than approaching individual incidents as isolated administrative events, the analysis considered how repeated interactions involving different public institutions are experienced by families over time and how these experiences influence subsequent behavior.

The findings suggest that the analytical significance of family pressure lies not primarily in the legal consequences of individual administrative actions but in their cumulative social effect. When relatives repeatedly encounter representatives of investigative bodies, law enforcement agencies, social institutions, or local authorities, the resulting experience is interpreted less through formal legal categories than through continuity. Families frequently perceive separate administrative contacts as components of a single institutional process regardless of whether those contacts originate within one organization or several independent agencies.

This distinction has broader implications for the study of political repression. Existing scholarship has traditionally concentrated on arrests, criminal prosecutions, imprisonment,

censorship, and other direct forms of state intervention. These measures remain central to understanding authoritarian governance. At the same time, they do not fully explain why individuals often modify their public behavior before formal sanctions become necessary. The material examined in this article indicates that responsibility toward parents, spouses, and children may become an equally important factor influencing political decision-making.

The analysis also demonstrates that indirect pressure extends the consequences of political conflict beyond the individual who originally attracted institutional attention. Family members frequently experience prolonged uncertainty despite having taken no part in political activity themselves. This uncertainty gradually alters patterns of communication, migration decisions, professional choices, civic participation, and everyday family life. Such changes are difficult to observe through legal documentation alone but become visible when examined from a sociological perspective.

Another conclusion concerns the relationship between formal legality and social experience. Administrative procedures that appear ordinary when evaluated individually may acquire a different meaning when they occur repeatedly within the same family over an extended period. The cumulative perception of continuing institutional attention becomes socially significant regardless of whether each individual action remains formally consistent with existing legal authority. Understanding this distinction requires combining legal analysis with the study of lived experience.

The framework proposed here should not be regarded as limited to a single national context. Although the empirical material considered in this article concerns contemporary Russia, the conceptual distinction between direct punishment and indirect family pressure may assist comparative research examining other political systems in which public institutions interact with relatives of politically active individuals. Future studies may therefore benefit from investigating similar mechanisms across different legal traditions, historical periods, and institutional environments.

The family has traditionally been understood as one of the primary institutions protecting individuals from external uncertainty. The evidence examined in this study suggests that under certain political conditions the same institution may gradually become a channel through which uncertainty is transmitted rather than reduced. Recognizing this transformation expands existing approaches to the study of political repression by demonstrating that the consequences of institutional pressure cannot always be understood through the experience of politically active individuals alone. They must also be examined through the lives of those whose only connection to political conflict is their relationship with someone who chose to speak, publish, protest, or simply express an opinion.

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