

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Authoritarian Gender Equality Policy Making: The Politics of Domestic Violence in Russia

Janet Elise Johnson

Brooklyn College, City University of New York, USA
Email: Johnson@brooklyn.cuny.edu

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Abstract

This article provides an analytical framework for understanding why and how many authoritarian regimes have recently adopted reforms that address gender equality. I illustrate and hone the framework by tracing three policy-making processes on domestic violence in Russia, an important and least-likely case for such reforms. While recent scholarship finds the importance of international leverage, strategic actions by women's groups, and regime interest in sidelining religious extremists, this study highlights other opportunities and agents and specifies authoritarian mechanisms such as intra-elite conflict, signaling between the autocrat and elites, and selective responsiveness. Drawing on the scholarship on authoritarian regime dynamics, policy making in Russia, and gender policy making, this study contributes to the literature on the relationship between gender and regime type by focusing on the micrologics of authoritarian policy making.

Keywords: Russia; gender policy; domestic violence; anti-gender; authoritarianism; regime dynamics; institutionalism

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, many authoritarian regimes adopted reforms that ostensibly addressed gender equality. Saudi Arabia, having prohibited women from voting or running for its consultative assembly, changed course in the 2010s; by 2020, women made up nearly one-fifth of the assembly's members, matching the average for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which has tripled since 2000 (IPU 2022). In the Maghreb particularly, comprehensive constitutional and legislative reforms have created more equitable family law, new laws against violence against women, and new protections of reproductive rights (Tripp 2019). Other authoritarian regimes, such as those in Laos, Ethiopia, Malaysia, and Uganda, have adopted legal reforms or set up entities supposedly to represent women or to make policy decisions that

promote gender equality (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2021). Rwanda continues to have the highest percentage of women in parliament, hovering near two-thirds, double the quota in its postgenocide constitution. Donno, Fox, and Kaasik's (2021, 3) cross-national study shows that "dictatorships are actively enacting women's rights legislation at rates that surpass democracies and that this is not explained simply by initial disparities in gender equality across regime type."

Such reforms have helped burnish these regimes' reputations, such as rehabilitating Saudi Arabia for U.S. leaders after recent atrocities at home and abroad. The United Arab Emirates is perhaps the most obvious in its strategy: since creating a federal Gender Balance Council in 2015, the country boasts about increasing its position on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index and the regime's "fundamental belief that women and men are equal partners in society" (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates 2022). Calling out the way these regimes are using gender equality reforms to distract from "persistent authoritarian practices," Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022, 61) label this dynamic "autocratic genderwashing." Given that more than half of all regimes worldwide are authoritarian (V-Dem Institute 2022), this is a crucial puzzle for political scientists.

Until these recent developments, comparativists who study gender have found authoritarian regimes in general to be more regressive on gender equality than democratic ones, though some subtypes of authoritarianism seem to be better than others (Tripp 2013, 517–18; see also Donno and Kreft 2019; Htun and Weldon 2018; Nazneen, Hickey, and Sifaki 2019). Socialist, postconflict, and party-based authoritarian regimes are more likely to adopt gender equality measures than rentier or military or personalistic regimes, with Arab autocracies being especially unlikely.

Recent literature on autocratic genderwashing points to a changed global context of increased influence of transnational and local women's movements following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the watershed 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing. Donno, Fox, and Kaasik (2021) point to international incentives, especially in countries susceptible to international pressure because of "aid dependence" or subject to "shaming." As Tripp (2019) elaborates in her analysis of the Maghreb reforms, the strategic actions of women's groups, in the context of more popular Islamist movements, nudged the regimes despite variations in their authoritarian subtype and historical accommodation of Islamist groups. These two studies, along with a few others that look at the recent reforms, suggest that authoritarian regimes genderwash because they seek to legitimate their rule internationally and/or to sideline religious extremists domestically (e.g., Bush and Gao 2017; Lorch and Bunk 2017). However, these studies are mostly focused on the MENA region, where there has been the most change, limiting their applicability to other cases, and those studies that are broader tend to use quantitative analyses that do not capture microprocesses of the authoritarian politics.

As part of this larger puzzle of autocratic genderwashing, this article investigates the micrologic of contemporary authoritarian gender equality policy making, asking how gender equality (and anti-gender equality) policies get made or not made. Extending the qualitative research beyond the MENA region, this

study focuses on Russia, which is an important authoritarian case. Russia influences gender equality not just within its borders but across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia by sponsoring illiberal groups and practices or by directly intervening, most evidently in its invasion of Ukraine, where there is evidence of use of sexual violence by Russian soldiers and their allies (UNHCR 2022). Russia, like most of these genderwashing regimes (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022), is an electoral authoritarian regime with democratic-seeming institutions like elected legislatures, political parties, and advisory councils.¹ But Russia is a least-likely case, as its geopolitical (including nuclear) and economic power makes it fairly immune to (and willing to disregard) international legitimizing pressures. Vladimir Putin has been increasingly siding with (rather than sidelining) the Russian Orthodox Church, which has become extremist in its rejection of gender-related human rights (Bluhm and Brand 2019). As this is a least-likely case, findings about how and why these mechanisms operate can help verify these emerging theories about autocratic genderwashing more broadly (Flyvbjerg 2006).

As expected of a least-likely case, Putin's Russia can hardly be accused of autocratic genderwashing. The common wisdom is that Russia has been backtracking on gender justice, most notably through increased restrictions on abortion since 2011 on top of a 2006 maternity "capital" program, repression of prominent feminist groups and individual activists starting with Pussy Riot in 2012, and partial decriminalization of domestic violence in 2017 (Johnson et al. 2021). But there have been some small progressive reforms: criminalization of trafficking in persons (2003), a maternity leave reform that made it easier for women to be compensated if fired while pregnant (2011), a small and short-lived reform on domestic violence (2016), and a shortened list of professions banned for women (2019). Here, I focus on the issue of domestic violence—that is, physical, sexual, or psychological violence between current (or former) family members, but predominantly by men against women—the only recent legislative reform (except for another minor reform on domestic violence in 2022). Scholars of genderwashing have focused on a variety of gender equality issues, gender quotas especially, but violence against women is a prominent one. This study compares three policy-making processes in Russia from the 2010s—an attempt to pass comprehensive domestic violence legislation, a criminal-legal reform on domestic violence, and its reversal—capturing a range of gender equality policy making.

Bringing in insights from the literatures on electoral authoritarianism and Russian policy making in addition to the gender policy-making literature more broadly, this article builds a comparative framework of authoritarian gender equality policy making that considers a variety of structural *opportunities*, *agents* beyond women's/feminist groups, and additional *mechanisms* such as intra-elite conflict, autocratic signaling, and selective responsiveness. For those who study autocratic genderwashing, the study shows when and why the politics of international legitimation and of managing extremist groups is likely to lead to gender equality policy making, but also when it does not or may even backfire, pointing out other important factors that influence authoritarian gender-related policy making. For those who study authoritarian policy making, it shows how to

incorporate gender as a policy issue as well as a part of the authoritarian political process.

Policy Frameworks

In this section, I show how the emerging scholarship on electoral authoritarianism and Russian policy making can refine the study of authoritarian gender equality policy making and help explain how and why authoritarian regimes are genderwashing in the twenty-first century.

Authoritarian Policy Making

Within the literature on comparative authoritarianism, there is very little recognition of the puzzle of twenty-first-century autocratic genderwashing. In addition to a general tendency to be gender-blind, policy making is assumed or found to be determined by elites, if not by the autocrats themselves, with legislatures “rubber-stamping” legislation that is assumed to be “window dressing” (Brancati 2014; Geddes et al. 2018). Public interests and social forces—such as protests, NGOs, or social movements—have been assumed to have limited or no role as “the basic notion of demobilization ... [is] a characteristic feature of authoritarian regimes” (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020, 4).

However, the literature on *electoral* authoritarianism has begun to challenge the blindness to authoritarian policy making, finding that elites give a lot of time and energy to making policy and that politics within authoritarian regimes somewhat resembles that in democracies in allowing input from broader interests (Ghandi, Noble, and Svulik 2020). The argument is that authoritarian regimes have become more likely to be selectively responsive because most are electoral authoritarian with democratic-seeming institutions that are important to regime stability (Boix and Svulik 2013; Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2010). Some of these scholars recognize that the selective responsiveness can include gender equality. For example, Miller (2015b, 1526, 1535–36) finds that electoral authoritarian regimes have “significantly better outcomes on health, education, [and] gender equality” than regimes without multiparty elections or elected legislatures. These public goods may be safer for the regime than the conventional autocratic tools of repression, fraud, or vote buying.

These realizations have led to theorizing around authoritarian policy making that builds upon “broader theories of authoritarian rule—co-optation, power-sharing, and information theories—to help structure analysis of micro-level processes” (Gandhi, Noble, and Svulik 2020, 1374). Gandhi (2008, xviii) argues that autocrats allow amendments to legislation proposed by the executive to co-opt potential opposition; elites use loyal legislators to get information about citizen grievances, allowing them to address issues that could spark resistance. Other scholars suggest that to keep elites from defecting, dictators may allow local popular politicians and sometimes even potential opposition to have some voice over formal policy making, in addition to access to spoils (Malesky and Schuler 2010; Reuter and Szakonyi 2019). Elections, even when there is no threat

of turnover, can allow “citizens to signal dissatisfaction with the regime [which] ruling parties use ... to calibrate policy concessions” (Miller 2015a, 691). The policy-making mechanisms themselves are analyzed within the dynamics of secrecy and information asymmetries, with the informal-formal dynamics navigated through signaling, the indirect provision of information (Boix and Svobik 2013; Malesky and Schuler 2010). While most legislators may “nod” at authorities, signaling agreement, others may “needle” them to push for alternatives based on their and their constituents’ different interests (Malesky and Schuler 2010), with those more secure vis-à-vis the regime less likely to rebel (Desposato 2001).

Policy Making in Russia

More developed, I argue, is the literature on policy making in Russia, which has been challenging the common claim that Putin is an all-powerful strongman who unilaterally determines policy, even as he is the formal president and chief patron of Russia’s competing pyramids of elite networks (Hale 2014; Ledeneva 2013). When “reform is the top political priority of the strong and authoritative head of state” (Gel’man and Starodubtsev 2016, 114), policy is made through Putin’s “manual control,” a top-down model in which Putin takes a clear and decisive role (Treisman 2018). This includes some gender-related policy, such as Russia’s maternity capital, which was introduced by Putin in a speech to the Federal Assembly in 2006. This model is evident with Putin making speeches indicating his policy preference, and then the relevant ministry, department, or agency heads (including courts and law enforcement) working to interpret, formulate legislation, and/or implement his preferences (Paneyakh and Rosenberg 2018; Schenk 2018; Taylor 2014). More common is what Treisman (2018) labels “normal politics,” which begins with these institutions, which formulate their preferred policies and then pass them up for Putin to endorse in his speeches. Sometimes elites in this second model directly appeal to Putin to get involved; he sometimes does, but not always, as any kind of failure—such as not getting a law passed—undermines his image as crucial to Russia’s success.

While many scholars consider the Federal Assembly, even the Duma, which has more formal responsibilities, to be a rubber stamp (“a mad printer” in Russian) (see, e.g., Remington 2007; for a discussion, see Noble and Schulmann 2018), others find that heads of the various bureaucracies and economic interests squabble and sometimes substantively change legislation, even bills sponsored by the president (Noble and Schulmann 2018; see also Noble 2020). While political parties may be important in some electoral authoritarian regimes, United Russia is “not the center of decision-making on policy,” instead serving mostly as a “vehicle for securing electoral victories for the Kremlin, which translate into majority voting blocs in the Duma” (Noble and Schulmann 2018, 74). There are a variety of other paraconstitutional policy bodies, such as the Public Chamber—which Putin created in 2005 and maintains a major role in appointing its members—and public councils within the various ministries.

While Putin is often understood to be crucial even in normal politics—with the policy advocate’s proximity within the elite networks seen as determinative

(Schenk 2018, 52; Taylor 2014; Treisman 2018)—other scholars find other actors important as well. The various executive, judicial, and law enforcement institutions have interests (whether simplifying procedures or increasing spoils) based on the policy arenas under their control, and there is a lot of intra-elite (sometimes vicious) competition over formal and informal spheres of influence, as these top-level insiders seek power and economic resources.² Schenk (2018, 48) suggests that “patron pacts,” in which patrons must keep their promises of jobs, informal benefits, and so on, operate throughout many levels of elites in order to maintain the client’s promise of loyalty, electoral outcomes, or administrative targets. Legislators must work within the pyramid of patron pacts while also sometimes balancing “populist pacts,” which require them to uphold public promises, made in response to perceived public opinion, to ensure electoral support. In both instances, their political survival often depends on their support for both types of pacts by passing legislation.

In Russia, social forces have a limited role, as Duma debates are seen as “largely untethered from societal concerns” (Noble and Schulmann 2018, 51). However, those who examine public opinion find that the regime is “selectively responsive” in that the president’s actions are at least partially driven by public opinion polls and by the Kremlin’s attempts to keep presidential approval high by responding to some demands while ignoring others that do not fit with its goals (Rogov and Ananyev 2018). Those who study NGOs recognize the greatest influence from the inner circle (“above”) or top bureaucrats or legislators (“inside”), but also find potential of civil society and public pressure (“below”) alongside international actors (“outside”) (Cook, Aasland, and Prisyazhnyuk 2019). Relying upon Kingdon’s ([1984] 2014, 227) multiple streams framework from the study of democratic policy making, others argue that public opinion (e.g., against egregious misconduct or in reaction to another focusing event) and NGOs can play an important, but not definitive, role in the process of framing issues and getting them on the agenda (Bogdanova, Cook, and Kulmala 2018; Taylor 2014). While most scholars of gender in Russia suggest that there is a symbiosis between the regime and the new conservatives, those who consider authoritarian regime dynamics argue that the Kremlin balanced cultivating conservative traditionalism with holding the conservatives at arm’s length (Bluhm and Brand 2019) until the year before Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine. Looking at Putin’s speeches through 2020, Johnson et al. (2021) found Putin to be tactically “mixing signals” on gender, speaking more to elites who support Soviet-style essentialism than these ultraconservatives.

Gender Equality Policy Making

In contrast with these two literatures, most of the scholarship on gender equality policy making is based on democracies, but increasingly, there is consideration of informal and authoritarian politics, especially among the new feminist institutionalism. Scholars had high hopes for increasing numbers of women in politics, but even in democracies, this increased descriptive representation has not led to commensurate gender equality policy making (Htun and Weldon 2012, 2018; Weldon 2011). Some scholars have found that the position of allies in power—

female or male—matters more than proportion of women in parliament (Blofield and Touchton 2020, 21). In authoritarian regimes, feminist institutionalists observe that women politicians are even less likely to be able to advocate for women; women elites are entrenched in informal elite networks that tend to be constituted by men and sustained through same-sex social bonds as well as forms of masculinity (Bjarnegård 2013; LeBlanc 2009). The head patrons of such networks are virtually always men who are reliant on appeals to “political fatherhood” (Charrad and Adams 2011). In Russia, for example, Putin is explicitly portrayed (through images of his masculine prowess) as the only man who can “get things done” (Sperling 2014). The elite networks rely on gendered informal practices (such as *kompromat*) to keep elites in line, allowing only a few women close to the inner circle and boxing them into circumscribed roles, such as demonstrating their extreme loyalty by proposing ideologically motivated policies (Bush and Gao 2017; Johnson 2016). This means that women elites closest to the patron-autocrat are less likely to rock the boat, while there may be some limited opportunities for those further from the patron-autocrat to advocate for gender equality (Johnson 2016; Nazneen, Hickey, and Sifaki 2019).

Other scholarship, especially Htun and Weldon’s (2012, 2018) cross-national study that includes a variety of regime types, argue that strong, autonomous feminist movements are the decisive factor in the success of gender equality policy making, especially on issues such as violence against women, which require significant change in policy and practice. But authoritarian regimes tend not to tolerate autonomous feminist movements, especially those that confront gender equality in the private sphere. Feminist scholars of authoritarianism find that moderate women’s movements are more likely to be influential (Kang 2015; Tripp 2019), especially through informal links between activists and those in power (Lorch and Bunk; Nazneen, Hickey, and Sifaki 2019; Tripp 2019).

As in the study of autocratic genderwashing specifically, the study of gender equality policy making points to the importance of international leverage, especially in the 1990s and 2000s and especially for violence against women. Transnational women’s organizations allied with human right advocates and donors to provide funding, framing, and legitimation for local activists to take on violence against women, leading to new laws in most countries (Johnson 2009; Nazneen, Hickey, Sifaki 2019). This alliance was made more real through international legal obligations, such as the United Nation’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which added violence against women to its 2000 Optional Protocol (Htun and Weldon 2018). Over the next two decades, there was a major shift in public opinion worldwide, and most states, at least publicly, now condemn violence against women and/or gender-based violence. The new scholarship on authoritarian gender equality policy making suggests that international legitimation is also important in authoritarian regimes, at least in those subject to international pressure (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2021).

However, while Htun and Weldon (2018) found violence against women not to be religiously controversial (in contrast to issues such as abortion), gender scholars looking at Europe and Latin America noticed a backlash emerging by the 2010s, with support from U.S. evangelicals and the Vatican, vilifying these

international efforts. It coalesced into a transnational “anti-gender” movement, with a “counter strategy that aims ... to refute claims concerning the hierarchical construction of the raced, gendered and heterosexual order [and] thwart gender and LGBTQ+ equality policies” (Corredor 2019, 616). Domestic violence became a target of this anti-gender countermovement as postcommunist states considered signing and ratifying the 2011 Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (Roggeband and Krizsán 2020). Before this, women’s movements had been proposing transformative frames that linked domestic violence to broader structural inequalities, but often had to settle for de-gendered frames of violence in the family and limited reforms, such as criminalization of domestic violence (Blofield and Haas 2013, 712). Afterward, there were contentious framing contests in which those in the anti-gender movement denied that domestic violence constitutes a policy problem. For Central and Eastern Europe, this anti-gender movement constitutes the extremists that feminist activists must get regimes to sideline. But, looking across Europe, scholars have found that local anti-gender affiliates tend to be advantaged vis-à-vis feminist ones, especially in less democratic regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, because they include actors in more powerful positions and they frame issues in ways that are more likely to resonate with societal norms (Verloo 2018).

Authoritarian Gender Equality Policy-Making Framework and Method

Together, these insights suggest a framework for explaining authoritarian gender-related policy making that considers the following:

1. **Opportunities:** The starting point of the process is either the autocrat taking a public stand or the opening of a structural opportunity. Structural opportunities include international leverage combined with more women in politics if regimes are seeking global approval, but also strategic predicaments created by elections that the regime wants to manage or by practical problems that government agencies and ministries want to solve.
2. **Agents:** If the policy is not unilaterally determined by the autocrat, the agents could be executive, judicial, or law enforcement elites or women’s/feminist groups with tactical framing of issues used to enlist legislators or other powerbrokers. These powerholders might be women because they have more interest in gender equality reform, but not necessarily because elite women in authoritarian regimes are often more precarious in the male-dominated networks. Religious/extremist groups, with their own allies including conservative women, are likely to form the opposition.
3. **Mechanisms:** Under the veneer of the formal policy-making process is likely a gendered signaling game. If the autocrat provides clear direction from above, passage of legislation is likely quick and virtually unanimous. Without clear direction from above, the (mostly male) heads of the relevant agencies may propose policy solutions, trying to guess and nod

to the autocrat's preference or to needle the regime toward a different direction, especially if they have a constituency pushing them during an election. There is uncertainty and precarity in this process, with consequences for needling the regime likely different for women than for men. The strength and clarity of the autocrat's signal is likely the critical juncture. The endpoint for each process is a change in legislation or a clear indication of a decision not to pass legislation.

I use this framework in the process tracing, followed by discussion of its implications for the study of authoritarian gender-related policy making. With a focus on the dynamics between feminist and anti-feminist forces, women as potential policy entrepreneurs, and trends in global norms around gender equality, the framework is particular to gender-related policy making. Htun and Weldon (2018, 8), arguing that policy scholars have long found that different types of policy issues drive different kinds of politics, find that this is even true within gender equality policy.

Tracing authoritarian policy making, which is purposefully opaque, is challenging. The Duma publishes minutes, not full transcripts, but comments in the Duma are only the tip of the political iceberg. It is impossible to observe the behind-closed-doors discussions where the most important decisions are made. It is also incredibly difficult to gain access to interview key policy makers, especially those without formal roles, and even if these were possible, it is not logical to expect powerbrokers to be candid in such regimes. Some recent studies of authoritarianism try to tease out legislative politics through the analysis of large data sets across time or place, such as on legislative voting, on time from proposal to outcome, or comparing first versus final drafts.³ While these studies have what political science has come to understand as methodological rigor, they lack crucial evidence about the causal processes within the black box of authoritarian policy making.

Building on long-term fieldwork on Russian gender politics, I conducted weeklong research trips in 2013 and 2018—the beginning and ending of the three policy processes—allowing me to contextualize and evaluate official accounts and media stories (references for these primary and secondary sources are in the process tracing). As noted by Tripp (2018), the new norms on data transparency and replicability are not well suited for qualitative research within authoritarian regimes, so my description here is somewhat vague, especially considering the worsening political environment. On both trips, I interviewed a dozen feminist activists. In 2013, I met with a handful of consultants (from inside and outside the state and power in power) in the formal policy process, but even then, two informants were clearly afraid. In 2018, to protect myself and them, I observed insiders making formal statements at two public events that took on domestic violence: an interfaith women's dialogue held at Russia's Public Chamber on November 14 and the Woman Who Matters conference (<https://womanwm.com/en/>) on November 15–16 at Moscow's House of Unions. To check the validity of my process tracing, I presented my research among experts in Russia and at a closed-door English-Russian language session held by the Kennan Institute of the Wilson Center.

The Puzzle of the Russian Case

Domestic violence is a wicked problem for people in Russia—more than half of whom are women or girls—that the post-Soviet government has mostly refused to address. Credible survey data shows that 35% of women in Russia have experienced physical abuse from a partner or sexual violence, and 38% of women murdered in Russia are murdered by their current or former male partners.⁴ The best estimate is that perhaps 5,000 women a year die from domestic violence (Ramanov 2021). Since the early 1990s, feminist activists have been organizing against domestic violence, leading to hundreds of centers spread across Russia in the early 2000s (Johnson 2009). With support from the global women’s movement, international human rights advocates, and development funds, activists founded NGO crisis centers with two goals: to help victims of violence with crisis hotlines and in-person counseling and to change attitudes toward the problem in the society and the state. In the 2010s, these feminists encountered financial and regulatory burdens, leading to the disappearance of many centers (Johnson 2018). The movement began to reinvent itself, recruiting prominent activists (such as journalist and internet entrepreneur Alena Popova) and embracing new strategies (such as new social media). Their activism resulted in a shift in consciousness, from indifference to concern. For example, a 2018 survey found that nearly three out of four Russians thought that violence against women was a serious problem in the country (VTsIOM 2018).

Despite multiple attempts by feminists to push comprehensive reform (1994–95, 1999, 2007, and 2011), all the legislative processes went nowhere, without even reforms to create the temporary protection orders seen globally as best practices (Duban 2020, 30). Although Soviet policy had sporadically addressed domestic violence as part of constructing proper socialist behavior, these practices collapsed in the 1980s. The main avenue for redress then became the gender-neutral criminal provision on simple battery (*poboi*, Article 116.1 of the Criminal Code)—that is, battery causing physical pain without perceived injury or aggravating circumstances. Until 2016, Russian criminal law only partially criminalized battery, as the abused was required to privately prosecute the crime, without the assistance of the public prosecutor, and if she reconciled with the abuser, the charges were dropped (Duban 2020, 34–35). This also incentivized the abuser to either sweet-talk or terrify the victim into dropping the charges.

Through the 2010s, the resistance to domestic violence legislation had been mostly unorganized, an illustration of long-standing beliefs about gender connected to new ideas about freedom from the state. In this context, the feminist activists began to tactically use the broad language of “family violence” or “violence in the family” (which includes child abuse) to resonate with the more traditional Russian society and with state pronatalist efforts (Johnson 2009, 100).

Then, in the early 2010s, Russia’s newly empowered conservatives, constituted by groups connected to the Russian Orthodox Church, turned their focus to domestic violence, following the lead of the transnational anti-gender movement (Bluhm and Brand 2019, 233–34). Conservative resistance coalesced around a claim for “noninterference” in the family during a push to bring Russia in line

with international norms on children, such as developing a specialized court system for juveniles and a child protection system. Putin's circle by then included the patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the conservative oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who has provided institutional and financial support for a variety of anti-gender groups; several individuals in government posts hold dual roles as heads of Orthodox Church-related groups. With this elite support, this anti-genderism spurred a conservative turn in policy on women's and LGBTQ rights (Bluhm and Brand 2019, 240).

Led by the All-Russian Parents' Resistance, which was formed in 2013 with formal support from both Putin and Russian Orthodox authorities,⁵ these groups began to challenge any domestic violence reform. The leading legislative ally has been Duma deputy and then senator Elena Mizulina (Bluhm and Brand 2019, 227). Once a champion for women's interests, if not a feminist, Mizulina became an anti-feminist as the architect of laws restricting abortion and the 2013 ban on "gay propaganda" (Johnson 2016, 652). The feminists and these anti-feminists who wanted no legislation on domestic violence became the primarily social forces contesting the issue of domestic violence in Russia. Given these dynamics, it would seem unlikely that Russian policy makers would pass any legislation to address domestic violence, that instead the issue would likely be put to rest in favor of the anti-feminist perspective, but here is what happened.

Process 1: Failed Comprehensive Reform, 2013–16

A structural opportunity for policy reform on domestic violence opened in the 2010s in Russia. The regime, including United Russia, changed course and brought an influx of women into formal Russian legislative and executive institutions (Johnson 2016, 644–45). While the proportion of women in the Duma remained about 14%, the highest thus far, the percentage of women in the Federation Council, whose membership is designated by the regime, jumped from 4.7% in 2011 to 14.7% in 2015. Valentina Matvienko was became chair of the Federation Council in 2011, the first woman in that post, while there was a historic presence of women in Putin's (and Dmitry Medvedev's) cabinets. In addition, needed by a beleaguered feminist movement, Russia was promising to meet its international legal obligation to address domestic violence as signatory to the CEDAW Optional Protocol in its periodic reports. International pressure was increasing as the Istanbul Convention opened for signatures in 2011 and entered into force in 2014.

As befits an authoritarian regime, Putin gave a behind-closed-doors signal supporting comprehensive domestic violence reform, which was apparently being pushed by some regime elites, starting the formal policy process. Widely perceived by activists by the summer of 2013, this was evidenced in the Public Chamber outlining a strategy and then a formal working group organized by the Ministry of Labor to draft legislation (Duban 2020, 26). Two lawyers with experience with violence against women, including a feminist activist (Mari Davtyan), joined the group and helped draft the bill, "On Prevention of Domestic Violence," which called for protection orders, batterer treatment, temporary housing for the victim and her dependents, and the transfer of offenses from private to public

prosecution. After decades of activism, the feminists had also found several allies among the women in politics, who had been freed from autocratic constraints to advocate publicly for domestic violence by Putin's signal.⁶

However, once the conversation was out in the open, the debate shifted. For example, at a 2013 roundtable, an invited participant quoted a Russian philosopher, saying that the "process of upbringing is violence" and then worried that even "slapping a kid below the back" would be seen as domestic violence (Russian Federation Public Chamber 2013). The most prominent ally in the Public Chamber (Olga Kostina) backtracked, saying that "it would be unwise for the country to prosecute any but the most horrific domestic abuse because it might lead to the dissolution of marriages" (Meyer and Galouchko 2013). In 2014, when the chair of Russia's Human Rights Council (Mikhail Fedotov) asked for his support, Putin then went on record expressing ambivalence: "This is a very sensitive issue; therefore, it is necessary to work it out and discuss it with the public ... it is very important that the law does not allow various state structures to *interfere in the lives of families*" (Antonova 2016; emphasis added). With his use of the language on interference in families, Putin was signaling to the anti-feminist social forces. The key anti-feminist legislative ally, Mizulina, perceiving an opening to needle the regime further, called the idea for a separate law on domestic violence "overblown," claiming that "all the necessary statutes for protecting victims are already present in our laws" (ROC 2016).

Still, without a definitive stand from Putin, there remained space for policy negotiation on domestic violence. While Mizulina proposed a conservative first-draft Concept of Russian State Family Policy, calling for decreasing divorce and recognizing only church marriages, the final edict in 2014 did not include these provisions and included domestic violence as an important problem facing families to which the state should attend. Four months after Mizulina criticized the domestic violence initiative, she was kicked upstairs from the Duma to the Federation Council, where other politicians have been sent when the regime wants to quiet them (Johnson 2016). While Russia's first Eurasian Women's Forum in 2015, convened by Matvienko, conveyed conservative commitments—such as recognizing "women's responsibility for protecting the health and upbringing of children, protecting family values"—it also professed commitment to "the prevention of all forms of violence against women and children."⁷ Feminist activists pushed forward, collecting more than 100,000 signatures on a petition calling for reform. Russia's Human Rights Council was allowed to keep advocating, meeting with Putin again, with council member and feminist Svetlana Aivazova extolling the need for the legislation (Antonova 2016). However, Putin's on-the-record ambivalence, a response to organized needling from both sides on domestic violence, had eliminated the support needed for legislation to proceed, and the process stalled by 2014.

Process 2: Criminalization of Domestic Violence, 2015–16

Putin's public signal of ambivalence would seem to bode ill for future progress on this issue in authoritarian Russia. Once the autocrat has taken a public stand, a policy model in which autocrats determine policy themselves would predict that

elites would seek to avoid uncertainty and continue to side with the pro-regime forces, especially over a small feminist movement. But, over the winter of 2015–16, another structural opportunity for the feminists arose: the Supreme Court proposed legislation to move several provisions of the Criminal Code to the Administrative Code (*Sistema Obespecheniia Zakonodatel'noi Deiatel'nosti* 2018). Included in this planned decriminalization was simple battery, eliminating the possibility of any type of incarceration, though criminal liability would still hold after an administrative conviction. The official explanation had to do with problems within the criminal justice system, especially the judges' caseload, but the impetus for reform more likely came from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a more politically active institution (Semukhina 2020, 19, 22).⁸ In either explanation, the reform was initiated in response to practical problems facing the regime. In interviews, police, prosecutors, and judges expressed frustration with the existing procedures—mixed with blame for the victims—as the multitude of cases not resulting in convictions were leading to career advancement issues (for cops) or decreased bonuses (for the judges) (Semukhina 2020). Administrative procedures would be much more streamlined, and the risk of taking on battery cases much less severe for police.

Feminist activists, aghast at the plan, remobilized with small protests, collecting signatures for a new petition, again drawing upon international human rights norms. Given the ambivalence of Putin's public signal, a group of feminist lawyers felt safe enough to issue a brief against the change, while other feminists lobbied the President's Human Rights Council and the Public Chamber, institutions that have some latitude on these kinds of issues. As Russia continued to cooperate with the Council of Europe on gender violence (Duban 2020), feminists were backed by international leverage from the Council of Europe, including its Convention on Human Rights, which includes responsibilities to address domestic violence,⁹ as well as the United Nations' CEDAW, including its Optional Protocol. At the same time, the Orthodox Church was following the lead of Archpriest Dimitry Smirnov, who declared that the term "family violence" was a tool of the West designed to destroy the family (Antonova 2016). The Orthodox Church issued a formal resolution in January 2016 declaring that efforts to prevent domestic violence were based on "false ideologies, conceptions and approaches" to the family that derive from feminists' "gender ideology" (Zezulin 2016).

This time, Putin publicly signaled concern about the decriminalization at an annual law and order conference while retaining some ambivalence:

Another issue is the proposed decriminalisation of a number of articles in the Criminal Code. ... As you may know, I expressed support for this initiative ... However, so far it has evoked a mixed response. Some experts believe that the decriminalisation of these Criminal Code articles would lead to an increase in domestic violence. Let us not forget here that liberalisation should apply only to those citizens who commit their first and only offence, while a repeated similar offence should lead to criminal liability. (Putin 2016)

Perceiving this as a signal that it would be all right to address domestic violence, the head of the Duma committee overseeing the reform of the Criminal Code (Pavel Krashennikov, perhaps serving as proxy for the courts) proposed amendments that would add “close persons” (including spouses, children, parents, grandparents, grandchildren, or coinhabitants) as aggravating circumstances. The second and final version of the comprehensive reform of the Criminal Code and criminal-procedural codes excluded from the decriminalization any forms of battery that were committed by people “close” to the victim (Russian Federation 2016).¹⁰ Under the umbrella of a broader bill, support was unanimous, including from Matvienko, who signed the Federation Council’s resolution approving the bill, and Putin, who signed as president.

This was a surprising success for a small, feminist social force with few, if any, close allies in power. Though not applying to former partners or partners who do not live in the household, Russia’s criminal law recognized the particular dynamics of domestic violence: that battery by family members could be more problematic than battery by strangers. Battery by close persons was also categorized as a private-public prosecution crime in which the victim must initiate the process by filing a complaint, but then the state is responsible for investigating and prosecuting (Duban 2020, 30). Together, these changes criminalized many forms of domestic violence (former partners not living in the home were excluded). Riding on this energy, in September 2016, Senator Anton Belyakov announced the formal introduction into the Federal Assembly of the draft comprehensive legislation on domestic violence.

Process 3: Decriminalization of Domestic Violence, 2016–17

Given what seemed to elites in the Federal Assembly to be a signal from Putin approving this reform, an autocrat-determined process would predict a compliant, if not rubber-stamp, legislature, but this was not so. As the reform was passing, resistance was already heating up, with senators in the Federation Council explaining that they were not establishing a new system of “juvenile justice,” a bugaboo of the conservative movement.¹¹ After the bill passed, the resistance exploded. The Orthodox Church shifted the debate to parents’ rights to physically punish their children, as the reforms had not specified battery of women. Church officials cast the reform as discriminatory against Orthodox adherents, whose traditions and scriptures “regard the possibility of reasonable and loving use of physical punishment as an integral part of the established rights of parents by God Himself” (Meduza 2016). A church commission issued a statement of concern, citing biblical passages that condone the physical discipline of children, and called for policy makers “not to be indifferent to the defense and the future of the Russian family and Fatherland” by letting the law stand (ROC 2016). The church-supported All-Russian Parents’ Resistance organized protests in a dozen cities across Russia, questioning whether beating family members should be a crime, arguing that such ideas are Western; they collected more than 200,000 signatures protesting the reforms (TASS 2017).

The structural opportunity that enabled this open resistance was that the Duma, just three months after the reform passed, had its first election since the turbulent 2011 elections (when the ruling party lost its supermajority and hundreds of thousands protested electoral fraud and the ruling party's corruption), and it was important to the Kremlin to regain the appearance of legitimacy through a show of popular support. The regime altered the electoral rules in its favor and issued a bland, populist message: "The Success of Everybody Is the Success of Russia." The Kremlin's goal was achieved, with United Russia ending up with three-fourths of the seats. Often overlooked—and it turns out, significant here as cover for anti-feminist moves—was that United Russia and other loyalist parties had an unprecedented percent of women candidates, leading to an even higher percent of women in the Duma (16%) (IPU 2018).

The regime's populist strategy to manage elections, with Putin's articulated ambivalence about criminalizing simple battery in the first instance, unintentionally encouraged anti-feminist legislators to needle the regime. The Duma committee on legislation returned the comprehensive domestic violence bill, alleging "errors" (Human Rights Watch 2018, 22–23). Senator Mizulina then introduced legislation to reverse the reform. Though this proposal was rejected at first, within a month, leaders of United Russia (including former feminist ally Krasheninnikov as well as Belyakov) changed their minds, they indicated, in response to the recent elections in which they felt the majority of the population was against the reform (BBC Russian Service 2017). Perhaps receiving a signal from Putin or just sensing the shift in the winds, the government and the Supreme Court also changed their minds, though the minister of internal affairs continued to point out the practical problems of fines on a family budget (Human Rights Watch 2018, 37). The new human rights ombudsperson in the Russian Federation (Tat'iana Moskalkova) came out in support of the reversal, arguing that women should have the right to decide whether to prosecute the husband (RIA Novosti 2016). In the end, leading sponsors from both houses as well as one-half of the total sponsors were women, while the male sponsors were less prominent. Key promoters were not just Mizulina but Duma deputy Olga Batalina (both sponsors of the anti-gay propaganda law) and Senator Galina Karelova (a senator who, like Mizulina, had once been a proponent of gender equality but had become a regime loyalist).

The new legislation proposed to move simple battery by close persons to the Administrative Code, if it was the first violation reported to the police (TASS 2017). As with battery by non-close persons, the penalties would include a fine (up to about \$500), 15 days arrest, or 120 days of community service, and the victim would have to prosecute privately (*Novaya Gazeta* 2017). The legislation was framed as a necessary fix to the technical problem of the reform—derided as the "slapping law"—in which violence within the family was being treated differently than violence between strangers. They had argued that, under the 2016 law, disciplining one's child would be punished more severely than stranger violence and could result in children being removed from their parents, something that had allegedly happened to one family in Russia already (RIA Novosti 2017).

Putin's ambivalence was transformed into repudiation, as he announced, in the language of the anti-feminists, that "[u]nceremonious interference in family matters is unacceptable" (President of Russia 2016). Three days later, the Justice Ministry nodded to the Putin's signal by placing the most internationally prominent crisis center, ANNA, on the foreign agent list, as it was castigated by the All-Russian Parents' Resistance for being part of an American feminist conspiracy. Mizulina seized the opening: "I hope that legislators will heed the fears of the parents' groups. It would be good if Russian families could start this year [2017] calm with the confidence that the newly elected Duma was with them, not against them" (RIA Novosti 2017).

Feminist activists continued fighting, protesting outside the Duma and publishing a letter to Federation Council chair Matvienko (*Novaya Gazeta* 2017). They cited her previous support for anti-domestic violence efforts, questioning the claim that the current law was only about "slapping" as opposed to beating, and arguing that violence in the family is worse than violence by strangers. Those signing included longtime activists and feminist organizations (including Popova and ANNA), but also three members of the Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights. As one member explained, "In Russia, it is necessary to take measures that will help reduce the level of domestic violence, and the decriminalization of beatings in the family will not improve the situation, on the contrary, will make this system even more closed" (Chlen SPCH schitaet 2017). Using their international prominence, feminist punk protest group Pussy Riot's Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova spoke out against the bill. Feminists found support in mass media, which included TV programs with experts criticizing the proposed reversal (Human Rights Watch 2018, 17). But most of the population seemed to agree with the anti-feminists. A survey released in the middle of this tumult suggested that the anti-feminists had persuaded public opinion to come around to their side: almost 60% of the respondents agreed with decriminalizing simple battery by close persons in the first instance (VTsIOM 2017). As some explained to me in 2018, feminist activists had thought that broadening the issue from woman battery to include child abuse would resonate with most Russians, but the anti-feminists successfully argued that Russians have a right to punish, if not batter, their children.

The legislation—which was only about battery by close persons—went quickly through the required three readings in the newly elected Duma, with 80% to 85% of deputies voting in support.¹² On February 1, the Federation Council approved this legislation, and within the week, Putin signed it into law. Domestic violence in the first instance was effectively decriminalized—in a fast-tracked process with little committee comment and only brief public hearings (Semukhina 2020, 21)—making the 2016 reform one of the shortest in post-Soviet history.

Evaluating the Framework

The comparison of these three processes in Russia demonstrates the importance of this framework for authoritarian gender equality policy making, showing how the specified opportunities, agents, and mechanisms matter when reform is not

led and determined by the autocrat, as none were in Russia (see [Table 1](#)). In all three processes, social forces and other regime elites were important agents in needling Putin, even as Putin's signaling was a critical juncture. Even in the decriminalization of domestic violence (process 3), which was the quickest and virtually unanimous of the processes, social forces strategically used an election that was important to the regime to change what seemed to insiders to be Putin's agreement to limited domestic violence reform. The first process, the one that most resembled democratic policy making, with feminist social forces and allies proposing a comprehensive reform in 2013 in response to the problem of domestic violence in Russia, led to no policy change. Instead of public opinion being a driving force, public opinion seemed to follow the elite politics.

In terms of opportunities and agents, comparing the first (failed) process with the gender equality success story (process 2) suggests that having more women in politics, with some international leverage, may not be sufficient, but broader reforms can create an opportunity when faced with problems that need to be addressed, such as an overworked criminal justice system, to maintain performance or stability. There were even more women in the third process when the criminal-legal reform was reversed. Counterintuitively, it was the male legislators (in process 2) who advanced the progressive reform; the female legislators were prominent in its reversal (in process 3), suggesting authoritarian dynamics opposite to what would be expected in democracies. The quick reversal (process 3) also illustrates that elections are a strategic predicament, but in the current postcommunist environment, these are likely to empower (anti-feminist) extremists.

In terms of mechanisms, the autocrat signaling was crucial in all processes but not definitive in a straightforward way (see also [Johnson et al. 2021](#)). Putin's lack of support for the comprehensive reform (process 1) slowed the process down, but the bill was not killed until the anti-feminists used the elections against domestic violence reform (process 3). Putin's comments seemed to allow the feminist success story (process 2), but they were not unambiguous, and different insiders appeared to have different information. There was nodding and needling on both sides, but also consequences for some key women elites, while some of the most powerful (male) legislators changed their expressed preference and did not face demotion.

Illustrating the continued gender-related pressures in Russia, domestic violence became more contentious in the aftermath of the 2017 decriminalization. The Russian Orthodox Church ([2018](#)) took an official stand against new legislation against domestic violence, labeling such efforts as "interference in family life" based on radical "anti-family ... gender ideology." Yet the regime supported a process to bring forth a new, mostly progressive comprehensive bill in the fall of 2019 ([Duban 2020, 26](#)).¹³ Once posted online, the draft legislation received more than 11,000 comments, most from anti-feminists, with the oligarch Malofeev dedicating his ultraconservative TV channel to the fight and inflaming Orthodox Church-sponsored Sorok Sorokov, an extremist group that has embraced violent protests but has strong patrons within the Russian elites ([Karnaukh and Coalson 2019](#); [Yurtaev 2020](#)). At his December 2019 "big press

Table 1. Opportunities, agents, and mechanisms for the three policy processes.

	Structural Opportunities		Agents		Mechanisms		
	Year	Domestic	International leverage	Social forces	Allies in power	Framing	Strength and clarity of autocrat signal
Comprehensive domestic violence legislation (attempted)	2013–16	More women in politics	CEDAW Optional Protocol, pressure to sign Istanbul Convention	Small feminist movement	Mostly women, in Public Chamber and human rights institutions	Domestic violence, international human rights norms	Behind closed doors, then ambivalence
Criminalization of simple battery by close persons	2015–16	Judicial reform (practical reform)	CEDAW Optional Protocol, Council of Europe Convention on Human Rights	Small feminist movement	Male legislators in both houses	Violence in the family, international human rights norms	Public, qualified support for reform
Decriminalization of simple battery by close persons in the first instance	2016–17	Elections (strategic predicament), even more women in politics	Transnational anti-gender movement	Anti-feminist All-Russian Parents' Resistance/ Russian Orthodox Church	Prominent legislators, instigated by Mizulina and other conservative women	Against "slapping law" limiting parenting	Delayed, but public support for reversal of reform

conference,” Putin took a question on domestic violence and offered mixed signals (see also Johnson et al. 2021):

What do I think about this matter? I have mixed feelings, ... I resolutely oppose any violence, including in the family, and, of course, against children and women... Do we need this law? Let’s discuss it reasonably, in public ... We must understand what is written in each of [the law’s] articles, try to predict the results that would emerge after adoption and application of the law, and then make a final decision. (President of Russia 2019) Once the COVID-19 pandemic started, the elite conflicts escalated. There were personal attacks in the media against Duma deputy Oksana Pushkina, the most outspoken legislative proponent of reform (Andreeva, Drozhashchikh, and Nelaeva 2021). Proponents sent a request for assistance to Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, who then asked the Ministries of Justice and Internal Affairs to consider increasing the administrative penalties, but Internal Affairs decided against it (Barshev 2020). In 2021, the Constitutional Court ruled that the 2017 reversal was not specific enough about what should happen at the third instance of battery in one year, which police had been treating as an administrative offense. This led the Supreme Court to propose more changes and Putin to make more ambiguously supportive public statements again, but another prominent domestic violence support group (Nasiliu.net) was put on the foreign agent list and Pushkina was not allowed to run in the Duma elections. In March 2022, to avoid being kicked out for its war on Ukraine, Russia withdrew from the Council of Europe; as a result, it was no longer subject to the European Court of Human Rights, which had ruled against Russia for its decriminalization of domestic violence. But the same month that this decision was ratified by the Duma, the Duma passed legislation to make the third and subsequent incidents of domestic violence in one year fall under the Criminal Code, reversing some of the 2017 partial decriminalization in response to elites’ practical interests.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on the relationship between gender and regime type in the twenty-first century by creating an analytical framework for the micrologics of authoritarian policy making and applying it to three policy processes in the unlikely case of Putin’s Russia. While recent scholarship, mostly focused on the MENA region, demonstrates the importance of strategic actions by women’s groups in the context of international leverage and regime interest in sidelining religious extremists, this study brings into focus other regime dynamics that are likely to be important across autocratic regimes. It highlights other opportunities (such as strategic predicaments created by authoritarian elections and structural reforms), agents (non-feminist insiders facing practical problems), and mechanisms (such a signaling game among elites) that shape the choice to pursue gender equality policy making or the opposite. It points to the importance of elite conflict and authoritarian regimes’ tendency to be selectively

responsive to the public. Increasingly, autocratic regimes outside the MENA region (as in Russia) must navigate religious extremists who are anti-gender but not anti-regime, and these regimes have been mobilizing, rather than sidelining, them. This is a framework that can help scholars of authoritarianism consider the most likely regime dynamics when it is clear that the gender-related policy was not unilaterally determined by the autocrat.

In these ways, the study also speaks to other feminist political science questions. It confirms findings that more women in politics, especially in non-democracies, do not necessarily mean more gender equality policy, showing how authoritarian dynamics may create more opportunities for male elites to be progressive and structure women elites to be regressive. It supports the new feminist institutionalism of gendered informal politics by mapping the dynamics of gendered signaling between a patron-autocrat and male-dominated elites. This study furthers the study of gender policy making, which has mostly been based on democratic models, by centralizing and theorizing puzzles of authoritarianism, such as intra-elite conflict and selective responsiveness.

Of course, some authoritarian regimes have virtually no pretense of gender equality. As I write this, Iran is violently clamping down on a revolutionary uprising in which women's right not to be forced to wear hijab is the spark and the symbol. Afghanistan's returned Taliban government is backtracking on two decades on women's increased access to education and representation in the workforce and politics. Arat (2022) finds that Turkey was genderwashing in the early 2000s when it was somewhat democratic, in an attempt at domestic and international legitimation, but became increasingly authoritarian and anti-feminist; it has since marked its rejection of gender equality with the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Some of the logics here, especially about elections as opportunities, apply only to electoral authoritarian regimes, leaving some questions about regime dynamics in nonelectoral authoritarian regimes such as China, which has also made some gender equality reforms related to domestic violence and sexual harassment in the last decade. And, even in the best case of autocratic genderwashing, regimes continue to maintain as well as promulgate policies that undermine gender equality as well as persecute (often violently) feminist activists.

Still, it is important to understand why and how gender equality issues got onto the agenda of authoritarian regimes in the last several decades. Given the (unfortunate) rise of authoritarianism around the world, it is a crucial empirical puzzle for building feminist political science. It is also important in terms of gender justice: new laws can provide leverage to intrepid feminist activists and lawyers acting individually and collectively to realize their promise. While the policy-making process is opaque in authoritarian regimes, we can map the dynamics much more closely than we have. Future research on gender equality policy making in other authoritarian regimes is needed to consider and hone this framework.

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Notes

1. See, for example, the April 2018 special issue of *Comparative Politics* titled “Wither Russia? Twenty-Five Years After the Collapse of Communism”; see also V-Dem Institute (2022).
2. The crucial formal part of this process is the “sign-offs” (*soglasovania*) that are required from relevant state actors before a policy proposal can be put forth; those with access to this sign-off loop usually can get heard (Ananyev 2018; Noble 2020).
3. For a summary of the literature, see Gandhi, Noble, and Svulik (2020).
4. It is a gendered problem in that the survey data shows that 75% of victims of violence in the home are female, but domestic violence impacts men in the most serious of ways: 79% of women convicted of murder killed an abuser in their home (*Meduza* 2020).
5. The All-Russian Parents’ Resistance was officially formed February 9, 2013, when the group unveiled its manifesto, which was supported and signed by President Putin. Note that the husband (Sergey Kurginyan) and wife (Maria Mamikonyan) founders “are not close to Orthodoxy.... [but] are close to other ideas of the new Russian conservatives” (Bluhm and Brand 2019, 228).
6. These included Olga Kostina, the head of the victim’s organization Resistance, a Putin supporter, and a member of the Public Chamber, who had brought the activists into the working group that helped draft domestic violence legislation. United Russia Duma deputy Saliya Muzarbayeva from the health committee was another ally, as was the human rights commissioner in Moscow, Tatyana Potyayeva. Kostina’s tenure in the Public Chamber ended in 2014; Muzarbayeva’s tenure in the Duma ended in 2016. It seems that Muzarbayeva and Kostina got into trouble for needling the regime too much, perhaps missing an earlier signal from the Kremlin.
7. Information about the event is available at <https://eawf.ru/env/about/>.
8. According to the Supreme Court, almost half of all defendants were being criminally convicted for petty offenses—including simple battery—that almost always led to no jail time. In 2014 and 2015, more than 2 million formal complaints of simple battery were made.
9. This was confirmed in later rulings against Russia by the European Court of Human Rights: *Volodina v. Russia* (2019) and *Tunikova and Others v. Russia* (2021).
10. The legislative process is detailed at <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/953398-6>. While 82 Duma deputies had voted against the legislation in the first reading, all who voted in the third and final reading voted for the legislation. Close persons did not include former spouses or partners or partners who do not live in the same household (Duban 2020, 30).
11. For example, law professor and senator Andrei Klishas presents and explains the amendments to the Council of Federation hearing in June 2016, arguing against the threat of creating a juvenile justice system; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKdvyI8Nmgc>.
12. The legislative process is detailed at <http://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/26265-7>. At most three deputies went on record in opposition to the bill, either abstaining or voting against it.
13. There were several high-profile incidents of domestic violence as well as three rulings against Russia for its decriminalization of domestic violence (from the United Nations’ CEDAW committee and two from the European Court of Human Rights). Public opinion shifted again, with four out of five Russians—and 90% of women—now holding that domestic violence is inexcusable (Levada Center 2020).

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Janet Elise Johnson is Professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College, City University of New York: johnson@brooklyn.cuny.edu

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