

**Ensuring the protection of  
political adversaries in unstable  
regions**



**GA4**

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## Introduction

In this era of democracy, the right of free speech and the right to choose and elect the leaders of nations is almost universal. Nowadays, most countries are democracies and host some form of election in order to choose the leader of the country. However, in certain countries, governments do not actually give this right to their citizens, they merely pretend to do so. After all, is it really a fair election if all the opponents are eliminated in advance and therefore taken out of the elections?

This is a problem that has happened before and is still happening in certain unstable nations. The political opponents which should be allowed to present themselves at the elections are either killed or imprisoned based on unjust charges. This means that even less people chose to stand up and officially take a stance in public, due to the potential risks to them and their family. This research report will focus on two instances of this complicated problem: Russia and Senegal.

In nations purportedly practicing democracy, the veneer of fair elections often masks the systemic suppression of political adversaries. This insidious trend plagues certain countries like Russia and Senegal, where the right to freely choose leaders becomes a hollow promise. Rather than fostering a competitive electoral landscape, these regimes eliminate or silence opposition voices through imprisonment, false accusations, or even violence. Such calculated actions not only subvert the essence of democracy but also intimidate potential candidates from standing up, creating a chilling effect on political participation and stifling the genuine representation of diverse viewpoints.

In examining these instances, the pervasive issue of eliminating political adversaries emerges as a critical obstacle to authentic democracy. Both Russia and Senegal serve as poignant examples of how the suppression of opposition obstructs fair electoral processes, denying citizens the opportunity to make informed choices and undermining the very foundation of democratic governance.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Political Adversaries/Opponents

In this research report political opponents are defined as people or parties who have made clear of their intention to present themselves in certain elections and who clearly take a stance opposing the one of the current governments in power in said nation.

### Unstable Nations

In this research report unstable nations are defined as nations which contain political instability.

### Political Instability

Political instability is defined as a natural tendency of a government to collapse because of conflict, either external or internal, and because of growing struggles between different political parties.

### Nerve Agent

A nerve agent is a chemical substance which disrupts and further affects the nervous system when administered. Nerve agents are considered chemical weapons and therefore their use in armed conflicts is prohibited in international law.

### Sovereignty

Sovereignty when related to a nation is the nation's right to govern itself and its citizens.

## General Overview

The elimination of political adversaries in unstable regions is not a new event, it has been happening for a very long time. Dictators or dictator like parties have often resorted to eliminating their opposition in order to keep a firm hand on the country at stake. This makes resisting their control over the country a lot more difficult and poses a dam to democracy. It is absolutely crucial to ensure that any political opposition who wish to step up and put themselves out there should have the right to remain protected in any countries, yet this becomes much harder when unstable countries are concerned.

## Russia and the Alexei Navalny situation

Russia is one of such 'unstable' nations where political adversaries are at risk. This problem has been ongoing for a long time, but the recent Russo-Ukrainian war has brought this issue to new depths.

An example of such instances is the case of Alexei Navalny, a prominent political adversary and an anti-corruption activist. Navalny is known to be the founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) and the leader of the party 'Russia of the Future'. Navalny had already been sentenced multiple times, before 2020 he was serving a sentence of 11 and a half years. According to Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, the charges upon which he was sentenced were made up in order to silence him and prevent him from potentially winning a Russian Presidential election. These supposed measures were then taken a step further during the Russo-Ukrainian crisis.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, just a few months after the beginning of the war, Navalny was poisoned by a Novichok nerve agent and fell ill during a flight from Tomsk, Russia to Moscow. He was first taken to a hospital in Omsk. Two days later he was flown to a hospital in Berlin, where he recovered. In September 2020, German laboratorians investigated and stated that Navalny had been poisoned by a nerve agent from the Novichok group. This was then later confirmed by independent labs in Finland and Sweden, who came to the same conclusion, as well as the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Of course, the Kremlin denied any involvement in the matter and claimed that Navalny had not been poisoned, and that his sickness was the result of other factors such as stress, dieting, or the consumption of alcohol.



Figure 1: Alexei Navalny

In December 2020, a journalist investigation team composed by Bellingcat, The Insider, CNN and Der Spiegel claimed that they had identified the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) as being responsible for the poisoning. They claimed that the FSB had sent a team of assassins after Navalny, a 'toxins team' which had been tailing Navalny for approximately 3 years. Following up on this, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2020 Navalny released a video recording of a phone call. In the phone call, Navalny allegedly tricked FSB agent Konstantin Kudryavtsev into what he believed was a debriefing. In the recording, the FSB agent admitted to having planted the Novichok agent in Navalny's underpants.

The Kremlin denounced this video to be a 'fake'. Putin responded by stating that if Russia really wanted to kill Navalny, they would have succeeded.

In January 2021, Navalny returned to Russia. He was immediately put to trial for having violated the terms of his suspended sentence by not reporting to his probation officer at a time when Navalny was still in convalescence in Germany. He was then sent to prison, and sentenced for many other charges, such as fraud. Navalny is now being kept in isolation in prison. His communication with the outside world is also strictly monitored. He states on X (formerly Twitter) that any letter from his wife and even from his lawyer are censored.

Navalny is not the only political opponent within Russia who has been sent to prison in order to be silenced, this has happened to many more political adversaries in Russia. In fact, there are a number who have simply been assassinated, supposedly by the Kremlin. All these risks make it very difficult for new political oppositions to rise in Russia and make it extremely difficult for the existing adversaries to be given a chance to fair elections and to reach the public.

### Senegal and the Ousmane Sonko situation

Russia is not the only nation in which political opponents are at risk, there are many more nations on earth where this is a problem. For example, this has also historically been the case in certain African countries, and some south American nations. It is extremely hard for the UN to intervene with these misuses of power without attaining to a nation's sovereignty. It is also extremely difficult to actually make an unbiased judgement on whether or not certain political opponents have been imprisoned for just or unjust reasons. An example of this could be seen in Senegal.

The leader of the Senegalese opposition is Ousmane Sonko. In June 2021, Sonko was accused of having raped a young woman. He was in fact convicted of 'corrupting the youth' and sentenced to 2 years in prison. His supporters, however, firmly believe that Sonko was unjustly imprisoned in order to stop him from running for the presidential elections. Sonko is in fact one of the favourite candidates for the presidential elections, and the decision remains to be taken on



Figure 2: Ousmane Sonko

whether or not he will be able to present himself for the presidential elections. In the end, it remains

quite unclear on what grounds Sonko was sentenced, although the situation seems suspicious to some it cannot be clearly determined yet whether or not his condemnation was justified.

## Timeline of Key Events

| Date                   | Event   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Pre-2020</b>        | Alexei Navalny, known for his anti-corruption activism, faces multiple legal challenges and sentences, including an 11 and a half-year prison term, widely perceived as politically motivated to silence his opposition.  |
| <b>August 20, 2020</b> | Navalny falls critically ill aboard a flight from Tomsk to Moscow, subsequently hospitalized in Omsk, Russia. He is later transferred to a hospital in Berlin, Germany, after suspicions of poisoning.  |
| <b>September 2020</b>  | German medical examinations confirm Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent from the Novichok group. Independent labs in Finland and Sweden validate these findings, with the OPCW further corroborating the use of a banned chemical weapon.   |
| <b>December 2020</b>   | Investigative reports from Bellingcat, The Insider, CNN, and Der Spiegel implicate the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in Navalny's poisoning. Navalny releases a recording of a phone call, purportedly with an FSB agent confessing to the poisoning, leading to Kremlin denials and dismissals of the video's authenticity. |
| <b>January 2021</b>    | Navalny returns to Russia and is immediately arrested for violating probation terms while recuperating in Germany. He faces additional charges and is   |

sentenced to prison, where he remains in isolation. Several other political adversaries in Russia also face imprisonment or assassination attempts, allegedly orchestrated by the government, creating a climate of fear and hindering fair political competition.

### **June 2021**

Ousmane Sonko, a prominent opposition figure in Senegal, is accused of raping a young woman. He's later convicted of "corrupting the youth" and receives a two-year prison sentence. Sonko's supporters argue that the charges against him are politically motivated, aiming to discredit him and hinder his presidential ambitions.

## **Major Parties Involved**

### **Russia**

Russia, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, finds itself embroiled in allegations of suppressing political opposition, notably exemplified in the case of Alexei Navalny. The Russian government has consistently denied involvement in Navalny's poisoning and subsequent imprisonment, asserting that Navalny's actions violated Russian law. The Kremlin maintains its stance, dismissing accusations as fabricated while justifying Navalny's arrest and conviction as lawful responses to his alleged violations.

### **Germany**

Germany is assumed to have a pivotal role when Navalny, after falling critically ill from a Novichok poisoning, was transferred there for medical treatment. German laboratories confirmed the use of a nerve agent, igniting international condemnation and demands for an investigation into the incident. Germany, in line with other European nations, strongly condemned the poisoning, provided medical assistance to Navalny, and supported efforts urging Russia's accountability for the attack.

### **Finland, Sweden and the OPCW**



Independent laboratories in Finland and Sweden assumed a crucial role in validating Germany's initial findings regarding Alexei Navalny's poisoning with a banned nerve agent. Their corroborative investigations provided additional weight to the evidence, aligning with Germany's conclusions. Alongside these laboratories, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) bolstered the case, independently confirming the utilization of a prohibited nerve agent in Navalny's poisoning. Their collective stance firmly supported the evidence, emphasizing the urgent need for international scrutiny and accountability, particularly concerning the use of chemical weapons. These organizations' alignment highlighted the severity of the incident, sparking global calls for thorough investigations and condemnation of such prohibited substances' deployment in international affairs.

### **Senegal**

Senegal finds itself embroiled in a contentious situation amplified by ongoing political tensions, notably fueled by the arrest of opposition figure Ousmane Sonko. The arrest stems from serious allegations of rape and corruption charges against Sonko, sparking a significant political and social uproar within the country. Senegal's government stands firm in asserting that Sonko's arrest was a response solely based on the gravity of the criminal accusations leveled against him. They emphasize the legal grounds for his detention, vehemently denying any political motivation behind the charges. The government's stance portrays Sonko's arrest as a lawful measure enacted in accordance with Senegalese law, attempting to separate the legal proceedings from any political context. However, Sonko's supporters and critics of the government view this as a polarizing issue, raising questions about the independence of the judiciary and the possible politicization of legal actions against opposition figures in Senegal's charged political landscape.

### **The West**

Indirectly, various international actors, including Western European countries, the United States, and other democratic nations, have expressed concerns and condemned actions that potentially violate human rights or democratic principles in these cases. These nations often play roles in voicing international condemnation, demanding investigations into alleged human rights abuses, and calling for the fair treatment of political dissenters.

### **Amnesty International**

Amnesty International, a leading advocate for human rights worldwide, actively involves itself in monitoring cases of political suppression, notably exemplified in its unwavering scrutiny of Alexei



Navalny's imprisonment in Russia. Drawing from its commitment to upholding fundamental human rights, the organization strongly condemns Russia's treatment of Navalny as a severe violation. Amnesty International ardently calls for Navalny's immediate release from prison, highlighting concerns over the fairness of his trial and the perceived political motivations behind his imprisonment. Their vocal stance aims to mobilize global attention, rallying support for Navalny's cause while emphasizing the imperative of fair treatment, justice, and the protection of individuals facing political persecution or suppression.

### **Bellingcat, The Insider, CNN, and Der Spiegel**

Bellingcat, The Insider, CNN, and Der Spiegel collectively engaged in rigorous investigative journalism with the primary aim of unraveling the parties responsible for the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. Their involvement stemmed from a commitment to uncovering truth and shedding light on the circumstances surrounding Navalny's poisoning, seeking to unearth the actors behind the incident. The collaborative efforts of these investigative entities led to a revelation implicating the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in Navalny's poisoning, supported by substantial research and evidence. This revelation challenged the Kremlin's denial of involvement and presented compelling evidence that pushed for further investigations into potential state-level complicity. Their findings highlighted the imperative of holding accountable those allegedly responsible for the poisoning, contributing significantly to the ongoing discourse on the incident's perpetrators and motives.

## **Possible Solutions**

### **International oversight**

The establishment of an independent international body dedicated to monitoring and investigating cases of political suppression globally holds substantial promise as a solution to address systemic issues like those seen in Navalny's poisoning and Sonko's arrest. This specialized body would serve as a crucial bastion for upholding democratic values and human rights on a global scale. Tasked with overseeing and meticulously scrutinizing allegations of human rights abuses, it would wield the authority to conduct impartial investigations into incidents involving the suppression of political adversaries. This oversight would not only shed light on violations but also ensure transparency in the investigation process, fostering trust in the outcomes and upholding the integrity of inquiries. By enforcing accountability, this international mechanism would act as a powerful deterrent, dissuading nations from resorting to repressive measures to silence opposition voices, ultimately reinforcing the

precedence of democratic norms and respect for human rights on the global stage. Such an institution could pave the way for a future where the protection of political adversaries becomes a universal priority, safeguarding fair and democratic processes across nations.

### Strengthening International Norms and Sanctions

Advocating for the reinforcement of international norms represents a crucial step in combating the suppression of political dissent and the egregious use of chemical weapons or other illicit methods to stifle opposition voices. Strengthening these norms involves establishing a collective, resolute stance among nations against such oppressive practices. One approach could be the imposition of targeted sanctions on individuals or entities complicit in human rights abuses and political suppression. These sanctions would deliver concrete repercussions, effectively holding accountable those responsible for violating fundamental human rights. By enforcing these consequences, the international community demonstrates an unwavering commitment to upholding democratic values and respecting the rights of political adversaries. This unified front against political suppression not only serves as a deterrent but also sends a clear message of solidarity in prioritizing democratic principles globally. It establishes a normative framework that condemns such actions, promoting a collective understanding that the silencing of opposition voices through repression will not be tolerated in the international arena.

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