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## Fear and Loathing in Russia : Repressions as a Tool of Kremlin's Rule

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## PREPARING FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2021: RUSSIAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY

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## Fighting for Discursive Hegemony: The Kremlin's Foundation Is Shaking

By Mario Baumann

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000477859

The backbone of Putin's leadership has always been unswerving support from a large part of the Russian population. Putin's accession to office was accompanied by an aura of a new beginning and youth, contrasting with the disillusionment of the Yeltsin era and the grim 1990s. After the swift economic upswing of Putin's first two terms, the leadership's support has been largely nourished by a narrative of external threat. The centrality of this narrative has been underlined by the recent events surrounding Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. These events show, however, that the leadership is increasingly having trouble maintaining that logic.

The Kremlin has reacted stridently to Western accusations of the leadership's complicity in the attack. Through questioning, ridiculing and discrediting the Western narrative, the Russian leadership has denied any involvement in the case. It has attempted to turn the tables and present Russia as the victim of an anti-Russian conspiracy. According to this version of events, Western governments are not only unwilling to cooperate in establishing the truth; it has also been suggested that the case was a staged operation (Lavrov 2021a), a mass disinformation campaign (Deutsche Welle 2020) resulting from anti-Russian hysteria (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020).

This storyline resonates with the ongoing accusations of non-credibility and double standards that the Kremlin asserts against the West. The idea of the 'outside enemy' has become central to generating political support. Yet, the question is to what extent the Kremlin is actually successful in hegemonizing public discourse with this narrative of the 'besieged fortress'.

With regard to the Navalny case, data provided by the Levada-Center (2020) draw a mixed picture. Out of all respondents aware of the issue, 30% subscribe to the idea of a staged operation and 19% believe the poisoning to be a provocation by Western intelligence services. Against these officially articulated narratives, only 15% support the version suggested by Western governments and institutions, namely that the incident was an attempt by the Russian leadership to eliminate a political opponent. Yet this interpretation of events is supported by the biggest share of those aged 24 or younger (34%). A similar picture emerges from polls on the Russia-wide protests after Navalny's detention in January (Levada-Center 2021a). While feelings towards protestors are generally mixed among respondents, sym-

pathy is especially high among the young and those relying on non-traditional media sources.

This illustrates that the Russian official rhetoric is only partly successful in hegemonizing public discourse. It seems to struggle particularly with the young, who have no active memory of the instability of the pre-Putin years and, through the internet and social media, are most exposed to alternative narratives. While Putin's approval ratings are still high (Levada-Center 2021b), they are nonetheless on an overall decline. The echo of Navalny's latest investigative video indicates that the legitimacy of Putin as the protector of the Russian people against a corrupt elite and the oligarchy might be shaking (Levada-Center 2021c).

### Responses: Increasing Hostility and Repression

So far, the Kremlin's response has been an ever more aggressive stance against the West and increasing repression against political dissent. Russia's fierce reactions to Western accusations in the Navalny case have demonstrated an unprecedented level of hostility, causing the country's already-strained relations with the EU to sink to a new low.

The Kremlin's rhetoric, however, not only discredits the challenge of an alternative Western interpretation—it also serves to legitimate a tougher stance at home, thereby transferring internal dissent to the outside. Navalny, so it goes, is an instrument of either the CIA or German intelligence (Peskov 2020, Lavrov 2021b). This rhetorically legitimises the hard course of action against him, his team, and his supporters. The harsh crackdown on protestors during the January events is indicative of a growing authoritarian response to domestic political challenges. Other signals include the recent confrontation with Twitter, the suppression of oppositional activities, and the tightening of the foreign agent law, whose application has now been extended also to non-registered entities and individuals.

For the leadership, these two sources of instability—Western accusations and growing internal dissent—are inextricably linked, since both challenge the authority of the official narrative. By lumping together any form of domestic political challenge with evil forces from abroad, the Kremlin thus aims to kill two birds with one stone. This strategy seeks to marginalise and discredit alternative interpretations from outside, to delegitimise dissent

within the country, and to justify the repressive measures taken to suppress those critics.

### Implications for the EU's Russia Policy

The EU ought to take the Kremlin's besieged fortress narrative into account when devising its policy approach towards Russia. This narrative not only perpetuates the political deadlock between Brussels and Moscow, but also aids the latter in covering up the silencing of domestic political dissent. Any policy must thus be evaluated against what effects it induces within the country—and especially for those the Kremlin has rhetorically ostracised.

The Russian leadership's defensive reaction to Western accusations in the Navalny case has shown that

a pro-government public discourse is crucial for the Russian leadership to keep up the appearance of legitimacy for its course of action. In response to the current crisis, the EU should therefore first and foremost vocally insist on the accountability of Russia's leadership to its population. Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are values Russia openly committed to as a member of multilateral institutions such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the United Nations. Firmly insisting on this normative ground, the EU can argue with facts to challenge the Kremlin's deflecting rhetoric while at the same time maintaining a basis for an inclusive vision for Europe that in the long run keeps alive the possibility of rapprochement and normalization.

#### *About the Author*

Mario Baumann is reading for his PhD at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies (BSIS). In his research he focuses on the interaction of interpretations in Russia and the European Union. In a [recent study](#), he analyses the discourse on information warfare in Russia–West relations.

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## Foolproofing Putinism, or Why Mikhail Mishustin Might Be One of the Most Ambitious Prime Ministers in Recent Russian History

By Fabian Burkhardt (Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg)

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Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin has been tacitly pressing ahead with an ambitious vision to reshape public administration. The main purpose of this advance is to foolproof the Russian state against the drawbacks of the heavy-handed top-down mode of governance of late Putinism, and to squeeze as much as possible out of the stagnant Russian state while avoiding any fundamental change.

### The Meta-Reform: The Government's Coordination Center

"I think he will start with reforming public administration [*gosupravlenie*]," said Sberbank's German Gref on 16 January 2020, one day after Mishustin was appointed prime minister. While Mishustin is best known for the digital transformation of Russia's tax service, his vision as PM is more ambitious: Mishustin did indeed launch an administrative reform the scope of which is only comparable to the one initiated in 2003–2004. A so-called "Coordination Center" was created on 22 February 2021, and can be considered the centerpiece of this reform. It is attached to the government's in-house think tank, the Analytical Center, and is headed by Deputy PM Dmitry Chernyshenko.

The idea goes back to 2015 when President Vladimir Putin tasked Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev with designing a specialized "project office". The philosophy behind this obscure "office" has been most clearly laid out by Sberbank's German Gref, who can be considered the founding father of what would later become the Coordination Center.

Gref's view might be summarized as follows: The state of Russia's economy is rotten. But before any meaningful reforms can be launched, the quality and capacity of the state's public administration should be enhanced, ideally with the help of big business: agile project management, performance measurement, and of course digital transformation. This meta-reform therefore would need to tackle the vertical governance style characteristic of the Russian state. And the archaic top-down system would have to be replaced by modern public management practices such as performance management.

Gref is famous for having become infatuated with PEMANDU, the "Performance Management and Delivery Unit" formed in 2009 to monitor Malaysia's "Government Transformation Program". On 30 June 2016, Putin created the Presidential Council on Strategic

Development and Priority Projects, essentially a coordination and monitoring group for the 2012 May decrees. Presidential aide Andrei Belousov was, as the main watchdog for the implementation of the 2012 May decrees, appointed secretary of the Council. In parallel, a department for project management was created within the PM's executive office [*Apparat Pravitel'stva*].

Even though there were major issues with the implementation of the 2012 May Decrees, they were to a large degree repackaged into the 2018 National Projects, and with the reappointment of the Medvedev government after the 2018 presidential elections, the previous management structure of the May Decrees was mostly kept intact. The reactivation of the State Council did not help much to improve feedback mechanisms between the center and the regions: in some spheres, such as salaries for certain categories of state employees, most regions even rolled back and fell behind the 2018 targets.

The reason why the Medvedev government had to step down simultaneously on 15 January 2020 has largely remained in the dark. Medvedev had been increasingly seen as a hindrance for meta-reforming the Russian state: with the National Projects, Russia had its answer to the Malaysian Government Transformation Program in place, but a functioning "delivery office" and performance management was largely absent. While PEMANDU promised "big, fast results," Medvedev played it small and slow.

The main question, of course, is whether Mishustin's elevation is simply yet another restructuring of the executive without changing the bigger picture. Mishustin at least appears to be motivated to act "big and fast".

First, the federal executive will be shrunk by about 32,000 staff units, with cuts at the center of up to 5 percent and in the regions of up to 10 percent of staff (mostly by cutting currently vacant positions). By contrast, the PM's office is being expanded to 1,792 staff. More importantly, the PM's office should move away from merely servicing 61 government commissions and focus on policy work instead: the PM's office now mirrors the Cabinet of Ministers, which should bolster its capability to coordinate policy and solve impasses. The restructuring of Russia's sprawling 40 development institutions, some of them under the roof of Igor Shuvalov's VEB (such as Skolkovo and Rosnano), should also be seen in this context: while six of them will be liquidated altogether, the functions of the others are meant to be

restructured in order to facilitate coordinated implementation of national development goals. Part of this reform is not only an audit of key performance indicators for the various developmental organizations and state corporations, but also cuts to staff, salaries and privileges.

Second, the Coordination Council is not a subordinate unit within the PM's office as the project department was, but rather a task force in its own right directly under Deputy PM Chernyshenko. The statute defines three main functions: incident management, priority tasks, and special projects. Moreover, decisions by the Center are obligatory for all federal executive bodies. In short, the Coordination Council will become the government's main troubleshooter. Last year, a predecessor task force had to solve "incidents" relating to bonus payment arrears for doctors working with Covid-19 patients, the provision of hot meals to pupils and the liquidation of deficits with certain drugs. Among the priority tasks, for example, is the coordination of government support for Russia's nine most economically depressed regions. The main idea behind the Center is to alleviate the drawbacks of top-down governance with more horizontal project-based work across executive officials and agencies. All of this should help to create an analytical ecosystem that supersedes the usual information barriers between vertically organized ministries and executive agencies.

### Mishustin's "Social Networks" and Russia's Data-Driven Authoritarianism

One of the main challenges to making the Coordination Council work is "digital feudalism," the more than 800 information systems within the executive with little compatibility and the bureaucrats who collect and insert (often manipulated) data into these systems. The proposed solution relates to the "state as platform" idea proposed by Aleksei Kudrin's Center for Strategic Development (CSR): such a data-driven state would serve as the main integrator for seamless communication between citizens, business and state executive bodies. But so far, data, Russia's "new oil," remains "dirty oil": In 2019, the government approved the National System for Data

Management (NSUD) to synchronize hundreds of state databases and create unified rules for the collection, manipulation, storage and usage of this data. However, regional pilot projects have exposed major issues with coordination among executive bodies with functional overlap.

Much more successful is the public services platform *Gosuslugi*, which reached 126 million users by the end of 2020, with 24 million having registered in that year alone. Around 70 million Russians are verified users of the Unified System for Identification and Authentication (ESIA) and are therefore entitled to use e-government services fully online via *Gosuslugi*. By linking verified *Gosuslugi* user profiles with the manifold state data bases in a unified data structure including between 20 and 60 categories of data on citizens, a "Digital Citizen Profile" will increasingly allow the Russian government to facilitate seamless data flows between the state, citizens and business (first and foremost banks). This will create abundant opportunities for citizen surveillance. But the Coordination Center is as the government's in-house think tank also called upon to improve feedback mechanisms with the population; to this end, the platform *Gosuslugi—Reshaem Vmeste (Let's decide together)* is being introduced in all federal subjects. Linking citizen complaints to e-government services in this way does not only create an early-warning system for citizen grievances, but is also a useful addition to the Kremlin's Centers for Regional Management (TsUR), which collect complaints about regional authorities on social media. Research shows that this kind of digital participatory governance is likely to increase votes for the incumbent.

Increased presidential powers in the wake of the 2020 constitutional changes exacerbate the "bad governance" associated with overcentralization and personalist rule. In the run-up to the long electoral cycle of the 2021 Duma elections and the 2024 presidential elections, Mishustin's administrative tweaks are intended to counterbalance the governance risks that accompany the zeroing of Putin's presidential terms.

#### *About the Author*

Dr Fabian Burkhardt is a research fellow at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg. Among his research interests are presidential and executive politics in authoritarian regimes with a regional focus on the post-Soviet space, in particular Russia and Belarus.

An earlier version of this article was published online via Riddle Russia at <https://www.ridl.io/en/foolproofing-putinism/>

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## Fear and Loathing in Russia: Repressions as a Tool of Kremlin's Rule

By Vladimir Gel'man (European University at St. Petersburg and University of Helsinki)

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Since 2012, the Kremlin has relied upon extensive use of selective political repressions vis-à-vis its rivals in various forms. These attacks have gone far beyond the most infamous cases, the killing of Boris Nemtsov in 2015 and poisoning of Alexei Navalny in 2020. Every instance of mass protest has faced Kremlin counter-attacks, which have included overt intimidation, public discrediting of critics, and persecution, harassment and violent coercion of opposition activists and/or supporters. The most recent wave of protests in January 2021, soon after the arrest and imprisonment of Navalny, resulted in detainment and arrest of thousands of participants across the country, mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. What are the major features of these repressions, and to what extent might they help to preserve Kremlin rule over time?

Political repressions under authoritarianism perform both punitive and signaling functions. First and foremost, their immediate goal is punishment and (if possible) elimination of actual and/or potential challengers to the regime. At the same time, the Russian government pursues repressions (or threat thereof) aimed at preventing the spread of public discontent towards anti-regime mobilization and aversion of spread of organized opposition across various segments of Russian society. Thus, regime critics receive a strong signal about the risks of unconventional behavior for their career and well-being, and may be less willing to be involved in anti-regime activism. To some extent, this approach to political repressions resembles those in the late Soviet Union, which in the 1960s pivoted from the use of mass repressions to selective targeting of dissident activism, a strategy which was able to contain it to a certain degree. While the number of political prisoners in the Soviet Union at that time never exceeded several hundred persons, preemptive control and monitoring enabled the Communist regime to avoid protest mobilization until the years of perestroika. In a sense, this experience serves as a role model for present-day Russia's rulers.

According to comparative studies, the scope and intensity of repressions towards regime opponents depends upon a combination of three factors. First, threat perceptions of rulers have forced them to rely upon repressions even when the danger of overthrow by dissenters is not very strong. Second, the previous experience of successful use of repressions for curbing protests is usually considered as an argument in favor of further reliance on these tools. Third, as co-optation

and repressions serve as two sides of the same coin, economic stagnation puts limits on the rewarding of loyal active citizens by the regime, and contributes to increase of sanctions for disloyalty. Russia's recent experience fits these arguments. The Kremlin's narratives wildly exaggerated the threat of "color revolutions", especially after the 2014 regime change in Ukraine. During the first wave of repressions, launched in 2012 after post-election protests (the Bolotnaya Square case), some dozens activists were imprisoned and several hundred fled Russia, quieting opposition activism for a while. From the viewpoint of the Kremlin, this experience, alongside vicious attacks on independent media and NGOs, was quite successful, and encouraged the regime to crack down harder during the next wave of protests during the 2019 Moscow City Duma elections and later on in 2021. Finally, amid the stagnation of real incomes of Russians in 2010s–2020s, the Kremlin was unwilling to buy Russians' loyalty and less inclined to offer enough side payments for satellite parties such as the KPRF. Also, unlike in the 2000s, the Kremlin no longer expands the pool of its supporters through support for loyalist youth movements, NGOs, and the like.

The expansion of scope and intensity of repressions in Russia recently developed in several directions. The list of potential targets, initially limited to NGOs (labeled as "foreign agents" and faced with many restrictions and fines), extended to media and individuals as well as other non-registered organized entities (such as regional networks of Navalny's headquarters), who faced even more severe restrictions and fines. The repressive regulations in Russia went further to cover new territory, such as "enlightenment activities", which were considered by the Russian parliament (who proposed a new bill aimed at their state licensing) as a dangerous channel of Western influence. Regulations of Internet and social media with criminalization of "fake news" and other forms of spread of unwanted information as well as threats to switch off certain website and services for Russian users also became tougher by the 2020s. Second, punishment of protesters become more severe by 2021, as fines, typical for the 2010s, were replaced by more arrests and criminal cases against activists. Third, vested interests of the coercive apparatus of the Russian state, which expanded its size through building of special anti-extremist departments in different agencies, also played an important role in increasing the scope of repressions, and instances of cases fabricated and/or

pushed by certain officials (such as the Network case or the Yury Dmitriev affair) demonstrated this tendency.

**Figure 1: The Scope of Arrests and Fines after Political Protests in Moscow**

Year	Total arrests in person-days	Total fines in million Russian roubles	Number of administrative and criminal cases against protesters in Moscow—initiated (completed)
2017 (26 March – 26 April)	591	7.2	905 (759)
2019 (27 July – 27 August)	1,082	15.7	2,466 (2,189)
2021 (23 January – 24 February)	6,736	6.4	5,716 (3,751)

Source: <https://www.proekt.media/research/statistika-arestov-mitingi/>

#### About the Author

Vladimir Gel'man is Professor at the European University at St. Petersburg and the University of Helsinki. He is the author of *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015) and has been published in *Democratization*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, and other journals.

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## Elections 2021: Tense Atmosphere, Likely Regime Victory, and Uncertain Policy Outcomes

By Boris Ginzburg and Alexander Libman (both Free University Berlin)

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For electoral authoritarian regimes like the Russian one, elections are always causes for concern. However, the Russian leadership has particular reasons for worrying about the Duma elections of 2021.

Russia enters the election year in rather bad shape from an economic point of view. Since 2013, the country has

As of yet, repressions have brought only partial successes for the Kremlin. Punishments of activists curbed opposition activism for a while, but they were not able to eliminate protests completely. Signaling of repressions in Russia in the atmosphere of fear and loathing faces a rising discontent of Russians with the regime, especially among the Russian youth. These contradictions between popular demands for change and the regime's supply of preserving the political status quo at any cost are likely to increase in the wake of the upcoming 2021 State Duma elections. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's increasing over-reliance upon repressions as the major tool of its rule is a risky game because of the great empowerment of the coercive apparatus of the Russian state. In a number of autocracies, similar tendencies have paved the way to military coups against unpopular dictators who have lost their legitimacy. To what extent Russia's leadership will be able to avert these risks remains to be seen.

experienced economic stagnation. The Covid-19 pandemic has hit Russia hard, with an estimated 260,000 excess deaths from April to November 2020<sup>1</sup> and with the government providing much smaller economic assistance to the population and to businesses than most large economies.<sup>2</sup> The pandemic contributed to the further decline of Putin's

1 Kobak, D. (2021). Excess mortality reveals Covid's true toll in Russia. *Significance*, 18(1), 16-19.

2 <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/396629-pandemiya-so-skidkoy-rossiya-vydelila-na-pomoshch-naseleniyu-i-biznesu-v-70-raz-menshe>

popularity, which was already suffering after the pension reform of 2018.<sup>3</sup> However, some level of dissatisfaction with Putin is driven simply by the length of his rule – Russian society (like most other societies worldwide) is getting tired of the leader who has been in office for two decades.

In addition to these fundamental developments, several recent political events are likely to make Russian leaders nervous. The return of Aleksey Navalny to Russia and his subsequent arrest are likely to make him an undisputed leader of the Russian non-systemic opposition (and a leader who is recognized by the international community). Protests in Belarus in 2020 show that even carefully planned elections can lead to unexpected public protests. In the eyes of the Russian leadership, Belarus and Navalny are parts of the general aggressive stance of the West which call for vigilance.

At the same time, the 2021 elections are likely to look like a window of opportunity in the eyes of the Russian non-systemic opposition as well. The experience of smart voting strategies provides the opposition with a tool it can use in the upcoming elections. There have been multiple episodes in recent years of Russians voting in a different way than the Kremlin would expect at the regional and local level, and the opposition can hope for similar surprises to occur during the 2021 elections.

As a result, for both the regime and the non-systemic opposition, the upcoming elections are far from ‘business as usual’, and this will most likely affect their strategies. To optimize its chances, the Kremlin will mainly rely on a rich repertoire of manipulative and repressive measures against its opponents like the passing of new repressive laws aiming to hamper the smart voting strategy, violent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations, disinformation tactics aimed at driving wedges between different parts of the non-systemic opposition, and the creation of Kremlin-loyal pseudo-oppositional parties to absorb some of the regime-critical votes (for example *Novye Lyudi*, created in 2020).<sup>4</sup> The Kremlin could also try to instrumentalize Navalny’s further physical and mental well-being in prison as a tool to blackmail his team and to constrain its actions. The annual State of the Nation address Putin has to deliver (the date of which is as of yet unannounced) would offer the regime the possibility to announce unexpected moves (e.g., generous social spending or major policy reforms) which the opposition will have no chance to prepare for.

The toolbox of the non-systemic opposition is more limited than that of the Kremlin, but the opposition is likely to utilize it as thoroughly as possible. One can expect the non-systemic opposition to attempt to further

build up the smart voting approach, to organize targeted protest rallies (with specific and attractive political agendas, rather than simple regular events without a clear message), to raise the international community’s awareness of state repressions in order to internationally delegitimize the current Russian regime, and thereby convince Washington and Brussels to toughen their sanction agendas.

The systemic opposition under these circumstances finds itself in a complex situation. On the one hand, it could benefit from smart voting. On the other hand, the Kremlin would most likely expect much stronger guarantees of loyalty from the parties allowed to run for parliament. On top of that, the readiness of the systemic opposition to cooperate with Navalny is not a given, as a recent article from Yabloko party leader Grigory Yavlinsky shows. Yavlinsky warns his readers about Navalny’s nationalist and populist roots.<sup>5</sup> For Yavlinsky, unwillingness to make any ideological compromises has been the cornerstone of his political stance since the mid-1990s; however, this also means that the opportunities for cooperation between Yabloko and Navalny (e.g., placement of Lyubov Sobol on the Yabloko party list) seem to be questionable.

The heightened risk perception on the side of the regime and the willingness of the non-systemic opposition to use the window of opportunity will lead to a highly tense atmosphere around the upcoming elections. To exacerbate the uncertainty, ultimately, the strategies chosen by the actors will depend not on the objective political situation and the attitude of the public (which in the Russian case remains unknown), but on the way the situation is perceived. One can only speculate how Putin himself interprets the current situation in Russia and where he sees the main challenges to his rule. In any case, political miscalculations on the side of all actors are highly likely, and possible over- (or under-) reactions could produce unforeseen consequences.

By far the most likely scenario remains that the regime will manage to retain control of the Duma and to prevent (or suppress) protests. Still, the election’s aftermath will create a fog of uncertainty about the further policy consequences for Russia. One can expect either an easing of the Kremlin’s current repressive grip with a certain attempt to improve relations with the West or the complete opposite, the Kremlin politically locking itself into its current repressive and isolationist vision, or the combination of both strategies. Again, perceptions of the regime, rather than real developments on the ground, will be the deciding factor (Belarus could become an important testing ground Russian leadership will draw lessons from).

*Please see overleaf for information about the authors.*

3 <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84052>

4 See also: <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/01/10/v-rossii-poyavyatsya-neskolko-novyh-partiy-vklyuchaya-partiyu-razrabotchika-igry-world-of-tanks-oni-budut-sozdavat-oschuschenie-politicheskoy-konkurentsii>

5 <https://www.yavlinsky.ru/article/bez-putinizma-i-populizma/>

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## Before the Duma Elections, Russia is Moving Forward with E-Voting. Why, and With What Potential Consequences?

By Stas Gorelik (George Washington University / Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen)

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### Abstract

Numerous experiments with voting technologies have been recently taking place in Russia. For instance, the role of online voting has been constantly increasing since 2019, and this trend seems set to continue in the coming 2021 elections. Why is the Kremlin tolerating and even promoting such innovations? In fact, they can boost the current Russian regime's legitimacy and allow for "stealth" electoral manipulation. However, they seem to be very unlikely to prevent post-election protests if structural conditions for them arise.

### The Spread of New Voting Technologies in Russia

Quite unexpectedly, online voting (officially called *distantsionnoye elektronnoye golosovaniye*) was introduced during the Moscow Duma elections in 2019 (Meduza 2019), though only in three city electoral districts (*okrugs*). The next year, in Spring 2020, it was decided that independent candidates who have to collect citizens' signatures to run for regional parliaments would be allowed to do so online through the gosuslugi.ru portal. Furthermore, more than one million voters from Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod Regions could participate online in the constitutional plebiscite (TASS 2020, RBK 2020). This year, nine regions may organize e-voting in the Duma and other elections, according to the Central Election Commission (Golosinfo 2021).

On the one hand, these innovations may look reasonable in light of the pandemic. Yet, they seem to be unlikely to curb electoral fraud. In fact, even the limited use of online voting in the 2019 Moscow Duma

elections led to a scandal, in which anomalous support for a candidate supported by the city administration was detected in one of the "online precincts".<sup>1</sup> In general, online voting tools in Russia have been developed hastily and without proper independent oversight. For instance, it is still unclear how exactly an online voting system will function in the coming elections and how civil society will be able to monitor it (Golosinfo 2021).

### How the Kremlin Can Capitalize on These New Technologies

To begin with, the introduction and increasing use of these technologies can be employed as a legitimation instrument to demonstrate that the current regime is actually reacting to some voters' dissatisfaction with the integrity of elections. For instance, the innovation of allowing potential candidates to obtain popular support for their bids through gosuslugi.ru may be considered a response to the 2019 Moscow protests, which started when many opposition politicians were disqualified under the pretext of them having provided invalid signatures in their registration applications.

More importantly, in order to use online voting systems for stealing votes or adding them to the "right" candidates, authorities do not need to rely on intermediaries, such as local election officials or directors of state-owned enterprises. Illicit activities such as ballot stuffing or threats to fire employees disloyal to the ruling party are sometimes detected by activists, which sometimes makes such intermediaries wary (Harvey 2020). Meanwhile, some research on protest mobilization in response to police repression (Sutton, Butcher, & Svensson 2014) and on post-election demonstrations

<sup>1</sup> One of the candidates from that electoral district filed official complaints and even created a web resource about the case: <https://evoting.ru/en> (accessed 25 March 2021).

(e.g., Kuntz & Thompson 2009) shows that visual and/or readily available evidence of authorities' misconduct can significantly increase the likelihood of protests. Obtaining such evidence during online voting is hard. Even in the case of mounting public criticism, new voting technologies can be just scrapped, as occurred in 2011 in Kazakhstan, where electronic voting machines had been introduced in the early 2000s (Kassen 2020). By doing so, the Kremlin may again score legitimacy points by showing its supposed responsiveness.

Finally, authorities can use the practices of e-voting and online collection of citizens' signatures in strategic ways that are "safe" for the regime. For instance, e-voting may be sanctioned only in the regime's strongholds. In Azerbaijan's 2008 parliamentary elections, video cameras were less likely to be installed in supposedly "problematic" precincts, where blatant fraud was needed to

ensure the desired outcome (Sjoberg 2014).<sup>2</sup> As for voters' signatures, candidates for regional parliaments may be allowed to collect only up to 50% of them online. This leaves authorities quite some room for disqualifications under the conventional pretext (Bækken 2015) of "validating" physical signatures.

New voting technologies may worsen the situation with electoral manipulation in Russia, both in the coming elections and thereafter, yet they seem to be unlikely to prevent mass discontent if conditions for it are ripe. As some cross-national research shows, post-election protests happen not or not only because of fraud *per se*. They are more likely when citizens become disenchanted with the ruling regime due to socio-economic hardships (Brancati 2014) and start to hope for changes (Lucardi 2019). In such situations, any result favoring the ruling regime may become a trigger.

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2 It is true that the approval rates for the constitutional amendments among those who voted online in Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod were lower than the country's total of almost 78%: around 62% and around 60%, respectively. Yet, it is striking that the amendments were not rejected even by online voters, whom one may assume to be more liberal-minded than the average Russian voter.

## Will Putin's Regime Survive?

By Andreas Heinemann-Grüder (University of Bonn and Bonn International Centre for Conversion)

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Putin's regime is a learning authoritarian system, not immune to crises but resilient. Russia no longer represents an electoral autocracy since elections have degenerated into plebiscites without any meaningful alternative. Many decisions are taken on an ad hoc basis, excluding institutions and beyond legal constraints that award legitimacy and ensure quality. In Putin's Russia, the absolutism of the autocrat, the tone-deafness of its leading circle and the autonomy of the security apparatuses reinforce each other. Since 2012, President Putin has been taking legal and repressive actions and has heavily invested in media campaigns to safeguard his regime and to protect it from interferences he deems dangerous. Putin's preventive counter-revolution has been successful so far, criminalizing independent civil society, discrediting opposition forces as a fifth column of the West, controlling the mass media and instrumentalizing social media, enlarging the outreach of the security apparatuses and successfully carrying out cyber attacks.

Putin's regime will survive as long as it commands sufficient state capacity. The security services and the judicial system monopolize public violence; the state is capable of levying taxes and extracting other resources; it provides basic public services. Bureaucratic procedures are functional. Russia did not lose a war. Putin's rule has compensated for the loss of Russia's status after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, made forgettable the uneasiness of having been economically overtaken by the Soviet Union's former allies in Eastern Europe and China. Putin also defused and substituted the never-admitted collective shame over Soviet mass atrocities by spreading a sense of Russia's and the Soviet Union's historical greatness. Putin's revenge for the Russian Versailles syndrome resonates among those age cohorts that spent their formative years in Soviet times and during the 1990s.

Russia's authoritarian regression fits into the global trend of democratic stalemate and reversal over the last two decades. While open military and one-party-regimes are growing less common, personalist regimes are quite persistent. The problem of Putin's succession is not solved, but succession crises should not be overestimated: Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have solved their succession problems without causing systemic crises.

Yet, political regimes usually become unstable once social and political upward mobility is suppressed, whenever a gerontocracy (as in the late Brezhnev period) is

cemented, and when the number of regime beneficiaries shrinks. The kleptocracy of the camarilla could count on silent approval as long as the regime was able to hand out clientelistic goods. However, its social clientele is shrinking, and this causes discontent, especially among the urban middle class.

The more Putin's regime radicalizes itself, the more some sources of its legitimacy evaporate—his image as anti-Yeltsin, James Bond or messiah. Appeals to the values of the *homo sovieticus*, to Orthodox traditions or hurray patriotism after the annexation of Crimea are losing traction. The generation born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is beyond the reach of Kremlin propaganda and state TV. State-sponsored movements such as the former "Nashi" no longer mobilize the youth. Support for the regime is trending downwards. Russia's governance model as a petro-state is out of fashion; the fossil age is coming to an end.

The radicalization of Putin's regime is also a result of the structure of political power. Radicalization does not result from ideological worldviews; the leading circle in the Kremlin is anti-liberal, but otherwise free of any *weltanschauung*. Decisions are taken by a tiny circle of Putin's cronies without institutional or personal counterweights. The inner circle operates in an unthinking, stereotypical manner. While power derives from being close to the president, there are several "verticals of power". Each actor in the institutional arrangement has to weigh which channel of influence is most advantageous. Russia consists of a system of competing case managers (*kuratorty*). However, who is the most favored is not always easy to discern. In Russia's political regime, autocracy is combined with anarchy. This leads to bad decisions which have to be covered up or corrected. The constant pressure to hide mistakes and deficits leads to nervousness, blame-shifting and the suggestion of radical solutions. The failed attempt to murder Alexey Navalny is a case in point, Bellingcat and Navalny's team exposing the perpetrators. These kinds of failures lead to a search for the guilty party.

The respective syndrome of failure has to be corrected. Finally, radicalization results from the autonomy of and competition between the security services, especially the secret services. Over time, the modus operandi of the Kadyrov regime in the Chechnyan Republic of the Russian Federation has been diffusing from the Russian periphery to the center, including contract killings and employing irregular paramilitary forces.

The behavior of the security services will determine the regime's trajectory in the years to come; they can side with the incumbent, stay neutral or defect. Their calculus will be informed by their assessment of the power configuration (nobody likes to side with the loser), the prospect of amnesty (no tribunals), the danger of instability spilling over to their organization (no decay of the army or police as in the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet case), the expected impact on patronage (who will lose privileges) and the regime challengers' offers regarding incorporation. The murder of the former spy Litvinenko in London and the attempted murder of the former spy Skripal in Salisbury deter potential defectors. The regime will deter civil society from autonomous activities and use targeted violence against opposition leaders, but is likely to shy away from shooting at mass demonstrators—as did Gaddafi, Assad and Yanuko-

vych. Putin will opt for harsh riot control instead of “bloody Sundays”.

With his exposure of the rottenness of Putin's kleptocracy and the sultanism of his cronies, Alexey Navalny was temporarily able to set the agenda of public communication. Like a person running amok, Navalny tried to force Putin into a decisive battle rallying the discontented around his martyrdom. Putin's spin doctors had to react, and they did by defaming, arresting and sentencing Navalny. Navalny targeted the personalist nature of Putin's regime, employing the policy style of a charismatic, populist and polarizing leader himself. Yet, any group of future challengers in Russia has to offer a programmatic alternative to Putinism, i.e., more than a mere replacement of the incumbent, and incentives to defect from the current winning coalition. Elite splits are more likely to end Putin's reign than protest.

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## Strategies for Russia: Avoiding a New Cold War

By David Lane (Cambridge University)

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It is now over twenty years since President Putin first appeared at the apex of the Russian political elite. Since that time, relations with the West have cumulatively deteriorated. Russia's support for the secession of Crimea and the West's view of Russia's ‘hybrid’ warfare have led to a dominant political discourse of a new ‘cold war’. Donald Trump's initial attempts to improve relations with President Putin were sabotaged. Current relations between Russia and NATO, the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union are increasingly hostile and include sanctions which have hurt not only Russian companies but also its citizens. The UK's current foreign policy review (March 2021), for example, will raise the cap on the number of British nuclear weapons and will extend their use to retaliation against cyber-attack. Even against the background of the enormous domestic costs of the 2008 world financial crisis and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, it is planned to increase the UK's military budget. The UK is manifestly responding to former President Trump's exhortations for the Europeans to pull their weight in NATO to sustain their own defence. Russia and China are clearly in the sights as actual or potential aggressor powers. One

major future task for President Putin will be to try to improve relations; if he is unsuccessful, he will have to find means to strengthen Russia's defences.

President Gorbachev faced similar problems and adopted a reform position which ended the Cold War. This is unlikely to be necessary or repeated by President Putin. Gorbachev came to power on a reform platform resting on a weak economic and strategic base. Putin has consolidated power. His attempts to join the hegemonic powers have failed: Putin was ignominiously excluded from the G8 group of countries. Domestically, Putin is unchallenged ideologically and has no effective political opposition: there is no ‘reform movement’, no likely ‘coloured revolution’. The West is divided. The European Union has lost its image of freedom and prosperity, and Germany needs Russia's energy supply. The defection of the UK from the European Union will weaken the influence of the Atlantic alliance in Europe and strengthen European moves to normalise relations with Russia.

Perhaps of greater importance is the fact that Russia under Putin does not pose an ideological or strategic threat in the same way as the USSR once did. The alleged

poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, in 2018 appears to be the main charge of the British government against the current Russian regime. But with the loss of the EU market, Britain also needs new trading partners. In the current international context, there seems to be no political or economic basis for a new cold war. Russia is most likely to continue with its policy of competitive interdependence with the West.

Of greater concern is the West's relationship with China, which is now the West's 'significant other'. The current British defence, security and foreign policy review considers China's power 'to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s'. While 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in its current form is hardly an ideological 'challenge' to global neo-liberalism, China's economic and technological advance certainly does put in in competition with many Western companies. China presents an economic challenge to the hegemony of the USA which underlies the worsening relations between the two countries under Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The cloak of support for competitive electoral democracy, human rights, and the sanctity of interna-

tional law hides the USA's awareness of the Thucydides' trap: China is the ascendant challenger. President Xi Jinping is aware of this and has warned against any adversary taking precipitous military action. China, however, is not yet strong enough unilaterally to defeat military action by the USA. The formation of the One Belt One Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as well as treaties with other states are an indication that China needs, and seeks, allies. Clearly, a pact with Russia would create a strategic and military bloc which would severely weaken the USA's military hegemony and form a military balance of power. A West European strategy, led by Germany, to avert a strengthening of political and military linkages between Russia and China might well move to a European understanding with Russia. The current policy of demonising President Putin is counterproductive: it diminishes Russia as a sovereign state, denies it a status as a world power and concurrently creates the preconditions for a Sino-Russian pact. President Putin is faced with the dilemma of how strongly Russia should be coupled with an Eastern alliance led by China.

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David Lane is an Emeritus Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge University and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (UK). Recent publications include: *Changing Regional Alliances for China and the West* (With G. Zhu) (2018); *The Eurasian Project in Global Perspective* (2016); (With V. Samokhvalov) *The Eurasian Project and Europe* (2015); *Elites and Identity in the Transformation of State Socialism* (2014). He has recently had articles published in *Critical Sociology*, *Mir Rossii*, *The Third World Quarterly*, *Alternativy* (Moscow) and *International Critical Thought*.

## **Citizen versus Strongman: Revival, Social Class, and Social Decay in Russia's Autocracy**

By Tomila Lankina (London School of Economics and Political Science)

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As Russia approaches parliamentary elections in September 2021, analysts confront a polar set of factors and dynamics that give significant fuel to both the "glass half full" and "glass half empty" sets of sentiments. Let us start with factors related to the global context. Across the world—whether in Myanmar, Belarus, Russia, or Hong Kong—citizens have been taking to the streets in peaceful pro-democracy protests. Simultaneously, we are seeing the rise and emboldening of the autocratic strongman. Unencumbered by considerations of the sanctity of human life, rights, or dignity, dictatorships and mild autocracies masking as democracies have signalled that repression is effective as rulers increasingly break the contract with their people and engage in pop-

ular repression. While citizens across the post-communist region and protesters globally have been learning from each other, so too have dictators. Morally, citizens eschewing violence and embracing the poignant symbolism of flowers, songs, or Valentine's Day heart shaped lights of course have the upper hand. However, practically speaking, they are powerless and outgunned, if not in some cases outnumbered if one looks at the vast armies of police "special forces" or actual army divisions deployed to suppress dissent.

It is with these considerations in mind that we ought to approach the potential of Russia's forthcoming elections—and the inevitable manipulations, electoral protests, and suppression that go with them—to

effect meaningful and irreversible change in Russia's regime. It is true that the scale of dissent this year has been unprecedented. Following the arrest of Aleksey Navalny, far more protesters than we have seen in recent years have taken to the streets. Even cities and regions where mass street activism had been unheard of witnessed rallies. This is clear if we examine over-time regional data in the [Lankina Russian Protest Event Dataset \(LaRuPED\)](#), which shows how the country is divided between habitually protesting and active regions and those which remain largely dormant. Another trend promising to increase the scale of protest is that, as seen during the 2011–2012 protest wave, citizens are united not by their allegiance to a leader, a party, or a movement, but rather by their antipathy towards the regime. There are also other dynamics that we should watch carefully and should not dismiss. Conventionally bracketed under the rubric of “demographic” or generational change, over the last two decades, there have been profound shifts in the cultures, mentalities, and outlooks of Russians, not just of the younger generations, but also across generations. Gone are the days of the socially awkward, insecure, and fearful *homo sovieticus*. Instead, we are seeing confident, well-travelled Russians who are aware of their rights as citizens, as an electorate, and as taxpayers, who have embraced the values of the Western middle class and who would not put up with anything less than the same kinds of freedoms and dignity that their European neighbours enjoy.

It is in this light that we should approach the phenomenal symbolism of FBK's “Putin Palace” video. Not so much a stunning exposure of the full extent of the regime's corruption—for many facts in the video were hardly new—it is a statement of the chasm between the values of the middle class and those of the regime. The former has internalised the sense of embarrassment associated with conspicuous consumption, and the latter symbolises precisely the kitsch, the vulgarity, the backwardness, if you wish, of the “uncool” regime. The contrast is clear when YouTube videos or retweets of arrests of prominent opposition figures—lawyers, publicists, journalists, intellectuals, both men and women, in their homes—give us a glimpse of their simple lives, the ordinary apartments, the modest furnishings, the happy domesticity. These are people eschewing greed, corruption, and disdain for the law to pursue their passions and fight for the dignity of the citizens of a future Russia. Contrast that with the now notorious “bunker” of the old man in the Kremlin. Middle class Russian citizens do not see such a lifestyle of Louis XIV palatial gold as “cool” or desirable as some may have during the “wild 1990s.” “Cool” is dignity, a rewarding and morally

uncompromised profession, and rights, not ski helipads, private chapels, vineyards, or yachts.

But there is another chasm that we ought to consider, that between the middle class—or, more precisely, the small group within it endowed with a public consciousness—and the rest. I am referring to the segment of the middle class free from the stupor of the pressures that, say, an underpaid schoolteacher or nurse faces daily in her work as a cog in Putin's electoral or repressive machinery, what I term Russia's “second class middle class” or, as the American scholar [Bryn Rosenfeld](#) aptly characterises it, as the state-dependent “autocratic middle class” segment. For, as I write in my [forthcoming book](#), communism in Russia never succeeded in fully abolishing the society of estates (*sosloviya*), with the small and superbly educated social minority of the intelligentsia of noble, clergy, or urban burgher background outnumbered by a vast army of the latter-day peasant habitually underprivileged in the system of imperial estates and the neo-estate social gradations of communism. Furthermore, as Alexander Libman and I explore in a [forthcoming paper](#) in the *American Political Science Review*, these estate legacies continue to influence Russians' orientations towards the political realm. These historical considerations should be at the forefront of how we approach, say, the question of policing of protest in present-day Russia, and indeed that of other post-communist autocracies like Belarus. We need to analyse the social milieu from which the massive army of recruits to Putin's National Guard come from, and to find whether it is the depths of social despair and deprivation, ideological conviction, ignorance, or a combination of these factors that make them turn into salaried enablers of the regime and perpetrators of its violence.

And so I come back to the opening discussion of this essay. Russian and global regime strongmen do not just feel emboldened because they see violence happening across the globe, because other strongmen are doing it and getting away with it. They are also confident of their power to recruit armies of enablers, presumably from the habitually socially deprived groups, elements of the criminal world, and the underclass. And as global social issues abound—whether due to Covid-19, the decline of the petrostate, or Western sanctions—and as dictators like Putin drive their economies further into the ground, so too are we likely to see more of the economically desperate and poor willing to trade principles for pay. It is for this reason that I cannot be too optimistic about what the intensely pointless ritualism of Russia's elections this year will bring to the country in terms of democratic change.

*Please see overleaf for information about the author.*

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## The Economic Consequences of Autocracy

By Michael Rochlitz (University of Bremen)

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In competitive democracies, elections are an institution to hold a government accountable. Good performance is rewarded, whereas poorly-performing governments have difficulties getting reelected. This holds especially true in terms of economic performance; the fate of the economy probably remains the most important factor in liberal democracies to determine if incumbent governments get reelected.

During Russia's parliamentary elections in 2003 and 2007, this was not so much different. After the economic crash of the 1990s, Russia's citizens were grateful for the economic upturn, and for a government that seemed less erratic than the administration of Boris Yeltsin. Despite some irregularities, the decisive victories of United Russia in 2003 and 2007 seemed to be a genuine reflection of the public mood.

Things changed in 2011. Eclipsing the effect of some useful reforms during the Medvedev presidency, Vladimir Putin's decision to run again for president and to head United Russia resulted in a 15% loss for the party in the December 2011 Duma elections, as compared to 2007. United Russia only managed to keep its majority through massive electoral fraud, sparking the most intense public protests since the end of the Soviet Union.

To crack down on protests, Putin tightened the screws upon his return to the presidency, sidelining Medvedev's more liberal economic team and extending the powers of the country's security services. The increase in repression was almost immediately accompanied by a downturn in economic growth, although global oil prices remained at an all-time high. While Russia's economy grew at an average yearly rate of 4.2% between 2010 and 2012, growth was down to 1.5% in 2013.

By the time of the 2016 elections, the situation had become even worse, with Russia's economy contrac-

ting by 1% in 2014 and 2.2% in 2015. To limit electoral repercussions, the Kremlin decided to play it safe by making the election as uneventful as possible. United Russia refrained from conducting any meaningful campaign, and the date of the election was brought forward to mid-September, when most Russians were just coming home from their summer holidays. The strategy worked, with low turnout and significant fraud ensuring that United Russia kept its majority in the Duma.

Five years on, the economic situation has now turned into a disaster. According to data from the World Bank (including an estimated economic contraction of 4% for 2020), Russia's GDP per capita in early 2021 is below its value in 2008. In other words, the average Russian citizen today is worse off than they were 13 years ago. In any competitive democracy, a government with such a dismal economic record would have been voted out of office long ago.

The problem is not so much the fall in oil prices since 2014, but rather a complete lack of strategy and vision by the Russian government. While Putin was mainly concerned with questions of foreign policy, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev showed himself to be almost embarrassingly weak and unable to address the problem of Russia's sluggish growth. When he was finally replaced by Mikhail Mishustin in January 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented Mishustin from introducing any significant changes, even though observers generally consider him to be a more competent manager than Medvedev.

The weakness of the Russian government was amplified by a shift in relative power within the Russian ruling elite, away from the more liberal, technocratic managers that were influential before 2012, and towards the security services, or *siloviki*. The latter either do not care about the business climate and the economy, do not understand the effect of increasing repression and

control on the performance of a modern market economy, or both.

Unfortunately, the situation has only become worse in recent years. Since about 2018, not only firms and entrepreneurs are constantly harassed and under attack, but increasingly also science and academia. As innovation is a crucial input to diversify an economy away from oil and gas, the longer-term effects of these developments will be devastating. For most scientists working in Russia, the assertion by Russia's security services that the country's scientific output has to be protected from predatory foreign powers sounds bitterly ironic. If Russia's researchers are no longer allowed to cooperate in any meaningful way with the international scientific community, and most promising young researchers either leave academia or the country, there will simply be nothing left to protect.

In Dmitry Medvedev's defense, one has to say that when he was president between 2008 and 2011, there actually was an economic strategy. At the time, the crisis of the years 2008 and 2009 had served as a wake-up call, pushing the government to adopt more business-friendly policies. Institutions were put into place to protect entrepreneurs from repression, the government tried to build its own Silicon Valley with the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology, and the police reform of 2011 actually resulted in a significant reduction of lower-level corruption. One can only speculate what would have happened had these policies continued.

#### *About the Author*

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## Preparing for the Parliamentary Elections of 2021

By Andrei Semenov (Center for Comparative History and Politics, Perm State University)

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The upcoming September 2021 parliamentary elections in Russia have already become a battlefield between the regime and the opposition. With the constitutional amendments that allow Vladimir Putin to run for another term, control over the State Duma has become crucial to ensure a smooth transition. However, retaining United Russia's (UR) majority is a challenging task: the party's ratings are at a historic low, and the "smart voting" strategy promoted by Alexei Navalny threatens UR's

In contrast, Vladimir Putin's economic record since 2012 looks bleak. Most economic reforms and initiatives that were started under Medvedev either fizzled out or were discontinued. The average overall growth rate over the past eight years stands at almost exactly 0%. This is much too low for an economy with the potential of the Russian Federation. Even worse, there does not seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel.

This lack of a perspective has led to the emergence of a new generation of young, motivated and talented politicians who see their future taken from them by an aging and incompetent political leadership. Despite immense odds, they try to participate in politics, to offer alternative solutions to Russia's many problems. By coming up with the system of "smart voting" during the 2019 Moscow city elections, they have even managed to put up a real political challenge to the incumbent party, in view of the upcoming Duma elections.

Unfortunately, instead of accepting the necessity of change, the Kremlin is only further tightening the screws. By repressing all genuine opposition, and increasingly allowing only pro-Kremlin hardliners to run even in the systemic political parties, elections have started to resemble what they looked like in the Soviet Union. If the policies of the last years continue, this might well happen to Russia's economy as well.

dominance in the districts. Consequently, the regime increasingly relies on coercion and filtering of opposition candidates. As the struggle over the Duma seats intensifies, even the systemic opposition parties can't feel safe: their ratings are not in good shape either, and their potential candidates are likely to experience an additional pressure to clear the electoral space for the ruling party.

The state of the economy will clearly be at the center of the agenda. Real disposable incomes have fallen six years

in a row, the current exchange rate depreciates purchasing power for imports, and the prospects of economic recovery at the moment are bleak at best. The pandemic has amplified the existing crisis: in 2020, inflation hit 4.9% annually (above the 4% Central Bank target) and unemployment peaked at a historic 6.3%. Public concerns about rising prices, unemployment, poverty, and corruption remained the most salient problems according to regular Levada-Center polling: in August 2020, 61% mentioned concern about inflation (+2 pp. over the previous year), 44% mentioned unemployment (+8 pp.), 39% poverty (-3 pp.), and 38% corruption and bribery (-3 pp.). The crisis in the economy was mentioned by 26%, ranking 7<sup>th</sup>.

Against the backdrop of the economic crisis, major political parties have little to offer. United Russia follows the executive's lead and, apart from a recent string of coercive laws, does not offer much to alleviate the economic pains. Not surprisingly, the party's polling hovered slightly over 30% through all of 2020, with no prospects of recovery. However, the systemic opposition has not capitalized on this decline much: the Communist Party's polling averaged 13.6% in 2020 (-1.8 pp. from the previous year), the Liberal-Democratic Party's fell from 12.3 to 11.5%, and Just Russia gained a negligible 0.16 pp. according to VTsIOM polls. It is the support for the non-parliamentary parties that has been steadily rising since 2017, reaching a high of 13.9% in October 2020. Given that the share of those who won't participate is surprisingly low (8.9% on average in 2020), the signs of political realignment among the voters are clear.

New political parties are unlikely to accommodate the demand for change. Despite breakthroughs in the regional elections that have allowed parties like "The Green Alternative" and "New People" to run for the State Duma with-

out the burden of collecting signatures, their electability on the federal level remains doubtful. Others—like left-conservatives "Za Pravdu" ("For Truth") and "Patriots of Russia"—preferred to merge with existing players like Just Russia, probably a desperate attempt at retaining their center-left loyalists. As Alexei Navalny's multiple attempts to register his party failed, a sizeable fraction of voters has been effectively disenfranchised. Much will depend on how far the Kremlin is willing to go with its usual strategy of filtering out the independent candidates.

Lastly, the 2021 federal campaign will be reinforced by subnational elections in 50 regions (11 executive and 39 legislative), including hotspots like Khabarovsk Krai and relatively competitive areas like Perm Krai and Sverdlovsk Region. The parallel campaigns will likely increase turnout, and higher turnout generally benefits the opposition. They also impose the additional burden of managing multiple elections from the center, inviting occasional miscalculations. For the opposition, it is an opportunity to bargain and demand concessions from the regime. On a more negative note, the Kremlin's resolve to crush the January 2021 mobilization indicates that institutional politics will remain closed for the most critical part of the opposition.

Parliaments matter even in authoritarian regimes, and the State Duma is not an exception. Apart from being a place for bargains between elite groups and the incumbent, parliaments legislate and provide a bare minimum of political representation. Over the years of his rule, Vladimir Putin has preferred to bend the laws in his favor rather than bluntly violating them. Despite its reputation of being a toothless rubber stamp, the federal parliament is a key player in this regard, and to the extent the Kremlin needs to justify its actions legally, the future of the regime hinges upon the composition of the next State Duma.

#### *About the Author*

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## Information Wars, Opposition Coordination, and Russia's 2021 Duma Election

By Regina Smyth (Indiana University and Woodrow Wilson Center)

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By 2011–2012, the Putin regime's efforts to manage electoral competition created a bifurcated strategy space: regime candidates and parties compete for votes, while the opposition works to produce new information about state

manipulation and the nature of shared grievances. While the opposition approach has disrupted some regional elections, by the time of the September 2021 legislative elections it has greater potential to spark widespread opposi-

tion mobilization at the ballot box and on the streets. The combination of societal discontent, effective opposition information campaigns, and the inability to shut down new media platforms has challenged the state, forcing it to adopt risky strategies that confirm the opposition picture of an unresponsive and authoritarian government.

### The Kremlin's Mobilization Strategy

As the Kremlin's overwhelming 2016 parliamentary victory underscored the regime's capacity to mobilize votes, United Russia (UR) evolved from a skeletal party into a site of elite exchange of political access, career development, and resources for loyalty. UR members staff electoral precincts and serve as election observers. Regional officials, state enterprises and bureaus can be relied on to turn out voters to preserve jobs and benefits. UR political technologists work with local media to shape electoral narratives. Technical parties, Kremlin creations developed to provide the illusion of choice, and carefully curated district-level ballots rely on loyal independents, often former UR candidates, and candidates available from the more than 80 registered parties developed for the purpose of constructing district-level choices that drain votes and divide opposition votes. Under this system, the regime won 55 percent of the vote in the party list race and 203 of 223 district seats, securing an absolute majority in the State Duma.

### Opposition Response

State control of ballot access relegates the opposition to contesting each stage of the election process—from party registration to exposing election day falsification—to demonstrate non-democratic processes and the lack of electoral accountability. In Moscow in 2019, this strategy led to significant protest as the CEC barred opposition candidates from competing.

Election Day coordination mechanisms such as the Navalny team's Smart Voting system provide a focal point for alienated voters to coordinate and define the degree and nature of discontent. While this solution is imperfect, and many longtime democratic reform activists see it as rewarding the co-opted systemic opposition parties, younger people and newly engaged citizens see it as a viable strategy. And there is indeed growing evidence that it does effect electoral outcomes, even when the Smart Voting candidates do not win (Turchenko and Golosov 2021). The pre-election information strategy is also evident in the Navalny Team's latest tactic: advertising of pre-registration of protest participation and a map of responses that illustrate the nature of opposition support across the Federation.

### The 2021 Challenge

In 2021, economic stagnation, growing household debt and inflation of food prices, the economic effects of

Covid-19, and the failure of the regime's economic development program have increased the potential for opposition voting and challenges for the regime's mobilization strategy. As in the 2011 Duma election, new media is buzzing with discussions of how to best express opposition in the absence of real choice, a precursor to electoral engagement, protest voting, and street actions. Unlike in 2011, this new opposition stretches across geography and class. It also increasingly draws on non-political and civic activism to provide structure, expertise, and tactical skills to enable voter coordination (Zhuravlev, Saveleva, and Erpyleva 2020; Zhelnina 2020).

In response, the regime has bolstered its mobilization strategy with new tactics. It is touting electoral appeals that promise increased social benefits in exchange for voter loyalty. Developed through the successful national vote on constitutional reform, social support will be the focus of the UR campaign, usurping the programmatic claims of other parties and Navalny's left-center populism (Smyth and Sokhey 2021).

Second, the regime has intensified efforts to drown out opposition signals, muting alternative media sources by circumscribing Twitter and TikTok and colonizing new media space with pre-installed Russian apps on devices sold in the Federation. Regional governors are creating portals for voters to lodge complaints and collect information about citizen preferences. The Kremlin has developed a similar information monitoring system that bypasses governors and sends details about voters' grievances to political technologists in the Presidential Administration. High-profile crackdowns on Alexei Navalny, his team, and independent deputies have extended into the civic space to break the connection between non-political activism and electoral mobilization and silence critical voices. Finally, the Kremlin is mimicking the Smart Voting strategy with its own "Smart Voice" app, one of many new tools that co-opt opposition tactics.

Finally, recent actions against pension reform and Covid-19 have revealed conflict within the Communist Party, and disdain among its rank-and-file for its leadership's collaboration with the Kremlin. The February 2021 pro-Navalny protests highlighted new schisms as rising regional party leaders expressed support for Navalny and his social democratic policy program. The Kremlin is retaliating against its loyal systemic opposition with left technical parties and exclusion from participation in electoral monitoring programs.

These actions raise the cost of a Kremlin victory and provide new information for opposition voters, kicking off a new cycle of innovation. As elections emerge as a focal point of discontent and dashed expectations, the Kremlin's mobilization strategy becomes more uncertain and the potential for post-election protest rises. As the

Soviet elections of 1989 and 1990 demonstrated, opposition coordination can be achieved through kitchen talk and low-tech information transfer, such as the Navalny strategy of combining online and offline communica-

tion to spread the word about opposition voting tactics. While revolution is not an inevitable outcome, these moments can yield unexpected outcomes.

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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