

Preparing for the Parliamentary Elections of 2021

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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

Michael Rochlitz is Professor of Institutional Economics at the University of Bremen. Two recent publications on topics related to that of this article are "Property Rights in Russia after 2009: From Business Capture to Centralized Corruption?" (with Anton Kazun and Andrei Yakovlev, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 36(5–6): 434–450) and "Control over the Security Services in Periods of Political Uncertainty: A Comparative Study of China and Russia" (with Nikolay Petrov, *Russian Politics*, 4(4): 546–573).

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 7th.

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-