

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

Smyth, Regina

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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*

Andrei Semenov is the director of the Center for Comparative History and Politics at Perm State University. He is a political scientist focusing on contentious, electoral, and party politics in contemporary Russia. He has been published in *Social Movement Studies*, *East European Politics*, and *Demokratizatsiya*.

## 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, Saveleyeva, 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.

#### *About the Author*

Regina Smyth is Professor of Political Science, Indiana University and 2020–2021 Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center. Smyth's recent book is *Elections, Protest, and Authoritarian Regime Stability, Russia 2008–2020* (Cambridge University Press).

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