

Correction of Errors

HOW THE KREMLIN RE-EQUILIBRATED AUTHORITARIAN ELECTIONS IN 2016

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After Russia's wave of protest during the 2011-2012 election cycle, the country's authorities embarked on an effort to prevent anti-regime mass mobilization during subsequent election periods. They made a series of institutional changes and implemented a "[politics of fear](#)" to weaken the political opposition. Before the 2011-12 elections, the opposition had organized an effective negative campaign against Kremlin candidates. Now, as the September 18 parliamentary elections approach, the Russian leadership is confident that they have substantially reduced the risk of public protest. Analyzing the Kremlin's 2016 parliamentary election campaign sheds light on how Russian authoritarianism survives.

A Repressive Turn: Lessons Learned by Autocrats

The first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union were accompanied by a remarkably low degree of political protest inside Russia. Most instances of anti-regime mobilization brought together only a few hundred activists at best. This is why the appearance of tens of thousands of protesters on the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities during the 2011-12 "[winter of discontent](#)" was perceived by the Kremlin as a major challenge to its general strategy of containing dissent. From the perspective of maintaining authoritarian rule, the problem was related not only to tactical mistakes the Kremlin made during the election campaign but also to the regime's overall use of carrots rather than sticks. This approach included coopting semi-loyal actors as junior partners in a broad pro-Kremlin coalition, the use of only light repression toward opponents, and the vocal rhetoric of liberalization heard during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. By the time Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency, however, it became clear that this containment strategy had been exhausted. The major implication for Russia's rulers of the 2011-12 protests was that even shallow liberalization posed a

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threat to the preservation of the authoritarian status quo. Thus, the regime felt it should tighten the screws and use sticks if it wanted to stay in power.

Hence the “politics of fear” that immediately followed the 2011-12 elections (as well as in the wake of the Crimean annexation and subsequent confrontation with the West). A desire to avoid the risk of anti-regime mobilization during the 2016-2018 election cycle lay at the heart of these changes. Apart from that, the repressive turn of the Russian regime was also driven by economic constraints. An economic recession against the backdrop of declining global oil prices and international sanctions (and counter-sanctions) left no room for the regime to buy the loyalty of Russian citizens any longer. In fact, welfare spending in Russia decreased before this year’s elections.

After 2012, the Kremlin targeted the infrastructure of organized dissent, following not only the model of late Soviet repression but also replicating the tactics of the authoritarian regime in neighboring Belarus. For example, the crackdown of the anti-Putin rally in Moscow in May 2012 and the incarceration of dozens of randomly chosen participants was nearly a carbon copy of similar developments that took place in Minsk after Belarus’ 2010 presidential election.

A combination of harsh new regulations and selective enforcement has now become the essence of a systematic and consistent “politics of fear.” The menu of repressive policies includes:

- (1) Harassment and intimidation of real and potential oppositionists – both individuals and organizations (first and foremost NGOs, considered nodes of anti-regime networks);
- (2) Increased control over information (replacement of leadership in media outlets and extending anti-extremist laws);
- (3) Regime-induced hysteria of “culture wars,” effectively employed by the Kremlin as a tool to consolidate public opinion around the regime and publicly discredit opponents.

As a result, the number of participants in anti-regime protests has visibly decreased. Hundreds of activists fearing criminal prosecution have fled the country. Many independent organizations have either closed down or had their voices diminished via self-censorship or stigmatization as foreign agents and national traitors. Although the number of political prisoners in Russia remains relatively low in comparison to many authoritarian regimes around the world, it greatly exceeds their number before 2012. The use or threat of violence against regime opponents has also expanded; the February 2015 murder of Boris Nemtsov was just the tip of the iceberg.

As Russia heads into next month’s parliamentary elections, the Kremlin’s repressive turn has had a predictably devastating impact on opposition parties and their

supporters. Instead of the enthusiasm and hope that existed before the 2011 parliamentary election, doom and gloom now dominate the Russian opposition landscape.

Loyal opposition parties, such as the Communist Party (KPRF) or Just Russia (JR), have aligned with the Kremlin and criticized only some of its policies.

Meanwhile, disloyal opposition parties have come under severe pressure. They have been denied participation in a number of sub-national elections and their mobilization capacity is very low. The Party of People's Freedom (PARNAS), an umbrella for various anti-regime activists, has experienced major schisms. It also failed to cooperate with the opposition Yabloko party, leading them to compete for the same limited pool of voters. Russia's most visible opposition leader, Alexey Navalny, was legally disqualified from balloting.

The disarray among Russia's opposition represents a striking contrast to the 2011 parliamentary election, when Navalny and other leaders effectively organized a negative anti-regime campaign under the slogan "vote for anyone but United Russia!" At the time, they were able to minimize the share of pro-Kremlin votes to under 50 percent, while loyal opposition parties managed to increase their representation.

Rewriting the Rules of the Game

Before the current campaign, the parliamentary electoral system was changed once again. While the 2007 and 2011 elections were held under a proportional representation (PR) system with a seven percent barrier for entry, there now exists a mixed electoral system with a five percent threshold, similar to the system in place from 1993 to 2003. During that time, one side effect of a mixed electoral system was the outsized influence of local leaders, given the Kremlin's weak central political control that [inhibited](#) Moscow from building a strong and disciplined ruling party. After the recentralization of a hierarchical "power vertical" under Putin, the full PR system gave regional chief executives (governors) only a small chance to place their nominees in parliament while they remained responsible for delivering local votes to the Kremlin and the ruling United Russia (UR) party. The restoration of a mixed electoral system provides governors with a balanced combination of positive and negative incentives to actively support the center. Unsurprisingly, the geography of single-mandate districts in many regions reflects gerrymandering in favor of rural areas, where local political machines can operate in full swing without serious resistance.

As for the proportional races, most pre-election surveys predict a secure victory for United Russia. According to August 2016 data from the Public Opinion Foundation, 45 percent of respondents intended to vote for UR (a slight decrease from 56 percent in December 2015). The Kremlin's satellite parties—KPRF, JR, and the Liberal Democratic

Party of Russia (LDPR)—could [get](#) around 10, 8, and 8 percent, respectively. In some single-mandate races, Kremlin-sponsored and/or governor-sponsored nominees are running as independents rather than as UR candidates. In addition, UR left vacant about fifteen single mandate seats thanks to tacit agreements with KPRF and JR. In all, experts consider there to be only around 30 competitive single-mandate seats out of 225, and opposition candidates have a serious chance only in a handful of races.

Another factor stacking the deck was the change to the electoral schedule. All previous parliamentary elections have been conducted in December, while the upcoming one is set for mid-September. This move aimed to decrease public interest in the elections thanks to the summer vacation season. This will decrease voter turnout, offer greater room for manipulation on election day, and diminish the potential effects of negative campaigning by the opposition. Holding earlier elections may also be considered a pre-emptive move against protest voting, given the expectation of increased voter dissatisfaction in the winter due to Russia's economic situation. Meanwhile, the Kremlin is trying to avoid any major scandals or accusations about electoral unfairness. Ella Pamfilova, who previously served as the government's ombudsperson and who has argued for "clean" elections, was tapped to replace Vladimir Churov, notorious chair of the Central Electoral Commission since 2007. Some regional electoral commissions were also reshuffled.

Such measures, however, serve as camouflage. As one political technologist linked with the Kremlin has [confessed](#) on Facebook, the presidential administration made it clear to the lower levels of the "power vertical" that UR must get two thirds of the seats in parliament by whatever means necessary. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, however, "honesty should be imitated to avoid the discontent of politically-concerned urban residents." In the provinces, "imitation of honesty will be abandoned, and elections should be conducted there as usual, through administrative pressure and a very special counting of votes" (i.e., [overt fraud](#)). As a result, a number of observers expect that UR will readily restore the two-thirds majority it held from 2007 to 2011.

Last but not least, the reaction of Russian voters to political change during the 2011 parliamentary elections (who behaved contrary to many predictions) may be regarded as *involution* rather than revolution. According to a July 2016 Levada Center [survey](#), Russians are demonstrating their lowest-ever interest in elections. Only 46 percent of respondents said they discuss election-related matters (in October 2011, this share was 62 percent), only 33 percent agreed that the parliamentary election is an important event, and 39 percent considered electoral participation "useless." Russia's climate of mass political apathy has been fueled by a lack of political competitiveness or a public desire for major political change. Public opinion is one of "resigned acceptance" to the status quo—not because of genuine support of the authorities but because alternatives are perceived as less attractive and/or unrealistic.

Toward a New Authoritarian Equilibrium?

Despite the fact that the 2011 parliament remained loyal to the Kremlin, all elections are now risky moments for the regime. Tightening the screws, institutional re-engineering, and more efficient top-down political control greatly assist in maintaining authoritarian equilibrium and legitimizing the status quo. Non-democratic elections also serve as a tool for the partial replacement of elites through careful selection and advancement of candidates by the Kremlin and its subordinates.

The Russian leadership's upcoming victory in next month's parliamentary elections will give it free reign going forward: at the moment, there are no domestic restraints other than increasing economic problems. With an eye toward the 2018 presidential election, the newly elected parliament could even turn into a major provider of constitutional change. A logical extension of Russia's authoritarian trajectory would be the adoption of a new constitution stripped of declarations on individual rights and liberties, the primacy of Russia's international obligations, and other such liberal statements (not to mention the removal of presidential term limits). After the expected restoration of authoritarian equilibrium this September, the Kremlin will be interested to further consolidate political and institutional arrangements that can help Russia's leadership maintain its monopoly on power for some time to come.

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