

Faking It in Russian Politics

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Russia's hot political season of 2011-2012 has raised a set of important questions: Who can be trusted in Russian politics? Can the identities of public figures be taken for granted? To what extent are Russian politicians and influential pundits sincere in their public statements? How much can a politician vacillate on key issues and still remain credible?

In a period of political volatility, when even short-term outcomes are unclear and the political landscape evolves rapidly, being outspoken is a risky strategy that offers no guarantee of success. Clear-cut statements or commitments can backfire; consistency is not rewarded. At the same time, because of the public's widespread disillusionment and short political memory, there is little cost, political or otherwise, associated with changing one's position or conveying contradictory messages to different audiences. Driven by short-term goals, a politician may find deception to be the most effective tactic to address unpleasant questions or suspicions.

This policy memo analyzes the phenomenon of "fake" or "faking" politicians during the recent period of political flux in Russia. It offers a categorization of fake actors in Russian politics and explores whether faking can be effective as a tactic in the short term and sustainable as a political strategy in the longer term.

Defining "Fake"

For the purposes of this memo, "fake" is defined as deliberate and consistent deception over an extensive period of time. As a multi-move tactic, faking is distinct from a single act of cheating (for example, disinformation), which actors undertake to achieve an immediate but one-off result. Longer-term implications of such a standalone act of deception are not of concern to its perpetrator. In contrast, in order to be effective, "fake"

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needs to last longer without being revealed. Three main types of “fake” in Russian politics today are: *fake political debate*, *fake behavior*, and *fake identity*.

Fake political debate is a discussion of largely irrelevant issues that are pushed into the limelight in order to crowd out more relevant issues or to skew public opinion in favor of certain policy options. For example, Russia’s state-owned media blew a highly emotional pedophile problem out of proportion in order to explain to the broad public the danger of unregulated access to the Internet. The online availability of instructions on committing suicide was presented in the Russian parliament as justification for endowing the authorities with the right to sue and shut down Internet media, including discussion forums and blogs. Another direction of a fake debate is whether other countries should necessarily seek to do harm to Russia. If this question is answered positively, then, among other things, all foreign funding made available to Russian nonprofits is, by default, aimed at weakening Russia and therefore should be restricted.

A fake political debate is a basic form of manipulation that is difficult to implement without control over popular sources of information. As the availability of broadband Internet rises, the extent to which authorities can control these sources in Russia is weakening.

Members of the expert community sometimes engage in *fake behavior*, imitating impartiality—a phenomenon that is by no means exclusive to Russia. This type of manipulation involves posturing as an independent pundit, while crafting biased arguments backed by handpicked facts. It takes another well-informed observer with substantial argumentative skills, as well as an intellectual environment conducive to open debate, for the fake expertise to be debunked. Uncovering consistent and purposeful bias is more difficult than exposing single and accidental mistakes. Therefore, the lifetime of a fake expert in Russia can be considerable.

Pro-Kremlin politicians and media outlets have argued that sources of funding tend to determine the real (and often hidden) agenda of political actors. They selectively apply this notion, however, to the foreign financing of think tanks and research projects. The idea that massive government funding of policy-relevant research may equally distort findings and squeeze out valuable critical perspectives has gained little traction in policymaking circles.

There have also been cases of fake opinion polls in Russia administered by allegedly independent polling agencies. Evidence of the polls’ fake nature is their correlation to official election results, which were subsequently challenged on formal mathematical grounds.

Internet “trolls” and paid propagandists have constituted another unfortunate dimension of “fake” in Russian political life. They posture as full-fledged citizens—politically conscious members of the public who are independent and reasonably rational in their political judgments and choices—while in reality they are acting on behalf of a paymaster. It is difficult to estimate whether more fake citizens act on behalf of the government than its critics, but the clear fact of their presence in online media highlights the importance both sides attach to the ability of the Internet to shape the political preferences of the yet undecided public.

The group of fake actors that has the most influence and is therefore most intriguing to analyze includes political leaders and parties with *fake identities*. Several major political actors in Russia have exhibited characteristics and/or behavior that allow us to regard them as partially or fully fake. Pro-Kremlin members of both chambers of the Russian parliament have had persistent difficulty positioning themselves as independent political actors. This primarily concerns United Russia parliamentary committee chairmen, whose ability to act independently from the Kremlin has been questioned by their counterparts in political systems with more autonomous legislatures. Other possibly fake actors include A Just Russia and Liberal Democratic (LDPR) parties, which were either established by close political allies of Vladimir Putin or have demonstrated a consistent record of voting with United Russia.

The most prominent individual political figure facing accusations of being fake is billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov. As presidential candidate, he came third in the March 2012 election, having secured about 8 percent of the popular vote. He subsequently pledged “not to let his supporters down” and establish a new liberal political party. However, Prokhorov stayed out of the public domain over the next several months and failed to show up at the inaugural assembly of the political party he had promised to lead and sponsor. Another example is ex-president Dmitry Medvedev; both opponents and supporters alike have repeatedly accused him of faking political autonomy in order to generate vain hopes among his potential constituencies.

Why Fake an Identity?

Why would one choose to fake one’s political identity? At least three rationales are imaginable.

First, a certain patron can create and promote a fake political actor (like a party) in order to test public attitudes to particular policies or proposals without taking responsibility for these proposals. In a closed political system where avenues of free expression are few and tradition of public discussion is limited, receiving feedback from the public may require imitation of debate. For example, a top leader (like the president) in an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian system, in which free media is absent or has limited reach, may choose to initiate a political party or movement with a platform built around ideas that the leader or his political allies would like to test or propagate.

Tested ideas can include, for example, the scrapping of social welfare too costly to sustain. In this case, a fake party would be allowed to engage the leader’s opponents on the tricky issue of reducing social benefits. As a result, the leader will be able to at least split responsibility for unpopular measures with the fake party and even allow his or her supporters to criticize the fake party for its unpopular proposal. The leader can also use fake political actors to gauge the public reaction and decide whether his real supporters within the political system could safely broach the subject. LDPR chairman Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, for example, is known for nearly advocating a military assault against NATO members and, shortly thereafter, floating the idea of Russia joining the alliance.

Second, a patron may charge a fake actor with the task of luring voters away from an adversary, in order to undermine or dissipate public support. If its identity is faked credibly, such a political actor can effectively prevent mobilization of or collective action by the opposing camp. Having secured a position within the political system, a fake actor can begin making calls on its supporters. These calls and political messages need not differ strongly from those issued by genuine actors in the political field. Indeed, the patron may only wish to see a small adjustment in behavior and/or preferences of the public that supports its opponent. A fake actor may be capable of ensuring such adjustment without risking exposure. Having rallied enough support, a fake political movement can negotiate coalitions with other parties or stimulate divisive debates, thereby undermining the unity of the whole wing of political forces to which the movement is planted.

According to some reports, the Kremlin initiated A Just Russia party in 2006 in order to dent the Communist Party electorate. A Just Russia developed a leftist platform bordering on populism. Led between 2006 and 2011 by Sergey Mironov, then speaker of the upper chamber of the Russian parliament and longtime associate of Vladimir Putin, A Just Russia refrained from criticizing the incumbent government and attacked the Communists instead. In a similar vein, critics of Mikhail Prokhorov charged that his presidential bid served the purpose of distracting and dividing liberally-minded voters whom he abandoned on the day the March 2012 presidential election results were announced.

Finally, in some cases, the patron might be interested in the mere existence of a political actor with a given identity. This could satisfy public demand for such a party or movement, while allowing the patron to retain control over its actions. It could also create an impression of greater pluralism or choice than exists in reality. The presence of an additional actor within the opposition can also potentially present the opposition movement as disunited, while embroiling it into a lengthy negotiation process on several fronts. A number of liberal proto-parties have emerged in Russia since the end of 2011. Some of them, such as Democratic Choice, have gone out of the way to criticize Alexei Navalny and other outspoken opponents of the incumbent government. It is not right to dub any of them a fake opposition prematurely, yet the possibility that at least some short-lived liberal opposition forces will eventually be exposed as political forgeries cannot be ruled out.

Morphing into Real?

A time of political flux inevitably comes to an end. As a political system develops stable features, sustaining a fake identity becomes increasingly difficult. Actors have to reveal some genuine characteristics or face the risk of losing appeal and influence. In Russia, A Just Russia moved to become more independent than the Kremlin had desired at its creation. In the highly galvanized and partisan political environment of the 2011-12 election season, even Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR was forced to take action contrary to the Kremlin's preferences on key political issues. For example, it abstained from voting on the controversial foreign agent bill adopted in July 2012 thanks only to the votes of

United Russia. The Kremlin would certainly have preferred it if another party had sided with United Russia and shared responsibility for that bill. For his part, Prokhorov adopted a strategy of ambiguity and silence that is likely to lead to political oblivion. The supporter base of Medvedev as a politician with presidential ambitions shrank to just a few percent.

A political force or individual leader may choose to “legalize” a fake identity by adopting it as real. Getting serious about what one has forged, however, requires breaking free from one’s patron. Russian politics may see a few examples of actors attempting to graduate from their patrons’ tutelage in order to turn into credible political forces.

Fake or token political discourse can last longer if it focuses on issues requiring sufficient qualification or argumentative skills to uncover the fraud. Still, as an increasing number of citizens become interested in politics during periods of transition and flux, the general level of political awareness rises so that the public acquires the necessary skills to distinguish between fake and real.

Conclusion

Political “faking” runs the greatest risk of being exposed when rationality begins to rule the day. In the absence of a culture of open and pointed discussion with clear-cut views expressed and juxtaposed, multiple opportunities for faking arguments and identities will remain in place.

Fake actors, debates, and politics poorly serve the nation. If a strategy of “faking it” can bring a political actor tangible benefits, the public debate morphs from a competition of arguments into one of smokescreens unsuitable as foundations for sound policymaking in the real world. Politics then becomes an under-the-carpet contest among disingenuous actors with hidden agendas and parochial interests that rarely coincide with those of the nation.