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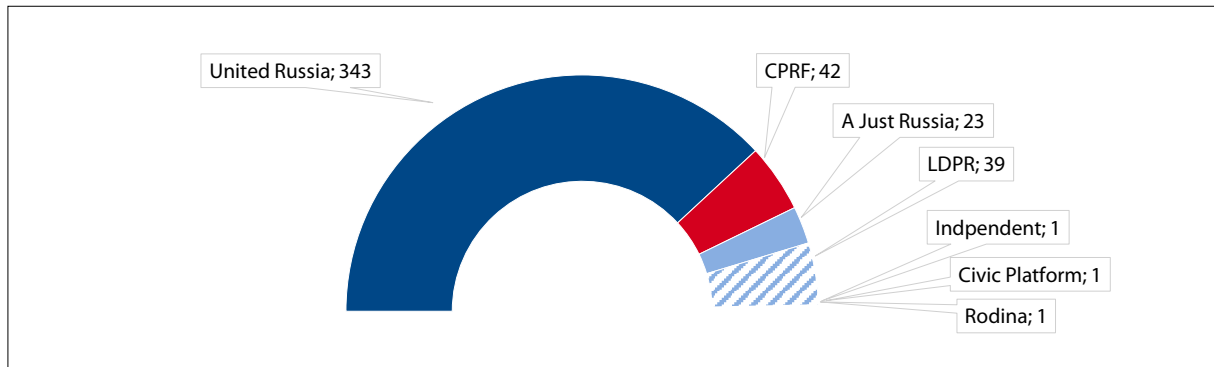
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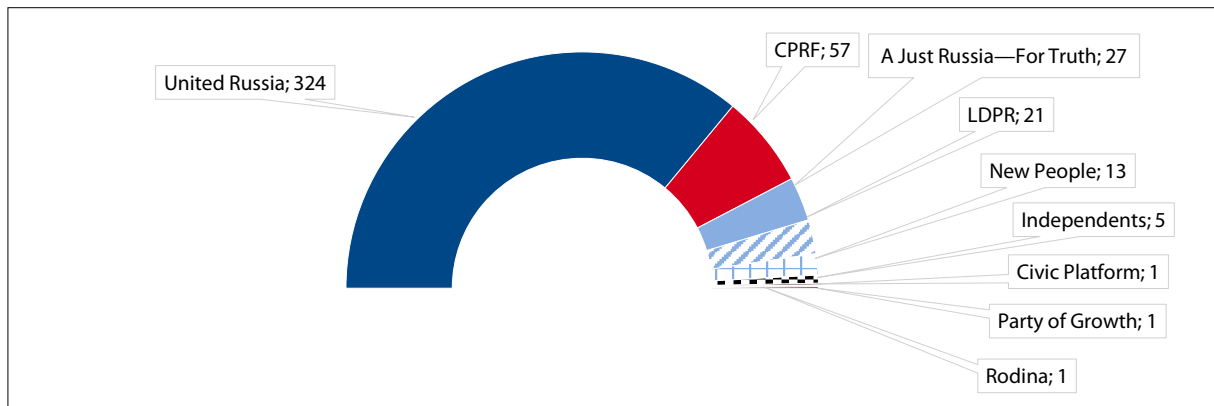
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Figure 4: Seat Composition of the Duma 2016–2021

Source: RBC, 24 September 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/09/2021/614a18399a79471a19f405d2>

Figure 5: Seat Composition of the Duma after the Elections of 2021

Source: RBC, 24 September 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/09/2021/614a18399a79471a19f405d2>

COMMENTARY

Elections in the “Protest Region” of Khabarovsk on Social Media and in Local Online Media

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Given the mass protests in the Khabarovsk region in 2020 triggered by the arrest of the “people’s governor,” Sergey Furgal, the election of a new governor in September 2021 was always going to be controversial—and so were the discourses about it on Russian-language social media. Even under difficult conditions, social media provide opportunities for political action and the construction of shared regional and Russia-wide political spaces. I analyze the case of the Khabarovsk region to show how elections, first and foremost the gubernatorial election, are discussed and what lines of discourse and interpretations can be identified.

The Khabarovsk region garnered much attention in Russia and abroad in 2020: the arrest and subsequent detention of the then-governor, Sergey Furgal (LDPR), provoked street protests that are remarkable for their longevity and mass

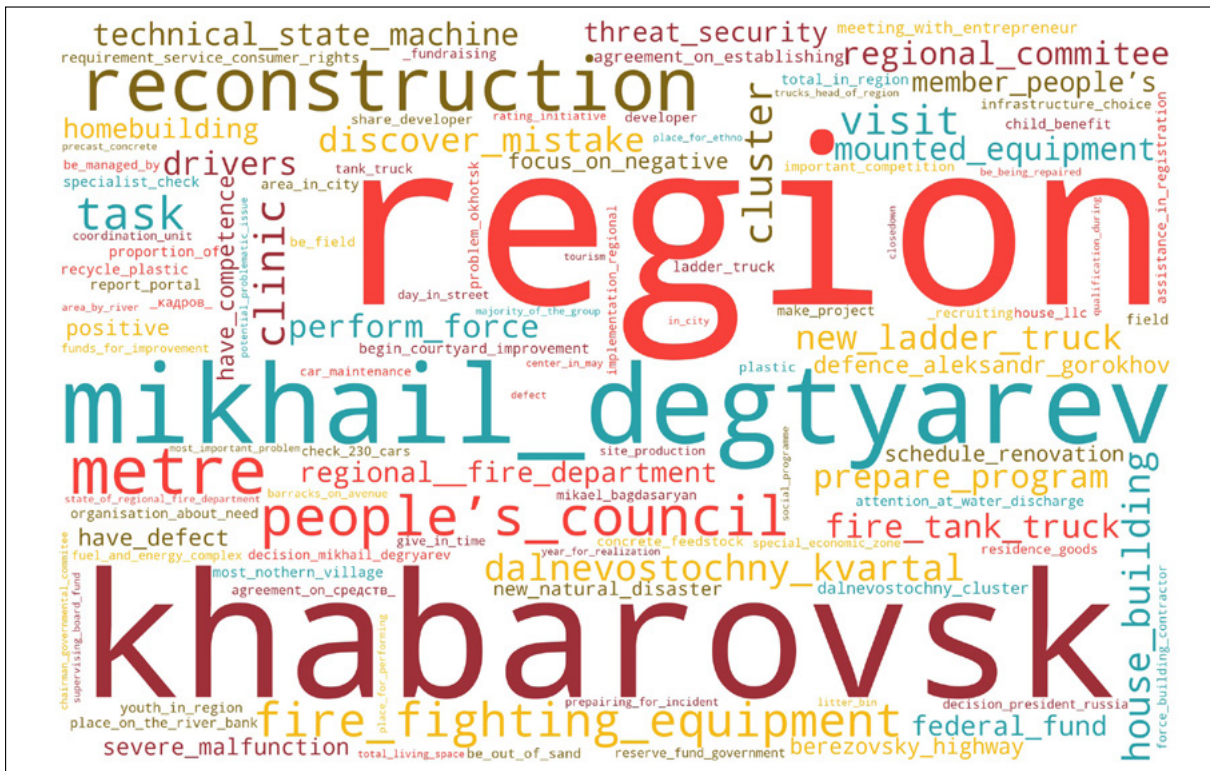
participation. They were characterized by anti-Kremlin and other political slogans, assertions of a pronounced regional identity, and a “good governor” discourse. Social media played an important role in this mobilization. Mikhail Degtyarev, appointed by Putin as acting governor, got off to a rough start with the protesters and the region’s inhabitants as a whole.

So what was happening on online and social media before the elections in this perceived “protest region”? To answer this question, I first collected posts and comments on social media (mostly Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Facebook, and YouTube) via a keyword-based search using the commercial service Medialogia SMM. Only publications on accounts (individual user pages, public pages, and groups) explicitly based in the Khabarovsk region were included. In a similar way, I gathered publications by regional and local online media (including the websites of hybrid media outlets), using statistics-based computer models to identify clusters of similar texts. To gain a better understanding of these patterns, selected texts representing certain clusters were then interpreted qualitatively. The analysis focuses on two timeframes: from August 2 to 18 (the period around the registration of candidates) and from September 13 to 20 (the elections were held over three days from September 17 to 19).

For each period, a large cluster of texts—between a third and half of which were published in regional/local online media—can be identified that depicts Degtyarev as a capable acting governor. For example, he is shown carrying out a personal inspection of renovations to Khabarovsk courtyards (“new benches made of eco-friendly materials were installed in a courtyard”) or presenting new fire engines to the fire department. This PR cluster includes comments supposedly by “ordinary people” that on closer inspection turn out to be identical to publications by trolls (e.g., “I think that our people tend to focus on negative things without noticing positive developments! Please don’t do that!”). Taken together, this and a similar cluster (see Figure 1) account for around one-third of the August sample.

Figure 1: Main Word Combinations for the “PR Cluster” in August

Cloud of relevant word combinations that occur frequently in the main “PR Cluster” and are specific in relation to other clusters of the same period. Words are included in the original dictionary form (e.g., “is” counts as “be”). Font size depends on frequency.



Source: Tatiana Golova

Another cluster focused on the gubernatorial election strikes a different tone: it contains fewer texts from online media outlets and more posts and comments from social media (indicating a higher level of user activity), a lot of everyday language, and opposing views. Identical comments by trolls are less prominent here. The main cleavage is between those who are for Degtyarev and those who are against him: “Don’t vote for Degtyarev. He is a lying populist and Putin’s slave. At the end of the day, he will, like Putin, hoodwink us all” vs. “Degtyarev works for real, without looking

for attention!” The fact that no genuine alternative candidates were allowed to stand for election is also discussed here. In addition to Degtyarev, three unconvincing candidates were registered in order to create the impression of a political competition without posing a serious threat. Piotr Pereversentsev (KPRF), who might have been able to consolidate the votes of the disaffected, failed to get past the “municipal filter” (to stand in a gubernatorial election, a candidate must collect a certain number of signatures from municipal deputies and officials). However, he did not feature prominently in the discourses analyzed here.

The discourse on the gubernatorial election is linked to other elections at federal, regional, and municipal level scheduled for the same dates. In this context, there is a cluster of social media texts that criticize the upcoming elections in general as unfair and manipulated (like a much-shared Team Navalny video, “Sold the Elections, Bought a Dacha. How Members of the Central Election Commission Are Getting Rich”). Also discussed is the main dilemma of discontented voters: to vote or to boycott the elections (“But if you do not go and vote for yourself, they will do it for you, for EdResnya [a pejorative term for United Russia] and for Putin”). Under difficult conditions where elections do not necessarily produce representation, social media enable people to interpret participation in elections as political action.

In relation to the Duma elections, critical discourses bring up the issue of state pressure on the KPRF and its candidates, including Pavel Grudinin and Nikolay Bondarenko. The multitude of styles and use of everyday language, for example in comments on articles reposted from media outlets, indicate a lively discourse that extends far beyond the borders of the Khabarovsk region. The regional dimension of the Duma elections is reinforced by the controversy over the election commission’s refusal to register Sergey Furgal’s son as a candidate.

Around the election dates, in the second analyzed period, the scope for individual political action becomes an even more important topic. The Smart Voting project initiated by Team Navalny, which sought to consolidate discontented voters around the most promising alternative candidates as a way of undermining United Russia, is both praised (including through sharing its recommendations) and criticized (see Figure 2). Noteworthy is an independent cluster of texts that calls on people to cast their ballots for the KPRF. These arguments are underpinned by the same rational logic divorced from voters’ genuine political preferences as Navalny’s Smart Voting but make no reference to the latter (“The KPRF is a left-wing party only on paper. [...] One should vote for them not because they are left or right, but because they stand a chance against UR”).

Figure 2: Main Word Combinations for the “Smart Voting Cluster” in September

Cloud of relevant word combinations that occur frequently in the “Smart Voting Cluster” and are specific in relation to other clusters of the same period. Words are included in the original dictionary form (e.g., “is” counts as “be”). Font size depends on frequency.



Source: Tatiana Golova

Electoral fraud at different levels and in different Russian regions is at the center of a further September cluster, where social media texts also dominate. The transregional political space that is constructed online is characterized by alienation. In a notable line of discussion, the official election results are contrasted with the experiences of voters and their personal networks in a way that suggests that the results are not legitimate (“All our friends and relatives voted against them. Such figures would not have been possible had the elections been held lawfully”).

The 2020 protests did not play a major role in the discourses analyzed here. They did, however, leave a trace. Protest voting was most visible in those Duma elections based on party lists: the Khabarovsk region is one of four regions where the current protest-voter party, KPRF, performed better than United Russia. As acting governor in an authoritarian regime, Degtyarev had a huge advantage over his competitors, yet he was elected with a relatively modest 57 percent of the vote (spoiler candidate Marina Kim received a respectable 25 percent). Regardless of the election results, social media enabled the construction of shared spaces of experience and opportunities for political action. That makes them very different from local online media, which first and foremost provided a stage for the acting governor’s PR activities.

About the Author

Tatiana Golova, PhD, is a sociologist and researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin. She works on activism in large Russian cities, including mobilization on social media, and on post-Soviet migrants in Germany. This contribution is based on the preliminary results of the research project “Regional Protests on Russian Social Media.”

Further Reading

- Golova, Tatiana: Mobilising for Regional Protests on Russian Social Media: The Case of Khabarovsk, ZOiS Report 4/2021, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/mobilising-for-regional-protests-on-russian-social-media-the-case-of-khabarovsk>.

ANALYSIS

Waste Management in Russia

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Abstract

The field of waste management in Russia demonstrates the consequences of stifling political opposition. Legislation censors environmentalists and activists who seek to reform current waste management practices, even as local politicians financially reward companies for dumping waste into deteriorating landfills. This article reviews current waste management practices in Russia and the effects of such practices on the Russian populace. It outlines the various protests and other forms of civic engagement that have taken place in response to inadequate waste management, and the government’s repression of such responses using the “foreign agent” law. Finally, the article examines the corruption in Russia’s waste management system and explores why reform of this sector is unlikely to occur.

Current Conditions and the Need for Reform

In 2014, the World Bank issued a report stating that in 2010, Russia produced 48 million metric tons of waste and sent about 95% of this waste to landfills, with 30% of such landfills failing to meet basic sanitary standards. Moreover, in 2010, of the 7,518 “waste disposal sites” in Russia, 5,243 of them were unauthorized (IFC, 2014).

The Embassy of the Netherlands in Russia released a similar report outlining percentages of waste in Russian landfills. According to this report, 34% of waste is food, 19% paper, 14% polymers, 12% glass, 6% wood, 6% street waste, 4% metal, 3% textile, and 2% “other” (Netherlands Embassy, 2019). The report stated that not only does Russia lack a “tradition of recycling,” but many of its landfills are also completely overfilled and