

## Elections 2021: Tense Atmosphere, Likely Regime Victory, and Uncertain Policy Outcomes

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pushed by certain officials (such as the Network case or the Yury Dmitriev affair) demonstrated this tendency.

**Figure 1: The Scope of Arrests and Fines after Political Protests in Moscow**

Year	Total arrests in person-days	Total fines in million Russian roubles	Number of administrative and criminal cases against protesters in Moscow—initiated (completed)
2017 (26 March – 26 April)	591	7.2	905 (759)
2019 (27 July – 27 August)	1,082	15.7	2,466 (2,189)
2021 (23 January – 24 February)	6,736	6.4	5,716 (3,751)

Source: <https://www.proekt.media/research/statistika-arestov-mitingi/>

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## Elections 2021: Tense Atmosphere, Likely Regime Victory, and Uncertain Policy Outcomes

By Boris Ginzburg and Alexander Libman (both Free University Berlin)

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For electoral authoritarian regimes like the Russian one, elections are always causes for concern. However, the Russian leadership has particular reasons for worrying about the Duma elections of 2021.

Russia enters the election year in rather bad shape from an economic point of view. Since 2013, the country has

As of yet, repressions have brought only partial successes for the Kremlin. Punishments of activists curbed opposition activism for a while, but they were not able to eliminate protests completely. Signaling of repressions in Russia in the atmosphere of fear and loathing faces a rising discontent of Russians with the regime, especially among the Russian youth. These contradictions between popular demands for change and the regime's supply of preserving the political status quo at any cost are likely to increase in the wake of the upcoming 2021 State Duma elections. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's increasing over-reliance upon repressions as the major tool of its rule is a risky game because of the great empowerment of the coercive apparatus of the Russian state. In a number of autocracies, similar tendencies have paved the way to military coups against unpopular dictators who have lost their legitimacy. To what extent Russia's leadership will be able to avert these risks remains to be seen.

experienced economic stagnation. The Covid-19 pandemic has hit Russia hard, with an estimated 260,000 excess deaths from April to November 2020<sup>1</sup> and with the government providing much smaller economic assistance to the population and to businesses than most large economies.<sup>2</sup> The pandemic contributed to the further decline of Putin's

1 Kobak, D. (2021). Excess mortality reveals Covid's true toll in Russia. *Significance*, 18(1), 16-19.

2 <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/396629-pandemiya-so-skidkoy-rossiya-vydelila-na-pomoshch-naseleniyu-i-biznesu-v-70-raz-menshe>

popularity, which was already suffering after the pension reform of 2018.<sup>3</sup> However, some level of dissatisfaction with Putin is driven simply by the length of his rule – Russian society (like most other societies worldwide) is getting tired of the leader who has been in office for two decades.

In addition to these fundamental developments, several recent political events are likely to make Russian leaders nervous. The return of Aleksey Navalny to Russia and his subsequent arrest are likely to make him an undisputed leader of the Russian non-systemic opposition (and a leader who is recognized by the international community). Protests in Belarus in 2020 show that even carefully planned elections can lead to unexpected public protests. In the eyes of the Russian leadership, Belarus and Navalny are parts of the general aggressive stance of the West which call for vigilance.

At the same time, the 2021 elections are likely to look like a window of opportunity in the eyes of the Russian non-systemic opposition as well. The experience of smart voting strategies provides the opposition with a tool it can use in the upcoming elections. There have been multiple episodes in recent years of Russians voting in a different way than the Kremlin would expect at the regional and local level, and the opposition can hope for similar surprises to occur during the 2021 elections.

As a result, for both the regime and the non-systemic opposition, the upcoming elections are far from ‘business as usual’, and this will most likely affect their strategies. To optimize its chances, the Kremlin will mainly rely on a rich repertoire of manipulative and repressive measures against its opponents like the passing of new repressive laws aiming to hamper the smart voting strategy, violent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations, disinformation tactics aimed at driving wedges between different parts of the non-systemic opposition, and the creation of Kremlin-loyal pseudo-oppositional parties to absorb some of the regime-critical votes (for example *Novye Lyudi*, created in 2020).<sup>4</sup> The Kremlin could also try to instrumentalize Navalny’s further physical and mental well-being in prison as a tool to blackmail his team and to constrain its actions. The annual State of the Nation address Putin has to deliver (the date of which is as of yet unannounced) would offer the regime the possibility to announce unexpected moves (e.g., generous social spending or major policy reforms) which the opposition will have no chance to prepare for.

The toolbox of the non-systemic opposition is more limited than that of the Kremlin, but the opposition is likely to utilize it as thoroughly as possible. One can expect the non-systemic opposition to attempt to further

build up the smart voting approach, to organize targeted protest rallies (with specific and attractive political agendas, rather than simple regular events without a clear message), to raise the international community’s awareness of state repressions in order to internationally delegitimize the current Russian regime, and thereby convince Washington and Brussels to toughen their sanction agendas.

The systemic opposition under these circumstances finds itself in a complex situation. On the one hand, it could benefit from smart voting. On the other hand, the Kremlin would most likely expect much stronger guarantees of loyalty from the parties allowed to run for parliament. On top of that, the readiness of the systemic opposition to cooperate with Navalny is not a given, as a recent article from Yabloko party leader Grigory Yavlinsky shows. Yavlinsky warns his readers about Navalny’s nationalist and populist roots.<sup>5</sup> For Yavlinsky, unwillingness to make any ideological compromises has been the cornerstone of his political stance since the mid-1990s; however, this also means that the opportunities for cooperation between Yabloko and Navalny (e.g., placement of Lyubov Sobol on the Yabloko party list) seem to be questionable.

The heightened risk perception on the side of the regime and the willingness of the non-systemic opposition to use the window of opportunity will lead to a highly tense atmosphere around the upcoming elections. To exacerbate the uncertainty, ultimately, the strategies chosen by the actors will depend not on the objective political situation and the attitude of the public (which in the Russian case remains unknown), but on the way the situation is perceived. One can only speculate how Putin himself interprets the current situation in Russia and where he sees the main challenges to his rule. In any case, political miscalculations on the side of all actors are highly likely, and possible over- (or under-) reactions could produce unforeseen consequences.

By far the most likely scenario remains that the regime will manage to retain control of the Duma and to prevent (or suppress) protests. Still, the election’s aftermath will create a fog of uncertainty about the further policy consequences for Russia. One can expect either an easing of the Kremlin’s current repressive grip with a certain attempt to improve relations with the West or the complete opposite, the Kremlin politically locking itself into its current repressive and isolationist vision, or the combination of both strategies. Again, perceptions of the regime, rather than real developments on the ground, will be the deciding factor (Belarus could become an important testing ground Russian leadership will draw lessons from).

*Please see overleaf for information about the authors.*

3 <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84052>

4 See also: <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/01/10/v-rossii-poyavyatsya-neskolko-novyh-partiy-vklyuchaya-partiyu-razrabotchika-igry-world-of-tanks-oni-budut-sozdavat-oschuschenie-politicheskoy-konkurentsii>

5 <https://www.yavlinsky.ru/article/bez-putinizma-i-populizma/>

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## Before the Duma Elections, Russia is Moving Forward with E-Voting. Why, and With What Potential Consequences?

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### **Abstract**

Numerous experiments with voting technologies have been recently taking place in Russia. For instance, the role of online voting has been constantly increasing since 2019, and this trend seems set to continue in the coming 2021 elections. Why is the Kremlin tolerating and even promoting such innovations? In fact, they can boost the current Russian regime's legitimacy and allow for "stealth" electoral manipulation. However, they seem to be very unlikely to prevent post-election protests if structural conditions for them arise.

### **The Spread of New Voting Technologies in Russia**

Quite unexpectedly, online voting (officially called *distantsionnoye elektronnoye golosovaniye*) was introduced during the Moscow Duma elections in 2019 (Meduza 2019), though only in three city electoral districts (*okrugs*). The next year, in Spring 2020, it was decided that independent candidates who have to collect citizens' signatures to run for regional parliaments would be allowed to do so online through the gosuslugi.ru portal. Furthermore, more than one million voters from Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod Regions could participate online in the constitutional plebiscite (TASS 2020, RBK 2020). This year, nine regions may organize e-voting in the Duma and other elections, according to the Central Election Commission (Golosinfo 2021).

On the one hand, these innovations may look reasonable in light of the pandemic. Yet, they seem to be unlikely to curb electoral fraud. In fact, even the limited use of online voting in the 2019 Moscow Duma

elections led to a scandal, in which anomalous support for a candidate supported by the city administration was detected in one of the "online precincts".<sup>1</sup> In general, online voting tools in Russia have been developed hastily and without proper independent oversight. For instance, it is still unclear how exactly an online voting system will function in the coming elections and how civil society will be able to monitor it (Golosinfo 2021).

### **How the Kremlin Can Capitalize on These New Technologies**

To begin with, the introduction and increasing use of these technologies can be employed as a legitimation instrument to demonstrate that the current regime is actually reacting to some voters' dissatisfaction with the integrity of elections. For instance, the innovation of allowing potential candidates to obtain popular support for their bids through gosuslugi.ru may be considered a response to the 2019 Moscow protests, which started when many opposition politicians were disqualified under the pretext of them having provided invalid signatures in their registration applications.

More importantly, in order to use online voting systems for stealing votes or adding them to the "right" candidates, authorities do not need to rely on intermediaries, such as local election officials or directors of state-owned enterprises. Illicit activities such as ballot stuffing or threats to fire employees disloyal to the ruling party are sometimes detected by activists, which sometimes makes such intermediaries wary (Harvey 2020). Meanwhile, some research on protest mobilization in response to police repression (Sutton, Butcher, & Svensson 2014) and on post-election demonstrations

<sup>1</sup> One of the candidates from that electoral district filed official complaints and even created a web resource about the case: <https://evoting.ru/en> (accessed 25 March 2021).