

Russia's 2016-2018 Election Cycle

POPULAR ENGAGEMENT AND PROTEST POTENTIAL

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In the wake of the For Fair Elections (FFE) protest movement in Russia in 2011-2012, the Kremlin initiated a new strategy of state-society relations that was aimed at diminishing the propensity for protest in the next election cycle. Since the mid-2000's, the Kremlin's strategy has been to close the political opportunity structure for opposition organizations and undermine elite brokers. The logic of the strategy was to undermine the alliances that could be built among existing opposition organizations and between non-protesters and protesters. This strategy included eliminating opposition organizations from formal political competition, coopting political elites in the systemic opposition, and channeling voters' preferences into regime support.² By 2013, as the economic crisis loomed and the legacy of the FFE movement persisted, this strategy proved ineffective.

The regime stepped up efforts to degrade protest potential by altering the calculations of protest newcomers and observers. The goal was to close the political opportunity structure that would lead to increased mobilization among the unorganized opposition. The first step in this strategy was to fragment the existing opposition and undermine the value of consensus in shaping new patterns of coordination. The second strategy focused exclusively on elections as the Kremlin realized the power of protest voting in controlled elections. These efforts were focused on disengaging opposition voters, while at the same time shifting electoral manipulation from election day to earlier in the process. The final step marked an increase in the infrastructure and deployment of repression, including new laws and policing power that would swamp the cost-benefit calculation of quiescent citizens and ensure that they also do not participate.

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² The systemic opposition consists of registered political parties that the regime allows to compete in elections and legislative processes because they will not challenge Kremlin policies or vie to control the political agenda. The systemic opposition includes the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Fair Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, Yabloko and a host of smaller parties that are largely constructed by the Kremlin to create an illusion of choice and competition.

The Target of State Intervention

The Kremlin's strategy to preclude protest in the 2016-2018 election cycle took aim at two key groups in society—casual protesters and non-protesters. Increases in political contestation are often preceded by a coalition between organized oppositions and protest newcomers and a shift in the opportunity structure, redefining potential coalition partners. These two factors were prominent in Russia in 2011 as millions of voters participated in a vote protest by voting for any party but United Russia (UR) or by spoiling their ballots and displaying evidence on digital media. They were also evident in the FFE street protests that linked a disparate group of opposition forces: protest newcomers, the organized opposition, nationalists, democrats, businessmen, and students who joined the call for political reform.

The FFE movement revealed that the Russian population is divided between regime supporters who are not available for protest action and regime opponents who are active or might be mobilized. Within the potential protester group, there are further divisions: non-participants, casual protesters, and core protesters. The relative size of these groups is difficult to know since they are often latent divisions that change quickly in response to different types of protest actions, opposition strategies, and state responses. In Russia, the Kremlin has manipulated elections and controlled information to obscure the configuration of social forces.

The protest core is the most committed group of activists. They are members of opposition organizations who are well known to authorities. They share a protest identity and are the first group onto the streets. The vanguard has already solved its collective action problem and will predictably take to the streets when they are called. This group has been the subject of politicized justice and state action for many years, and these efforts have increased since 2011. Good examples are the fabricated political charges leveled at Aleksei Navalny and his campaign team, new laws and regulations that limit bloggers' access to their audiences, and the use of *kompromat* against opposition leaders or the release of the personal information of activists who participated in opposition primaries.

The second group of protesters consists of casual protesters. These are citizens who are mobilized by the protest itself: they will take action if they know that everyone else will participate with them. Vanguard actions provide some of this information by taking to the streets and articulating demands. Through social media, personal networks, and organizations, opposition groups can provoke protest by providing evidence that others will participate and spark coordination among the group. Coordination is based on participants' agreement on their shared grievances, political goals, and the actions they should take to redress their concerns. In 2011, casual protestors participated in the vote protest and many also joined the observer movement and street actions.

The last social group is the largest. The latent opposition consists of citizens who are playing collective action strategies: weighing the costs and benefits of taking to the streets or voting for the opposition before acting – either because it is risky or they doubt the efficacy of protest or protest demands. For this group, simply observing protest will not prompt mobilization. They are mobilized through a shift in their cost-benefit calculation or a profound shift in their understanding of politics. In the 2011 “anybody but United Russia (UR)” vote protest, the cost of participation was low and the expected benefits were high. As a result, many in this group joined the vote protest. But most did not join the street actions where real and potential costs of participation were much higher and the benefits more ambiguous and dispersed.

While many in the first group of activists joined the protest vanguard and continued to take to the streets between 2012 and 2016, this change was not perceptible in national polls or in the institutionalization of the opposition. In short, this growth in opposition support was barely, and only intermittently, perceptible to the broader population. In contrast, there was a visible effect of movement from observers to active participants in elections. Navalny’s successful transfer of protest resources into the electoral arena resulted in 27 percent of the vote in the September 2013 election. This surprise outcome revealed that the latent opposition was still active and willing to participate in low-cost vote protests. Regional elections, although dominated by UR victories, revealed a great deal of opposition support or disengagement, creating pressures within the electoral authoritarian system that required Kremlin control of all electoral contests. In response, the Kremlin increased its efforts to shape the political opportunity structure facing the opposition to mitigate the threat of protest.

The Kremlin Responds: A Closed Political Opportunity Structure

The Kremlin’s attempt to decrease protest capacity in elections and on the streets limited opposition influence while shoring up its core support. It used institutional change and electoral manipulation to eliminate any unpredictable opposition from electoral competition, limiting the need to engage in vote fraud. The regime also increased its use of targeted repression: charging opposition leaders such as Navalny’s electoral team, removing critical resources through mechanisms such as the foreign agents law, and imposing a ban on endorsements from any person prohibited from running for office. This regulation targets Navalny and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who supported a wide range of candidates in single-member district races. The same strategies were used against coordinators and potential voters. New regulations decreased the capacity to observe elections, and police forces openly harassed activists collecting signatures for candidate registration. The regime gerrymandered districts to dilute urban-based opposition voters and timed elections to decrease participation and limit campaign and candidate effects on vote choice.

To further diminish opposition capacity to forge and maintain a broad coalition, the Kremlin altered its policy agenda and public appeals, fragmenting the political space and undermining opposition coalitions. The moral panic over LGBT citizens and the subsequent stress on conservative values divided opposition consensus. Similarly, Kremlin policies and aggressive framing of tensions with the West and war in Ukraine painted the opposition as pro-Western traitors. The Kremlin deployed a similar public relations strategy to devalue elections as a source of social or political change. These efforts took a number of forms. The visible cooptation of the systemic opposition parties is an important component of this strategy. In formulating ballots for the 2016 single-mandate races, the Kremlin appears to have brokered agreements similar to those in past gubernatorial races. In 40 districts, systemic opposition party leaders will run without competition from other parties' candidates, increasing their likelihood of victory. This access to the perks of office seems sufficient to ensure compliance with the Kremlin's agenda. Despite their increased presence in parliament after 2011, the political agenda and policy process remained firmly under Kremlin control.

A second important component of this strategy is the undermining of expectations about electoral processes worldwide. In this argument, all elections are flawed. Efforts to delegitimize U.S. elections through email leaks that highlight manipulation or coverage of rhetoric about rigged elections are good examples of this strategy. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Russians believe U.S. elections are inherently corrupt and that this corruption is comparable to Russian practices. The effort to delegitimize foreign elections is accompanied by a narrative about the free and fair nature of Russian electoral practices. Despite massive intervention in electoral competition between 2011 and 2016 and evidence of fraud in cases like Barvikha on the outskirts of Moscow and in the UR primaries, the Kremlin has announced that the 2016 race will be free and fair and that UR will regain its overwhelming majority in the State Duma.

The third element of the Kremlin's post-2012 strategy has been to increase the threat of repression aimed at citizens engaged in collective action. In 2012, focus group respondents argued that they believed protest would spark authoritarian deepening. These fears proved true. In the past year, the Kremlin continued to build its reliance on repression, jailing digital media users for posting anti-regime material and building corruption charges against regional elites. It also continued to create the legal infrastructure for political prosecution through the adoption of the Yarovaya omnibus law that lowered the age for charges for crimes such as participation in protest or failure to report a crime. An ominous institutional change is the formation of a National Guard, composed of seasoned military and police troops, headed by President Vladimir Putin's long-term ally General Viktor Zolotov. The National Guard seems aimed directly at protest activity with the right to deploy armored vehicles and water cannons against protesters. All of these changes increase the potential cost of protest, discouraging new activism.

The Balance before Elections

What does this analysis tell us about the likelihood of protest in September 2016? Evidence demonstrates that the Kremlin's reliance on symbolic politics reinforced with aggressive policy options shored up its electoral support and decreased protest potential. Similarly, the Kremlin's efforts to frame the electoral processes as fair and competitive had some success. Expectations of a free and fair vote have increased relative to 2011 and the percentage of voters who think that the distribution of seats is determined by the authorities declined from 51 percent in November 2011 to 42 percent in March 2016.

The disengagement strategy found similar success. In some Levada polls, likely voters have decreased more than 10 percent relative to 2011. This drop almost surely consists of opposition voters. Those who say they will not vote cite the lack of choice among trusted candidates or the belief that their votes will not count. Conversely, the support for UR among committed and likely voters remains at or above its 35 percent target goal—higher than among unlikely voters. There has also been a 9 percent decline in citizens who participate in electoral discussions relative to October 2011. Political discussion is a consistent predictor of political activism. Perhaps most importantly for protest potential, those who say that they will vote ascribe their motivations to habit and peer pressure while the influence of positive motivations for participation, civic duty, a desire to express political opinions, and the desire to participate in national life, have all declined significantly since 2011. At the same time, while society may be quiescent, it is not content. Surveys indicate that regional economic discontent is growing and the percent of citizens who believe the country is moving in the right direction is declining (close to 2012-2013 levels), expectations of fraud are increasing, and UR's rating is declining.

Conclusion

Analysts note that when elections get close, citizens re-engage quickly and vote choice shifts, producing unexpected outcomes. The change in electoral rules that reintroduced single-mandate races renders the Kremlin vulnerable to this process in district level elections across the country, a potential new focal point for opposition activism if elections are stolen. To avoid this, the Kremlin is likely to rely on the tactics it has honed since the last election cycle to disengage potential protesters and shore up support through manipulation and positive incentives in these final weeks before the election.