

# READINGS

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## Planning Ahead: The Strategy of the Russian Government going into the 2016 Parliamentary Elections

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### Introduction

On 18 September 2016, Russian voters will go to the polls, for parliamentary polls that international (or for that matter, many Russian<sup>1</sup>) observers believe to be neither free nor fair. Nevertheless, even in an authoritarian regime, elections offer an opportunity and space for opposition forces to challenge the regime<sup>2</sup>, by making use of innovative tactics both to challenge the regime at the polls, and later in the streets, as occurred in Russia after the 2011 Parliamentary Cycle. Could Russia be in store for another eruption of these protest? Such a repeat seems unlikely, as the Russian Regime appears to have adapted new strategies for handling contentious actions.

The tactics of the regime can be divided broadly into two categories, pre-election tactics, and post-election. The pre-election tactics are those that attempt to ensure the uncontested dominance of United Russia, through giving United Russia an overwhelming advantage, halting the creation of a viable opposition, and stopping effective monitoring. Post-election tactics are those that attempt to neutralize the types of street protest that occurred after the 2011 cycle, by inhibiting protest organization, thwarting those that occur, and delivering harsh punishments to dissuade future protest. Some methods can be classified as both; for example, restricting NGOs can be a pre-election tactic that prevents the independent monitoring of elections, or can be a post-election tactic by neutralizing the creation of an organized protest.

### Pre-Election Tactics

The regime's plans to ensure United Russia dominance rest on two main areas: "Political Technology," that prevents the formation of viable opposition challengers, and use of state control media to discredit any that have already formed. Among the methods of "political technology" is the use of "paperwork

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<sup>1</sup> Chulkovskaya, Yekatrina. 2016. "Poll: Over 35% of Russians believe voting in upcoming elections is useless." *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, July 14. [http://rbth.com/politics\\_and\\_society/2016/07/14/poll-over-35-of-russians-believe-voting-in-upcoming-elections-is-useless\\_611717](http://rbth.com/politics_and_society/2016/07/14/poll-over-35-of-russians-believe-voting-in-upcoming-elections-is-useless_611717).

<sup>2</sup> Koesel, Karrie J., and Valerie J Bunce. 2011. "Putin, Popular Protest, and Political Trajectories in Russia: A Comparative Perspective." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 403-423

errors” that prevent opposition candidates from participating the election<sup>3</sup>. Such a method has been used against Alexei Navalny's Party of Progress party, to prevent it from running independently after its coalition with the PARNAS party fell through.<sup>4</sup> Another tactic that has been used is the creation of Kremlin funded “spoiler parties.” These parties, often appearing with similar sounding names (such as the Communist Party of Social Justice), or a similar platform to another party (e.g. Right Cause), sap votes away from those groups. In addition to these, the regime performed in the autumn 2015 a good old-fashioned gerrymandering, mixing rural and urban districts (which favors United Russia’s monopoly on government resources), and eliminating districts where United Russia was not the winning party in 2011<sup>5</sup>.

As in previous elections, the regime’s control of mass media (particularly television, the main source of information in Russia) will be used to control the narrative around the opposition, by providing one-sided, negative analysis on the opposition. The media is also appearing to be used to increase disunity in the opposition, thorough the broadcasting of *Kompromat* (compromising material) on opposition figures. As a recent example, the channel NTV recently broadcast a documentary film that allegedly showed opposition leader Mikhail Kasyanov engaged in an adulterous affair with one of his party activist and making disparaging comments on Alexei Navalny, who was planning to run his party in coalition with Kasyanov’s PARNAS party<sup>6</sup>. The film ended up being a contributing factor to the end of the coalition.<sup>7</sup>

The regime recognized that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a large part in both rallying the public through their recording of electoral fraud, and in organizing the protest after the elections. As such, the regime has made restricting NGO activities a priority for this parliamentary cycle. In 2012, the “Foreign Agents Law” was promulgated. This law forced NGOs that do received foreign funding and are engaged in vaguely defined “political activity” to register as a “foreign agent (which in Russia implies espionage)”. In addition to the delegitimizing effect this has on NGOs, and the loss of any state support, the law bans NGOs registered as foreign agents from participating as election observers, thereby reducing significantly the amount of electoral observers as a whole<sup>8</sup>.

## Post-Election Tactics

The regime has adopted a three-pronged approach concerning post-election tactics. First, preventing the organization of protest by restricting Internet access. Second, creating an effective response to protest that do occur by the creation of the National Guard forces. Third, inflicting heavy punishments of fines or possible jail time on those who would participate, both to remove protestors from the streets and to dissuade others from participating.

Noting how social media was used to organize protest in 2011, the regime as moved toward restricting material on the Internet. In 2012, Putin signed into the law the “Blacklist Bill,” which among other subjects, allows the communication regulator Roskomnadzor to block websites that encourage the

<sup>3</sup> Stanovaya, Tatiana. 2014. "The Kremlin’s Party Games." *Institute of Modern Russia*, March 17. <http://imrussia.org/en/politics/693-the-kremlins-party-games>.

<sup>4</sup> Moscow Times. 2016. "No Help for Navalny's Party to Run in Russian Elections." *The Moscow Times*, June 29. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/no-help-for-navalnys-party-to-run-in-russian-elections-53484>.

<sup>5</sup> Lasocki, Janek. 2016. "Counting down to Russia’s 2016 Duma Elections." *Transitions Online*, May 20. <http://www.tol.org/client/article/25909-russia-politics-elections-duma.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, Henry. 2016. "State TV Targets Putin's Former Prime Minister With Sex Movie." *Bloomberg*, April 2: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-02/state-tv-targets-putin-s-former-prime-minister-with-sex-movie>.

<sup>7</sup> (Moscow Times 2016)

<sup>8</sup> (Lasocki 2016)

vaguely defined “mass riots” or “participation in unsanctioned events<sup>9</sup>.” Roskomnader’s authority was enhanced even further in 2014 with the passage of the “Lugovoi Law,” which allows the authority to block access without court order for websites deemed “extremist” or a “threat to the public order.<sup>10</sup>” Legislation is being suggested to extend these provisions specifically to “websites that spread information about preparations for unsanctioned political demonstrations and calls to mass unrest<sup>11</sup>.”

Social media, in particular, has been subject to increased restrictions specifically. In 2014, the “Blogger’s Law” was promulgated; this law, which applies not just to blogs or independent site but also to social media accounts, classifies web based writers with post exceeding 3000 page views as media outlets, and requires them to “fact check” their post for any “inaccuracies” or risk their sites being blocked. The law also implement scanning software that allows the Russian Government to review all Internet-based material, and block sites if they include undisclosed “curse words.<sup>12</sup>” Particularly damaging for attempts to use social media to organize contentious action is the “Law against retweets.” Under this law, also passed in 2014, the government can imprison anyone who is a disseminator or redisseminator of “extremist materials” to up to five years in prison<sup>13</sup>.

Should someone actually manage to organize a protest, or should one (more likely) spontaneously occur, those protestors will have to confront the regimes reorganized response. In April 2016, Putin organized the National Guard. This organization, answerable directly to the President, saw units including OMON riot control units and SOBR special tactics units transferred into it from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). Among the official duties of this force is confront public unrest, and video evidence has surfaced that appears to show units attached to the guard running anti-protest drills. Disturbingly, the National Guard might be given the authority to fire live ammunition into crowds<sup>14</sup>

If a group is able to navigate through these restrictions and organize a protest, or more likely, one spontaneously occurs, the state will now inflict harsh penalties on those who are caught. In 2012 a law imposing heavy fines for individuals who participate in “unsanctioned protest” was enacted; this law was recently bolstered in 2014, increasing the amount of fines for repeated violations and doubling the length of time that police can hold a protestor<sup>1516</sup>.

## Conclusion

The regime has analyzed the events of 2011 and taken measures to prevent a repeat of those mass demonstrations. “Political technology methods,” constant anti-opposition media broadcast, and NGO restrictions ensure that the United Russia party is dominant at the polls. Restrictions on the Internet,

<sup>9</sup> Duffy, Natalie. 2015. *Internet freedom in Vladimir Putin’s Russia: The noose tightens*. Research Paper, Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Internet-freedom-in-Putins-Russia.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> (Duffy 2015)

<sup>11</sup> Interfax. 2016. “Without court oversight, Russia’s attorney general wants to block websites writing about unsanctioned protests.” *Meduza*, June 8. <https://meduza.io/en/news/2016/06/08/without-court-oversight-russia-s-attorney-general-wants-to-block-websites-writing-about-unsanctioned-protests>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Roth, Andrew. 2016. “This is how the Russian police say they will put down mass protest.” *Washington Post*, April 29. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/29/watch-how-russian-police-are-drilling-to-put-down-mass-protests/>

<sup>15</sup> Herzhorn, David M. 2012. “New Russian Law Assesses Heavy Fines on Protesters.” *New York Times*, June 8. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/world/europe/putin-signs-law-with-harsh-fines-for-protesters-in-russia.html>

<sup>16</sup> The Moscow Times. 2014. “New ‘Anti-Maidan Law’ Lets Russian Authorities Come Down Harder on Protesters.” July 22. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/new-anti-maidan-law-lets-russian-authorities-come-down-harder-on-protesters-37570>.

the formation of the National Guard to pacify mass protest, and heavy fines for unsanctioned demonstrations ensure that any contentious protest is put down quickly and thoroughly. By adapting these tactics, the regime in Russia is well prepared to prevent any contentious activity going into the 2016 elections.