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Russia 2021: Consolidation of a dictatorship

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The dynamics of the domestic political situation in Russia in 2021 was determined by the authorities' crackdown on Alexei Navalny – the most important opposition figure – as well as on his associates and supporters. The aim was to destroy the nucleus of a nascent political alternative to the regime in view of the parliamentary election in September 2021 and, above all, the presidential election scheduled for 2024.

The September vote revealed the limits of public support for the Kremlin and the considerable scale of the protest vote against those in power. Despite the unprecedented wave of repression and the lack of real competition in the parliamentary election, it was necessary to commit wholesale fraud to achieve the desired official results. The communist party (CPRF) became the main beneficiary of the protest vote, although it is doubtful whether the communists can become a real opposition force.

Post-election polls have revealed a deepening of many trends in public opinion, which are unfavourable to the government – including a further decline in trust in the authorities, growing fatigue with Vladimir Putin's rule, and an increase in social demands. The likely response to it will be an escalation of the regime's repressive course in the coming years. The obsession with control over citizens and the stifling of dissent will above all bring further waves of political emigration.

The increasing role of repression in the state governance

The year 2021 in Russia was marked by an unprecedented repression against the democratic opposition and civil society. Although this has not taken on a mass scale (state violence is meted out according to the degree of threat the Kremlin perceives), it is gradually becoming a primary tool of state management and control over society.

The government's stricter authoritarian line was a reaction to political developments that were perceived as a threat to the stability of the Russian regime: last year's mass protests in Belarus and Alexei Navalny's return to Russia in January 2021. It was also a logical continuation of the new stage reached by Russia's authoritarian system in 2020. It had then in fact transformed into a dictatorship, which is devoid of a democratic façade and increasingly based on legal nihilism,

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as evidenced by the unlawful amendments to the Constitution. The adoption of successive anti-constitutional laws, progressively impinging on public activity and the private lives of citizens, betrayed the neo-totalitarian ambitions of the authorities.[1]

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The immediate context for this year's repression was set by preparations for the parliamentary election in September 2021, which in turn was a kind of dress rehearsal for the presidential election scheduled for 2024.[2] The Kremlin took a number of unprecedented steps to eliminate any real competition from the ballot. Above all, the power base of Navalny – the most important oppositionist – has been targeted. Not only was Navalny himself imprisoned in January 2021 but the organisational network he had created was banned as "extremist". His supporters were also targeted by a law enacted on June 2021, which retroactively deprived people "involved in the activities of an extremist organisation" of their passive voting rights.

The government's offensive can be explained by Navalny's growing recognition and popularity, his openly anti-Putin rhetoric and his determination to build up his own position as the regime's main opponent.[3] The demonstrations of solidarity with the opposition figurehead organised in January–April 2021 showed how much his power base had broadened. This was made evident both by the social composition and age profile of the participants, and by the geographical range of the protests. His slogans about fighting corruption, striving for fair elections and the accountability of government to the people attracted even those who do not consider themselves to be Navalny's followers.[4] The first mass demonstration, on 23 January, was the largest unauthorised one in post-Soviet Russia (it was declared "illegal" by the government, which carried a high risk of repression). It gathered over a hundred thousand people in over 120 cities. The authorities were also concerned that the political campaigns organised by Navalny's activists in recent years had contributed to the crushing defeats of Kremlin-backed candidates in some regional elections.[5]

Repression in the wake of street protests

After the abovementioned demonstrations, Russia was swept by a wave of detentions, arrests and searches – both at the NGO offices and in private homes. In total, a record number of over 17,000 people were arrested. There was also an increase in the number of criminal cases launched against those taking part in 'illegal' actions – previously, the participants most often faced administrative charges – and growing numbers of them were sentenced to jail terms. Those spreading information on demonstrations online were often persecuted as co-organisers of 'illegal' events. Detentions based on recordings from city surveillance systems, taking place weeks or even months

[1] The laws adopted in 2020, among other things, limited passive voting rights, de facto abolished the freedom of assembly, tightened censorship, and allowed for unprecedented repression against independent NGOs and the media. For more information see: M. Domańska, M. Menkiszak, J. Rogoża, I. Wiśniewska, 'Rosja u progu 2021 roku. Sytuacja polityczna, społeczna i gospodarcza', *Komentarze OSW*, no. 371, 8 January 2021, osw.waw.pl; M. Domańska, 'Tightening the screws. Putin's repressive laws', *OSW Commentary*, no. 380, 18 February 2021, osw.waw.pl.

[2] For more see M. Domańska, 'Russia's parliamentary elections: the choice without a choice', OSW, 20 September 2021, osw.waw.pl.

[3] Before he went to prison, the percentage of his supporters in the polls reached 20%, and his recognition rate was 88%. 'Лев Гудков: Навальный стал фактором кристаллизации недовольства общества', Голос Америки, 6 February 2021, golosameriki.com.

[4] For more see the Liberal Mission Foundation report, *Год Навального.Политика протеста в России 2020–2021: стратегии, механизмы и последствия*, 8 September 2021, liberal.ru.

[5] M. Domańska, 'Pandemiczne wybory w Rosji: nowe instrumenty manipulacji', OSW, 16 September 2020, osw.waw.pl; *idem*, 'Repressions and electoral fraud: regional elections in Russia', OSW, 11 September 2019, osw.waw.pl.

after a demonstration, have become a new practice that serves to more effectively intimidate their participants.

Hitting NGOs and free media

In response to mass protests, the process of imposing 'foreign agent' status on NGOs, independent media and even individuals has noticeably accelerated. Currently, around 170 entities are labelled as such. Under a constantly tightened and highly non-transparent law, this entails an increasing risk of penalties and bureaucratic burdens. The number of entities banned under the law on 'undesirable organisations' is also growing (it has reached about 50). In May 2021, in the face of new restrictions, Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia decided to self-dissolve. This socio-political organisation had for many years been engaged in defending human rights, developing free media and supporting opposition candidates in elections.[6] Today, not only opposition activity, but even non-political civic engagement, which is not controlled by the authorities, can be treated as anti-state and illegal. The Kremlin's goal is to force independent organisations to give up their activities and to discourage citizens from contacts with 'disloyal' entities. One of the most recent examples of this strategy is the prosecutor's motion to liquidate the International Memorial Society.[7]

Gagging academia

The pressure on science and education has been increasing, especially on institutions that maintain extensive international cooperation. The Higher School of Economics, a prestigious state university which had long been considered relatively liberal (by Russian standards), has been forced to follow the government's line. It has led to dismissals of lecturers who openly expressed criticism of the government, and changes to the curriculum. The Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences may face a similar fate (its management is currently under investigation for alleged corruption offences). The law on educational activity, adopted this spring, further restricts the already limited autonomy of universities in the implementation of educational projects. This potentially poses a threat that any activity in this area, not regulated by the government, can actually be outlawed.[8] This may ultimately hinder international cooperation in the sphere of education and science.

Increased control over the Internet

In recent months, the authorities have been particularly busy perfecting techniques for centralised Internet management and censorship (as envisioned in the 2019 "Sovereign Runet" law). Methods to selectively cut off access to certain sources of information or throttle the flow of data have been tested. This is not only an element of the consolidation of dictatorship, but also a response to the growing role of the internet as an alternative source of knowledge for Russians. They are becoming less and less susceptible to the influence of state propaganda, which is spread primarily by television. The percentage of respondents declaring that they access information mainly from television has been steadily declining since spring 2018. It currently stands at 62%, but in the 18–24 and 25–39 age groups, the Internet (including social media) has already become the primary source of news about the world.[9]

The first case of centralised management of data flows was the throttling of Twitter, initiated by Roskomnadzor in March 2021, in response to the service's refusal to remove 'illegal' content (much of it was political). This was primarily intended to warn other, more popular online services and to

[6] For more on the provisions on 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable organisations' see M. Domańska, 'Tightening the screws…', *op. cit.*; *idem*, 'The law on 'undesirable' organisations: Russia deepens its self-isolation', OSW, 27 May 2015, osw.waw.pl.

[7] *Idem*, 'Threat of liquidation of the Memorial Society in Russia', OSW, 12 November 2021, osw.waw.pl.

[8] The actual impact of this legislation will be known after the adoption of implementing regulations, which are expected to clarify many of the framework provisions contained in the law. Its text together with the explanatory memorandum can be found on the official website of the State Duma, sozd.duma.gov.ru.

[9] 'Российский медиаландшафт – 2021', Левада Центр, 5 August 2021, levada.ru.

force international IT corporations to censor content in line with the Kremlin's political interests. One signal that this strategy may be effective came during the parliamentary election, when Google and Apple removed the 'Navalny!' election application from their mobile app stores.[10]

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The government's actions have so far led to an increase in political emigration. All of Navalny's closest associates and more than a third of the former coordinators of his regional offices have fled Russia. Emigrants head first of all for Lithuania and Ukraine, and to a lesser extent for Latvia, the Czechia, Georgia and Germany. The independent milieus have been forced to focus on ad hoc, tactical actions that aim to save individual activists from persecution and keep the existing networks afloat. It is still an open question whether the scattered emigration groups will be able to create alternative organisations and continue activities previously carried out in Russia. The worsening social moods may turn out to be their ally.

Erosion of public support for the Kremlin

Despite the repressive measures and Vladimir Putin's personal involvement in the parliamentary campaign, the party of power, United Russia, had to struggle to achieve a high official share of the vote. The 72% of seats, formally obtained in the State Duma, was the result of mass fraud and manipulations, including the use of a highly opaque online voting apparatus where the procedures and results were unverifiable.[11] In fact, the authorities sacrificed their public legitimacy to manifest their capability of imposing their will against the preferences of voters.

Independent analyses, based on the study of statistical anomalies in the vote distribution (as well as on data from polling stations where the vote count was relatively honest) showed the probable scale of fraud. In the party list voting, United Russia is believed to have won a mere 30%, which was slightly higher than the actual result of one of the parties of the so-called licensed opposition – the communist CPRF (25%) which refers directly to Soviet traditions and slogans of social justice. Irrespective of the varied public support for its political programme, voting for communists was in fact the only legal form of protest against the authorities' policy (for more on the CPRF, see below).

As indicated by polls conducted by the independent Levada Centre, the social base of support for the regime is gradually shrinking, while demands for a welfare state are clearly growing. The main reason for this is the decline in the real incomes of citizens, which has continued since 2014. It has been caused both by prolonged economic stagnation and rampant food price inflation (over the past year, some basic foodstuffs have risen by several dozen percent). About 20 million Russians live below the poverty line, over 60% spend half of their household budget on food, while another 16% spend almost all of it.[12] Material hardship is accompanied by a deepening sense of social injustice – not only in relation to extreme income inequalities, but also to violence and lawlessness as an inherent feature of Putin's model of government. Frustration is increasingly taking the form of nostalgia for the political and economic system of the Soviet Union, which is associated above all with social security and stability. In a survey conducted in August 2021, the Levada Centre sociologists asked Russians about their preferred political system. Half of the respondents indicated the Soviet model, while support for the current system practically equalled that of 'Western-style democracy', which

[10] Details: M. Domańska, 'Marzenie późnego putinizmu: wielki rosyjski firewall', Nowa Europa Wschodnia, 5 July 2021, new.org.pl.

[11] M. Domańska, 'Russia's parliamentary elections…', *op. cit.*

[12] А. Вишневская, 'Россияне раскрыли, сколько тратят на еду каждый месяц', Газета.Ру, 15 July 2021, gazeta.ru.

remains relatively unpopular (18% and 16% respectively). There is also a noticeable rise in acceptance for the model of central planning and income redistribution (62% of supporters). Only a quarter of respondents prefer a system based on private property and free market relations, which is mostly associated with predatory capitalism. At the same time, support for great-power ambitions is decreasing. In response to the question about what kind of Russia they would prefer to see, a record two-thirds of the respondents chose "a country with high living standards, not necessarily one of the strongest on the international arena", and only one-third (a record low) indicated "a great power that others are afraid of".[13]

" Growing repression has led to an increase in political emigration. Among others, Navalny's closest associates have fled Russia.

The post-election polls from the Levada Centre clearly showed a waning trust in state institutions. In relation to the institution of president, 53% of respondents declared faith in it (the lowest since 2012); confidence in the law enforcement bodies has also been declining.[14] This may be due to the growing awareness of violations of citizens' rights by law enforcement and secret services, as well as the increasingly high costs of aggressive foreign policy, including military interventions, which are paid by ordinary Russians. As many as 58% of those surveyed do not feel protected by the law – the highest result since 2010.[15] There is also an erosion of trust in the institution of elections: the percentage of respondents who consider them unfair is growing, and dissatisfaction with their results is also deepening.[16]

There is a noticeable fatigue with the lack of rotation in the highest office in the country, despite the fact that the declared support for the president's policy remains above 60%. As many as 42% of respondents would not like Putin to be president after 2024. (the highest number since 2013). In society as a whole, trust in him (as a person, not an institution) has fallen twice since 2018. As with many other issues, the moods of the oldest and youngest electorates, as well as TV viewers and internet users, differ significantly.[17] The sense of the president's alienation from society is also growing. An increasing percentage of Russians (currently 40%) believe that he represents the interests of law enforcement bodies or big business. Moreover, as many as 41% say that people keep faith in him because they see no alternative (in 2020 it was 23%).[18]

At the same time, one of the surveys showed that a hypothetical "Navalny's party", if registered, would have a chance to enter the parliament.[19] For the time being, however, the only political force in Russia which is potentially capable of managing the mood of protest is the communist party.

Communists – the "opposition" tailor-made to Russian realities

The relatively good electoral result, which seems to have raised moderate hopes both in the CPRF itself and among its supporters, is a serious challenge for a party that for the past two decades has been

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[13] 'Какой должна быть Россия в представлении россиян?', Левада Центр, 10 September 2021, levada.ru.

[14] While in 2017, the army was trusted by 69% of those surveyed, and the FSB and other security services – by 57%, now it is 61% and 45% respectively. 'Доверие общественным институтам', Левада Центр, 6 October 2021, levada.ru.

[15] 'Закон и деятельность правоохранительных органов', Левада Центр, 20.10.2021, levada.ru.

[16] Compared to 2016, the percentage of respondents who rate the elections as 'unfair' increased from 31 to 45%, and those dissatisfied with their results – from 27 to 40%. 'Как россияне оценивают итоги выборов?', Левада Центр, 6 October 2021, levada.ru.

[17] 57% of those polled over 55 want another Putin term in office, the same percentage of 18–24 year olds do not want it. The personal trust in the president has fallen from 60 to 32%. 'Одобрение институтов, положение дел в стране и доверие политикам', Левада Центр, 30 September 2021, levada.ru. In April 2021, Russian youth (18–24 years old) were three times less likely to declare trust in Putin than in 2018, and three times more likely to declare trust in Navalny (these indicators have almost equalled each other). А. Мельникова, 'Молодежь в России стала в 3 раза меньше доверять Путину и в 3 раза больше – Навальному', Znak, 5 April 2021, znak.com.

[18] 'Владимир Путин', Левада Центр, 11 October 2021, levada.ru.

[19] 'Умное голосование', Левада Центр, 8 October 2021, levada.ru.

functioning in close symbiosis with the authorities. Its Kremlin-approved role was to safely channel protest sentiments focused around demands for better living standards. At the same time, the CPRF made efforts to drive away a broader electorate by its hard-line communist ideology, including its affirmation of Stalin's policies.

" Public support for the regime is gradually shrinking – especially among the younger generation and Internet users.

In recent years, two tendencies have been noticeable in the party. On the one hand, its leadership headed by Gennady Zyuganov, who maintains control over the formation, tries not to offend the Kremlin, and ostensibly keeps opposition activity within a strictly defined framework. On the other hand, at the lower levels of the party apparatus and in the regions one can find popular leaders and activists who embrace ideas close to social democracy. A generational change is also taking place. The heads of about one third of regional party organisations are young people[20] who are often dissatisfied with the ossification of the CPRF and the conservative course pursued by its leadership. Many of these people choose membership or affiliation with the party for purely pragmatic reasons – as it is one of the few political career paths that does not involve the risk of repression. The party enjoys relatively large public support and has well-developed organisational structures across Russia. Unlike Vladimir Zhirinovsky's LDPR, it is also relatively pluralist.

Even though the party leadership have many times manifestly condemned Alexei Navalny, in recent years local activists operating under the CPRF's banner have often sympathised with Navalny's milieu and have also been supported by them in elections against Kremlin-backed candidates (which exposed communists to the government's disfavour). Sociologists also see similarities between the profiles of Navalny's electorates and political agendas and those of the communists. Both formations appeal to the growing sense of injustice felt by Russian citizens, and their disappointment with corruption and deteriorating living standards. At the same time, supporters of the Kremlin's United Russia and the CPRF are united by a paternalistic vision of state–society relations (based on the conviction that the public should be well looked after by the state rather than take responsibility for their own life), but those voting for the CPRF are 'angry paternalists' who demand better social policies and a real fight against the abuse of power. These demands are far more important than identification with Marxist ideology, formally enshrined in the party's program. The former 'hard core' of the CPRF electorate (the older generation, inhabitants of the smaller cities and the countryside) now often supports United Russia, while the communists – in a country where the anti-systemic opposition has effectively been banned – attract more and more votes from the younger generation, the urban population, and well-educated people, i.e. the broadly defined 'protest electorate'.[21] This gives rise to a natural temptation for some of the party's activists to transform themselves into a genuine opposition, which, however, is met with an immediate reaction from the Kremlin. Although the CPRF demonstrations against the falsification of the September elections to the disadvantage of its candidates gathered no more than about a thousand supporters, they resulted in the arrests of dozens of people (including communist municipal councillors). Some of them were fined, while at least one person was sentenced to a short term in jail. Party offices were also blocked to prevent the lodging of election protests.

[20] *Россия после выборов: Политический 2021. Онлайн-дискуссия*, Сахаровский Центр, 24 September 2021, youtube.com.

[21] А. Колесников, 'Пересечение красной линии. Почему Россия опять голосует за коммунистов', 24 September 2021, carnegie.ru; *Россия после выборов…*, *op. cit.*

Forecast: an even firmer authoritarian line

The Russian political system has entered a long phase of preparation for the presidential succession, which is likely to be planned well in advance and will take place possibly no later than in 2030. The culmination of the current political cycle will be marked by the presidential election, after which strategic decisions on the future of the country should be expected.

In view of the prospect of permanent stagnation (economic growth is expected to slow down to 2% in 2022), the spectre of further impoverishment of the population, and the progressive erosion of public support for the government, one should expect further escalation of repression and an intensification of neo-totalitarian efforts to control all spheres of independent citizens' activities. The Kremlin is likely to focus on destroying or taking over the last relatively free institutions (e.g. universities), paralysing the independent media, stepping up online censorship, as well as isolating Russians from 'subversive' circles at home and abroad. Those who financially support the opposition and independent civic activists may also be targeted. A further tightening of repressive regulations may be anticipated. If the CPRF maintains its role as a centre of gravity for the protest movement, it may come under increased attack as a potential organisational base for grassroots activity uncontrolled by the government (a purge in its ranks or a Kremlin-inspired split in the party cannot then be ruled out).

" The Communist Party (CPRF) attracts the votes of the disenchanted electorate. It is doubtful, however, that the communists could become a real opposition.

The mechanisms of manipulation and fraud, tried and tested in the parliamentary election, will be employed in the presidential election, probably on a larger scale than before. The plan to extend online voting across the entire country is particularly noteworthy in this context. Repression will keep Putin in power, but his public legitimacy may for the first time be seriously questioned. The Kremlin's determination to penalise anti-regime attitudes, the ultimate closure of legal channels of dialogue between citizens and those in power, and the final delegitimisation of the institution of elections may result in radicalised public sentiments and forms of protest. Increased anti-systemic attitudes among part of the population may thus have a destabilising effect on the process of presidential succession.

Successive waves of emigration from Russia are to be expected – both for economic and political reasons. These may be triggered by direct repression, as well as the lack of prospects and growing oppression targeting even relatively loyal citizens. It remains an open question whether political émigrés will retain their impact on public sentiment in Russia. This will largely depend on their ability to fight censorship online. In turn, those opposition circles which will not leave Russia will be forced to search for new forms of activity – more dispersed, horizontal, less institutionalised ones, which will represent a more difficult target for the repressive state – and to find new, effective forms of communication with fellow citizens (also with political emigrants). The final outcome of this game will depend on the evolution of attitudes in Russian society, which is currently the most difficult factor to forecast.