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Russia

March 2024: the “Calm” in the Middle of the Storm

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The results of the upcoming presidential elections in Russia hold little potential for surprise, but does this mean that civil society can do nothing? What is the opposition’s strategy?

Russia will hold presidential elections in March 2024. In liberal democracies, one would probably say that there is an obvious front-runner, namely Vladimir Putin. However, these elections are a sham: there will be no candidates competing to win them, or political forces that seriously criticize the current president. That’s why, in Russian public discourse, elections are occasionally referred to as “electoral procedures.” This term emphasizes how utterly devoid of competition they are. However, I would prefer to characterize them as a plebiscite to gauge trust in President Vladimir Putin.

These elections will occur amid an unprecedented purge of the Russian political arena, where most opposition politicians have either emigrated, been imprisoned, or compelled to curtail their activities to a minimum. Nevertheless, few doubt that the results will be falsified. In some regions, such as Moscow, where the elections pose a challenge for the authorities, the ultimate weapon, the Remote Electronic Voting (REV) system, will be deployed. The thing is, overt falsification of results can serve as a catalyst for mass protests. The Kremlin first grasped this in 2011 and was further convinced by the protests in Belarus in 2020. The authorities are resolute in avoiding such occurrences and other surprises in regions with high protest potential, and the REV system can help ensure “accurate” results.

From an external standpoint, dictatorships appear so monolithic that elections seem superfluous. Can’t the president simply decree perpetual rule and proceed with planning the next phase of the invasion? We can see that this is not the case. Moreover, the political leadership of the Russian Federation is meticulously managing the situation hour by hour. What impact will these elections have on Russian society? What is the most valuable aspect of these elections for the Kremlin? Why are these elections simultaneously crucial and perilous for the Russian authorities?

I don’t want to hide my position behind words: I think it is necessary to take part in the March elections, even if they are fake. For over a month now, there has been a lively discussion on this issue in Russian opposition circles. One of the most important parts of it is Alexei Navalny’s public open poll on election strategies in March 2024.

I have no intention of listing the arguments of all sides; there are numerous, and one can find one to suit any taste. I would simply like to highlight that Russia’s political leadership has established an elaborate system of bureaucratic control over elections, designed to produce results desired by the regime. In essence, it is crucial for this system that the ballot boxes contain the maximum number of “For” and the minimum number of “Against” ballots. Everything else — voter turnout, the number of candidates and their personalities, ballot box stuffing, and manipulation — is technicalities. This must be considered in any prospective opposition plan for March 2024, but it does not determine the answer to the question of whether opponents of Vladimir Putin should participate in the polls.

In a recent commentary for a New York Times article, Dmitry Peskov stated that presidential elections in Russia are not democracy but rather a “costly bureaucracy.” The reasons behind his statement are not essential; the perspectives of President Putin’s press secretary hold limited significance at this juncture. Let’s refrain from delving into the subtext or hidden meaning of his words, leaving that to experts in “signals to the elite” and political technology. We’ll assume that his statement is a fragment of a relatively comprehensive understanding of the political system of the Russian Federation. In this reconstruction, it is a form of administrative control intended to prevent democracy from inadvertently occurring in the country — a political regime in which the masses’ opinions could disrupt the plans of the ruling groups.

Democratic processes, even in liberal, constrained democracies, presume an upward dynamic within society: NGOs are established and disbanded, parties and political movements compete, radicals revolt and the police try to control them. This sums up political life and politicization when we look at citizen engagement. Elections are only a part of this process. An important one, because they determine the balance of power and resources for a specific period, but not the only one. It is precisely the social dynamics within Russian society that Vladimir Putin has intentionally targeted since he became president. Hence, we can assert that depoliticization has been a calculated domestic strategy of the Kremlin in recent decades.

The first thing officials tell any public group or local protesters is not a flat-out rejection of their demands. Instead, it is a phrase that has been Putin’s mantra throughout his rule: “Let’s not make this political.” This saying carries three messages: discussions about social issues should be kept to a minimum, upset citizens should not dig into the reasons for their discontent, and efforts should be made to limit the involvement of political parties and socio-political movements in championing their interests. Deputies at all levels often struggle to grasp the purpose of their work, as they’re mostly occupied with approving bills handed to them by the executive branch, i.e., the bureaucracy. The prevailing belief across the Russian ruling class is that there are no political problems, just glitches in the bureaucratic machinery.

Depoliticization is achieved by breaking the connection between words, actions, and outcomes. I want to highlight the importance of the link between words and actions, as it presents the most significant challenge in the intricate framework of contemporary Russian political governance. At the same time, it’s crucial to bear in mind that words can also serve as actions. Take, for instance, a vote in an election. If it influences the election results, it is, undoubtedly, a straightforward form of action through words. We cast a vote, and the act of voting, in itself, carries tangible meaning and influences the political landscape.

After the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the majority of Russian opposition politicians relocated abroad, with the most resourceful among them launching substantial YouTube channels. In this setting, they are compelled to provide information on one hand and entertain their audiences on the other — that’s how media functions, that’s how words function. Undoubtedly, some actions indeed prove to be valuable and significant for those opposing Putin’s regime. Recently, prominent opposition media platforms organized a marathon fundraiser in support of political prisoners, entitled “You Are Not Alone,” which collected 34.4 million rubles.

However, the daily videos and hourly broadcasts represent an unending marathon of content production in a fiercely competitive landscape for audiences. This ceaseless generation of words is intended to fill the void of action, but it has not achieved a performative effect and cannot be assessed. Admittedly, one might argue that there is a struggle for the minds, hearts, and moods of Russians. But, to be frank, in the second year of the invasion, it’s hard to believe that the issue is solely a lack of information and supposed political ignorance. Many opposition media editorial offices have been rescued and expanded, new media outlets have emerged, and the majority of politicians wishing to leave the country have been able to do so. It appears that the emergency plan has been executed. However, the connection between words and deeds has ultimately been broken, creating operational space for the Kremlin to finalize the project of depoliticizing society. The harsh reality is that you can talk, but transforming words into action is impossible under these circumstances. Alternatively, you can take some limited action, but then keep silent. For instance, numerous announcements of events, innocent by the old standard, come with the prefix “only for distribution in small chat rooms.”

It is this challenge, the breakdown of the possibility of being a political actor whose words transform into actions, that forms the central intrigue of the 2024 presidential election. In these circumstances, is dissent possible, even if only in theory? After all, participating in an election is a performative act; one can genuinely execute a minimal political action with a word that represents the name of a candidate. The potency of this straightforward connection brought tens of thousands of people onto the streets of Moscow in 2011-12. Nothing is as straightforward as the accurate counting of ballots. A paper ballot is tangible; you can see and touch it. If the ballots are in a stack in the ballot box,

you don't need digital tokens to understand which box has a checkmark or tick. Each ballot is marked by a person you have seen and verified by a member of the election commission. It is this instinctive comprehensibility that enables the performative impact of voting, turning participation in elections into an accessible political action.

In this scenario, REV is the perfect depoliticization machine. When Peskov mentions costly bureaucracy, he undoubtedly refers to the REV factor, which could minimize the bureaucratic efforts in the years ahead. With electronic voting in place there is no need to worry about troublesome regions, people organizing themselves, forming watch groups, or careless heads of election commissions pushing ballot packages into the ballot boxes with hairbrushes. None of that will happen; the power will be efficient, discreet, and controlled.

Contemporary society is heavily geared toward the production of content. Frankly, what one does matters less and less than the content one produces. The content of Putinism, the social feeling it constantly reproduces, revolves around the sensation of complete solitude for the individual in the face of the reality of the world. The ideal citizen of Putin's Russia is lonely, and the REV certainly contributes to making every citizen politically isolated. The continuous reproduction of frustration and irritation with fellow citizens is the technological foundation and strategic choice of the Russian authorities. However, there are also non-ideal citizens in this Russia. They come together in communities, attempt to engage in politics, monitoring, and mutual aid. They create pockets of politicization. Their activity undermines Putinism. We must be very clear that it is not the election results on the scoreboard that destroy it, as the scoreboard is entirely controlled. It can result from social processes leading to increased cooperation among citizens and their politicization.

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