

Proposed Research (750 Words)

Provide a short summary of the research question to be explored in the 6-week research period.

Include the following:

- Key project objectives and impact in terms that can be understood by a non-expert;
 - any community partners or key stakeholders with which you will work;
 - whether the research is addressing an issue of public concern; and
 - any potential impact of your findings.
- Projects must have an international dimension. Those with a community-engaged or interdisciplinary nature are strongly encouraged.

Competition in an Authoritarian Regime:

New Actors in Russia's Political Arena in the 2021 Election

The potential for democratization in Russia has been widely examined since the fall of the Soviet Union. Although Russia is considered an authoritarian country by the West, the nation's electoral system preserves many practices that create a vague illusion of democracy: regular elections, different political parties, and several branches of government. My Laidlaw Scholars project aims to analyze the facets of democracy that underlie a generally authoritarian regime, focusing on four new political parties that have emerged ahead of the upcoming Duma (Federal Assembly) election to take place in September 2021. I will work with Professor Bryn Rosenfeld in Cornell's Department of Government for whom I have done previous research work to explore the dynamics of Russia's political arena during a time of governmental strain.

The overarching question my research will address is, "Do Russia's four newly created parties serve as real competition, or are they manufactured by Russian leadership to provide an illusion of democracy?" The parties in question are the For Truth, New People, Green Alternative, and Party for Direct Democracy, all registered shortly before Russia's regional parliamentary races in September 2020. Although their websites boast a variety of ideological platforms, some analysts have also linked them to a potential Kremlin strategy aimed at dividing opposition votes. Vladimir Putin and his ruling United Russia party are currently experiencing record low support, compounded by COVID-19, economic crisis, and heightened political agitation across the country. I hypothesize that the aforementioned parties are led by Kremlin allies and created to generate an impression of democracy while serving Putin's needs.

My project will rely on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, as well as historical research. Prior to visiting Russia, I will research the background of the four political parties in question, creating a timeline that identifies the events leading up to their creation. I will also research their leaders and ideologies, learning more about how their stances compare

to each other and to that of the ruling United Russia party. More broadly, I will look at the last twenty years of Kremlin political strategy during the time Putin has held office, identifying any parallels that have occurred during past elections.

In the summer of 2021, I aim to conduct field work in Moscow. Having identified key informants during the preliminary research period, I will spend my six weeks there to hone in on an understanding of the four political parties, interviewing groups such as party leaders, voters, governmental officials, NGO representatives, and political experts. I will attend events hosted by the parties and speak with attendees, making observations on event attendance, event structure, and further noting direct or indirect connections between the parties in question and the United Russia party. While I will ideally do this work on the ground in Moscow, if I am unable to travel to Russia, this research can be adapted to virtual interviews, e-mails, phone calls, and meetings.

To aid in my research, I intend to work with the Movement for Defence of Voters' Rights ("Golos"), the only active election monitor in Russia that is independent of the government. Based in Moscow, the group is headed by some of Russia's leading voting and civic rights activists. By connecting with Golos and speaking with its experts, I will be able to further examine and understand the Russian political landscape and particularly the four newly created parties.

As a Russian heritage speaker and student of government, I believe that the importance and impact of this project are multifaceted, and I hope that it will shed light on both Russian politics and the state of democracy at large. First, this project will lead to a deeper understanding of four new and relatively unstudied political parties in Russia, giving insight into cracks that are forming below the surface of Putin's regime. This, in turn, can generate a deeper understanding of modern authoritarianism, which rarely looks like the restricted, uncompetitive regimes of the past. Analyzing Russia's electoral authoritarianism, a model that implements aspects of democracy, is essential to understanding the country's political sphere and the potential for true democratization.

Research under the Laidlaw Scholars Program would be invaluable to me in gaining a more nuanced understanding of Russian politics. As an aspiring diplomat and expert in the fields of democracy and U.S.-Russia relations, I believe that this project could pave the way to a heightened understanding of the past and present of the Russian government and the potential for future change.