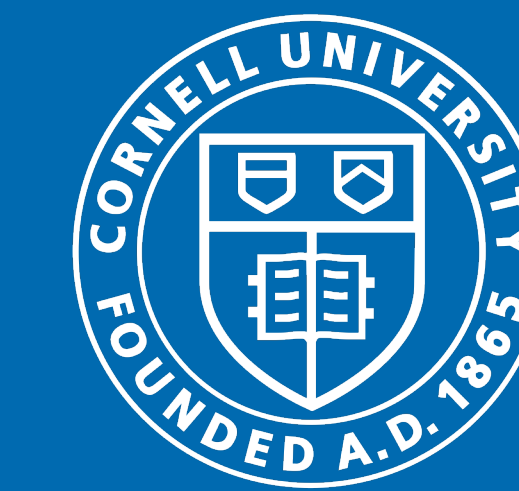


# Spoiler Alert: Who are the New Actors in Russian Politics?

Cornell University Laidlaw Scholars Symposium – Fall 2021

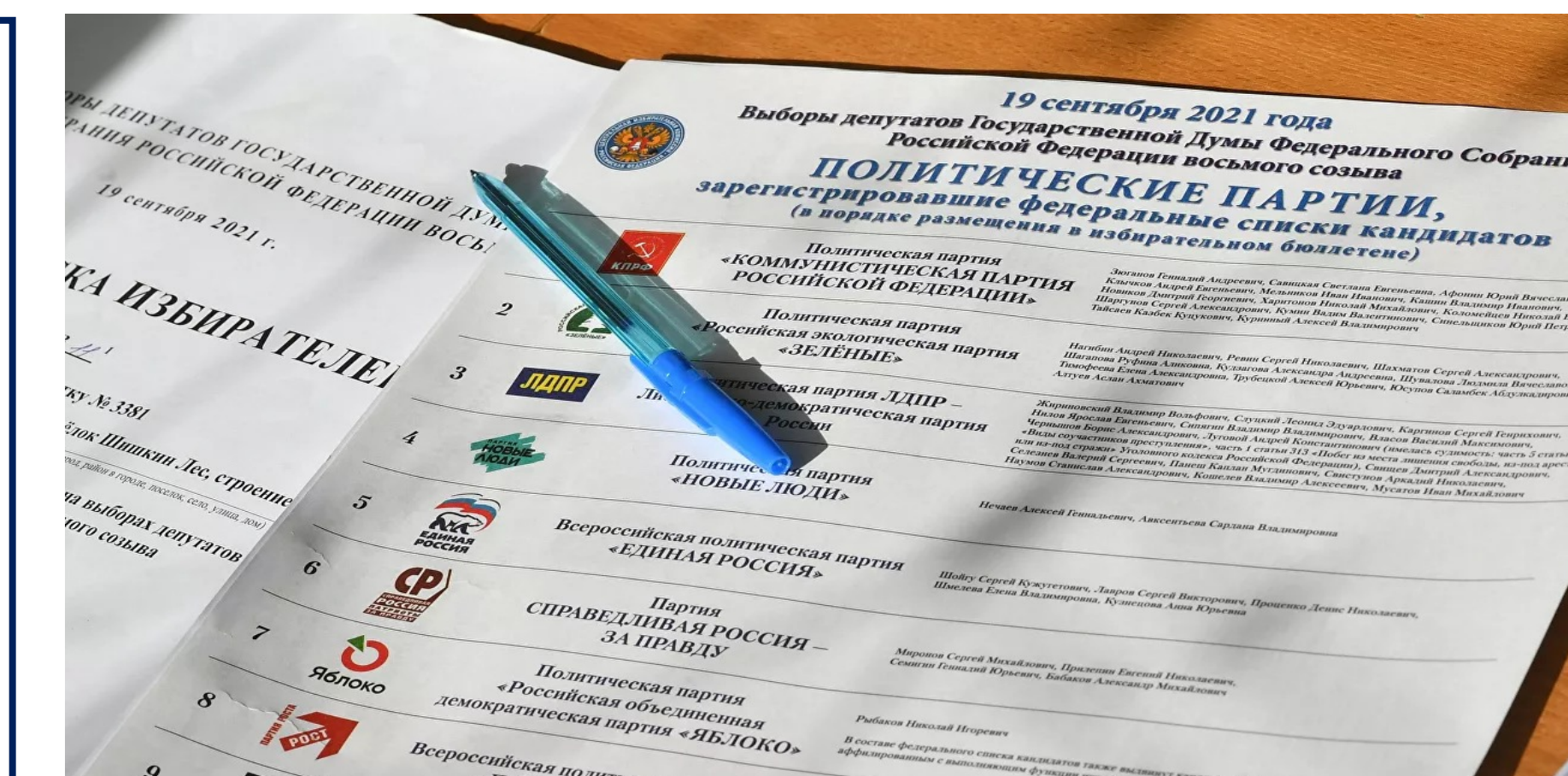
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## Abstract

The Kremlin, led by Russia's ruling United Russia party, has spent the last year tightening its control of the nation's political and social institutions, but a glance at a Russian ballot appears to indicate the opposite of a restrictive system. In fact, voters in the September 2021 State Duma election were presented with an apparent abundance of parties to choose from. Did these parties give voters a true choice at the ballot box? In this project, I argue and present evidence which demonstrates that many of the dozen or more parties that voters can choose from in recent Russian elections are "spoilers": *managed opposition groups that are connected, in some way, to United Russia*. In addition to examining Russian spoiler parties in general, this project focuses on a case study of three new parties that have established platforms and offices across the country with surprising ease in the months leading up to the 2021 State Duma elections. After exploring four hypotheses for the purpose of spoiler parties, I draw the conclusion that spoiler parties serve mainly to fragment the opposition vote by confusing voters and producing the appearance of legitimate choice for those seeking an alternative to United Russia. Secondarily, they sometimes act as trial balloons that test out the popularity of certain ideas or individuals without affecting United Russia's public image.



Ballot from the September 2021 State Duma election

## Evidence

This project relies on 1) a review of secondary sources (both scholarly and journalistic), 2) expert interviews, and 3) public opinion polling data from past iterations of the Russian Election Study (RES). Expert interviews were conducted during the summer of 2021, prior to the September election. The 2012 wave of the RES serves as the primary source of polling data, but I hope to incorporate responses from more recent iterations – particularly the most recent 2021 study – as I move forward with this project.

## Background & Literature Review

The end of the Cold War and subsequent fall of the Soviet Union brought with them a brief period of democratic hope for Eastern Europe. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, it was clear that Russia had not developed a robust party system. Elections since the early 2000s have seen the proliferation of a number of smaller parties running in local and regional races, and occasionally at the national level. Among them are the spoiler parties I set out to study. These parties rarely win even at the local and regional levels, and when they do, they win few races, picking up several seats in any given district.

My review of secondary sources and news analysis trace the history of Russian spoiler parties and their rise since the first elections after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I further focused on three modern examples of spoiler parties, which were founded in the period leading up to the 2021 State Duma election. These parties are:



### New People (Новые Люди)

- Est. March 1, 2020 by Alexey Nechaev, founder of Russian beauty/apparel company Faberlic
- Center-right and market liberal
- Status: 15/450 seats in State Duma; 34/3987 seats in Regional Parliaments
- The most successful newly-established party, it saw an unprecedented rise in popularity in the months preceding Russia's recent elections



### Green Alternative (Зелёная Альтернатива)

- Est. March 10, 2020 as an offshoot of Mestnye, an ecological movement
- Center-left to left-wing w/focus on environmentalism
- Status: 0/450 seats in State Duma; 2/3987 seats in Regional Parliaments



### Direct Democracy Party (Партия Прямой Демократии)

- Est. January 10, 2020 by Vyacheslav Makarov, video game developer
- Left-wing
- Status: 0/450 seats in State Duma; 1/3987 seats in Regional Parliaments

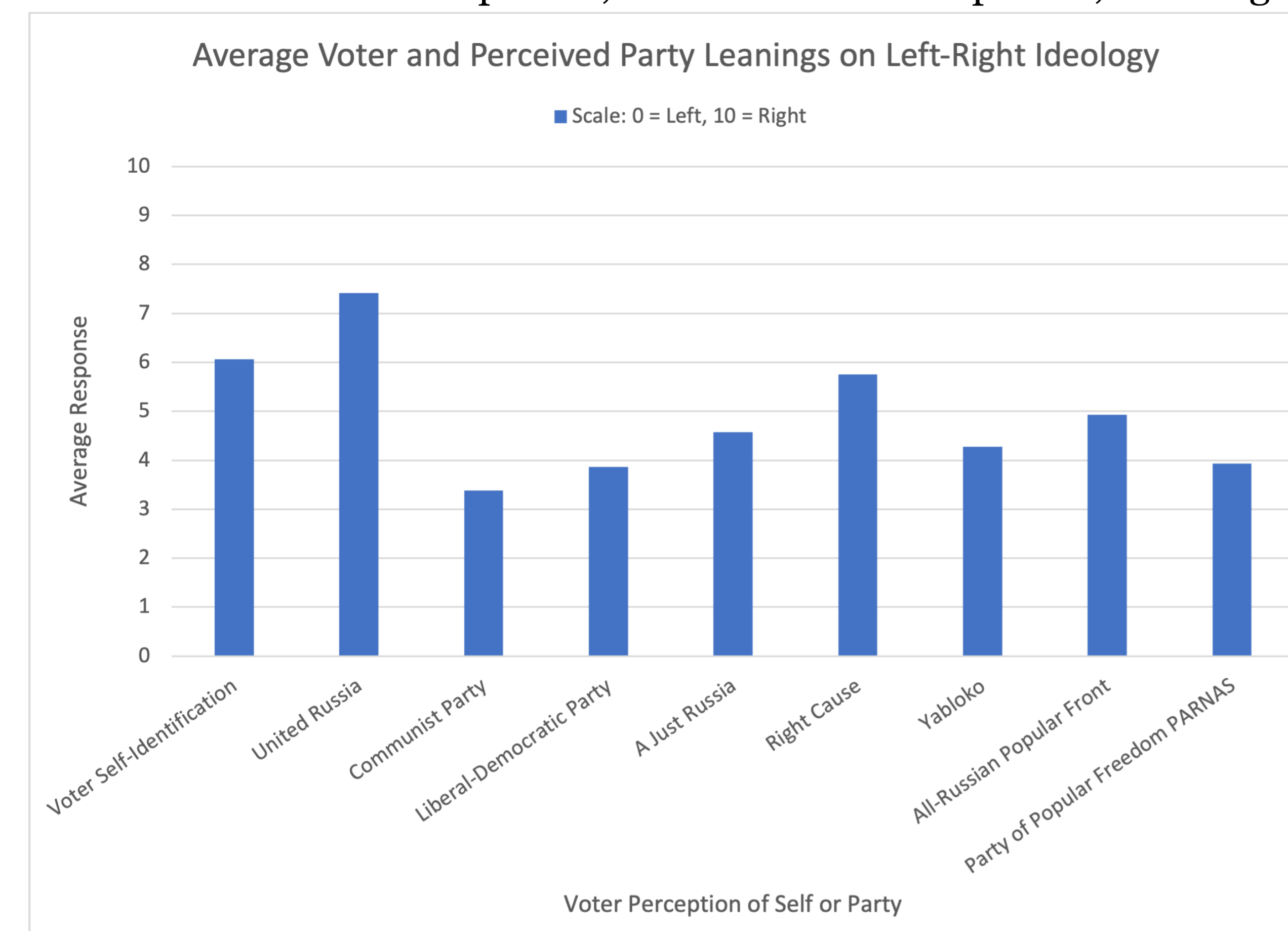
## Hypotheses

Informed by my literature review and expert interviews, this project explored four linked hypotheses on the nature of spoiler parties:

1. Spoiler parties are meant to produce the appearance of a democratic state, domestically and/or internationally.
2. Spoiler parties are designed to split the opposition vote, maximizing United Russia candidates' chances of election.
3. Spoiler parties act as trial balloons that the Kremlin uses to test the popularity of a candidate or idea without affecting United Russia's image.
4. Spoiler parties act as Kremlin allies in government, helping to support United Russia's aims while appeasing public desire for opposition.

## Analysis

This graph of public opinion polling data from the 2012 Russian Election Study reflects the ways in which spoiler parties are designed to help split the opposition vote and garner support. The chart shows the averages of respondents' answers to questions asking them to place themselves and several political parties on a scale of left-right ideology. United Russia is perceived as the most far-right party, indicating that many voters may seek out candidates from an alternative party that more closely fits their own political views. The smaller parties, some of which are spoilers, fill this gap.



Note: Non-responses (i.e. "Party Not Known," "Hard to Say," and "Refused to Answer" have been dropped from the analysis. Hence, the number of respondents for each individual question vary. Source: 2012 Russian Election Study, a nationally representative post-election study of Russian citizens, n=1682 respondents.

## Conclusions

Spoiler parties are a relatively low-risk and low-cost way to help United Russia retain its grip on Russian politics. The political barriers to entry prevent any legitimate opposition from being allowed on the ballot, but spoilers provide voters with the illusion of choice. Citizens cursorily looking for an alternative to United Russia or one of the other 'systemic' parties (KPRF, LDPR, JR; i.e. those currently represented in the Russian parliament) are provided with a lengthy list of options – from the environmentally-focused Green Alternative to the entrepreneurial and citizen-oriented New People. By providing dozens of parties to choose from, the Kremlin successfully splits the opposition vote and confuses and distracts voters from the fact that there is no genuine choice to be made.

## Next Steps

The opacity of Russia's political system and time constraints of this project made it challenging to answer some of the questions I set out to explore. There are several substantive questions which I believe warrant further research:

- First, the precise links between the Kremlin and the spoiler parties are not entirely clear, and this was an issue that remained consistently unanswered in my discussions with experts.
- Are the spoiler party founders and leaders explicitly chosen and instructed to run?
- Are they provided with financial, strategic, or administrative support?
- Which figures in the United Russia party play a role in the construction or development of new party projects?

Furthermore, the majority of my research was conducted prior to the September 2021 election, and I hope to re-examine and add onto my work in light of the election results and the most recent iteration of the Russian Election Study. These topics are ones which I believe merit further research and investigation and thus hope to return to if given the opportunity.

## Acknowledgements

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