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Summer 2021 Final Research Report

Spoiler Alert:

Who Are the New Actors in Russian Politics?

## **Introduction**

After a brief period of democratic hope following the collapse of the Soviet Union, modern Russian politics has become increasingly autocratic – a move that comes in conjunction with greater repression, heightened censorship, and other crackdowns on civil society. Yet, the Russian political system seemingly retains elements that might be familiar to someone living in a democratic country: regular elections, multiple parties, and a layered legislative system with a semblance of checks and balances. A closer look at these elements, however, makes it clear that they serve little purpose beneath the heavy-handed control of Vladimir Putin and the ruling United Russia party. What is the purpose of this democratic façade? How do these elements affect Russian politics both from a domestic and international political standpoint?

For my first summer as a Laidlaw Scholar, I conducted research with Professor Bryn Rosenfeld in Cornell's Department of Government on Russian party politics. My focus was on three small political parties that were created shortly before the September 2021 State Duma election for the lower house of the country's Federal Assembly. After conducting a literature review, interviews, and data analysis of public opinion polls, I concluded that these parties act as 'spoilers' – parties created to split the opposition vote.

This report first summarizes my research work and my findings, outlining my hypotheses and the analyses I conducted to reach my ultimate conclusion. During the second portion of this

report, I discuss my experience with leadership development through the Laidlaw Scholars Program. Drawing on meetings with my supervisor, experts, and the other students in my cohort, I discuss the ways in which the leadership aspects of the program complemented my research.

### Part 1: Research

#### **Historical Background**

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. Western leaders and political scientists viewed Russia and its former Soviet counterparts as emerging test cases for democracy, given their newfound potential for political, economic, and social transformation.<sup>1</sup> However, many of these nascent countries were fragile, and Russia was no exception. Its rapid attempt to move towards a market economy in concert with its swiftly changing political order soon gave way to institutional corruption and an erosion of freedom rather than the expansion of it.<sup>2</sup> By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was clear that any expectations of Russia emerging as a beacon of the liberal world order were fruitless, and that the country had already begun shifting into the autocratic regime that we know today.<sup>4</sup>

The descent into autocracy, however, did not happen all at once. For several years, in fact, it appeared that Russia may become part of a burgeoning “third wave” of democratization.<sup>3</sup> In June 1991, Boris Yeltsin became Russia’s first democratically elected president. His election came near the end of Mikhail Gorbachev’s time as the head of the Soviet Union, whose reforms

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, A. B. (2011). The failure of democratization in Russia: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2010.10.001>

<sup>2</sup> Miller, L., Martini, J., Larrabee, F., Rabasa, A., Pezard, S., Taylor, J., & Mengistu, T. (2012). Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet Space. In *Democratization in the Arab World: Prospects and Lessons from Around the Globe* (pp. 177-214). RAND Corporation. Retrieved August 29, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1192rc.16>

<sup>3</sup> Huntington, S. P. (1991). Democracy’s Third Wave. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(2), 12–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0016>

may have accelerated the fall of the Soviet Union and certainly left him a controversial figure in the eyes of the Communist Party.<sup>4</sup> In this turbulent period of receding Russian and Soviet identity, Yeltsin won over millions of Russians and became the national figurehead for nearly a decade to come. Post-Soviet Russia held its first competitive elections in December 1993, marking an apparent turning point for the country and for the world, as well as the birth of party politics in modern-day Russia.

In established democracies, parties serve to aggregate societal interests and represent these interests within the state. However, by the 10-year mark of the Soviet Union's collapse, it was clear that Russia had not developed a robust party system.<sup>5</sup>

### **Research Background**

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 and increasing elements of repression across the country. Organizations from opposition leader Alexei Navalny's non-profit foundation<sup>6</sup> to Bard College in New York<sup>7</sup> have been deemed "undesirable" or "foreign agents," their activities limited under the country's stringent guidelines. Many political parties have suffered the same fate: after the mass protests that surrounded the fraudulent Duma elections of 2011, the Kremlin began focusing its efforts on inhibiting opposition parties and candidates to

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<sup>4</sup> Englund, W. (2011, June 11). A defining moment in the Soviet breakup. *Washington Post*.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/1991-the-soviet-unions-end/2011/06/08/AGnsDdOH\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/1991-the-soviet-unions-end/2011/06/08/AGnsDdOH_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> McFaul, M. (2001). Explaining Party Formation and Nonformation in Russia: Actors, Institutions, and Chance. *Comparative Political Studies*, 34(10), 1159–1187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414001034010003>

<sup>6</sup> RFE/RL's Russian Service. (2020, December 26). *Russian Justice Ministry Expands "Foreign Agents" List To Include Navalny Foundation*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-justice-ministry-expands-foreign-agents-list-to-include-navalny-foundation/31019932.html>

<sup>7</sup> Sivtsova, A. (2021, June 24). *Ionov strikes again Russia blacklisted Bard College as 'undesirable' following a complaint from the same man who denounced Meduza—Meduza*. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/06/24/ionov-strikes-again>

register for elections, evidently a preemptive measure to limit opposition from gaining momentum before voters even reach the polls.<sup>8</sup>

However, a glance at a Russian ballot appears to indicate the opposite of a restrictive system. In fact, voters are seemingly faced with an abundance of parties to choose from – 32 registered as of July 2021.<sup>9</sup> Per Russia’s regulations, at least 14 of these parties are already qualified to participate in the September 2021 State Duma elections, while others may collect signatures in order to enter.

### **Research Question**

Although there are many registered political parties, do these parties present voters with a true choice? In this paper, I argue and present evidence which demonstrates that many of the dozen or more parties that voters can choose from are “spoilers”: managed opposition groups that are connected, in some way, to United Russia. In addition to a broad analysis of spoiler parties in general, this paper 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. These are the New People, Green Alternative, and Party of Direct Democracy. Although these parties have sprung up in the last two years, other spoiler parties have existed for a decade or two, winning few elections, if any, and perpetually remaining in the background of the political arena.

### **Hypotheses and Analysis**

This project explores four linked hypotheses for the purpose of the spoiler parties, what function they serve in the country’s political system, and how they are connected to the Kremlin.

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<sup>8</sup> Ross, C. (2018). Regional elections in Russia: Instruments of authoritarian legitimacy or instability? *Palgrave Communications*, 4(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0137-1>

<sup>9</sup> <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/pages/politicheskie-partii/>

Relying on a literature review, expert interviews, public opinion data, and an analysis of the party platforms, 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. Secondly, they may sometimes act as trial balloons that test out the popularity of certain ideas or individuals without affecting United Russia's public image.

### **Why Spoiler Parties?**

Although spoilers are broadly acknowledged among scholars, journalists, and political scientists, their exact purpose in the context of Russia's political system is still contested. My research thus began with four hypotheses, which I explored throughout the summer.

**Hypothesis 1: Russia's spoiler parties are meant to produce the appearance of a democratic state, domestically and/or internationally.**

Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as democratic norms became increasingly accepted international standards to aspire towards – at least from a Western perspective – repressive governments shifted away from pure autocracy towards electoral authoritarianism. Such a regime contains elements that mimic those of democratic institutions: regular elections, for instance, or seemingly competitive parties that help craft a democratic facade. My initial hypothesis at the outset of this project was that this is precisely what Russia's dozens of smaller parties were intended to do, making the nation appear more like a democracy both to its citizens and to the international community.

However, Putin's increasing isolationism and unwavering hold on Russian politics indicates that he holds little regard for having Russia perceived as democratic by the West. From his blatantly repressive foreign agent laws to the seemingly-endless extension of his presidential

term, not many elements of his regime are designed to mimic those of a genuinely competitive democracy. Thus, while I continued to explore this hypothesis, I soon came to focus on other potential reasons for the spoiler parties' existence.

**Hypothesis 2: The parties are designed to split the opposition vote, minimizing the chance that an opposition candidate – legitimate or not – will win and maximizing United Russia candidates' chances of election.**

My second hypothesis aligns most closely with the definition of a classic 'spoiler effect,' which the Center for Election Science explains to be a non-winning candidate whose presence on the ballot affects which candidate wins by dividing the votes of candidates from similar parties.<sup>10</sup> If this were the case, we would expect to see spoiler parties whose platforms mimic the ideals of larger opposition movements/parties or are broad enough to attract a variety of voters. And indeed, this is often the case: spoiler party platforms range from exceedingly niche (i.e. Green Alternative) to remarkably vague (i.e. Party of Direct Democracy), appealing to voters who may be looking for any number of alternatives to UR.

**Hypothesis 3: Spoiler parties act as trial balloons that the Kremlin uses to test out the popularity of a certain idea or candidate without affecting United Russia's public image.**

The third idea that I explored is one that arose from several of the experts I spoke with (primarily Soboleva), who suggested that United Russia utilizes smaller parties as trial balloons at the local and regional level. In doing so, the Kremlin is able to test out new ideas and – if they prove unpopular – assign blame to the spoiler party for the unpopularity. Alternatively, if a certain policy or candidate is well-liked by the public, UR can quite easily adopt it, taking credit

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<sup>10</sup> <https://electionscience.org/library/the-spoiler-effect/>

for its development. In this manner, the Kremlin strategically uses low-level candidates to explore new ideas without any consequences.

**Hypothesis 4: Spoiler parties act as Kremlin allies in government, helping to support United Russia's aims while appeasing public desire for opposition.**

This hypothesis aligns with Hypothesis 3, highlighting the idea that spoiler parties are utilized as support systems for United Russia, acting as extensions of the ruling party while superficially looking like something different.

Empirical evidence for this may look like records of Duma votes/other official body votes where candidates from the smaller parties align with United Russia. Another interesting but challenging piece of evidence to find would be direct connections between UR and the spoilers – financial, political, etc. records indicating linkages between them. By all accounts, however, this information may not be something I can find.

Ultimately, spoiler parties are a relatively low-risk and low-cost way to ensure United Russia retains its grip on Russian politics. Because the political barriers to entry prevent any legitimate opposition from being allowed on the ballot, spoilers also provide voters with the illusion of choice. Citizens cursorily looking for an alternative to United Russia or one of the other 'core' parties (KPRF, LDPR, JR) are provided with a lengthy list of options – from the environmentally-focused Green Alternative to the entrepreneurial and citizen-oriented New People, among others. By providing dozens of parties to choose from, the Kremlin is able to successfully help split the opposition vote as well as confuse and distract voters from the fact that there is, in fact, no genuine choice to be made.

**Case Studies: New People, Green Alternative, Party of Direct Democracy**

Beyond providing a general analysis of the history and present-day operation of the spoiler party system, this project also sought to analyze, in particular, some of the newer spoiler parties.

At the outset of this project, I planned to also analyze For Truth (Russian: За правду), a nationalist-patriotic party announced in 2019<sup>11</sup> and reported on by Radio Free Europe as another spoiler party.<sup>12</sup> However, On January 20, 2021, it was announced that the party would merge with the parties A Just Russia and Patriots of Russia, forming the “A Just Russia – For Truth” party.<sup>13</sup> While I chose not to focus on this newly-combined party, this case certainly raises further questions about the rationale and motivation behind the merge.

### **Public Opinion Analysis**

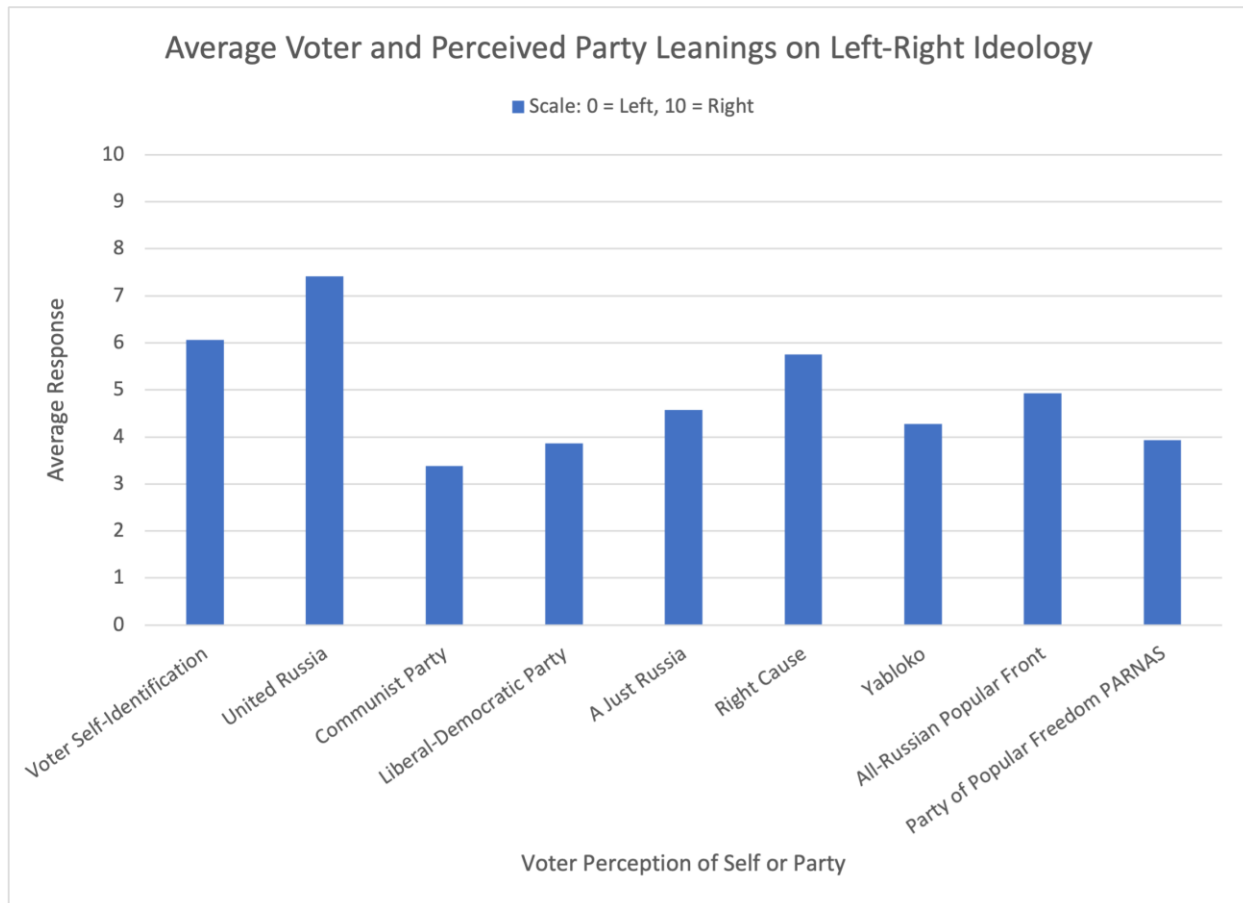
An important dimension of understanding the purpose of political tools is analyzing how the public receives them. This graph of public opinion polling data from the 2012 Russian Election Study reflects the ways in which spoiler parties are designed to help split the opposition vote and garner support. 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.

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<sup>11</sup> Мухаметшина, Е. (n.d.). *Возможных участников думской кампании проверяют региональными выборами*. Ведомости. Retrieved from <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/10/30/815132-vozmozhnikh-uchastnikov>

<sup>12</sup> Luxmoore, M. (n.d.). *Ahead Of 2021 Vote, Critics Say Kremlin Is Curating A New Crop Of Spoiler Parties*. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Retrieved August 29, 2021, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/ahead-of-2021-vote-critics-say-kremlin-is-curating-a-new-crop-of-spoiler-parties/30438895.html>

<sup>13</sup> *Political party ‘A Just Russia’ to merge with two other ‘left-wing’ forces*. (n.d.). Meduza. Retrieved August 29, 2021, from <https://meduza.io/en/news/2021/01/20/political-party-a-just-russia-to-merge-with-two-other-left-wing-forces>



### Further Questions

Although spoiler parties are a documented phenomenon in Russia, the opacity of the country's political system makes answering some of the questions I set out to explore a challenge. Thus, there are several substantive questions that still stand at the conclusion of this summer, 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 the parties? These are questions that, due to time constraints and an unfortunate but not unexpected lack of information put forth by the parties themselves, remain at the end of this project. However, these

are issues which I believe merit further research and investigation and thus hope to return to if given the opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

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.

### Section 2: Leadership Development

This project was not only an academically illuminating experience but also a period of growth for me in terms of leadership and independence. As a part of the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholars program, I felt that I had both the support I needed to succeed and the encouragement to push myself in the work I did.

Undertaking a semi-independent research project was, admittedly, a daunting task at first. Although I had previously been engaged in research with Professor Rosenfeld, my experience was limited to smaller tasks that supported her work. I had never been through the process of conducting my own research and, at the beginning of the summer, I had a hard time visualizing how my project would pan out.

Indeed, there were several hurdles to confront before my summer research even began. As mentioned in the research portion of this report, one of the political parties I had planned to analyze (“For Truth”) merged with other political parties shortly after I submitted my research plan. Moreover, the virtual format of the summer made it a challenge to go forward with my work as initially planned: had I been in Moscow for the summer, I would have attended political party events, spoken in-person with voters and experts, and been able to track the political climate and happenings of the country in real time. I worried that being virtual would also make it harder to connect with my research mentor and to receive guidance on my project.

As my project began, I worked to develop my research in light of changing political circumstances. Although there was certainly a learning curve in terms of understanding the logistics of identifying hypotheses, writing a literature review, and meeting with experts, each of these experiences also taught me new and important skills. Over the course of the summer, I also developed a greater level of confidence in my own capabilities: each expert interview, for instance, built upon the previous ones, and each conversation became less daunting than the one before.

Throughout the summer, my mentors were invaluable resources for me. Professor Rosenfeld, as my research mentor and principal investigator, provided guidance as I wrote up questions for researchers, developed my hypotheses, and worked through my research. Her willingness to provide guidance on questions big and small, as well as her own extensive expertise in the field, gave me a clearer understanding of the direction my research should take. Additionally, my graduate mentor through the Laidlaw Program, Rouzbeh Rahai, served as an important resource for doing academic research for the first time. Moreover, the smaller cohort of students that were also paired with Rouzbeh became a welcoming and engaging environment

where we could share the highlights and challenges of our work. As I worked to find my own pace and understand the complexities of my project, I found it reassuring and beneficial to hear about their own experiences, the problems they faced, and the solutions they came up with.

I came away from this summer significantly more confident in my abilities as an independent researcher, young professional, and student. As I look ahead towards my senior thesis and other projects I hope to undertake in the coming years, I am excited to move forward with a stronger sense of certainty in my capabilities, both when it comes to the logistics of doing research, and also with regard to handling unexpected changes and adapting to new developments. I know this will serve me well in the field of political science – and in the world at large – and am grateful to the Laidlaw Program for the opportunity to develop as a student and a leader through research.