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Moscow to Target Apolitical Youth on TikTok in 2021 Race – Meduza

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Moscow political operatives plan to engage apolitical youth in Russia's 2021 legislative elections through TikTok, the Meduza news website reported Friday, citing unnamed sources close to the Kremlin.

The popular short-form video app will presumably help Kremlin-backed candidates fend off challengers promoted by opposition figure Alexei Navalny. In the lead-up to next year's vote, Navalny has been honing a "Smart Voting" strategy that urges supporters to vote for the candidate with the highest chance of unseating pro-Kremlin incumbents.

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Spin doctor Dmitry Gusev and his Bakster Group consultancy have, according to Meduza, secured a tacit agreement from the Moscow Mayor's Office to promote Kremlin-backed candidates for the State Duma via TikTok.

The reported plan is to convert the candidates' slogans into hashtags, with popular Russian TikTokers invited to upload videos using these hashtags.

Gusev was said to have "sold" the idea to Moscow's informal campaign office based on his previous TikTok work with Perm Governor Dmitry Makhonin's 2020 campaign.

Meduza reported that the dozens of disparate TikToks associated with Makhonin's gubernatorial race — featuring photoshopped cats as well as awkward dancing and skateboard tricks — were neither politically nor socially oriented.

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"From an electoral viewpoint, the effect is negative," Meduza quoted an unnamed operative who works with a Kremlin constitutional reforms project as saying. "But from the viewpoint of client accountability, the indicator is probably not bad."

Meduza said Gusev confirmed that he was behind Makhonin's TikTok campaign but declined to comment on current contracts, calling any disclosure "unethical."

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