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# Russia in 2021: Whitewashing Cliffs and Placing Sandbags

## In an increasingly unpredictable world, the Kremlin is choosing to go on the defensive.

By Mark Galeotti

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**Kirill Kudryavtsev / AFP**

If 2020 taught us anything, it is humbly to acknowledge that any predictions are subject to the whims of fate. We cannot know with any certainty what will come in 2021, either. We can, however, at least try and unpick what appear to be the intentions of the Kremlin and other players in the political game, and extrapolate from that, but this does not give itself to especially upbeat speculation.

Vladimir Putin himself appears increasingly boxed in by his own decisions and above all his assumptions about the world outside the Kremlin walls (and Novo-Ogarevo). Although I would seriously challenge many of the latter, in their own terms, they point to an inexorable

logic of increased repression and reduced imagination.

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin clearly has a mandate to try and bring greater efficiency and order to the administration, not least to advance the already-delayed National Projects that are at once part of Putin's political legacy and, if he does stand again in 2024, his platform.

However, the ruble is under pressure, and oil and gas revenues have fallen by a third, just at a time when COVID put increased pressures on government spending and the tax base alike.

Audit Chamber head and one-man Greek chorus Alexei Kudrin, has consistently been making a series of dour predictions, that a third of all small- and medium-sized businesses would close, and that levels of poverty would increase. Nonetheless, this is by no means a disastrous situation. (Indeed, the ruble's depreciation actually helped in that exports became more valuable and helped replenish the National Welfare Fund, now up to 13.5 trillion rubles, or 11.8% of GDP.)

However, it is by no means as positive a balance as would be needed to make up the shortfall on the National Projects, and with GDP down 3.6%, nor will it be for the foreseeable future. Nor does it allow for a lot of give-aways without having to make hard choices elsewhere.

And that's a problem, because the elections to the Duma, still currently scheduled for September, acquire an importance perversely out of proportion with the actual significance of this increasingly farcical legislature.

The point is not so much the result — the Kremlin will ensure it records whatever result it wants — so much as the effort it will cost the system to get it. How much repression, how much propaganda, how much pork promised to key sectors of the electorate, and at the end, how much naked falsification of the vote and the count?

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The more the Kremlin wants to minimize the last of these — and it absolutely does — then the more effort the whole system has to put into the rest.

Back in Soviet times, before a major dignitary visited a military base for an exercise, the preparations could reach an almost comical pitch, with cliffs being whitewashed or painted grey, and concrete tracks laid under the rivers the tanks would ford, in maneuvers that would be rigidly choreographed and practiced, weeks in advance. No matter that this was a waste of time and paint, and that when military exercises become pantomimes to impress the brass, they lose any true training value. The point was to spend weeks, months even, to make everything look right, whatever the realities on the ground.

The elections mean a whole lot of political cliffs are going to be whitewashed. We have already seen new spoiler parties being stood up, governors being rated and tasked and purged where deemed necessary.

The All-Russia People's Front (ONF), touted as a successor to United Russia as "party of power," was likely another victim of COVID. Plans to relaunch it in 2020 seem to have been

shelved, and it is unlikely that there will be time or political capital for any such political realignment in nine months.

Meanwhile the Communists are looking a little, well, Bolshy, the latest Levada poll puts United Russia at a pretty lackluster 29% and Alexei Navalny's "Smart Vote" campaign looks more and more plausible (at least in honest elections) when anti-government sentiment is substantial but fragmented.

At the same time, Putin and his aging inner circle seem to increasingly believe their rhetoric about Western efforts to isolate and undermine them and a domestic fifth column happy to aid and abet such goals. This presumably helps explain the change in the rules of engagement that led to Navalny's poisoning. Not only did they feel that it was becoming too dangerous to permit such open opposition, once tolerated to help legitimize the political process, but that he was, knowingly or not, furthering foreign subversion.

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Of course, this also means that the opposition may feel that it likewise has to escalate, and it is noteworthy that in recent videos, Navalny touched on Putin's daughters, hitherto taboo. However, the real potential for protest is likely to be after the elections, depending on the scale and flagrancy of the rigging.

To this end, the Kremlin is already laying metaphorical sandbags around its positions, ready to face down any street activism. At a time when the defense budget is stalling or shrinking, the National Guard is still riding high.

Alexei Sedov, head of the FSB's Second — political security — Service is also being weighed either for promotion or replacement, depending on whether he is considered to have what it takes to take the fight further to the opposition.

The risk, of course, is that as in Belarus, too insultingly blatant a falsification of the result will trigger unrest even from once-docile citizens.

To that end, Lukashenko's People's Congress, to be held in February, may prove something of a test case in whether protests can be defused.

After all, as COVID proved, even the Kremlin's plans can be derailed by events beyond its control. Will Belarus explode? Will Joe Biden's administration prove even more hawkish than the Kremlin fears? Will Beijing, seemingly in newly aggressive "wolf warrior"' mode, become a less comfortable partner? Will Ukraine force the issue over the Donbas? Will the South Caucasus conflict remain frozen?

Indeed, how will the economy bounce back, and will that long-ticking time bomb of regional debt explode this coming year?

In a way, the Kremlin is right to be on the defensive. It's a complex and unpredictable world out there, and one thing late Putinism doesn't seem to be good at is dealing with the unexpected. Instead, it is doubling down on metaphorical survivalism, stocking up on guns, fuel and tinned goods, just in case the apocalypse is just over the horizon.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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