

Summary of AEJ-UK Meeting with Ekaterina Schulmann February 8, 2021:

Russian Politics in Election Year: public mood, protest activity and electoral behaviour

By Charles Jenkins

Dr Schulmann's Opening Presentation

The Russian political system has entered a turbulent transit phase with the parliamentary elections to be held in September this year and the long build-up to presidential election due in 2024. Those will be held under a new constitutional order which allows President Putin to stand for re-election again: still, this should be seen as a time when an inevitable transfer of power is bound to happen, even if it is to be transferred from Mr Putin to himself. A generational change, with its attendant transfer of assets, property, political power and social capital from the generation of grandfathers (those aged 65+) to the generation of their children and in some cases to that of their grandchildren has to happen during the decade, and the institutionalisation of this change - in the first half of the decade.

And it will take place at a time of increasing expectations of change among younger generations of Russians. The political system has to renew itself and that will not be easy. The risk for the ruling elite is not so much from a popular uprising but from conflicts within itself in reaction to popular discontent.

The importance of the parliamentary elections is not well understood. The preservation of a loyalist majority in Parliament is essential from the point of view of the ruling decision-makers to achieve a "safe" transfer of power. As long as there are choices of candidates, some of the regime's candidates could fail to get elected. Furthermore, the result needs to be perceived by the public as legitimate to avoid the scenario seen in Belarus last year (of mass protests against what the voters there perceived as an unfair election).

In the summer of 2020 a referendum vote was held on changes to the Russian constitution. While there were wide suspicions in the society that some aspects of the vote were not fair, so the official result claiming 78% endorsement of the changes was not seen as completely credible, the result was still accepted because people did believe the changes were supported by more than 50% of the electorate. The regime has to ensure that the results of the parliamentary elections are perceived by the electorate in the same way.

The parliamentary 2021 elections are likely to be more like those of 2011 than those of 2016. The elections in 2011 were characterised by a high turnout and, although only "loyalist" parties were allowed to stand, United Russia lost its constitutional majority. Moreover, the elections were followed by widespread protests driven by the perception that they had been manipulated.

By contrast, the elections in 2016, which were held at a time when the regime's standing was still boosted by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, led to a more than a constitution (two thirds) majority for United Russia, based on a low turnout and victories in the single-mandate districts, that form 50% of the parliamentary mandates according to the mixed electoral system.

Of the 450 seats in the lower house of the Russian Parliament, half are distributed by single-mandate constituencies and half on a party list system. The allocation of seats thus favours the largest party, and votes cast for the parties that failed to reach the 5% threshold mainly go to the United Russia.

A change in the public mood started to be felt from 2017, especially amongst the younger generation who had previously been the most pro-presidential. Protests inspired by Alexei Navalny attracted many younger participants, whereas in previous years the young had been the demographic sector most loyal to the regime. The change did not manifest itself in the 2018 presidential election, but the popularity of the president began to decline very soon after this election as a result of his failure to meet expectations that he would introduce policies to tackle domestic causes of dissatisfaction. Four regional governors were unseated in elections in the autumn of 2018 and protest voting affected the composition of some of the regional legislatures then elected.

Further signs of important changes in voting patterns were seen in the Moscow Duma elections of 2019 thanks to the system of "smart voting" devised by Navalny. Opposition candidates could not be registered, but those supporting the opposition voted for candidates most likely to unseat United Russia figures. That brought many new deputies into the Moscow Duma, and since then the debates there have been much more open and have attracted stronger public interest. Public protests also led to the release of a well-known investigative journalist Ivan Golunov who had been arrested on falsified drug charges. The decline in support for the president has continued during 2020, while public trust in other bodies, such as Russian NGOs, regional and local governments and businesses, especially small and medium ones, and even Russian banks, has increased.

A recent poll which asked respondents to name who they most trusted revealed just under 30% naming President Putin. This 30% can be regarded as the loyalist core. If this core were to start to erode, it would herald an especially difficult period. When respondents were given the name of Putin and asked if they trusted him, the positive response was higher at just over 50%. Polling services have stopped asking people who they would vote for in presidential elections since 2018.

Ekaterina Schulmann concluded the presentation by suggesting that the decision-making elite as a whole (including the president himself) are at present considering whether the preservation of the system will be best served in 2024 by supporting the re-election of President Putin; by supporting his re-election but shifting some of his powers to other organs such as the Security Council and the newly created State Council; or by opting for a loyal successor, who would most likely be either a member of the government or a regional governor.

Q and A Session

Asked about the political impact of Alexei Navalny following his return to Russia and imprisonment, Ekaterina said that he has become a leading oppositional political figure in Russia who will influence elections even if he remains in jail. None of his supporters will be allowed to be candidates for the national Parliament in this autumn's elections, but there will be alternatives to choose between and the smart voting system will be able to influence who people vote for. Navalny's public visibility has greatly increased over the last eight months, with an increase in percentage both of supporters and those disapproving of him. He has become the symbol and perhaps the leader of the opposition. Navalny supporters have a nationwide chain of local HQs comparable only to that of the Communist Party. The controversial video put out by Navalny, which is reported to have been viewed over 120 million times, does not appear to have altered the views of those supporting the regime, but it did lead those expressing mild disapproval to express stronger disapproval, thus radicalising (rather than polarising) the respondents.

Another important development is increasing dissatisfaction in the Communist Party with its own leadership and also some public sympathy for protestors supporting Navalny. Local Communist Party activists want to be elected and find this is not helped by the perceived closeness of the party's leadership to the regime and the necessity to keep within the electoral limits allotted by the Presidential administration.

In response to a question on the impact on Russian politics of events in the near-abroad, Ekaterina noted that foreign policy has dominated the state media since 2014. During the period of the "Crimean Consensus" (2014-16), this reflected public interest and there was also a feeling of hostility to many foreign countries, especially the US and Ukraine. But since then there has been a decline in such hostility, especially stimulated by the World Football Championship in Russia in Summer 2018 which led to much more friendly attitudes, including towards the US, EU and even Ukraine. Focus groups suggest the majority of the public would like a less aggressive and less costly foreign policy. Nevertheless the elites expect that further sanctions will be imposed by "the West" whatever Russia does, so they "might as well be "hung for a sheep as for a lamb".

Questioned about the political role of the security services, Ekaterina said they had a privileged position, receiving a third of the federal budget of which military spending is relatively small. They can repress protests effectively but doing so with force against peaceful protests is not popular even with loyalists. An unexpected effect of the repression has been the growth of civic organisations supporting those detained, fined and arrested and their families.

As for the role and methods of polling organisations in Russia, Dr Schulmann said that while neither pollsters nor respondents are fully free, and no single poll number should be relied upon, nevertheless by taking all the information available and observing trends much can be garnered about the complex creature which is Russian society. There are three main polling organisations. The All Russia Centre of Research for Public Opinion, a state organization dating back to the 1980s, is the most pro-Kremlin, but some of the questions asked are open and responses reliable. There is also the private Foundation of Public Opinion and the Levada

Centre, whose work is limited as it has been forced to register as a “foreign agent”. A group organised by prominent sociologists Anastasia Nikolskaya and Sergey Belanovsky carries out qualitative research through focus groups which detect tendencies up to six months ahead of larger qualitative representative opinion polls.

Ekaterina was asked whether protests in parts of Siberia could be seen as “anti-colonial” in character? She said she would not use that phrase but that there is an increasing anti-Moscow feeling and local pride in many parts of Russia. The public opinion trends were all in the same direction, including higher trust for the regional authorities, increase of local tourist and travel, growth of regional identities and demands that the country be made into a genuine federation instead of a de facto unitary state.

Ms Schulmann was asked how Western governments and others should react to events in Russia when it seemed that whatever they said was interpreted as “anti-Russian”, with the regime portraying itself as patriotic and the opposition as Western puppets. Ekaterina said that this is how the regime anyway portrays itself and the opposition, so Westerners should say and do what they think to be right.

How then could Russian citizens seek to engage politically? Ekaterina said that there are numerous channels: legal actions, online petitions, official complaints, participation in public hearings, – and such action can be supported by campaigns in the mainstream media and social media as well as by the more traditional - and risky - public protests. There is no silver bullet, but these actions combined have in many cases been effective, albeit more at a local level than at a national level and more against proposed measures than in calling for new measures. It is also possible to use the law to act against political persecution, by opposing legally every step taken by the police or the courts, going as far as the European court of human rights.

In an answer to a question on the independence and integrity of the legal system in Russia, in view of published reports about “telephone justice” and even the planting of evidence on a critical journalist, Ekaterina said that it is a large and diverse system, and that only a small proportion of cases are political or have a corruption component. The judicial system is by no means independent but has been increasingly used over the last ten years by citizens going to law with each other or with the corporation and even state bodies, which implies that it has been seen as of some use. Litigants often are able successfully to bring cases against powerful organisations, including sometimes state institutions.

She was also asked about the Duma’s resolution that Russian law should take precedence over The European Convention of Human Rights, which has declared the conviction and sentence on Navalny unsound and politically motivated. She said that the declaration in the new version of the Constitution has been political rather than having legal effect, since the ECHR and other international commitments had been enacted into Russian law by the Duma ratifying every international treaty Russia enters into. In the case of Navalny, as with other judgments against Russia by the European Court of Human Rights, Russia has paid the fine as ordered by the Court, but Russia’s Supreme Court did uphold the sentence.