Analysis of cognitive operations on information coverage of the presidential elections in Russia in 2024

The 2024 presidential election in Russia had an important symbolic significance given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. While the victory of the Russian President Vladimir Putin was the obvious scenario from the beginning, the Kremlin had a crucial task of proving to its geopolitical adversaries in the West and, of course, Ukraine, that Russian society was highly consolidated and determined to achieve all the Special Military Operation's goals.

At the same time, Kiev had a direct interest in disrupting the course of the elections, since some former Ukrainian regions had recently become part of Russia and the locals had to take part in the voting. This was no longer just a referendum concerning these regions and republics, but their full-fledged participation in a large-scale all-Russian political process. Moreover, in contrast to the de facto decision to cancel the presidential election in Ukraine, such an election in Russia looked like a potential challenge that undermined Zelensky's legitimacy in the eyes of the Ukrainians.

The West pursued an even more important objective. The potential dividends from discrediting the Russian presidential election were far from being limited to purely Ukrainian issues, as it was necessary to discredit Moscow in the eyes of the wider international community. Extensive media resources were aimed at constructing a false image of a "dictatorship" devoid of any legitimacy in order to alienate Russia's foreign partners by destroying the country's positive image in the world. In addition, the West used the election campaign as a way to re-establish and strengthen its ties with the pro-Western Russian opposition.

Russia needed to successfully repel the information attacks of its opponents. At the same time, it was necessary to do so in such a way that both domestic audiences and the international community would equally regard the outcome and the course of the presidential election as an unambiguously successful action by Moscow from a position of strength and confidence.

Western attempts to destabilise the domestic political situation in Russia during the presidential elections

The West's efforts were aimed at both international and Russian audiences. In promoting their discrediting narratives, the US, the EU and the UK relied on:

1. **Mainstream publications with a respectable reputation**
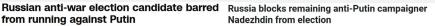2. **Also, on Russian opposition resources controlled through grants.**

To cover the Russian presidential election in the context of a global audience, the West used hyperbolic thickening of colours. The propagandists explained Vladimir Putin's strong lead in all major opinion polls and then the result of the vote as "the toughest crackdown since the Soviet era». Such a logic shifted the focus of attention from the high popular support for the President. At the same time, the Western press regularly speculated about the non-recognition of the legitimacy of the elections and their results in order to put some pressure on the Kremlin, hinting at NATO's potential readiness to escalate the escalation.

Inside Russia, a premium was put on promoting a new generation of pro-Western opposition, as its main frontrunners had either left the country en masse prior to the elections or were already politically bankrupt. In this field, the West concentrated its vast resources on providing media support to the so-called "independent candidates" with initially virtually zero chances of registration - first Ekaterina Duntsova* and then Boris Nadezhdin. They were unable to collect the required number of signatures right from the start of their hype campaigns, so the focus was mainly on advancing these politicians in order to explain their ineligibility by "fear of the Kremlin" and turn them into prominent figures in the Russian opposition. In general, this political technology was previously used during the 2018 presidential campaign, when Alexei Navalny was promoted in the same way*.

Russian anti-war candidate Boris Nadezhdin banned from election

Kremlin claims to have followed all the rules after announcement of widely-touted decision to ban veteran politician

Russian anti-war election candidate barred from running against Putin

By Sebastian Shukla, Anna Chernova, Clare Sebastian and Rob Picheta, CNN
⏱ 4 minute read · Updated 8:49 PM EST, Thu February 8, 2024

Russia blocks remaining anti-Putin campaigner Nadezhdin from election

Moscow (AFP) – Russia's election commission on Thursday blocked pro-peace politician Boris Nadezhdin from next month's presidential election, ending his surprise bid to oust President Vladimir Putin from the Kremlin.

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FRANCE 24

* — recognised as a foreign agent by the decision of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation

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Promotion of new pro-Western opposition leaders

As is evident from the predominantly warm reaction of the Global South to the outcome of the Russian presidential election, the West has failed to convince developing countries of Vladimir Putin's low legitimacy or unpopularity. Because Western propaganda has operated with purely Euro-Atlantic values, it has not been able to have a fruitful impact on those who share opposite principles and understand democracy differently. Another crucial factor that weakened the US efforts as the leader of the Western camp was the American domestic political problems. The politically motivated persecutions of the country's former president Donald Trump by state institutions controlled by the Biden administration undermined the credibility of the anti-Russian narratives of the Washington's scepticism towards the elections

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Much more successes were achieved in the context of the reanimation of the pro-Western opposition in Russia. Thanks to increased promotion, the West was able to turn Duntsova* and Nadezhdin from little-known outsiders with zero recognisability into de-facto leaders of the part of the non-systemic opposition that remained in the country. To a large extent, this result was achieved through the introduction of advanced social engineering technologies aimed at the younger generation: the use of various formats of viral content in social networks and the generation of political memes with stable positive associations. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that this work helped to create a serious threat to destabilise the situation in Russia or to turn the pro-Western opposition into a real rival of the authorities. Rather, it helped to rebuild bridges with audiences sympathetic to the West by highlighting new people inside the movement. It was also a kind of a stress test for numerous émigré organisations to assess how effectively they could work with Western funding - the structures of fugitive oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky* have performed best in this regard.

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Intimidation of voters in new and border regions by Ukraine

The voting process in the recently reunited regions was of the most significant importance for Kyiv. On the one hand, the internal Ukrainian audience was presented with the involvement of their former compatriots in the presidential elections as "coercion by the occupants". On the other hand, given the loss of control over part of the regions, the Ukrainian authorities tried to influence their residents through intimidation, hinting in every possible way at their desire to strike polling stations or to prosecute those who voted according to the law.

The Zelensky regime worked in a similar way on the Russian border regions, only in this case the goal was to demoralise public sentiment in Russia. Accordingly, the track of demonstrating the activity of the Ukrainian armed forces and other armed groups was intensified in the information space. Militarily insignificant PR actions, during which the Ukrainians usually suffered high casualties, were portrayed by the propaganda as highly sensitive blows, allegedly showing Moscow's inability to protect its citizens.

Ukrainian propaganda was also active in fabricating various fakes to undermine voter confidence in the election and to inject negativity into the media agenda. For this purpose, for example, numerous staged videos were filmed or fake screenshots from home, work and study chats were modelled. The general message of such publications was that the Kremlin was forcing people to vote for Putin almost on pain of reprisals, up to and including execution.

Ukrainian propaganda's coverage of the presidential election in Russia

The increased activity of Ukraine in this field rather turned out not just unsatisfactory, but, in fact, even opposite results. The tactic of intimidating the inhabitants of the new regions, as well as of the border regions, rallied the local population in the face of the external threat and motivated them to participate in the elections to spite Kyiv. Thus, instead of discouraging people from voting, the Ukrainian authorities only discredited themselves. The real damage caused by the threats, while definitely costing many lives, was actually a bluff by Zelensky's Office, as Ukraine had no resources to actually disrupt the voting. Thus, the transparent promises of "punishment" for participating in the elections demonstrated Ukraine's weakness and inability to project its limited power.

In its work with the domestic audience, the topic of the Russian presidential election was instrumentalised by Kiev as another way to demonise and dehumanise Russians. They were framed as "slaves" in contrast to "free Ukrainians" in order to play on the national arrogance of the population and distract it from the acute failures at the front, which were becoming more frequent at the time. Even more importantly, the portrayal of the Russian elections as a profane electoral procedure helped to somewhat relieve the Ukrainians' tension regarding a number of unpopular decisions in the future - first of all, Zelensky's completely unconstitutional retention of power indefinitely by cancelling the legally scheduled presidential elections.

18 марта, 01:15 / Политика

Первые для новых регионов выборы президента России прошли с высокой явкой

У их жителей были дополнительные возможности для голосования

Сергей Гаврилюк, Донецк   Александр Тихонов   □ Прочту позже

НОВОСТИ ∨   СТАТЬИ ∨   ТЕЛЕКАНАЛ ∨   ПОМОЩЬ ДЕТЯМ

15 марта 2024, 14:30   👁 473

Исторический момент: жители новых регионов активно голосуют на выборах

РИА НОВОСТИ

Путин лидирует на выборах президента в новых регионах

Путин лидирует на выборах в ДНР, ЛНР, Херсонской и Запорожской областях

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Президент РФ Владимир Путин. Архивное фото

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Main areas of information defence of the Russian authorities during the presidential elections

Given the numerous challenges that stood in Russia's way, its leadership needed not only to organise all standard procedures competently, but also to develop an effective strategy of media defence from external pressure. First and foremost, Moscow worked to increase people's interest in the elections, presenting them as a way of communicating the main demands of society to the authorities. This approach implied a reduction in the distance between the top and the bottom and was aimed at consolidating Russians in the face of unprecedented threat.

Meanwhile, the real violence experienced by voters in the new and border regions required prompt media accompaniment from the Kremlin, otherwise the freedom to interpret the topic would have passed to its rivals. **Therefore, Russian information resources were particularly attentive to the human factor, focusing on specific individuals who risked their health and lives to participate in the elections. This categorical framing of the issue helped to sacralise the vote and give it a fundamentally important character.**

On the international track, Russia engaged its many foreign supporters as election observers. Their expertise and presence on camera was aimed at breaking the Western information blockade and appealed to ordinary citizens in the United States, Europe and, of course, the Global South, convincing them that the Russian presidential election was conducted in accordance with all laws and that the results were objective and credible.

Moscow's media success

Russia successfully curbed all risk factors posed by the hostile actions of the West and Ukraine. The media coverage of the election, through the coordinated interaction of state and non-state actors, generated high public interest in voting. The two main narratives that Moscow used to attract voters were:

1

The need to unite around a national leader

2

To work together on the future course of the country

This constructive agenda was particularly in demand in regions that experienced daily bombardment from Ukraine, as it focused on the positive and turned voting into a heroic civic act.

Creative circumvention of sanctions by engaging citizens of the US and EU, as independent observers, who were complimentary of Russia helped Moscow deprive the West of its monopoly on informational interpretation of the presidential election. An alternative point of view, departing from the usual mainstream, clearly demonstrated that Russia, unlike the West, has a much more advanced electoral system, devoid of flaws that would allow manipulation of the voting results.

Overall results

Neither the West nor Ukraine managed to realise most of their goals during the information attacks on the Russian presidential election. The country's citizens showed record support for the authorities and also clearly backed the Special Military Operation, which disrupted the plans to destabilise the internal situation in Russia in order to win the conflict. At the same time, on the international arena, virtually no one listened to Western criticism and Vladimir Putin's victory was unequivocally recognised and welcomed by many important politicians from around the globe. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that certain interim successes have not been achieved. In particular, the West was able to re-establish a small but controlled opposition cell in Russia. As for Ukraine, although it only aimed to propagate to its own population once again, the country's authorities generally managed to impose a package of anti-Russian narratives.

Moscow, on the other hand, not only handled the difficult challenges with dignity, but also inflicted reputational damage on its opponents. Russia's exemplary conduct of the elections sent a clear signal to the world that the country was ready to continue its involvement in the conflict in Ukraine until all the tasks of the Special Military Operation were fully fulfilled. At the same time, the contrasting cancellation of the presidential election in Ukraine itself made it look bad in the West, forcing it to spend scarce media resources to maintain the illusion of Zelensky's "popular support" from the people.

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