**Welcome to the circus**

**In place of genuine politics, the election season will be full of Kremlin-sanctioned buffoons, clowns and imps**

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IN A packed stadium, an actor-turned-priest with presidential ambitions sporting a white cape clambers atop a pyramid and preaches about Russia’s messianic role. In a television studio politicians of all stripes entertain viewers with mudslinging, shouting and buffoonery. With parliamentary and presidential elections three and six months away respectively, Russia’s political season is in full swing.

In a country of 140m people with huge demographic, economic and regional problems, and a simmering war in the north Caucasus, elections ought to be a serious affair. But in place of proper debates about the country’s future is a political marsh bubbling with imitators, clowns, nationalists, provocateurs and other imps.

The outcome of both sets of elections is predetermined, as Russian voters know well. (More than half tell pollsters they believe the elections will be dirty.) The Kremlin’s United Russia party, whose only purpose is to keep the incumbent bureaucracy in power, will probably get at least 60% of the vote in December’s parliamentary election, giving Vladimir Putin, its leader, a power base, whether or not he decides to stay as prime minister or to return to the Kremlin next March.

In the absence of genuine politics the main job of the Kremlin’s spin-doctors is to imitate it in order to stop the crowd from getting so bored that they ignore elections altogether. Parties are engineered for all tastes: nationalist, liberal, communist (nationalism sells best). The Kremlin’s cynical stage managers run the show with utter contempt for their audience. Although mostly concealed from view, they occasionally peep out to make sure that the actors are sticking to the script.

The case of Right Cause, a liberal party headed by Mikhail Prokhorov, a billionaire tycoon, confirms that Russia’s leaders have limited tolerance for anything outside their control. In June the Kremlin promoted the party as an alternative to the independent liberal opposition it had recently barred from running in the Duma election. It thought Mr Prokhorov could be useful in neutralising the vocal liberal voters that constitute up to 15% of the total electorate. People close to Mr Prokhorov say that Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin’s chief ideologist, told him which subjects he could campaign on and nominated snoops to keep an eye on him.

But Mr Prokhorov had his own ideas. He gambled that the Kremlin would let him run his own campaign, and possibly even share power, so long as he did not personally attack Mr Putin or Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s president. Instead of sticking to Mr Surkov’s brief, he aimed to position Right Cause as a mainstream party appealing to Russians who see only dead ends at home but are unwilling to emigrate. He also insisted on control over his party list for elections.

The Kremlin was not slow to react. First, masked police raided a bank part-owned by Mr Prokhorov. Then, on September 14th, fake party members planted by the Kremlin hijacked Right Cause’s party congress. Blaming Mr Surkov for the attack, Mr Prokhorov angrily resigned a day later. He vowed to stay in politics and to petition Mr Putin and Mr Medvedev to fire Mr Surkov, describing him as a “puppeteer” who had “privatised the political system”.

What this shows is that the system created by Mr Putin is spooked by the slightest competition. After all, Mr Putin’s choice of Mr Medvedev as president in 2008 was dictated precisely by his lack of competitive edge. If Mr Putin decides to return to the Kremlin it will probably be because he believes Mr Medvedev is too weak to exert control. But rather than bring the Kremlin more power, the disposal of Mr Prokhorov is likely to feed into a growing sense of hopelessness among Russia’s ambitious types. Some could be tempted by a new populist movement calling itself “Nakh-Nakh” (read: “fuck off”), which urges voters to spoil their ballots.

The Kremlin is confident of its ability to manipulate politics. Yet the real threat comes not from Mr Prokhorov but from the Kremlin’s nationalist games. It has dusted off Motherland, a nationalist party created by Mr Surkov before elections in 2004. It has allowed Vladimir Zhirinovsky, another nationalist, to run on the slogan “For the Russians”. All this can only fan the fast-spreading conflict between the ethnic Russian population and the Muslims of the north Caucasus. Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman president of Chechnya, and his kind do not work by the Kremlin’s post-modern rules. If a surge in racial conflict turns them against the Kremlin, Russia’s political farce could quickly turn into tragedy.