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Russia's September 2023 Elections: A Dress Rehearsal for Vladimir Putin

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On 8–10 September 2023, Russia conducted a three-day “single voting day” for 41 regional elections and numerous local electoral contests, including in the occupied Ukrainian territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. These elections served as a testing ground for the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for March 2024, with the primary objective of showcasing the system's capacity for efficient delivery of results. Notably, an overt display of loyalty is not the foremost concern. Rather, the emphasis is on the ability to produce anticipated vote tallies, regardless of the means employed to achieve them. The introduction of electronic voting has further reduced transparency for election observers and made electoral fraud cheaper. Despite the overall predictability of electoral outcomes, there are occasional instances of opposition electoral success. Given the escalating repression within the Russian political regime, European policymakers should prioritize efforts to assist in collecting evidence of electoral irregularities, supporting independent media outlets and amplifying the voices of impartial observers.

On 8–10 September 2023, Russia conducted a three-day “single voting day” for 41 regional elections and numerous local electoral contests, including in the occupied Ukrainian territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Among these, gubernatorial elections were held in 21 regions, including Moscow, and 20 regional legislative elections, including the annexed territories. In addition, 12 city council elections occurred in Donetsk, Luhansk and Melitopol. This electoral event involved more than 50 million eligible voters, representing approximately half the Russian electorate.¹

Despite being widely regarded as controlled and lacking in genuine competitiveness, these elections have provided insights into both the strengths and vulnerabilities of Russia's current political regime. The regime has demonstrated its capacity to deliver and its preparedness for

¹ <https://golosinfo.org/en/articles/146608>

the upcoming presidential elections. In all regions except Khakassia, where the communist governor retained power, the ruling United Russia emerged victorious. United Russia secured resounding support with an average of over 70% of the vote.² United Russia also triumphed in the party lists for all the regional parliaments, with the exception of Khakassia, the Nenets Autonomous District and Yaroslavl Oblast, where control was maintained through victories in single-mandate districts.

Yabloko stood out as the only political party advocating an anti-war agenda, albeit cautiously. It was notable that two Yabloko factions managed to secure re-election to city assemblies in Yekaterinburg and Novgorod. The domestic election monitor, Golos, has attributed this success primarily to personalized campaigns conducted by local representatives with close connections with their respective voter bases. Consequently, while the regime demonstrated its strength and ability to secure votes, it was also evident that there were limited opportunities for moderate opposition in local elections in more politically pluralist regions.

Programmatic opposition parties experienced a significant decline in their performance compared to previous elections. Despite retaining governorships in Khakassia and the Oryol region, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) saw a notable drop in votes in the majority of regions, positioning them as the primary losers of the 2023 elections. Both “A Just Russia: For Truth” and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) lost their appeal in attracting protest votes from the nationalist camp, as this narrative has largely been monopolized by United Russia. The only party to demonstrate an expanding regional presence, driven by protest votes, was New People. Aleksei Navalny’s network advocated a “smart voting strategy”, which involved voting for the most promising non-United Russia candidate. However, the impact of this strategy was notably less conspicuous than its relative success in the 2019 elections to the Moscow City Duma and the 2021 elections to the State Duma.³

There is a severe lack of information on the voting process in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Hundreds of parliamentarians were elected in these regions, but many candidates hailed from outside the local areas. Importantly, despite the “passportization” campaign, residents were permitted to vote using Ukrainian documents. Reports have emerged that some residents were compelled to vote by home visits, raising concerns about coercion. Certain polling stations also came under drone attack and had to be closed prematurely.⁴

Second, the elections marked the largest-ever deployment of electronic voting in Russia. Official statistics indicate that nearly 4 million voters cast their ballots online – approximately 2.7 million in Moscow and around 1.2 million in other regions – including voters in the occupied territories. Of the 2.7 million electronic votes cast in Moscow, over 2 million were for the incumbent, Sergei Sobianin, while the runner-up received approximately 200,000 electronic votes. Only around 570,000 votes were cast on paper in Moscow.⁵ The Russian authorities promoted electronic voting as a convenient and modern method but it effectively operates as a “black box” as far as independent observers are concerned, leaving fraud

2 <http://www.cikrf.ru/eng/>

3 <https://ridl.io/the-impact-of-smart-voting-on-the-2020-elections/>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-elections-smart-voting/31471587.html>

4 <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15405.doc.htm>

5 <https://golosinfo.org/en/articles/146608>

invisible and undocumented. Many public sector employees and economically dependent populations were strongly encouraged to vote electronically, and opportunities were provided even at the polling stations. From this perspective, it would be logical for the Central Election Commission to consider extending its use in the upcoming presidential elections, as it leaves fewer traces of fraud and prevents professional monitoring, thereby enhancing the appearance of a “cleaner” electoral process.

Third, despite maintaining a semblance of control over the election process, the Kremlin has adopted a risk-averse strategy aimed at eliminating all threats to the smooth conduct of elections. This approach extends to independent observers, such as Golos. Golos's co-chair, Grigory Melkonyants, was detained three weeks before the elections, accused of cooperating with an “undesirable organization”, the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, which could result in him being sentenced to up to six years in prison.⁶ Domestic observers have been removed to prevent professional witnesses from documenting instances of fraud and other electoral violations. Similarly, political parties and candidates are no longer permitted to send representatives to Election Commissions as observers, and freelance journalists and candidates' proxies are barred from polling stations. This repression also serves as a stark reminder that engaging in observer activities comes with substantial risks.

Fourth, according to Golos, there were widespread reports of massive carousel voting, ballot stuffing and voter coercion, as well as instances of “dead souls” in the voter registers. The extent of electoral malpractice reached a new high, and observers characterized these elections as the worst in the past 23 years. The sheer volume of electoral violations underscores the heightened state of alert among the political authorities, in their determination to prevent even the most unlikely risks. While such excessive fraud and pressure might temporarily bolster the regime, they erode citizens' trust in electoral procedures over time, normalizing these practices beyond Russia's borders.

Fifth, the electoral campaign was notably uneventful and inconspicuous, reflecting what has become the “new normal” in a context of prolonged war and international isolation. The overarching aim was to regain control of the situation, especially in the aftermath of Prigozhin's mutiny. The primary objective of the media campaign was to pacify the Russian voter and convey a sense that everything was proceeding according to plan. Consequently, news coverage of the “special military operation” was toned down during the campaign. Candidates with military backgrounds were given little visibility or promotion, leading to an absence of any discernible surge in popularity fuelled by patriotic or aggressive slogans or narratives. Ultra-patriotic opposition forces found themselves marginalized, mirroring the regime's concerted effort to neutralize any form of uncontrolled political activity.

In summary, the regime continues to use elections as a signalling mechanism, serving as a message to both the populace and the elite. Despite having achieved formal success, securing these numbers makes the electoral process a costly and intricate undertaking involving multiple actors and witnesses of electoral violations. Striking a balance between showcasing resounding numbers and preserving the appearance of a “clean process”

6 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cw56xp05en0o>

remains elusive. Maintaining complete control over elections down to the local level is highly challenging, which leaves room for occasional breakthroughs. However, local elections have lower stakes, and such breakthroughs typically do not pose a significant threat to the regime. Managing isolated oppositionists is generally well within the regime's capacity.

The municipal level did indeed emerge as fertile ground for the moderate opposition in the years leading up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Some have even argued that this represents a way to erode the regime's institutions from within. In the current context, however, such penetration by the moderate opposition might provide the regime with a semblance of legitimacy. On the other hand, the presence of these political figures and their voices would be essential should any significant change occur at the federal level. Political competition persists even in closed autocracies, albeit in more informal forms. While it is rare for political unrest to originate at the local level, local oppositionists can serve as crucial support groups. As the September 2023 elections served as a trial run for election logistics ahead of the 2024 presidential election, next year's vote can be expected to proceed without any major surprises, unless there is a dramatic shift in the situation on the frontline.

Policy recommendations

Given the escalating repression inside the Russian political regime, European states should prioritize policy efforts to assist in the collection of evidence related to electoral violations, support independent media outlets highlighting fraud and intimidation, and amplify the voices of impartial observers. Ensuring that Russian voters have access to reliable information about the true state of elections is still a critical objective even in time of war. The presence of independent politicians at the local level signals a limit to the control exercised by the Russian power structure, although their potential to be subversive should not be overestimated.



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