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The September 2021 Duma Elections: Mission Overdone?

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Abstract

In the run-up to the September 2021 Duma elections, the Russian authorities employed a range of tools to increase the odds that United Russia, the main pro-government party, would retain its two-thirds majority in the Duma in a context of low public support. They sought to facilitate the administrative mobilization of loyal voters through electronic voting and multi-day elections while reducing incentives for opposition-minded voters to turn out by excluding Navalny, listing independent media as foreign agents, and cracking down on protests. These tools were apparently successful: as counting went on, the vote shares of United Russia and A Just Russia steadily increased, while the vote shares of other major parties declined. But the sweeping and unidirectional nature of this change prompted widespread speculation about fraud, which has hampered the authorities' search for electoral legitimacy.

The 2021 Duma elections in Russia were held on the Unified Day of Voting on September 19, 2021. As in the previous elections held in 2016, Russian voters had to return 225 Duma deputies in party-list contests with a 5% legal threshold of representation and 225 deputies in single-member districts under first-past-the-post rules.

Following the practice of multi-day elections, which first appeared in the 2020 voting on constitutional amendments and continued in the September 2020 regional elections, there was provision for casting votes not only on September 19 itself, but also during the two preceding days. Again similarly to the 2020 election, votes could be cast not only in person, but also, in seven regions including Moscow, electronically.

These innovations were justified primarily by reference to the necessity to minimize threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another argument often cited by proponents was that they made voting more convenient for the electors. The counter-arguments, including that multi-day elections offered many opportunities for electoral fraud due to the lack of control over the contents of the ballot boxes (which were stored for two nights before counting) and that the transparency of electronic voting was not sufficiently guaranteed, were ignored by the Russian authorities.

One of the major advantages enjoyed by the main pro-government party, United Russia, in the 2021 elections was that both of these innovations served as major channels for the administrative mobilization of loyal voters. This is particularly true of the first day of voting, September 17, a working day when both state and private employers could reward their employees with an additional vacation day in exchange for turning out to vote in an organized fashion, often accompanied by a representative of the employer and/or transported to voting locations.

The system for administrative mobilization of voters has been under development in Russia for many years—its

foundations having been laid by the gubernatorial political machines of the 1990s—but it has apparently achieved an entirely new level of efficacy since the introduction of multi-day voting. Electronic voting, while entirely new to Russia's electoral system, also provided ample opportunities for the mobilization of voters because, according to numerous reports, employers exerted pressure on their employees to help ensure that the latter both registered for electronic voting and cast their votes. Indeed, about a third of those who registered for electronic voting in the six regions that conducted it via the Gosuslugi platform (in Moscow, a local platform, *mos.ru*, was used) voted in the first three hours after the start of the elections on September 17.

The authorities found themselves heavily reliant on the mobilization of loyal voters because since 2019, and particularly the 2019 pension reform, public opinion polls have registered a relatively low level of voter support for United Russia. According to a major pro-government polling firm, the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), the share of respondents who intended to cast their votes for the party stood at 30% in December 2020. This figure remained relatively stable (ranging from 27 to 33%) through early September 2021, when it stood at 29%. Nevertheless, the FOM projected that United Russia would achieve 45% of the vote, which would have allowed it to retain a simple majority in the Duma. To reach the more ambitious goal of retaining its two-thirds majority—which, according to numerous reports, was a target set by the presidential administration—United Russia had to win no less than 80% of single-member districts. Both targets, unrealistic as they might seem in light of the low level of voter support in public opinion polls, could be achieved if turnout, however low, came mostly from among administratively mobilized loyal voters.

Obviously enough, then, the other side of United Russia's strategy was to reduce the incentives for opposition-minded voters to turn out. According to the FOM,

in early September 2021 the combined support of the three main parties of the official opposition among those respondents who had made their voting decisions stood at 24%, which points to these parties' lack of credibility with voters. Even this figure was likely inflated because it had probably already been affected by the "Smart Voting" (SV) strategy developed and implemented by Alexey Navalny and his supporters.

The SV campaign—first proposed in 2018 and implemented, with a degree of success recognized by the media and in several academic studies, in the 2019–2020 regional and municipal elections—essentially sought to mobilize opposition-minded voters by urging them to turn out and vote for the strongest non-United Russia candidate in each single-member district, that candidate's ideological stances notwithstanding. In this way, Navalny argued, it would be possible to reduce the dominant party's share of seats in the assembly, thereby reducing the managerial leverage of the executive over the legislature and inflicting symbolic damage on the regime. To help voters identify the strongest opposition candidates in their respective electoral districts, Navalny's supporters developed a number of electronic tools, including the Navalny application (available from the Apple App Store and Google Play) and a Telegram bot. The purpose of these tools was to provide the voter, on her request, with information about which of the opposition candidates in a given district was most likely to outrun United Russia's candidate.

The SV did not make any specific recommendations about party-list voting, but voters who were turning out to defeat the United Russia candidate for the single-member district were highly unlikely to then vote for the party's list. The other aspect that remained unarticulated in the SV campaign but quite apparent from previous experiences of Russian electoral politics was that opposition voters' mobilization could push the authorities to engage in widespread electoral fraud, sparking massive discontent and protests among the population, as occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 Duma elections.

For their part, the organizers of the 2021 campaign within the presidential administration dealt with the threats posed by the SV campaign systematically. First, Navalny himself was excluded from active campaigning by his alleged poisoning in August 2020 and subsequent imprisonment upon his return to Russia. Navalny's main organizations, the Anti-Corruption Foundation and its affiliates, have been classified as "foreign agents" by the Russian authorities continuously since 2019, which has significantly impeded their activities. In June 2021, all these organizations, including the so-called Navalny Headquarters that operated in the regions, were further recognized as "extremist" by a court decision and banned, making any kind of cooperation with these organizations a criminal offence. This led, in particu-

lar, to the effective disenfranchisement of several prominent opposition politicians who had originally planned to run in the elections. Several prospective candidates from the opposition camp were arrested and detained.

Second, in the run-up to and during the campaign, the authorities made an unprecedented effort to reduce the amount of politically relevant information available to opposition-minded voters. This was achieved by listing a large number of media outlets—including *Meduza*, *VTimes*, *The Insider*, *iStories*, and several others—as "foreign agents" or "undesirable organizations," forcing some of them into self-liquidation and greatly reducing the availability of others to the Russian audience as a whole. Third, the prospects for mass protests in response to electoral fraud were diminished by the brutality displayed by the police and state security forces in January and February 2021 during the public demonstrations against the imprisonment of Navalny, when many participants faced mistreatment and significant criminal charges.

The official electoral campaign started on June 18. By that time, as many as 32 political parties were eligible to run in the Russian elections. However, only 14 parties could nominate candidates without collecting the required number of signatures in their support. The previous Duma elections had demonstrated quite clearly that no party could expect to navigate the signature collection procedure successfully. Indeed, in 2021 only one minor party experimented with signature collection, to no avail. There was also formal provision for self-nomination (independent candidacy) in single-member districts, which was likewise conditional on signature collection. Only 11 of 174 self-nominees managed to get registered as candidates; most of them were pro-government candidates who, for a variety of tactical reasons, preferred not to run under the label of United Russia.

The set of parties that ran in the 2021 elections was not much altered from the 2016 elections. Four of them—United Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and A Just Russia (SR)—were already represented in the Duma. It should be noted that following a series of poor performances in regional elections, A Just Russia made an effort to renovate its image by merging with two minor nationalist parties and renaming itself A Just Russia—Patriots—For Truth.

The remaining ten parties were, in descending order of the success they achieved in the party list section of the 2021 elections: New People (new), Pensioners' Party, Yabloko, Communists of Russia, The Greens, Motherland, Russian Party of Freedom and Justice (previously known as the Communist Party of Social Justice), Green Alternative (new), Party of Growth, and Civic Platform. The New People party deserves some attention as a successful newcomer. The party was founded in March

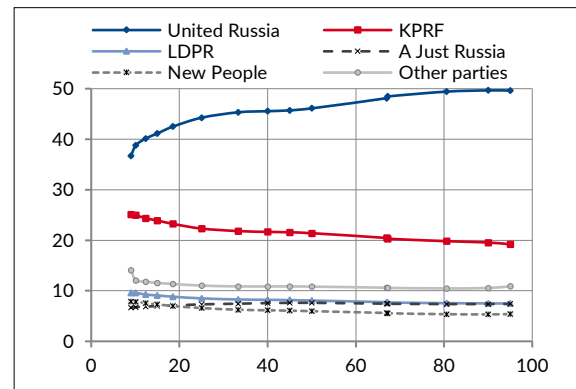
2020 on the basis of the Faberlic network marketing company specializing in cosmetics, beauty, soft goods, and fashion accessories. Its skillful campaigning in the 2020 regional elections helped it secure some level of visibility among voters and entitled it to nominate its list without signature collection. Ideologically, it claimed to represent the “center-right” segment of the electorate.

The four main parties mostly campaigned via street posters that highlighted their traditional priorities: stability for United Russia, justice for the KPRF and A Just Russia, and a strong state for the LDPR. Media coverage of United Russia was provided not so much by its own campaign as by news programming and televised endorsements by Vladimir Putin. New People focused its campaign on street posters that emphasized the newness of the party. All the major parties carefully distanced themselves from Navalny and his SV campaign, particularly the only party that could realistically claim pro-democracy credentials, Yabloko. At some point, Grigory Yavlinsky said outright that Navalny supporters did not have to vote for Yabloko because it had nothing to offer them. Such statements obviously undermined the party’s electoral chances, but many analysts suggested that this unusual approach was necessary to avoid the party’s disqualification from the elections.

The first day of elections, September 17, witnessed rather massive turnout of mostly organized voters, averaging about 40% in the ethnic republics and about 30% in other regions. Given that overall turnout was reported as 51.7%, this suggests that no less than half of the voters in the 2021 elections were subject to administrative mobilization. The SV campaign was severely hampered by the fact that shortly after the SV lists were released on September 16, both the Apple Store and Google Play switched off their Navalny applications; the Telegram bot ceased to function several hours later under pressure from the Russian authorities. The lists did, however, remain available in the form of a YouTube video and a Google Doc.

The early results of the elections, reported late in the evening of September 19 after 10.1% of ballots had been counted, indicated that United Russia’s list was in the lead with 38.8% of the vote, followed by the KPRF (25.0%), LDPR (9.6%), New People (7.8%), and A Just Russia (6.8%). The results of elections in most single-member districts were not reported for a longer time, but it is known that the SV candidates were originally in the lead in more than half of Moscow city districts. As counting went on, the vote shares of United Russia and A Just Russia steadily increased, while

Figure 1: The Dynamics of the Reported Vote for Political Parties by Share of Ballots Counted in the 2021 Duma Elections



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of election results.

the vote shares of other major parties declined. This is illustrated by Figure 1, where the Y-axis is the reported share of the vote by party and the X-axis is the share of ballots counted. Nearly all of the victories of SV candidates in single-member districts were also reverted. The official results of the elections are reported on pp. 11–13.

Of course, it is only natural for election results to change as vote-counting proceeds. Indeed, this happened in previous Russian elections, but the change was never as sweeping and unidirectional as in 2021. This invited widespread speculation about massive fraud. Additional grounds for this speculation were provided by the facts that independent election observation was extremely limited; that Golos, the only independent group that still conducted some observation, reported numerous violations; and that the Central Election Commission greatly reduced the potential for quantitative analysis of election results by installing a ciphering device, the scrambler, on its website.

The Russian election authorities thoroughly rejected all allegations of fraud and officially confirmed the returns, as a result of which United Russia retained its constitutional majority in the Duma, albeit in a slightly reduced form. The SV campaign did not reach its proclaimed goal, but by mobilizing at least some opposition-minded voters, it increased the likelihood of fraud and thereby hampered the authorities’ search for legitimacy. No massive post-election protests occurred, even though the Moscow city organization of the KPRF did stage several small-scale meetings. Soon after the elections, several remaining independent media outlets and nearly all regional coordinators of the Golos association were placed on the “foreign agents” list.

About the Author

Grigorii Golosov is Professor of Comparative Politics and Dean of the Political Science Department at the European University at St. Petersburg.

Additional Reading on the Efficacy of the Smart Voting Strategy

- Mikhail Turchenko and Grigorii V. Golosov, “Smart Enough to Make a Difference? An Empirical Test of the Efficacy of Strategic Voting in Russia’s Authoritarian Elections,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2021, pp. 65–79.