

The Scandalous Electoral Victory of the Governing Party "United Russia"

by Alexander Kynev

With unprecedented restrictions on voting rights and electoral manipulations, the governing party United Russia succeeded in gaining a comfortable majority in the Russian Duma elections despite growing dissatisfaction in the country. The secret winner of the election is the Communist Party, which unlike the other opposition parties increased its share of votes. During the parliamentary elections in Russia between 17 and 19 September 2021, the governing party United Russia officially won 324 of the 450 seats in the State Duma with 49.82 percent of votes. The results of the election again give the governing party a two-thirds majority, enabling it to amend the Constitution. However, its results are worse than in 2016, when United Russia received 54.2 percent of votes and 343 seats. At the same time, the approval rates for the party remained at a stable low of 27 to 28 percent during the entire electoral campaign according to the official sociological Russian Public Opinion Research Center.¹

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“Electoral sultanates” and protest regions

The discrepancy between the official electoral victory and surveys can be explained by differences between the Russian regions, which extremely differ with regard to the political situation and electoral behavior. There are numerous regions with hard authoritarian regimes, in particular in the Northern Caucasus and Volga area, in which the governments always can boast an above-average electoral participation rate of 80-90 percent of votes for the governing party. According to independent election experts as well as the opposition, electoral participation there does not differ in reality from electoral participation in other Russian regions. However, massive electoral fraud takes place in these so-called “electoral sultanates”.

Altogether, 24 regions can be designated as “anormal” electoral regions. Approximately 30 million or 27.46 percent of the eligible voters in the country live there. Yet due to their seemingly above-average electoral participation, 38.04 percent of ballots and 49.3 percent of all votes for the governing party came from there in 2016. Since an even higher electoral participation can simply not be expected, every increase in electoral participation in the other regions with more protest and independent votes should decrease the share of the “electoral sultanates” in the entire result and the result of United Russia. Therefore, the

government is primarily interested in demoralizing potential protest voters and giving them a feeling of hopelessness regarding their electoral participation, as was the case in the 2021 electoral campaign. The aim was to decrease electoral participation in the regions of the “protest zone”: in the large cities of most regions in the Ural, in Siberia, in the Far East and in the Russian North. Although electoral participation in the protest regions slightly increased (altogether it increased from 47.88 to 51.72 percent), this year’s victory of United Russia was nevertheless ensured by manipulations in the “electoral sultanates”.

Besides the “electoral sultanates”, an online voting experiment was carried out in seven regions with the purpose of boosting votes for *United Russia*: in Moscow, Sevastopol and in the Kursk, Murmansk, Nizhegorod, Rostov and Jaroslav Oblasts. Between 2 August und 13 September, 2,032,498 persons registered for online voting, 1,524,000 of them in Moscow. According to the opposition, it is impossible to determine who voted how online and whether the published results correspond with the actual results. The results of the electronic vote in Moscow were not announced until 12 hours after the end of the elections. The online votes were ultimately decisive for the victory of United Russia in all Moscow districts, in which the opposition parties were ahead while votes were being counted.

Changes in the opposition landscape

The situation of the opposition has radically changed since the elections of 2016. At that time, the *Communist Party of the Russian Federation* (KPRF) and the populist-nationalist *Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia* (LDPR) almost received the same number of votes, that is 13 percent of votes each, and the leftist-centrist party *Just Russia* (SRZP) 6.2 percent. After the pension reform of 2018 though, the favorability ratings of the governing party decreased significantly again, while those of the KPRF increased. Therefore, the government began to openly attack the KPRF in 2019 – around 40 of its representatives in the regions were victims of criminal or administrative proceedings.

The KPRF has de facto no longer been a “communist” party for a long time, rather a normal leftist party, whose name is simply a familiar brand. As a parliamentary party, it is privileged with regard to the registration of candidates. It therefore most frequently puts up local oppositional activists or defenders of the law. The battle against the KPRF has further strengthened the concentration of protest voters around it, so that it took the lead among opposition parties. According to official data, it received 18.93 percent of votes and 57 seats in the recent Duma elections. It strongly increased its voting share in the protest regions: it won in Yakutia, the Khabarovsk region, the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Republic of Mari El and in many large cities such as Vladivostok, Omsk, Syktyvkar and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. In all these regions the governing party won in 2016.

By contrast, the LDPR experienced a deep fall. This primarily has to do with the

fact that the party factually refused to defend its member, the then very popular governor of the Khabarovsk region, Sergey Furgal, who was arrested in July 2020 due to a conflict with the Russian Vice-Premier and Plenipotentiary Representative of the President in the Far Eastern Federal District Yuriy Trutnev. And this took place even though the Far East always had a stable voter base for the LDPR. The 75-year-old party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskij has aged significantly and has not travelled through the regions for a long time (died April 6, 2022). During the debates, he was forced to unsuccessfully justify abandoning Furgal. Number two in the party from 2000 to 2021 was his son, Igor Lebedev, who is not well known. Zhirinovskij was Vice-Speaker of the Duma and Lebedev party group leader of the LDPR. However, Lebedev did not campaign during this year's elections. The transfer of leadership of the LDR to a new person is openly discussed. As a result, the LDPR lost nearly half of its votes and only secured 7.55 percent of the vote and 21 seats in the Duma.

The party *Just Russia* united before the election with two ultra-patriotic parties, the *Patriots of Russia* headed by Gennadiy Semigin and *For Truth* headed by Zakhar Prilepin. Therefore, part of the moderate supporters left the party, with some of them joining the party *New People*. SRZP carried out a large-scale electoral campaign, during which the focus was primarily on social and municipal issues. Despite the declining approval for the governing party, SRZP was hardly able to gain support: 7.46 percent and 17 seats compared to 6.22 percent in 2016.

It is also important to note that a new party was elected to parliament for the first time in 17 years: the party *New People*, which was founded in early 2020 by Alexey Nechayev, the director of the cosmetics firm Faberlic. This moderately liberal project was admitted to the elections by the government, in order to give educated urban voters, who tend towards the opposition, at least a chance at political representation. The charismatic former mayor of Yakutsk, Sardana Avksentyeva, became #2 in the party list. The other candidates were largely unknown among the public – the party elected them as part of a competition on Youtube. In summer 2020 it launched a massive campaign with newspapers and billboards in the regions. On television it was among the three most frequently mentioned parties, whereby it was only portrayed positively, and the KPRF only negatively. It was elected with 5.32 percent of the votes and obtained 13 seats. It received almost no votes in the “electoral sultanates”, but between 8 and 10 percent in the protest regions.

Unprecedented repression

In comparison to 2016, the 2021 electoral campaign played out entirely differently regarding the direct mandates. In 2016 it was a “colluded” game, because the competition was still an imitation and United Opposition had even succeeded the so-called “system opposition” part of the electoral districts in advance: in 19

of 225 districts the governing party simply did not put up any candidates, it won in 203 districts and only lost in three districts. In 2021 there was no division of districts: United Russia did not campaign in only eight districts. However, it did not concede these districts to the opposition, rather to self-appointed candidates from local administration. In doing so, it was victorious in 198 districts and only lost in 19. In the latter districts the opposition won after feisty electoral campaigns. In approximately 20 other districts the opposition lost due to electoral manipulations.

Under the pretext of “health protection” due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government banned every single small public activity of the opposition, while countless government activities were allowed. The headquarters of the Electoral Commission allowed the elections to be held on three days, instead of one day as before, based on sanitary-epidemiological reasons. This significantly limited the possibilities for monitoring the election, while facilitating the organized submission of votes and direct electoral manipulations. At the same time, the pandemic led to a deterioration of the socio-economic situation. It ruined many small and mid-sized businesses and contributed to an increase in frustration and hopelessness among citizens,² which in turn negatively impacted the approval ratings of the governing party and increased the willingness of voters to engage in protest voting.

An additional particularity of this year’s elections was that they took place after the constitutional reform of 2020, which had consolidated the powers of the President – in particular with regard to his influence on the justice system. The new regulations make it more difficult to defend the rights of citizens outside national borders and led to a series of new bans on voting rights, which previously were included in laws, but not in the Constitution.

Thus, the declining approval rates of the government and the new constitutional means for repression enabled the government to exert pressure on civil society, oppositional organizations and politicians in an unprecedented manner, even for Russian electoral standards. There had indeed been repression campaigns, but this time it was a massive campaign, to which thousands of people fell victim. The “victims” are not only the citizens, who were not able to run for election, but also those who were arrested or forced to emigrate.

Massive restrictions on electoral rights

On 23 May 2020, the criminal provision no. 153-F3 was introduced, which denies every citizen who was convicted to imprisonment due to a moderately severe crime the right to run for political office for up to five years after the termination of the period of punishment. This also holds for suspended sentences. This applies not only to citizens who committed crimes against other persons, but also “political” crimes: for example, the “public dissemination” of knowingly false socially significant information”, the “repeated disruption of organizational rules for assemblies”, “public appeals for extremism”, “calls for separatism” and

“the use of force against governmental representatives”. Large-scale indictments due to commercial crimes (“fraud, embezzlement or misappropriation”) and drug offences were also handed out by the prosecution authorities.

After the arrest of Alexey Navalny on 17 January 2021 and the subsequent protest activities, all regional departments of Navalny’s *Anti-Corruption Foundation* (FBK) and the “Navalny

Shtaby” (Navalny Regional Offices) were forcibly broken up. Several of his companions emigrated, while others were arrested. On 16 April, the Moscow Public Prosecutor applied for the classification of the FBK, the *Navalny Shtaby* and the *Foundation to Defend Civil Rights* as extremist organizations, because the “actual goal of their activities is to create conditions to modify the foundations of the constitutional structures, including the application of scenarios of a ‘color revolution.’”³ On 9 June the court ordered their disbandment.

On 27 May the organization *Open Russia* also had to suspend its activities and close all regional departments. The executive director Andrey Pivovarov communicated on the issue: “All members were locked out and their membership cancelled in order to avoid potential criminal proceedings against them. We did not need any new publications and criminal proceedings and we want to protect our adherents.”⁴ The police referred to the links between *Open Russia* and the British organization *Open Russia Civic Movement*, which was founded by Mikhail Khodorkovskiy and whose activities in Russia were deemed as “undesired” and already had been terminated in 2019. Pivovarov himself was arrested at Pulkovo Airport before his trip to Warsaw on the evening of 31 May.

At the same time, law no. 157-F3 against the FBK was approved by fast-track procedure on 4 June. This law bans people who belong to a civil or religious association or another organization, which is classified as “extremist” or a “terrorist organizations, from running for political office. Founders, leading members, leading figures of regional or another structural sub-divisions and their representatives, who have had one of these positions in a timeframe retroactively three years since the coming into force of the disbandment or ban of the organization by court order, may not run for office in the following five years. “Simple” participants, members and employees of the organization and other persons close to them may not run for office for three years after the court order. The law stipulates that their affiliation can be determined by an expression of support, including on the internet, or other activities such as donations. This law thus reverses the rule of law: it punishes for people for actions which were not unlawful at the time they were carried out. The vague wording creates new arbitrary possibilities to take action against citizens who support the opposition. It is impossible to determine the exact number of people in Russia who currently are not allowed to run for political office. The movement for the protection of electoral rights *Golos* (“voice”) estimates their numbers to be no less than nine million, which corresponds with

approximately eight percent of persons eligible to vote in Russia. However, the number is presumably significantly higher.⁵

The government is attempting to suppress and restrict the protest activities to the maximum extent. Not only they are intimidated, but also the members of political parties. Therefore, the latter criticize the situation very carefully with allusions and euphemisms, while compulsorily and indeed ritually distancing themselves from Alexey Navalny and his companions. However, the fear of repressions will not be able to stop the increasing dissatisfaction due to the deteriorating living standards and lacking future prospects.

About the author

Alexander Kynev is a well-known political scientist and political expert in Russia. Graduated with honors from the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Philosophy, Moscow State University. Since 2000 he actively cooperates with various NGOs as a specialist in political parties, the electoral process and the political development of the regions. From 2008-2010 to 2012-2019 he was Associate Professor at the Higher School of Economics, and since 2018 he is head of the expert group on Election Monitoring of the Committee for Civic Initiatives (CIC) 2012-2018, the Liberal Mission Foundation. From January 2017 to February 2020 he was member of the Expert Advisory Group under the Chairman of the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. 2010 – 2020 he was also Member of the OSCE/ODIHR Core Group of Experts on Political Parties. He is also author of several hundred scientific and journalistic articles in the Russian media, author and co-author of a number of books. His more recent works are *Governors in Russia: Between Elections and Appointments* (2020) and *Elections of Regional Parliaments in Russia 2014–2020: New Departmentation and Managed party system 2.0* (2021).

Endnotes

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