

Repressions and electoral fraud: regional elections in Russia

Maria Domańska

Annual regional and local elections were held on 8 September in Russia. The officials elected included 16 governors, members of 13 regional parliaments (including in the occupied territories: Crimea and Sevastopol), city mayors, city council members and municipal councillors. For the Kremlin, the elections to Moscow City Duma (city council) and the governor and municipal elections in Saint Petersburg were the most important. The candidates supported by the government won a narrow victory (25 out of 45 seats) in the Moscow City Duma election which was preceded by street protests and a wave of repressions. According to official results, all the Kremlin's candidates for governors won their elections without the need for a runoff. Government-backed candidates performed worse in regional parliamentary elections. The announced average voter turnout was 41.2%, only slightly higher than in 2018.

Irregularities and manipulations were much more frequent during the elections this year as compared to last year. Given the deteriorating socio-economic situation and falling public support for the government, the Kremlin must engage more and more effort and resources to achieve satisfactory results. However, the desire to gain total political control will not neutralise the increasing frustration of the Russian public which will be manifested on various occasions in the coming years and may significantly affect the course of the parliamentary election in 2021.

Special characteristics of the regional elections in 2019

The Kremlin treats the annual elections as a ritual aimed at legitimising the model of authoritarian government and this year they were set in a special context. The levels of public support and trust in the government have been noticeably dropping since the middle of 2018, above all for socio-economic reasons (for example, the continually decreasing real incomes of the people). This increasingly visibly affects the popularity ratings of the president who is viewed as the guarantor of the regime's stability and the safety of the government elite. According to the governmental public opinion research centre VCIOM, trust in the president has fallen by 17 percentage points to a level of around 30% since the middle of 2018. According to the independent Levada Center, within the same timeframe public approval of his activity has fallen from 79% to 68%, and the proportion of people who would not want him to govern the country for another term has increased from 27% to 38%. The impact which the Kremlin's propaganda has on citizens is on a downward trend. Only 54% of respondents trust the information provided via its main means of communication - television, while in 2009 this proportion was 79%. The outcome of the gubernatorial

elections last year rang alarm bells at the Kremlin. The public outrage provoked by the pension system reform led to the defeat of the government-backed candidates in four regions (the election was repeated in one of them to correct the result, to the detriment of the Communist Party candidate).

This made the government intensify their efforts to prevent the situation from developing in an uncontrolled manner this year. It is worth noting that one third of the governors and all of the Kremlin's candidates to the Moscow City Duma took part in the election as 'independent' candidates, hiding their affiliation to the increasingly unpopular 'party of power', United Russia. The share of 'independent' candidates more than doubled in the elections to regional and local parliaments and councils when compared to 2018 (mainly at the expense of United Russia).

One characteristic feature of the elections this year was the government's efforts to eliminate the competition almost completely: not only candidates of the democratic opposition but even numerous representatives of the 'licensed' opposition, so far effectively controlled by the executive power. The latter apparently considered they might now somehow challenge the Kremlin's political monopoly. This determination was most clearly manifested in Moscow. The government, surprised by the opposition's successful campaign (a dozen or so independent candidates managed to get a sufficient number of signatures to register for the election to the city duma), decided to prevent the opposition candidates from participating in the election by resorting to ostentatious violations of the law. In effect, the routine elections gave rise to a local political crisis. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets to manifest their support for the opposition candidates. The government's reaction was brutal and aimed at intimidating the voters. The methods used included beating the demonstrators, unprecedentedly high numbers of arrests, numerous prolongations of the detentions of the protest leaders and – finally – a fabricated criminal case. This case led to four demonstrators being sentenced to several years in prison on the grounds of fabricated charges of using violence against police officers. This crackdown on peaceful protesters has been criticised not only by the public but also some circles of the Russian elite. Inept attempts were made to overcome the crisis by launching a propaganda campaign discrediting the protests as allegedly inspired and paid for by the West. A commission tasked with dealing with the issue of foreign interference with the Moscow election was established in the State Duma. It will investigate, among other issues, the politically-motivated allegations that Alexei Navalny, the key political opponent of the Kremlin, was recruited by the US secret services.

Evaluation of the course and outcome of the election

According to the independent organisation Golos, which has watched elections in Russia for years, the number of violations seen during the elections this year was much higher than in 2018. The scale of irregularities differed depending on the region. For example in Moscow the government, apparently, was afraid to falsify the election on a massive scale, while in Saint Petersburg where the protests ahead of the election were much less numerous, the tactics was different. It is suspected that the government resorted to falsifying the results of the municipal elections on a large scale.

As compared to last year, the conditions of work of independent observers and members of election commissions were much worse. Citizens were forced to take part in the elections more frequently, some were also paid to cast their votes for the government's candidates. There were reported cases of ballot stuffing and carousel voting, as well as numerous attempts to forge the results during the vote count. Early voting, which offers a broad range of possibilities for forging the results, was clearly much more frequently misused than in 2018. The ban on campaigning on election day was violated on a massive scale in many regions (including by means of digital telephone technologies).

The online voting system which was experimentally introduced in Moscow (in 3 out of 45 constituencies), had met with a great deal of criticism from experts and most likely also offered numerous opportunities for electoral fraud. The government's candidates achieved better results in online voting than in the traditional system; the government-backed candidate's victory might be a direct effect of manipulating the online voting results in at least one constituency. The unprecedented engagement of law enforcement agencies during the election campaign this year can be viewed as a new quality factor. Their officials, for example, actively impeded or prevented campaigning and the work of independent observers.

Given these conditions, all the Kremlin's candidates for governors who had no real rivals officially won the elections in the first round. It is worth paying special attention to the manner in which the gubernatorial election was held in Saint Petersburg as it was accompanied by numerous irregularities and violations of the procedures. This was a manifestation of the serious concern that Aleksandr Beglov, who was a weak candidate supported by the Kremlin, might lose the election. It is worth noting that the results of the municipal election in Saint Petersburg has not yet been announced, which may be proof of the intention to falsify it on a large scale. Most likely, the government fears that the participation of numerous independent candidates in this election poses the risk of repeating the relative success of the opposition in the municipal election in Moscow in 2017, when opposition representatives garnered a majority of the votes in more than ten constituencies, which increased their popularity ahead of the election to the city duma.

The government achieved worse official results in the elections to regional parliaments. As compared to party list results, United Russia on the national scale (according to experts' estimates) garnered over ten percent fewer votes than in the preceding elections to the same bodies. According to official results, it sustained the most serious losses in Khabarovsk Krai and occupied Sevastopol; when compared to 2014, the share of the votes cast for the list of this party was more than four times and two times lower, respectively. United Russia was beaten in a spectacular manner by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's party, LDPR, in Khabarovsk Krai. LDPR garnered 56.12% of the votes there (the Communist Party of the Russian Federation won 17.24% and United Russia only 12.51%). It also won 22 out of 24 seats in single-member constituencies and won a sweeping victory in the most important local elections in the region. United Russia failed to win a single seat in the parliament of the capital city of this region. The elections this year revealed all the weaknesses of the 'party of power', deprived of an attractive political agenda, which faced the need to be engaged in the political struggle without intensive support from the regional administration (the region has been governed for one year by a governor representing the LDPR).

The efforts to somehow institutionalise protest voting, which had been disorganised and spontaneous during the regional elections in 2018, proved successful in Moscow. Alexei Navalny's 'smart voting' idea (concentrating the votes 'against the government' on the strongest alternative candidates) resulted in the defeat of the Kremlin's candidates in almost half of the constituencies (according to Navalny, four seats were most likely 'stolen' from the opposition as a result of electoral fraud to deprive them of a majority). The opposition's relative success cannot be overshadowed even by the continuously low voter turnout (21.77%) which – given the numerous protests earlier – may be proof of the fact that a significant section of the electorate has finally lost confidence in the election process. Even though most of the prospective deputies elected in effect of the 'smart voting' are representatives of the 'licensed' opposition who display a conciliatory approach towards the Kremlin (the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – 13 seats, A Just Russia – 3 seats, while the faction of the democratic party Yabloko will have only 4 seats) and the competences of the Moscow City Duma are very small, two essential goals from the point of view of the opposition's long-term strategy have been achieved.

The first one is to demonstrate to the public that defeating candidates of the 'party of power' is technically possible, and that the Kremlin's political monopoly can be broken (although the 'party of power' has maintained an absolute majority in the duma, it has lost 13 seats compared to 2014). The second one is the possibility to utilise those limited instruments available to deputies (including approving the city budget – around US\$38 billion, the legislative initiative, access to information and control of law enforcement) to publicise the government's abuses and corruption crimes or initiate discussions concerning reforms. Thus, even though their participation in the assembly will not change the balance of power in Moscow, it may result in seriously undermining the government's image in the future, for example, in the context of the parliamentary election scheduled for 2021.

Outlook

The Kremlin has to engage increasing resources and efforts to get the election results that are satisfactory from the point of view of the authoritarian regime, and thus manifest its control of the political sphere and the election ritual. Its good result in 2019 was achieved primarily through suppressing the competition and numerous irregularities and manipulations. Even though these moves in general have provided the desired effect, this kind of strategy will not resolve the long-term problems inherent in the system. The desire to wield total political control supported by repressions will not curb the intensifying public frustration. The latter, together with the increasing recognisability of the democratic opposition, will be manifested on various occasions in the coming years. It can generate mini-crises in the system and may affect the manner in which the parliamentary election - a crucial one for the Kremlin - will be held in 2021. Given all these facts, the future of the United Russia is uncertain as it is losing popularity and is currently more of a burden than an asset for the regime. Therefore, attempts to 'rebrand' the 'government party' and even to rebuild the Russian political party scene may be expected before 2021 to achieve the best results during the parliamentary election.