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Russia: regional (pseudo)elections in the shadow of war

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On 11 September, the annual so-called 'single voting day', elections were held at various levels in the Russian regions. These included votes for governors in 14 regions (including the Sverdlovsk and Kaliningrad oblasts and Buryatia), for regional parliaments in 6 regions (including Udmurtia and Sakhalin Oblast), for city councils in the capitals of 12 regions, and municipal elections. The most important of the latter were held in Moscow (in 125 city wards). In 8 regions (including Moscow), online voting was also possible. Some regions maintained three-day (9–11 September) or two-day voting periods (10–11 September), a procedure that was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some opposition groups, centred around jailed Alexei Navalny, called on Russians to join the so-called 'smart vote' political initiative, which this year was restricted to Moscow only. This amounted to voting for candidates who were most likely to defeat the representatives of United Russia (*Yedinaya Rossiya*, YR), the party of power, and who expressed a clear anti-war stance. The official election results showed that this campaign had no success.

Commentary

- According to official data, the electoral campaigns and the vote went the Kremlin's way, and the results did not yield any surprises. In the most important, gubernatorial elections, all the incumbent heads of the regions running on behalf of YR, or candidates who were formally independent but supported by the party of power, won their seats without any problems (the two 'independent' candidates were Mikhail Yevrayev in the Yaroslavl oblast and Yuri Zaitsev in the Mari El Republic). The best official result was achieved by the incumbent governor of Buryatia, Alexei Tsidenov, who reportedly received more than 86% of the vote. In all six regions where representatives of regional parliaments were elected, YR candidates also won. In the municipal elections in Moscow, where the opposition is relatively most active, over 90% of the seats (i.e. around 1300) were won by nominees of the YR and the My District (*Moy Raion*) social movement, which was supported by the capital's government and its mayor Sergei Sobianin. The democratic, non-parliamentary Yabloko party, which five years ago won as many as 170 council seats, won only four this time. The failure of the 'smart vote' initiative stemmed both from this year's unprecedented repression against the opposition, and from the use of a completely non-transparent procedure for online voting. According to official data, in Moscow as many as 1.7 million people cast their vote remotely, on a quite high turnout rate of 33.9 per cent, while only 700,000 did so at polling stations.
- The elections were even less competitive than in previous years. According to the independent movement Golos, the most prominent election monitoring initiative in

Russia, the competitiveness indicator for the regional parliamentary elections was the lowest since 2012. The results which the Kremlin desired were ensured by comprehensive control over every stage of the process: the registration of the candidates, the conduct of campaigns and the voting itself. Any independent campaign was in fact impossible, or at least highly risky, given the context of the six-month-long war with Ukraine, the accompanying economic sanctions, and the unprecedented degree of wartime censorship. The latter was exacerbated by propaganda hysteria targeting 'traitors to the motherland', i.e. those daring to criticise the Kremlin. Inconvenient candidates were weeded out even before the campaign began, by means including politically-motivated convictions or court proceedings; most often the charges referred to 'discrediting the Russian army' or 'spreading fake news about the special operation in Ukraine'. The most high-profile cases were the sentencing of Moscow councillor Aleksei Gorinov to seven years in prison for spreading 'fake news', and the arrest of opposition figures Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilya Yashin on the same charges. The opposition candidates themselves were also quite reluctant to run, as morale in the opposition circles has weakened significantly, due to systemic persecution as well as the fear of further repression. In addition, many relatively popular figures who could have contested the elections have found themselves in enforced political exile in recent months.

- The desired results of the vote were produced thanks to the retention of multi-day and online voting, which offered officials convenient tools to 'correct' the results at the final counting stage, beyond any public scrutiny. Moreover, the room for manoeuvre for independent observers was drastically reduced this year. Another important factor in the Kremlin's favour was the relatively low public interest in the lower-level elections, which are perceived as a politically insignificant event. This effect was compounded by state propaganda marginalising the elections in its coverage.
- The Kremlin's main ambition was to hold the vote in a calm atmosphere, so as to demonstrate that – despite the so-called special military operation – life in the country continues as usual, and that Russia's unfavourable international and economic situation has had no impact on the Russian people's lives. This strategy succeeded largely because the general public has not yet felt the full negative effects of the economic crisis; nor has information about the real losses suffered in Ukraine become truly widespread. The Kremlin's objectives were also to limit the number of controversial incidents during the voting and to prevent any unforeseen outcomes, by any means necessary, in order to demonstrate full pro-Kremlin public consensus during wartime, which the authorities succeeded in achieving. The course of the elections proved once again that they have been of little political significance in Russia for several years now. They are mostly just a spectacle in which the authorities are able to achieve the desired results, through all kinds of falsification and fraud.