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RUSSIAN DUMA ELECTION 2021

KREMLIN SUPREMACY ACHIEVED THROUGH UNPRECEDENTED PRESSURE AND FRAUD

Maintaining the ruling party's overwhelming majority was an obsession for the Kremlin, regardless of the growing dissatisfaction. The election result, achieved through blatant fraud, further undermines the Kremlin's connection with citizens.

The Russian Duma election was held for the first time over three days on September 17–19. The targeted constitutional majority of two-thirds for the ruling *United Russia* party was achieved, although its pre-election support, exit polls, and the initial results from counting the votes only indicated the plurality position of the party and, in this case, at least a clear loss of face. The election reached a point where the Kremlin no longer relied on a minority role assigned to the opposition in demonstrating the legitimacy of *United Russia*.

Central to this – as well as the previous Duma election in 2016 – was the division of 450 parliamentary seats into federal party list districts (225 seats) and single mandate districts (225 seats). Allocating all seats through party list districts

would be problematic and would have led to the inevitable loss of a two-thirds majority this year. This was the case in the 2011 election. For this reason, selecting 225 candidates from single mandate districts has minimized the potential risks of the list vote.

The Kremlin's ability to gerrymander election districts, combined with its repressive measures and pseudo-democratic innovations – more polling days and electronic voting – are aimed at securing absolute dominance. They expand the potential for covert fraud by making independent election observation impossible in many places. However, thousands of registered reports of fraud show that civil society is able to expose them despite the aggravating circumstances.

The key issue in this election concerned the conditions and ways in which *United Russia* would achieve the constitutional majority. It is clear that if the conditions for the opposition and civil society to operate had been freer, the result would have been quite different from the preliminary official result – 324 seats out of 450.

The only loss the Kremlin would seem to accept was to relinquish the result of 343 seats won in the 2016 election. However, it is noteworthy that in August 2021, support for *United Russia* was about 27%, even by state-aligned pollsters. In addition, Putin's approval rating had decreased by almost 20% from 2016.

The second issue was related to conditions for marketing the “smart voting” of Aleksey Navalny, who is

languishing in prison, and whose network has been criminalized; namely, concentrating opposition votes in single mandate districts to defeat a Kremlin candidate. In the previous two regional elections in 2019 and 2020, “smart voting” paid off, and its main beneficiary was the Communist Party. The growing support for the party is a result of socioeconomic discontent, protest voting, and the party’s strong organization across the country.

This year, the apparent success of “smart voting”, especially in the 15 single mandate districts in Moscow, appeared unacceptable to the regime. Opposition candidates were strong in 12 Moscow districts, but after the announcement of the results of electronic voting, all 15 districts were lost. In St. Petersburg, the results were similar. The delay in announcing the final results and the absence of key United Russia figures from the party’s election celebration suggest at least that the outcome was not what the Kremlin expected.

The subordinate position of the systemic opposition to United Russia was ensured through the establishment of small spoiler parties under the Kremlin’s control, whose primary task was to take votes from the systemic opposition, but which were not meant to exceed the 5% threshold required for passage. In

this election, the likely entry of the *Novye Lyudi (New People)* party into the Duma is a little surprise and unintended consequence of the Kremlin’s *rule and divide* policy.

The election result, achieved through unprecedented repression and blatant fraud, further undermines the Kremlin’s ability to gain information about the mood of the populace, which may have been obtained from the election.

A growing number of Russians are not allowed to run in elections. On the one hand, since the goal of a super majority has been reached, it is difficult to retreat from the path of political repression when there is no desire to take any risks in forthcoming elections. On the other hand, as public dissatisfaction deepens, the risks of electoral losses are real if the process is to be liberalized. For this reason, too, the deepening regression of elections into ruthless rituals of political power is more likely than the regime’s readiness to allow genuine political competition.

Boundaries related to Putin’s status are a key issue in Russia’s current election. The Duma must remain an absolutely subordinate executor of presidential power. Regional elections, in turn, measure the loyalty of regions to the president. In the 2016 Duma election, the most important aim was to keep

life on an even keel for the 2018 presidential election and the 2020 amendments to the constitution. For this election, the 2024 target has been officially reached. It will then be decided whether to go for Putin’s first six-year extension, guaranteed by the new constitution. There should be no risk from political alternatives outside the Kremlin, and thus the Duma’s behaviour must be secured.

While the Russian elections are becoming increasingly hopeless for a growing number of dissatisfied citizens, the West must not succumb to the Kremlin’s efforts to see increasingly blatant violations of civil rights as an internal Russian affair. The development of the rule of law in Russia and the state of civil society must be given greater prominence in Western relations with the country. Google’s and Apple’s adherence to the Russian authorities’ demands to censor Navalny’s “smart voting” application from their platforms, which occurred on the eve of the election, is the first serious warning of the future conditions for Russia’s most important civil society lifeline – the free internet. The debate in the West over political control of social media must not become a pretext as far as the demands of authoritarian regimes for political censorship are concerned. /