

Jussi Lassila, Senior Research Fellow, FIIA

RUSSIA'S REGIONAL ELECTIONS 2022

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

A floundering war in Ukraine provided easy justification for the extreme clampdown on the opposition prior to Russia's regional elections. At the same time, the Kremlin is trying to stifle the last remaining legal means of expressing discontent.

This year, Russia's united voting day was 11 September, the day when 14 gubernatorial elections, parliamentary elections in six regions, city council elections in 11 regional centres and elections for Moscow district representatives all took place. In addition to still-applied Covid restrictions, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the ensuing extreme censorship have created a concerted means of minimizing the conditions under which the opposition is able to voice citizens' hushed grievances. Criticism of social problems, which used to be allowed, as well as the existence of opposition at the regional level are no longer tolerated.

The results of the elections were in line with expectations. The ruling party – United Russia – did not face any setbacks, and the party

candidates, or those directly connected to it, are ahead in all elections. As in last year's elections, the three-day voting period, and electronic voting in particular, offered clear opportunities to declare the “correct” result and turnout. Activity by the opposition typically means a higher turnout. In the 2017 Moscow district representative elections, despite the opposition's success, the voter turnout was as low as 14%. Now, when electronic voting was used and the opposition's campaigning largely eliminated, the official turnout was declared to be 33%.

Political competition at the regional level has traditionally provided a safety valve for the expression of local problems and an information channel for the central government. However, the situation has changed in recent years due to the

weakened position of United Russia throughout Russia. Since 2018, there have been considerable protests and visible losses by the ruling party's candidates in connection with the regional elections.

The risk of pluralism at the regional level has been identified and new restrictions have been put in place in the past year after the Duma and regional elections. Although this year's elections were not held in regions considered difficult for the Kremlin, the regime did not want to take any risks. The number of candidates to be chosen from the party lists was significantly reduced while the parties' right to nominate candidates for the next elections was significantly weakened.

Until now, each party that had got at least one candidate through

in previous elections had the right to nominate candidates for further elections without the bureaucratic approval procedure required from the election authorities. Now, parties are required to win at least 3% of the votes cast to gain the right to nominate. In future elections, this will force more and more candidates to obtain separate approval from the authorities. The procedure for approving candidates based on supporters' signatures has been at the core of Putin's electoral authoritarian system, which has enabled independent candidates to be effectively filtered out of the elections under various technical pretexts.

Prior to these elections, the representatives appointed by the parties had the right to participate in election committee meetings regarding the organization of the elections and, above all, the right to observe the counting of votes. This right no longer exists. The "unified system of public administration" enshrined in the constitutional changes in 2020 effectively means the elimination of the democratic control mechanism of regional governance guaranteed by the 1993 constitution.

The suppression of potentially dangerous opposition activists well before the 2022 elections under the guise of war censorship was unprecedented. Ilya Yashin, a prominent opposition activist elected in the previous district council elections

in Moscow, was arrested in July. In turn, Yashin's representative colleague, Alexei Gorinov, was arrested in April and sentenced to seven years in prison in July for "spreading false information about the Russian army". In Yekaterinburg, the former mayor of the city, Yevgeny Roizman, was put under house arrest in August to await sentencing for his criticism of the war. In Moscow alone, approximately one hundred potential candidates participating in district elections were excluded from running under various administrative pretexts.

In addition to the exclusion of candidates not belonging to registered parties, the filtering of candidates from the Kremlin-controlled systemic parties was tuned to the extreme in these elections. This was aimed at combatting the "smart voting" of Alexei Navalny's network – eliminated in Russia and currently operating from abroad – that caused a headache in previous elections. It guided people to vote for critics of the Kremlin, who were participating under the umbrella of systemic parties, especially the Communist Party.

In the name of war censorship, it has been possible to use administrative violence to control and suppress the degree of freedom of speech previously afforded the opposition. It is not only the issue of censoring criticism directly related

to the war, but also the voicing of any socio-economic causes related to it which is becoming increasingly evident. For example, in Vladivostok, a Communist Party candidate was barred from the election by the party because he had criticized the use of money for "the silovik bloc" instead of the social sector and mentioned that the "special operation" would benefit the "ruling class".

It is possible that in the event of a victorious war, the Kremlin could have counted on a boost similar to the euphoria that followed the annexation of Crimea in 2014. If this had happened, the anti-war opposition could have lost its agenda with regard to socio-economic problems, and the overwhelming majority of citizens would have had their great-power nostalgia concretized despite their problems. Absent this concreteness, the war is hurtling towards disaster, and there is no hint of any euphoria. The war has increasingly become a topic to be avoided even for ruling party governors. Next year's elections will be significantly more challenging for the Kremlin, both in terms of regions and the prevailing trend whereby the Kremlin is increasingly channeling cumulative problems outside of legitimate political participation. Moreover, by then, the 2024 presidential election will be less than a year away. /