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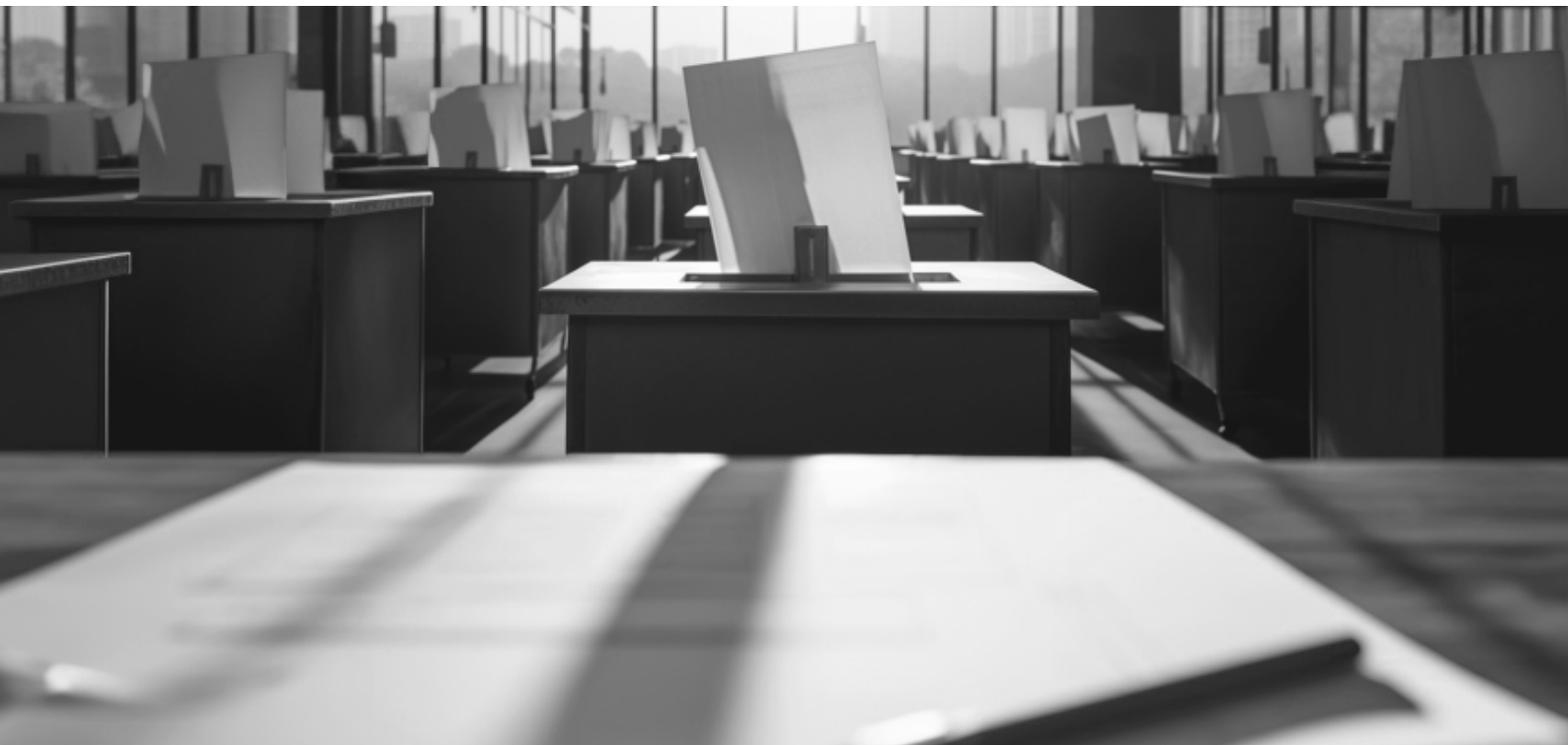
FREE RUSSIA

Russia's 2023 Electoral Dynamics. War and Presidential Anticipation



About the brief

"Many will be surprised to hear it, but there are still elections ,"

— Alexey Navalny commentary from prison, August 21, 2023.

Russia's 2023 elections were the largest regional elections in the country's five-year cycle. Yet, for many Russian citizens, these elections went almost unnoticed. Putin's regime tried to divert public attention away, neutralizing ordinary voters and mobilizing their core electorate.

According to the voters rights movement Voice[1], these elections were even less free and fair than those in the previous electoral cycle. Coordinated nationwide propaganda, censorship, suppression of dissent, and brazen misuse of administrative resources to coerce voters to support the United Russia party have been documented.

Nevertheless, there were still opposition candidates fighting for a role in Russian politics, for an opportunity to improve their cities and regions, and convey democratic values to voters. NGO projects providing support to candidates, observers, and voters continue to operate. Coalitions are being formed and evolving, organizing politicians with different viewpoints around common goals and tasks.

In this brief, we examine the recent elections; identify those which were tightly managed and those which remained fairly competitive; describe the voting process administered in the illegally occupied territories of Ukraine; and ways in which the war has impacted pre-election campaigns. We assess the agendas and strategies of opposition candidates, and the monitoring efforts . As part of this report, we also attempt to forecast ways in which these elections are setting the stage for the presidential elections in March 2024.

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Why Russian Elections Matter to Europe

1. The Role of Elections in Legitimacy:

In Russia, elections aren't just a democratic formality; they are the linchpin of the government's claim to legitimacy. While the country is far from democratic, the government consistently advances the narrative that its actions are the direct manifestation of the people's will. This makes elections not just a symbolic ritual, but the Kremlin's primary instrument for consolidating power and asserting its legitimacy. For European politicians, it's crucial to understand this dynamic. Exposing and challenging this electoral facade would be a significant step toward empowering the Russian people to assert its real choice and true political will both in Russia's foreign and domestic policy.

2. Championing Political Initiatives:

Our brief underscores ways in which political initiatives can become real game-changers for politics in Russia: from coalitions and projects that back opposition candidates to monitoring efforts that persist in the political arena, even under the looming threat of prosecution. While scores of activists fled Russia, many remained, continuing their work under increasingly challenging conditions. Both groups are in dire need of support. However, it's essential to craft ways to assist those on the ground in Russia without inadvertently putting them at greater risk. Their efforts represent a direct challenge to the Kremlin's electoral apparatus, and their safe and effective support can be a catalyst for change.

3. The Lead-Up to the 2024 presidential elections:

The regional elections of 2023, spanning 79 of Russia's 83 regions and 5 illegally occupied Ukrainian territories, can be seen as a dress rehearsal for the presidential elections slated for 2024. The Kremlin is actively fine-tuning its electoral system in the new context of war and sanctions, with innovations like online voting being tested and set for expansion. Additionally, the fabrication of new "electoral sultanates" in LPR, DPR, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia further supports a predictable and controllable outcome in favor of the Kremlin. The increasing restrictions and pressures on independent observers, such as the potential blacklisting of Golos, highlight the Kremlin's escalating efforts to tightly control the electoral narrative. Understanding these shifts and emerging tactics is essential for anticipating the political landscape of Russia in 2024.

Major Elections by Region

4,270 electoral campaigns took place from September 8 to 10

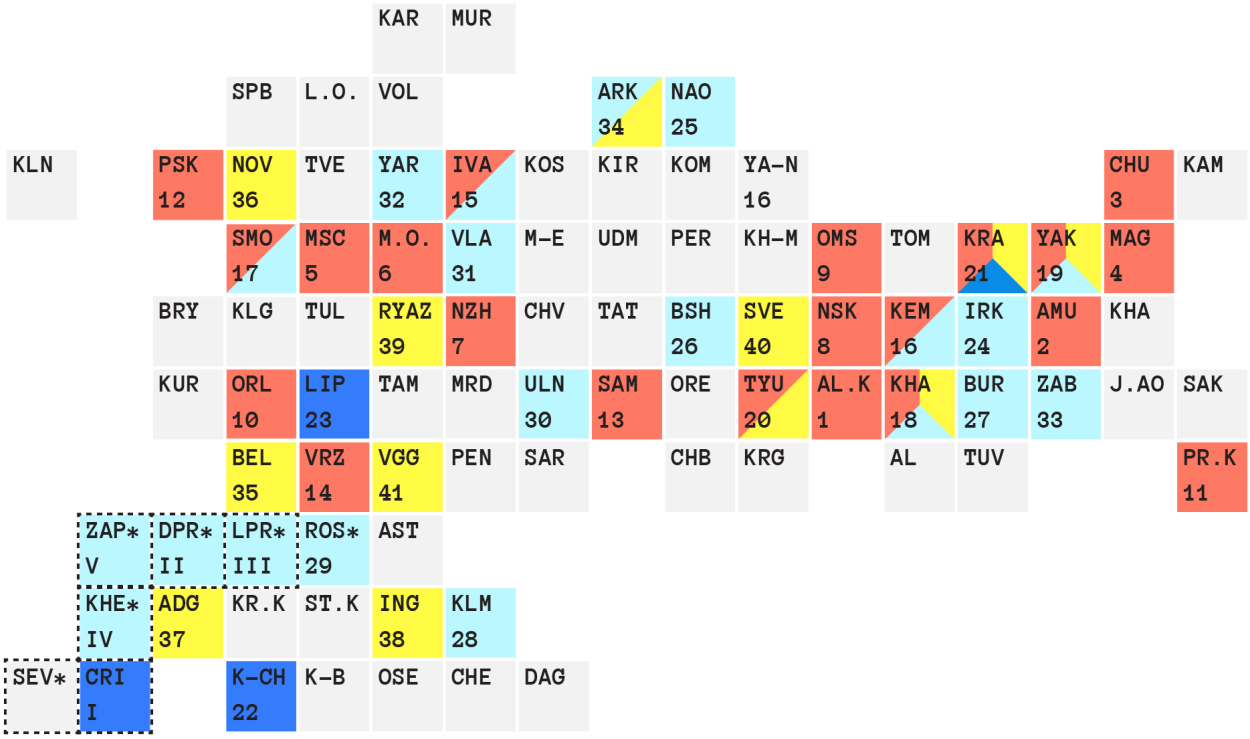
Major elections occurred in 41 Russian regions and five illegally annexed territories: Crimea, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, LPR, and DPR.

21 regions
Direct elections of regional heads

16 regions +4*
Regional parlamentary elections.

12 regions
Municipal Councils elections

3 regions +1*
By-elections for State Duma deputies



1. Altai Krai
2. Amur Oblast
3. Chukotka Autonomous Okrug
4. Magadan Oblast
5. Moscow City
6. Moscow Oblast
7. Nizhny Novgorod Oblast
8. Novosibirsk Oblast
9. Omsk Oblast
10. Oryol Oblast
11. Primorsky Krai
12. Pskov Oblast
13. Samara Oblast
14. Voronezh Oblast
15. Ivanovo Oblast
16. Kemerovo Oblast - Kuzbass
17. Smolensk Oblast
18. Republic of Khakassia
19. Sakha Republic (Yakutia)
20. Tyumen Oblast
21. Krasnoyarsk Krai
22. Karachay-Cherkess Republic
23. Lipetsk Oblast
24. Irkutsk Oblast
25. Nenets Autonomous Okrug
26. Republic of Bashkortostan
27. Republic of Buryatia
28. Republic of Kalmykia
29. Rostov Oblast
30. Ulyanovsk Oblast
31. Vladimir Oblast
32. Yaroslavl Oblast
33. Zabaykalsky Krai
34. Arkhangelsk Oblast
35. Belgorod Oblast
36. Novgorod Oblast
37. Republic of Adygea
38. Republic of Ingushetia
39. Ryazan Oblast
40. Sverdlovsk Oblast
41. Volgograd Oblast

***Illegally occupied:**

I. Republic of Crimea
II. Donetsk People's Republic
III. Luhansk People's Republic
IV. Kherson Oblast
V. Zaporizhzhia Oblast

Data: Central Election Commission of Russia

Executive Summary

Election Overview:

In 2023, Russia held elections across its 79 federal subjects and the 5 illegally occupied Ukrainian territories at four distinct levels: regional executive leadership posts (21), federal subject parliaments (16+4), regional center parliaments (12), and by-elections for vacant seats in the State Duma (3+1).

Regional elections took the center stage. Over 81.1k candidates, including 10.4k independents[2], vied for 33k deputy seats and elective positions. The electoral process was dominated by pressures on the opposition and voters, centralized propaganda, media censorship, forceful suppression of dissent, and direct coercion of certain segments of the electorate to vote for the United Russia party. The online voting system was introduced in 25 regions, with 18 of them experiencing it for the first time.

United Russia has claimed the votes of 24 million citizens[3]. In regional parliaments, it secured 81% of the mandates, and in capital city parliaments — 78%.

Gubernatorial Elections:

- The elections of regional heads in Russia remain extremely opaque due to the "municipal filter" requirement, which curtails competition. Remarkably, no independent candidates were registered, an unprecedented occurrence in the past five years.
- Incumbent governors and their acting successors have won in all regions. All belong to the United Russia party, except for two members of the Communist Party — Valentin Konovalov in Khakassia and Andrey Klychkov in the Oryol region.

Regional Parliamentary Elections

- At this level, United Russia has significantly improved its performance compared to previous years. Only United Russia and the CPRF have secured seats in all 16 regional parliaments. Other parties such as the LDPR and A Just Russia faced setbacks, with the New People party failing to gain representation in several regions. Only in Khakassia did the CPRF outperform United Russia.
- United Russia's rise in representation echoes its 2007 success under Putin's leadership. Despite only two of the 16 regions consistently delivering predictable outcomes due to falsifications (Bashkortostan and Kuzbass), the party thrived. While most regions were open to opposition, the government took steps to sideline their candidates. Historically protest-prone regions are now aligning closer with the predictable ones, a result of both decreased voter turnout and a weakened opposition.
- The Communist Party (CPRF) continued a trend that began with the war: in 2022, their results had already decreased by almost half compared to 2021. Current decline varied across regions. In Yakutia, the results plummeted from 35% in 2021 to just 13%. Similarly, in the Ivanovo region, the numbers fell sharply from 28% in 2021 to 9.9%. On average, most regions saw their results drop by about 50%.
- The LDPR, on the other hand, has been proactive in its campaigns, maintaining a strong presence recovering from a minor dip in support from the 2018 elections.
- A Just Russia party's position is more tenuous, with its support shrinking 1.5 to 2 fold since 2018, though it improved its performance better in the Yaroslavl region and Yakutia.
- The New People party, a newcomer to the regional elections, has seen modest successes, notably securing second place in Yakutia.

Election Integrity:

- The elections were marred by violations of key articles of the Russian Constitution, notably precluding the candidates from interaction with voters under the guise of the COVID-19 restrictions, formal and informal media censorship, and forceful measures against the opposition.
- Centralized propaganda, censorship, suppression of the opposition, and leveraging administrative resources for United Russia have been documented.
- The observer group Golos captured instances of voter coercion in several regions, including the Moscow oblast. Some instances of coercion appeared to be centrally orchestrated rather than region-specific.

Elections in the war zone:

- The Kremlin has administered elections in occupied territories, including the LPR, DPR, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. These included elections for regional heads, regional parliaments, and municipal deputies and administrative center deputies in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions.
- These elections are illegitimate for two main reasons. Firstly, the territories are illegally annexed, and secondly, the campaigns and voting occurred without a clear understanding of the number of voters and electoral district boundaries. Campaigning was nearly impossible due to martial law and curfews.
- These territories are being fashioned by the Kremlin as the new "electoral sultanates" with high voter turnout and a majority voting for the ruling party. They are expected to provide votes in favor of Putin in the 2024 presidential elections. The urgency in conducting these elections is seen as a move to integrate these territories into the Russian political and legal framework ahead of the 2024 elections.

Candidates for Peace:

- Yabloko was the only party with an anti-war campaign. Its candidates have been elected to the assemblies of Yekaterinburg (with the party list receiving 9.2%), Veliky Novgorod (Anna Cherepanova), Krasnokamsk in the Perm region (Olga Kolokolova), and Yasnogorsk in the Tula region (Marina Lesnikova).
- Anti-war sentiments were also expressed within the ranks of the Communist Party (CPRF) in Komi, Buryatia, and Moscow, but these views did not feature in the party's official platform.

Election Observation, Coalitions and Tactical Voting:

- Multi-day voting, remote electronic voting (REV), and the designation of foreign agents (NGOs labeled as foreign agents cannot nominate candidates to observation commissions) have undermined the role of observers.
- An influential observer movement Golos faced increasing pressure from authorities. Grigory Melkonyants, the co-chair of the movement, is currently in detention on charges related to organizing activities for an NGO designated as undesirable in Russia.
- Typically, opposition candidates resort to collective action strategies, forming coalitions. Notable coalitions from previous elections, such as the Moscow coalition, "VyDvizhenie" project, and "Novosibirsk 2020", did not participate in this year's campaigns.
- Opposition candidates also join parties to get nominated, bypassing the need to collect signatures — a process with high risk of non-registration due to disqualification of allegedly invalid signatures.

- Dmitry Kisiev's Candidate Headquarters project collaborated with the Civil Initiative party in regional elections in New Moscow, Moscow region, and other cities. The Headquarters provided technical support, while the party nominated candidates and offered media backing. Two candidates from New Moscow secured second places but were not elected.
- Navalny's Smart Voting initiative changed its strategy, endorsing 25 single-mandate candidates and the Yabloko party list for the Yekaterinburg City Duma elections. The service operated via email newsletters and social media. As a result, Yabloko doubled its previous year's result, reaching 9.3%—its best performance in Yekaterinburg since the 1990s. Konstantin Kiselev secured a seat in the City Duma. On average, Yabloko candidates supported by Smart Votinggarnered 12.6%. Out of 15 candidates, 9 secured second places.
- Recommended candidate lists were also published by Zemsky S'ezd and the Novosibirsk 2020 coalition.

Remote Electronic Voting (REV):

- The REV system was operational in Moscow and 24 other regions, with 18 of them using it for the first time. More than 3 million people voted online across the country[4].There are two separate technical platforms: one for Moscow and another federal one. Both platforms are closed and lack transparency.
- REV expands opportunities for election manipulations and serves as a tool for direct coercion of certain categories of voters to support United Russia. Public sector employees are often asked to provide screenshots of their registration in the system.
- The Central Election Commission prohibited[5] those outside the country from voting, violating[6] the constitutional right to vote and the Federal Law on basic electoral rights guarantees.

Preparation for the Presidential Elections:

- The Kremlin has field-tested the electoral system's performance within the new reality of the war and sanctions.
- In March 2024, the Kremlin's main objective will likely be to demobilize regular and opposition voters by promoting safe and weak candidates.
- The loyal electorate can be mobilized through controlled votes in illegally occupied Ukrainian territories and other "electoral sultanates" (typically North Caucasus republics like Adygea, Dagestan, Chechnya, etc., but also regions like Tuva and Tatarstan), and through coercion in the REV system.

General Overview

Out of the 83 regions, only four did not hold elections this year: Kabardino-Balkaria, Mari El, Saint Petersburg, and the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YANAO). In contrast, 79 other regions, along with five illegally occupied Ukrainian territories (Crimea, LPR, DPR, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia), hosted a total of 4,270 elections. Some regions simultaneously held elections for various levels. Major elections were conducted in 41 regions and five of the occupied Ukrainian territories. Twenty-one regions had their residents chose their regional leaders. Legislative assemblies were elected in 16 regions, as well as in LPR, DPR, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions. By-elections in four single-member districts to fill vacancies that arose in the State Duma. Furthermore, major cities held elections for their city councils.

Elections of Regional Heads

The process of electing regional leaders is one of the most opaque political procedures in Russia. To qualify, candidates must clear the "municipal filter": collect signatures from municipal deputies in their nominating region.Only for those with substantial resources and allegiance to United Russia, the dominant party in all regions, are allowed to achieve this task by the Kremlin. The requirement to amass a significant number of signatures from municipal figures effectively stifles competition, as the opposition seldom manages to surpass this hurdle without the backing of United Russia and local governing bodies.

This year, both candidates and political parties demonstrated the lowest interest in gubernatorial elections in the last five years. The formal competition in 2023 dipped to its nadir since 2018, with an average of 5.9 candidates per region. To put this in perspective, the figure stood at 6.3 in 2022, and in 2018 — when the list of regions closely mirrored the present list — the candidate count peaked at 7.8[7].

Following the elections, every region either retained their incumbent governors or appointed their acting successors. Of these, 19 hailed from "United Russia", while two represented the CPRF in Khakassia and the Oryol region. For example, in Moscow, Sergey Sobyanin secured his re-election with 76.39% of the votes, triumphing across all of Moscow's territorial election commissions[8].

Imaginary Elections on Imaginary Territories

In addition to the State Duma elections in a single-member district in Crimea, the Kremlin also conducted elections in the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. Despite the ongoing war, these elections were made possible due to amendments to the electoral legislation introduced in May 2023.

Inhabitants of these territories voted for the inaugural sessions of their legislative bodies within the Russian Federation and also elected local representatives. Given that many residents lack Russian passports, the Central Election Commission (CEC) permitted[9] voting using any document that verifies identity and residency, a provision that doesn't exist in electoral legislation.

Local assemblies chose the leaders of these territories. Five major parties presented candidate lists to the acting regional leaders. These leaders then submitted a shortlist of five candidates to the president, who further narrowed it down to three. The final selection was then left to the regional parliamentary deputies.

Elections in the four territories were neither legitimate nor competitive. Due to migration along the front lines, the exact number of eligible voters remained unknown. The absence of defined boundaries made the formation of single-member districts unfeasible, leading to elections based on party lists from those parties permitted to establish branches by the occupying administrations. The state of martial law and imposed curfews rendered campaign activities nearly impossible.

Moreover, a novel voting practice emerged in the annexed regions. In May 2023, Russia enacted legislation allowing regions to establish polling stations beyond their borders. Initially intended for those who had fled the annexed regions to Russia, this provision was eventually extended to residents of Russian regions as well. In the occupied territories, polling stations catered to Russians working in the area. Stanislav Andreychuk, co-chair of "Golos," expressed concern[10] about the concept of extraterritorial polling stations, particularly regarding the actual number of voters and their influence on the overall outcome.

As political scientist Ekaterina Shulman succinctly put it[11], "these are imaginary elections in imaginary territories." Their primary objective is to assimilate these regions into Russia's political and legal framework, paving the way for their participation in the 2024 presidential elections.

Election Results

Party Outcomes: United Russia Dominates

The 16 Russian regions that held parliamentary elections can be categorized into three distinct types[12]. The first category encompasses regions where the electoral process is firmly and unequivocally under the control of the authorities, rendering opposition candidates non-competitive. This includes places like the Republic of Bashkortostan and the Kemerovo region, also known as Kuzbass.

The second category is made up of transitional regions. While these regions might not exhibit robust electoral competition, internal political dynamics can sometimes yield unpredictable outcomes. The Rostov region, situated near the frontline, serves as a prime example.

The third category includes regions where elections are competitive, albeit within the confines of the Russian political landscape. This group comprises 13 regions, predominantly located in Siberia and the Far East, such as Khakassia, Transbaikal Territory, Buryatia, Yakutia, and the Irkutsk region. Recent political campaigns indicate a revival of political activity in these areas. Two primary factors contribute to this trend. Historically and geographically, certain regions, like the Far North, have always been more inclined towards protest and competition. Additionally, the stabilization of the political system has played a role. The initial shock and uncertainty many felt last year have given way to a realization of the regime's stability, prompting a shift in discourse towards navigating the current circumstances.

Despite the dominance of the third category, United Russia's performance (you can find a short introduction to the Russian parties in Annex) in regional parliament and local council elections has seen a marked improvement compared to the 2021 State Duma elections and the 2018 regional elections. Only United Russia and the CPRF secured seats in all 16 regional parliaments. The LDPR missed out in Kalmykia. A mere three parties managed to gain representation in the parliaments of Khakassia, Ivanovo, and Rostov regions. A Just Russia lost its factions in multiple regions, while New People couldn't secure a spot in several others. In these regional assembly elections, United Russia emerged victorious in all regions, with the sole exception of Khakassia, where the CPRF took the lead.

Among the non-parliamentary parties, the Greens secured a spot in Krasnoyarsk; Yabloko in Yekaterinburg and Veliky Novgorod; Communists of Russia in Yakutsk and Belgorod; and the Pensioners' Party made its mark in several cities.

United Russia's surge in representation is reminiscent of the 2007 scenario when Vladimir Putin spearheaded the party's list. Intriguingly, this ascent was realized even though merely two of the 16 election-holding regions could be labeled "anomalous" due to rampant falsifications and predictable outcomes. The

remaining regions were relatively amenable to the opposition, though the government did take measures to curtail the opposition's sway.

Regions historically prone to protest are increasingly mirroring the anomalous ones. This shift can be attributed partly to dwindling voter turnout, amplifying the vote share from administrative structures and conformists. This phenomenon isn't solely a byproduct of administrative coercion but also stems from the opposition's frailty and demoralization

United Russia's Stronghold in Single-Mandate Districts

In the elections for regional parliaments and local councils within majoritarian districts, the United Russia party's dominance was unmistakably evident. Of the 436 majoritarian districts for regional parliament elections, United Russia clinched 405 (93%). Similarly, in the city council elections for regional centers, they secured 196 out of 207 majoritarian districts, accounting for 94.7%. This resurgence in United Russia's stronghold in majoritarian districts harks back to their 2015 performance.

CPRF's Decline

The Communist Party (CPRF) is on a downward trajectory, a trend that began with the commencement of military actions. Their performance in 2022 plummeted, with results nearly halving from the previous year. The party grappled with defining a distinct identity amidst the shifting political sands. Historically, its support base was a blend of the conservative-patriotic faction, yearning for the USSR days, and a broader protest faction that encompassed diverse segments, including liberals. However, the military actions have eroded this base, rendering the CPRF obsolete for some and unpalatable for the anti-war faction.

This decline manifested in majoritarian districts, with the CPRF losing a majority of seats. Their best performance was in Khakassia, but overall, their influence waned, aligning them with the LDPR in terms of seat count. Essentially, the party grappled with an identity crisis. Patriotic voters gravitated towards United Russia, while anti-war voters distanced themselves, disillusioned by the party's stance and its exclusion of opposition voices. This, combined with internal strife, has eroded the CPRF's standing as the leading opposition party, aligning its influence with other political groups.

LDPR's Opportune Moment

The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) made waves with a pronounced presence in regional and local media, spearheading an assertive campaign. They championed populist agendas tailored for diverse voter segments, sparking widespread discussions across local media platforms and social networks.

Thanks to its well-established campaign network and financial resources, the party managed to mobilize supporters and garnered support from local businesses, boosting voter turnout, especially when overall turnout was low. The demise of their leader, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, in April 2022 curtailed potential scandals, further solidifying the party's standing. The decline of other opposition forces and their inability to run notable campaigns provided the LDPR with an opportunity to expand its voter base. For a considerable chunk of the electorate, rallying behind LDPR became a symbolic gesture of dissent and a reflection of their disenchantment with the political climate.

Despite a slight decrease in support compared to the 2018 elections, the party remains ahead and continues to hold a significant place in the political arena. Krasnoyarsk is one of the regions where the LDPR demonstrated the most success, even though there was a slight decline in support compared to previous elections.

A Just Russia: Rapid Decline

The situation within A Just Russia is extremely unstable and complex. Its election results are plummeting. A significant factor contributing to this decline is its unsuccessful campaign that failed to mobilize voters. Moreover, the party's regional networks deteriorated after aligning with ultra-nationalist forces and supporting Evgeny Prigozhin's "party." This alliance shifted the party toward nationalism, making it less appealing to moderate voters, who had long been the party's target.

Previously, A Just Russia succeeded by attracting diverse candidates who lost other opportunities for election nominations. Since 2012, the party has steadily lost access to regional platforms and has seen a decline in assets due to internal purges and conflicts. The purges began when several members voted in favor of Medvedev as Prime Minister, contrary to the party faction's decision to vote against. Notable conflicts arose when party members, Ilya Ponomarev and both Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov, supported protests, a move that party leader Sergey Mironov disapproved of. Collaborating with ultra-nationalists and subsequent shifts in political positions tarnished its image and reputation. These setbacks, coupled with dwindling campaign funds and the exodus of moderate regional leaders, precipitated the party's decline in several regions and a marked drop in its overall electoral performance.

The result was the loss of six factions in regional parliaments and a drop in results 1.5- to 2- fold compared to 2018. Better results were seen in the Yaroslavl region and Yakutia.

The New People Party: Modest Successes

The New People party is just beginning to build its regional network and management (it did not participate in the 2018 regional elections). Nevertheless, it has secured the second place in Yakutia and third place in Buryatia and Kalmykia.

New People adopted an optimistic and positive campaign style, focusing on the youth and small businesses. While this approach appeals to a segment of voters, it might not resonate with those facing social hardships and economic challenges. Nevertheless, the New People campaign was one of the most creative, from memorable ads, especially regional ones in Yakutia and Krasnoyarsk, to the slogan "Change horses, and there won't be a ford!" The party successfully "regionalized" its campaign, leading to victories in single-mandate districts at the regional level and strengthening their influence.

Candidates for Peace

Yabloko: For Peace and Freedom

Yabloko stands out as the only party with an anti-war campaign. Rallying under such slogans as "I'm for Peace", "For Peace and Freedom", and "Everyone Understands", its candidates participated in elections across 13 regions, including Karachay-Cherkessia, Karelia, Krasnoyarsk and Perm territories, Sverdlovsk, Novgorod, Pskov, Moscow, Saratov, Tula, Rostov, Ryazan regions, and New Moscow. The most significant electoral campaigns took place in Veliky Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, and Krasnoyarsk[13]. They targeted two distinct demographics: urban dwellers with anti-war sentiments, for whom voting for Yabloko was a protest vote — a way to voice their disagreement with Russia's foreign policy; and those whom the party aimed to attract with other pressing issues, subtly emphasizing the importance of a peaceful stance[14].

Out of 179 candidates, 151 had been approved for the elections. The rest faced political backlash due to their anti-war stance. Members of the Yabloko' party encountered raids, searches and faced physical aggression. Despite this, four Yabloko' candidates have been successfully elected to four councils:

Yekaterinburg, Veliky Novgorod, Krasnokamsk (Perm region), and Yasnogorsk (Tula region). One candidate joined the Council of Deputies of the Miloslavskoye urban settlement in the Ryazan region.

Anti-War Sentiments in the CPRF

While the CPRF didn't officially adopt an anti-war stance, such sentiments were expressed within its ranks. In February 2022, the Komi CPRF committee bureau dispatched an anti-war statement to the party's Central Committee. In the Republic of Buryatia, the regional CPRF leader, Vyacheslav Markhaev, publicly denounced[15] the war on social media[16] shortly after the invasion began. In 2020, he was the sole member of the Federation Council to vote against the law introducing amendments to the Constitution. Other State Duma deputies from the CPRF, like Mikhail Matveev and Oleg Smolin, also voiced their opposition to the war. All three voted in favor of recognizing the independence of the LPR and DPR.

"Special Military Operation" in Electoral Campaigns

Among the systemic parties there was a clear distinction between those who actively support the special military operation and those who avoid discussing it.

Most candidates refrained from discussing the SMO for a couple of reasons. On one hand, it's a taboo subject. On the other, regional elections prioritize domestic issues over foreign policy matters. Authorities at this level focus on practical local challenges, such as road repairs or hospital construction — foreign policy isn't within their purview.

According to a political analyst Alexander Kynev, in non-competitive gubernatorial elections, the narrative of SMO in the electoral campaign wasn't included for its appeal to the voters but as a self-defense measure by candidates: "It's a defensive reaction: many governors fear coming under scrutiny for lack of patriotism, so they wear camouflage, visit hospitals, and head to the front."

For the most part, the SMO theme figured in campaigns in the context of social welfare of those negatively affected by it. Kynev notes that local sociological studies indicate there's a demand for assistance to the affected, and this is well-received by the public.

REV in the Regions

The Remote Electronic Voting (REV) system was first implemented during the Moscow City Duma elections in 2019. Since 2020, it has been used at the federal level and is executed by the company Rostelecom on behalf of the Central Election Commission. The REV consists of two separate platforms — the Moscow and the federal ones. Unlike the Moscow platform, the federal one hasn't been compromised yet, but it's even less transparent.

The launch of REV in Moscow was accompanied by a myriad of issues (detailed in the Closed Data section). The system was rolled out in an extremely tight timeframe — over just 7 months[17]. The plan was first aired in February 2019, the federal law for the initial experiment was adopted in May, and by September 8, the REV was operational in three districts for the Moscow City Duma elections. This timeframe was insufficient for the preparation of both the technical and regulatory bases. Everywhere the

pilot launch took place, the results of online voting played a decisive role in the vote count.

This year, the REV operated in Moscow and 24 other regions, 18 of which were using it for the first time. According to the Ministry of Digital Development[18], in 2023, 1.07 million voters from 24 regions voted using the federal REV platform. In total, about 7% of voters registered in the system. The federal REV system experienced glitches in two out of the 24 regions[1]. In the Nenets Autonomous District, some citizens received only one electronic ballot instead of two, and voting was suspended for two hours. In the Novosibirsk region, the CPRF party reported that some voters couldn't vote for their representative on the first try.

Election Monitoring

While the Russian Constitution mandates the State to organize elections, the 2000s — even more explicitly than in the 1990s — starkly revealed a growing public distrust towards the government's electoral processes. This led to the rise of observation movements and initiatives. These grassroots networks train citizens to become observers and document electoral violations. However, recent changes like multi-day voting, the Remote Electronic Voting (REV) system, and the aggressive labeling of "foreign agents" have significantly curtailed the role of these observers.

Evolution of Electoral Legislation

Since 2005, when United Russia secured a constitutional majority in the State Duma, electoral legislation has rapidly deteriorated. According to Andrey Buzin, the law on voters' rights adopted in 2002 has "lost any basis to be considered a law; it doesn't comply with international electoral standards, the Constitution of the Russian Federation, or even itself."

The practice of neutralizing the observers — including by unlawfully removing them from polling stations, sometimes en masse and with physical violence — has spread.

However, the most significant change came before the vote on amendments to the Constitution in 2020. Under the pretext of the Coronavirus pandemic, Russia introduced multi-day voting and voting outside polling stations. Among the population, this scheme has been colloquially termed "voting on tree stumps [19], [20] ." Simultaneously, public observation began to be imitated by pseudo-independent observation from regional Public Chambers, which are essentially GONGOs.

The most popular status used by observers — the status of a commission member with an advisory vote — has been abolished. Additionally, the right to observe elections as a trusted representative of a candidate or party was revoked. The status of trusted representatives now ends simultaneously with the conclusion of the agitation period, before the start of vote counting and the announcement of results[21].

Observer Movements

A significant setback for independent observers was the re-designation of Golos (Voice), a movement defending voters' rights, as a foreign agent in August 2021. In August 2023, Grigory Melkonyants, the co-chair of the movement, was arrested and charged under the article on undesirable organizations. Initial repercussions for anyone who works with a project that bears "undesirable" status involve fines, but associations with such entities could lead to criminal prosecution. Melkonyants remains in pre-trial detention. Searches have been conducted at the residences of regional coordinators at 14 addresses across various Russian cities[22].

Despite recent searches and criminal prosecutions, representatives of Golos do not see these actions as a threat to the future work of independent observers. The movement has already trained a generation of independent observers and continues to provide the necessary infrastructure for the future — including manuals, courses, and a hotline.

In preparation for the Moscow elections, the Golos movement actively monitors the remote electronic voting system. They have provided a detailed six-step instruction[23] that allows voters to independently verify whether their vote was counted in the system and processed correctly.

In addition to Golos, which operates in 40 regions, the Citizen Observer project boasts a vast regional network of coordinators, with 32 branches in 28 Russian regions. There are also regional projects such as Observers of St. Petersburg, Observers of Dagestan, andAssociation of Observers of Tatarstan.

Hidden Data

Not only is observing elections becoming more challenging, but tracking results is also increasingly difficult. The Election Commission does not publish interim voting results. While this data is not classified, it is scattered, making automated collection extremely challenging. Special digital barriers prevent data scraping. Only a professional programmer can obtain a complete picture of voting results across all regions, and even then, it's a laborious task.

Moreover, officials' income and property declarations have become inaccessible. In 2022, Putin decreed the suspension of the publication of officials' income and property declarations during the "special operation." Those involved in the SMO or dispatched to LPR and DPR are even exempt from submitting reports. As of March 2023, property ownership data from the Federal Service for State Registration, Cadastre, and Cartography (Rosreestr) is also inaccessible. As a result, members of the Government and the State Duma no longer report to voters, and some have even retroactively deleted data on their income and property[24].

The issue of data concealment is particularly acute when it comes to Remote Electronic Voting (REV). Current problems with the REV, such as lack of transparency and security vulnerabilities, are based on the analysis of the Moscow platform. Despite the claimed use of blockchain technology, which implies decentralized data storage, it turned out that all data of Moscow's REV is stored on the servers of the Department of Information Technologies (DIT) and is divided into public and hidden databases. Technically, the system is highly opaque and concentrated in the hands of a single department.

After the 2021 elections, a statistical analysis of the REV results revealed[25] anomalies suggesting potential election result distortions. In short time intervals (5-10 minutes), the support level for the ruling party surged by 50%. These spikes were sharp and observed simultaneously in all 15 single-member districts, suggesting automated ballot stuffing. It was also noted that the number of ballots accepted by the electronic voting system always exceeded the number of ballots issued in each district.

When the REV's source code was open, programmer Petr Zhizhin discovered[26] a "loophole" in the blockchain that allowed "re-voted" ballots to be considered valid and any information to be added to the database, effectively "fabricating results," provided one had the key controlled by Moscow's DIT. From 2022, the source code of Moscow's REV was removed from public access.

What Motivates the Opposition

In Russia, the grassroots demand for democracy is more about a call for self-governance than for fair elections. Independent candidates run for office with the motivations of improving their communities, conveying self-empowerment to voters, and helping them voice pressing issues.

We should not expect radical changes from politicians at the regional level at present. However, they are working for long-term impact. Today's candidates, who run for offices amid increasing pressure and repression, primarily serve as role models.Such examples and support are crucial for the candidates themselves. As the dynamics of the rise and fall of opposition activity in Russia show, when there's a public demand, a critical mass of active politicians forms in response. Currently, there's no such wave. Russia's civil society is in decline and stagnation due to the Kremlin's closing grip of censorship and violent suppression, which lead to the fifth wave of Russian emigration comparable to the 'white' emigration after the Revolution and Civil War. Yet, many anticipate an impending wave of public activism. This expectation stems partly from the belief that overlooked internal issues will soon emerge, rallying civil activists. Additionally, as society processes the initial shock of war and adopts new coping mechanisms, change is anticipated. Given these factors, it's crucial to retain the collective experience and prepare now, even amidst mounting challenges.

Why Do the 2023 Elections Still Matter

We have collected responses from prominent Russian political experts and scholars to the question of whether the 2023 elections are important. Below are the select results of this exercise:

A Means of Legitimizing Power

> Grigory Yudin, *Sociologist, PhD in Philosophy, Professor*
>
> For the Russian government, elections are the cornerstone of their legitimization strategy. While this doesn't imply that Russia fully embraces democracy, its claim to legitimacy hinges on democratic principles. The government underscores that every decision it makes, from extending the presidential term to annexing Ukrainian territories, mirrors the people's will. Consequently, the nation's entire administrative apparatus is geared towards holding elections to sustain this veneer of democratic legitimacy.

Instrument for Politicizing Society

> Yulia Galyamina, *Politician, Co-founder of Zemsky S'ezd, Co-founder of the Soft Power movement*
>
> Elections offer a safe avenue for engaging people in socio-political life. The war is not a result of the Russian people's choice but a consequence of Putin's authoritarianism. The root cause of this authoritarianism is societal depoliticization, which encompasses not just abstaining from elections but also broader democratic and political engagement. This depoliticization is a strategically planned policy by those who have usurped power. Thus, elections are a step towards building an active civil society, the foundation for future changes. It's essential to draw people into politics and build a critical mass of individuals who, at a certain point, will become the driving force for change and protest.

A Massive Sociological Survey

> Alexander Kynev, *Political Scientist, Expert in regional political processes of Russia and CIS countries, party and electoral systems*
>
> Elections are not just a formality; they act as a "massive sociological survey" reflecting societal sentiments. Even considering all the issues of competition and power dependency, elections can serve as an indicator of the degree of societal control and its dynamics. They allow for gauging how homogeneous or diverse society is. Even an imperfect measurement tool can be useful if applied systematically.

A Key Tool for Understanding Regional Dynamics

> Stanislav Andreichuk, *Co-chair and Head of the Analytical Group of the Golos movement*
>
> Although federal-level elections haven't been a tool for power transition in the past two decades, they still play a pivotal role at the regional level. Beyond expressing opinions on current events and serving as a conflict resolution mechanism, elections provide a clearer picture of what's happening in the country. In an environment of censorship and many media outlets losing their regional networks, elections become the primary tool for understanding the real situation in the regions.

Opposition Strategies

Over the past eighteen months, there has been a significant increase in the number and severity of government repressions against independent and opposition candidates. Active participants in political life are denied registration or have their collected signatures rejected. Many face administrative cases and are designated as foreign agents, which prevents their nomination. They are frequently targeted by violence, including confiscation of campaign materials, raids, searches, and physical assaults. Standing against such pressure individually is nearly impossible, so opposition candidates resort to various collective action strategies.

Coalitions

A significant achievement of the non-systemic opposition was made as part of Moscow coalitions[27]. By joining forces to prepare and nominate candidates, in the 2017 municipal elections, the opposition has ensured that the United Russia party lost the majority in 25 out of 125 districts. In seven districts, not a single deputy from the ruling party was elected.

By the start of the 2022 municipal campaign, various platforms supported opposition candidates. However, they couldn't replicate the successes of 2017. For instance, the VyDvizhenie (Nomination) project secured nine mandates out of 129 candidates. Most seats were occupied by United Russia representatives and candidates from the government-loyal My District association. Despite the dominance of United Russia, in 2022, the VyDvizhenie platform evolved into a full-fledged coalition. Teams poised for election—district activists and youth keen on influencing their district's life—remained intact and continued their collaboration post-election. In 2023, the project did not participate in the election campaign.

The Novosibirsk 2020 coalition was founded in 2020 by active Novosibirsk citizens to counter the dominance of United Russia and the Communist Party in the city government. By uniting over 30 candidates,

the coalition managed to get its representatives elected to the city council in 4 districts and secured second places in 18. The city council emerged as a platform for active discussions, and citizens' interest in local politics significantly increased. Naturally, the coalition faced pressure from the authorities. Key coalition members have been forced to leave the country due to criminal cases, while others faced administrative and criminal prosecutions. Despite this, the coalition continues its work.

Electoral Franchise

In today's Russia, large systemic (pro-Kremlin) parties are often reduced to so-called "electoral franchises" due to a lack of ideology. Independent candidates are denied election participation ten times more frequently than United Russia members (see Appendix, p.2), and their numbers have halved over the past decade.

Joining a systemic party offers independent candidates a chance to participate in elections. Without such support, collecting signatures for regional elections is often unfeasible, and registering a real opposition party is nearly impossible. At the federal level, the nomination of undesirable candidates through franchises is thwarted. However, at the regional level, their chances are higher. The most successful examples of the "electoral franchises" use involve cases where coalitions and parties united.

Stop-Shies — an interregional coalition of political and environmental activists, emerged in 2019 against the backdrop of a two-year successful struggle to save the Shies station from the construction of a garbage landfill. Today, the coalition comprises 31 environmental movements of the Northwest. In 2021, to avoid collecting signatures, the coalition leader and co-founder Oleg Mandrykin joined the Yabloko and secured second place after a United Russia candidate. In February 2022, Mandrykin's office was searched on suspicion of tax evasion[28]. After that, the activist vanished from the public eye and left Russia[29].

This year, the opposition project Candidate Headquarters joined forces[27] with the non-parliamentary party Civil Initiative for joint participation in the autumn regional and municipal elections. The project identified candidates for local campaigns in New Moscow and the Moscow region, as well as for city council elections in Arkhangelsk, Belgorod, and Veliky Novgorod. Candidate Headquarters handled technical issues: legal support, signature collection, training, team formation, campaign development, and fieldwork. Civil Initiative nominated candidates and provided media support. As a result, two candidates from New Moscow settlements achieved second-place results after the threshold.

"Tactical Voting"

In 2011, Alexei Navalny's tactical voting strategy, which urged "vote for anyone but United Russia", deprived the ruling party of its constitutional majority in the State Duma. In 2019-2020, Navalny's team launched Smart Voting, a new service offering specific recommendations on preferred candidates who could challenge the dominance of United Russia in various districts. The service was available on a dedicated website, a Telegram bot, and the Navalny app. Before the 2021 State Duma elections, Roskomnadzor blocked the service's website, the bot, and ensured the app's removal. In 2022, the service was used exclusively for Moscow's municipal elections.

In 2023, Navalny's team adapted their Smart Voting strategy: it supported 25 single-mandate candidates (from Yabloko, New People, CPRF, and A Just Russia) and Yabloko list in the Yekaterinburg City Duma elections. The service operated through email newsletters and social networks. As a result, Yabloko doubled its previous year's result, reaching 9.3% — the best outcome for the party in Yekaterinburg since the 1990s. Konstantin Kiselev, the leader of Yabloko list with a clear anti-war stance, secured a seat in the City Duma. On average, Yabloko candidates from the Smart Voting list garnered 12.6%. Out of 15 candidates, 9 secured second places.

This year, tactical voting lists were also presented by the Novosibirsk 2020 coalition and the Zemsky S'ezd. The Zemsky S'ezd recommended 22 candidates from seven regions. Four were successfully elected: three from Yabloko and one independent candidate.

Preparation for 2024 Elections

In the run-up to the 2024 elections, the Kremlin is finetuning its electoral system and testing it in the new reality of the war. In this context, special attention is paid to online voting, its potential risks and benefits, and the Kremlin's strategy for mobilizing and demobilizing a certain electorate. In this section, we'll explore key aspects of this dynamic, starting with the concept of "costly bureaucracy" and ending with the strategy toward opponents.

Setting up the "Costly Bureaucracy"

For the Kremlin, the recent elections have provided an opportunity to test technological and substantive concepts that can be applied in 2024[30]. Firstly, they covered a vast number of regions and almost half of the country's voters. According to the Central Election Commission, the potential reach for the September 8-10 elections was up to 65 million voters — about 60% of Russians with voting rights. Secondly, these were the first large-scale and somewhat competitive elections held under new conditions: the SMO, international sanctions, and escalating international relations. Additionally, a new stratum has formed in society: people who have been impacted by the SMO and their families.

Regional elections have allowed the testing of tools for pressure and control, as well as the evaluation of technological solutions and opposition sentiments. Dmitry Peskov referred to the fine-tuning of the entire electoral machine as "costly bureaucracy". The fact that this bureaucracy is costly is a crucial component of the monopoly on power. Only the current government, controlling the country's budget, can afford to invest the resources needed to maintain acclamatory bureaucracy.

Harmless Opponents Under Control

The Kremlin prefers to hold elections without facing any viable opponents. However, this naturally results in a lower voter turnout, which is undesirable for presidential elections where high turnout is preferred. The Kremlin's primary task is to mobilize the loyal electorate while simultaneously demobilizing potentially protesting voters. As a result, the slate of candidates will likely support an illusion of diversity but remain predictable, with their actions under tight scrutiny.

New Pillar of Government Support

United Russia is a corporate and administrative party supporting the state bureaucracy. It targets budget-dependent groups like pensioners, teachers, and healthcare workers, as well as employees of corporations and administrative structures.

Today, a new category of electorate receiving social support and providing votes includes those who participate in or have been affected by the war. For local residents, contract service means about a tenfold increase in salary and becomes a social lifeline. Families of those affected also receive attention and social support. This becomes a foundation for supporting the SMO and the government that initiated it.

New Electoral Sultanates

To ensure an optimal voter turnout, there will likely be significant pressure exerted by the Kremlin. Earlier this year, annexed territories were swiftly integrated into the Russian political and legal system by amending the legislation. All four territories predictably became new "electoral sultanates" that deliver the desired pro-government results, regardless of the actual voting outcomes of the citizens. In Donetsk, the parliamentary election turnout was over 76%[31], with "United Russia" securing 78% of the votes[32]. The lowest turnout at the same level of elections was in the Kherson region — 65%, with 75% of votes for United Russia.

REV

The Central Election Commission has already confirmed that online voting will be used in the presidential elections. The platform will operate at the federal level but only in regions where it has already been tested. Thus, the REV will serve 40-45% of all voters in the country. Considering that this year only 7% of voters preferred online voting, even if this number rises to 10%, likely between 4-5% of all Russian voters would participate in REV. This equates to approximately 5-6 million votes coming predominantly from an administratively dependent electorate, which includes social workers, bureaucrats, and employees of state-owned or state-affiliated companies. These individuals often vote for the incumbent government due to pressure from their management.

The possibility to "fabricate" the results of electronic voting exists, but such an approach could be potentially dangerous for the authorities, especially in the long run. With offline voting, where the mechanism involves millions of people from commission members to budgetary workers, the entire "costly bureaucracy" apparatus must function cohesively. However, with online voting, achieving the desired result might only require a few programmers under the supervision of the FSB.

Thus, the Kremlin faces a dilemma: is it worth handing such a powerful tool to a limited number of people, bypassing the entire bureaucratic apparatus? This is especially risky for a leader who has been in power for over 20 years and faces challenges like a recent armed uprising and not-so-successful military actions. Potentially, the dominance of online voting could indicate serious systemic issues.

Appendix

Parties

Following the 2021 elections, five parties are represented in the State Duma: "United Russia" — the administrative party of power with a constitutional majority of 50% of the mandates, the Communist Party (CPRF) — 19%, LDPR — 7.6%, "A Just Russia" — 5.5%, and "New People" — 5.3%. The primary electoral competition usually occurs between these parties. The last four parties are system opposition: they are under the control of the presidential administration and are aware of their boundaries. However, they still have their electorate, minimal autonomy, and agency in political life[33].

The KPRF, a left-patriotic party, is far from the European understanding of left-wing ideas and combines them with social conservatism. Historically, it has always been close to the Russian military-industrial complex and security forces. In the regions, it's one of the most recognized platforms for nominating activists with a local protest agenda.

The right-populist LDPR, despite the passing of its founder Zhirinovsky last year, remains active, albeit at a regional level. Among its ranks is State Duma deputy Leonid Slutsky, who actively supports the "Special Military Operation". Otherwise, they engage in minor initiatives, from state numbers on scooters to combating mobile operator monopolies.

"A Just Russia" started as a left-centrist project but recently became known for its ultra-patriotism and support for Yevgeny Prigozhin. Now its position is very diluted, evident from its aimless pre-election campaign.

"New People" acts more as a right-centrist party and deals with "small matters" at the city level: they support businesses, proposing initiatives for the development of various sectors, from IT to urban management.

Apart from being system parties, these parties are also officially funded from the state budget: 152 rubles annually for each voter's vote based on parliamentary election results. According to the Central Election Commission report, in the first quarter of 2023, parties received 8.3 billion rubles in funds. "United Russia" received 4.8 billion rubles, KPRF — 1.6 billion, LDPR — 661 million, "A Just Russia" — 648 million, and "New People" — 467 million.

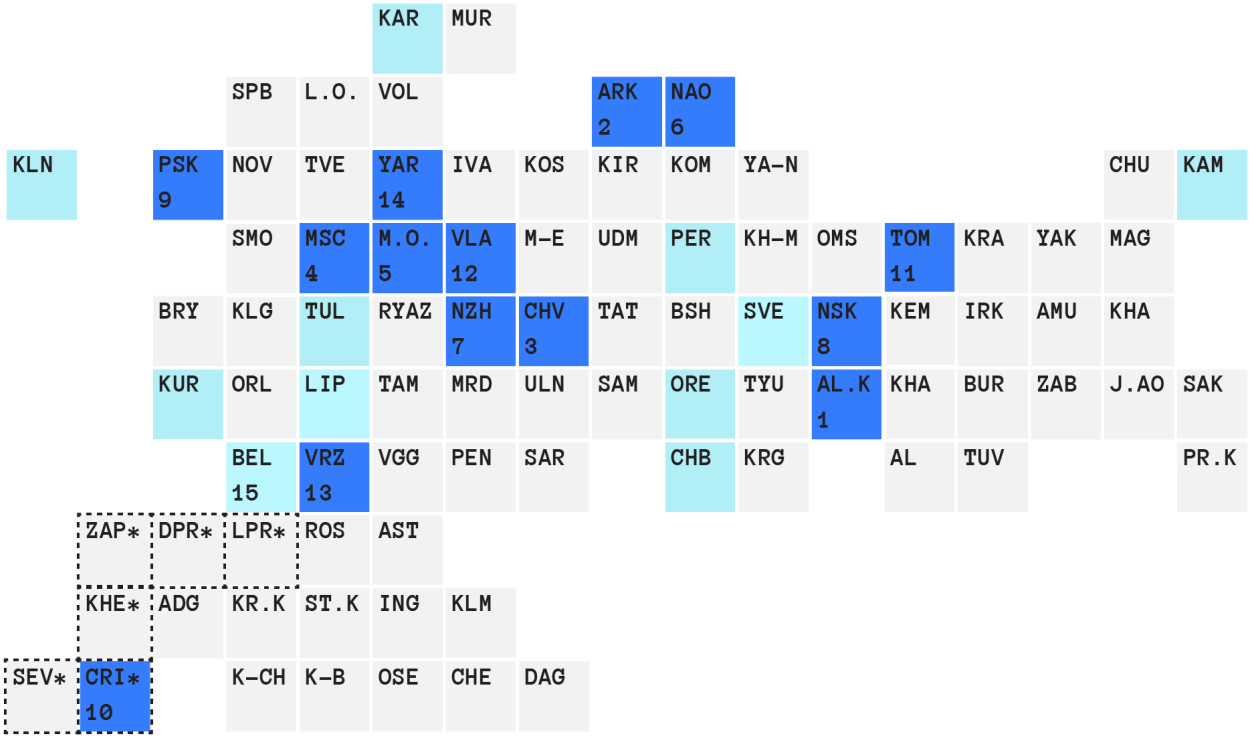
Among the non-parliamentary parties, the most well-known and active is the Russian United Democratic Party "Yabloko". It's the only party that openly advocated a pacifist program — all others, to varying degrees, supported the war. Occasionally, "Communists of Russia" and "Motherland" are also noticeable. In these elections, a candidate from the "Party of Pensioners" was successfully elected (by party list) as a deputy of the Ryazan City Duma.

Remote Electronic Voting

25 regions, including Moscow, have implemented the remote electronic voting system.

14 regions
All election levels

11 regions
Some election levels



1. Altai Krai
2. Arkhangelsk Oblast
3. Chuvash Republic
4. Moscow
5. Moscow Oblast
6. Nenets Autonomous Okrug
7. Nizhny Novgorod Oblast
8. Novosibirsk Oblast
9. Pskov Oblast
10. Republic of Crimea
11. Tomsk Oblast
12. Vladimir Oblast
13. Voronezh Oblast
14. Yaroslavl Oblast
15. Belgorod Oblast
16. Chelyabinsk Oblast
17. Kaliningrad Oblast
18. Kamchatka Krai
19. Kursk Oblast
20. Lipetsk Oblast
21. Orenburg Oblast
22. Perm Krai
23. Republic of Karelia
24. Sverdlovsk Oblast
25. Tula Oblast

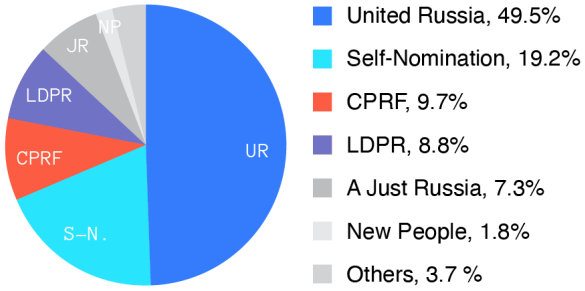
*Illegally occupied territories

Data: Central Election Commission of Russia

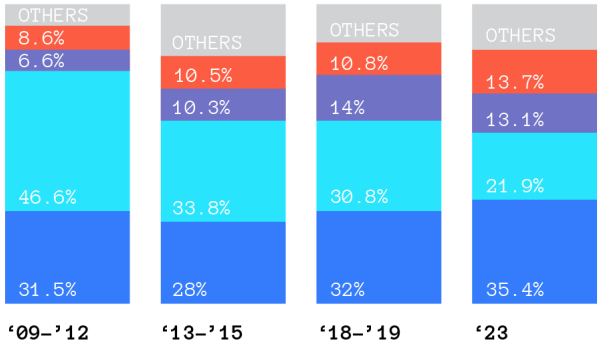
Parties participation

5 parliamentary parties are the most represented, while another seven parties, including Yabloko, account for less than 4% of all candidates.

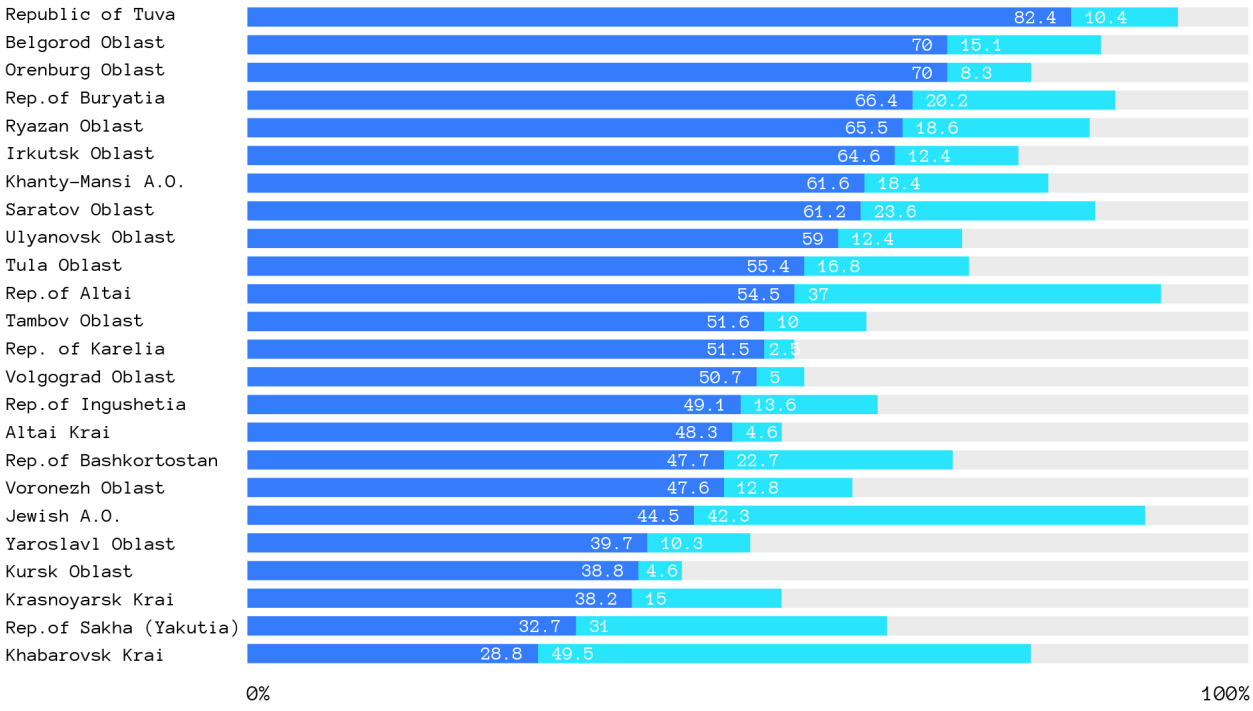
Candidate distribution by party affiliation in the 2023 elections at all levels:



Candidate distribution by party affiliation during regional elections at all levels from 2009 to 2023:



Candidate distribution by party and by region in the 2023 elections at all levels (regions with more than 20 campaigns)

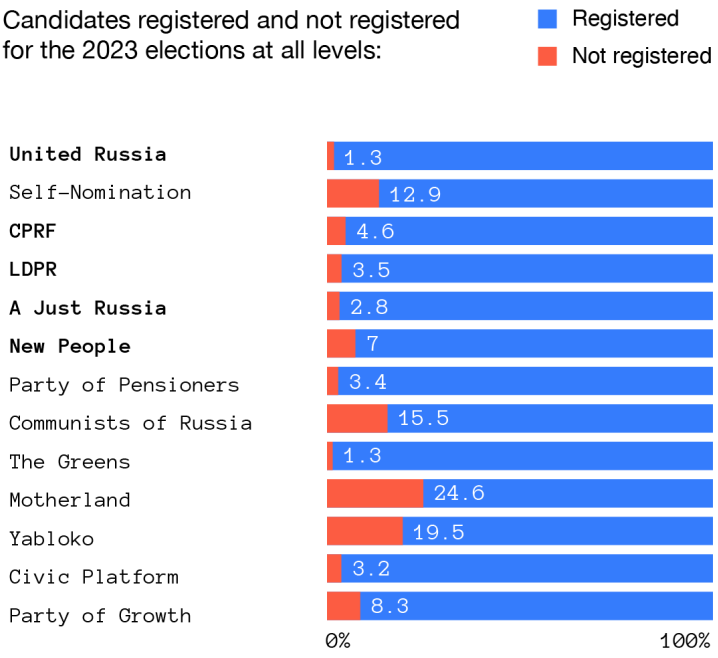


Data: Free Russia Foundation.
We limit our research to candidates who are nominated in the majoritarian part (in single-mandate and multi-mandate districts). All candidates who were nominated only by lists were not included in the sample. We analyzed 2,745 elections out of 4,270 and respectively 55,050 candidates out of 81,306.

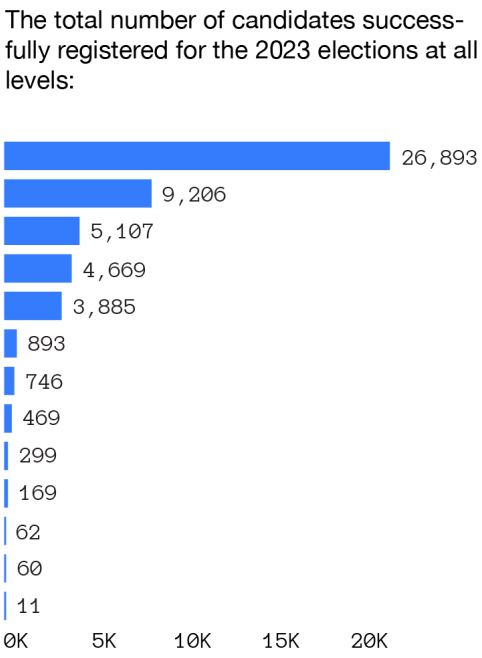
Rejected candidates

10x more rejections for self-nominated candidates compared to United Russia candidates.

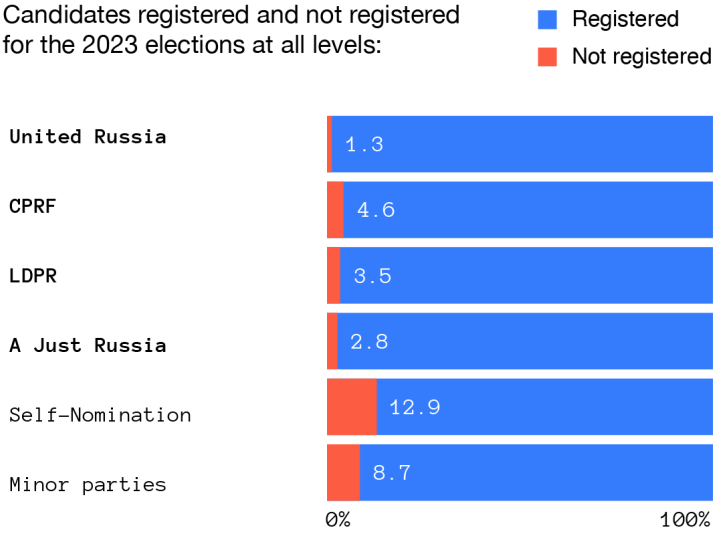
Candidates registered and not registered for the 2023 elections at all levels:



The total number of candidates successfully registered for the 2023 elections at all levels:



Candidates registered and not registered for the 2023 elections at all levels:



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