

# Research Reports

Research Group on 'Russia in an Era of Great Power Competition'

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"Research Reports" are compiled by participants in research groups set up at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, and are designed to disseminate, in a timely fashion, the content of presentations made at research group meetings or analyses of current affairs. The "Research Reports" represent their authors' views. In addition to these "Research Reports", individual research groups will publish "Research Bulletins" covering the full range of the group's research themes.

## The Stability and Vulnerability of the Putin Administration in the 2021 Russian State Duma Elections

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The State Duma elections were held in the Russian Federation from September 17-19, 2021. Unlike previous elections, in which there had been only one day to vote, the Duma elections were held during the three days and electronic voting was conducted in seven regions, including Moscow. Such methods had been adopted for the constitutional referendum and the local elections in 2020 in order to afford citizens the opportunity to vote during the coronavirus pandemic, and they were subsequently employed in the State Duma elections.

The elections resulted in a landslide victory for the ruling United Russia (UR), as many had expected. With the recent stagnant economy, which has been getting worse by the coronavirus pandemic, opinion polls showed that support for UR had declined. However, due to the fierce repression against opposition candidates, such as the arrest of Alexei Navalny, the elections were less competitive and UR won 324 seats, more than two-thirds of the total. This outcome represented a decrease of 19 seats from the previous elections in 2016, but it was satisfactory for the Putin administration in that the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution was secured.

In the following sections, we examine how the Putin administration managed to win the State Duma elections in the midst of UR's stagnant approval ratings, and what the electoral results mean for the Putin administration's future.

## United Russia's Low Approval Rating and Regime Repression

In Russia, power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of President Putin. It is symbolic that the constitutional amendment in 2020 enabled Putin to continue as president until 2036. On the other hand, the approval ratings of the administration and UR have declined in recent years. Putin's approval rating, which had remained high following the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, began to decline after the announcement of the pension reform in 2018. Furthermore, due to the introduction of a national lockdown in response to the spread of coronavirus infections, his approval rating dropped below 60% in May 2020 for the first time since his inauguration.

More serious is the decline in UR's approval rating. As shown in the figure below, a study conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (ВЦИОМ) shows that UR's approval ratings have been in a downward trend since 2008, dropping to 34% at the time of the 2011 State Duma elections. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, support for UR increased, but it has declined again in recent years. The impact of the 2018 pension reform was particularly significant, plunging UR's approval rating back into the mid-30% range again. The COVID-19 pandemic has also pulled this approval rating down to below 30%, which was the lowest level of support in UR's history.

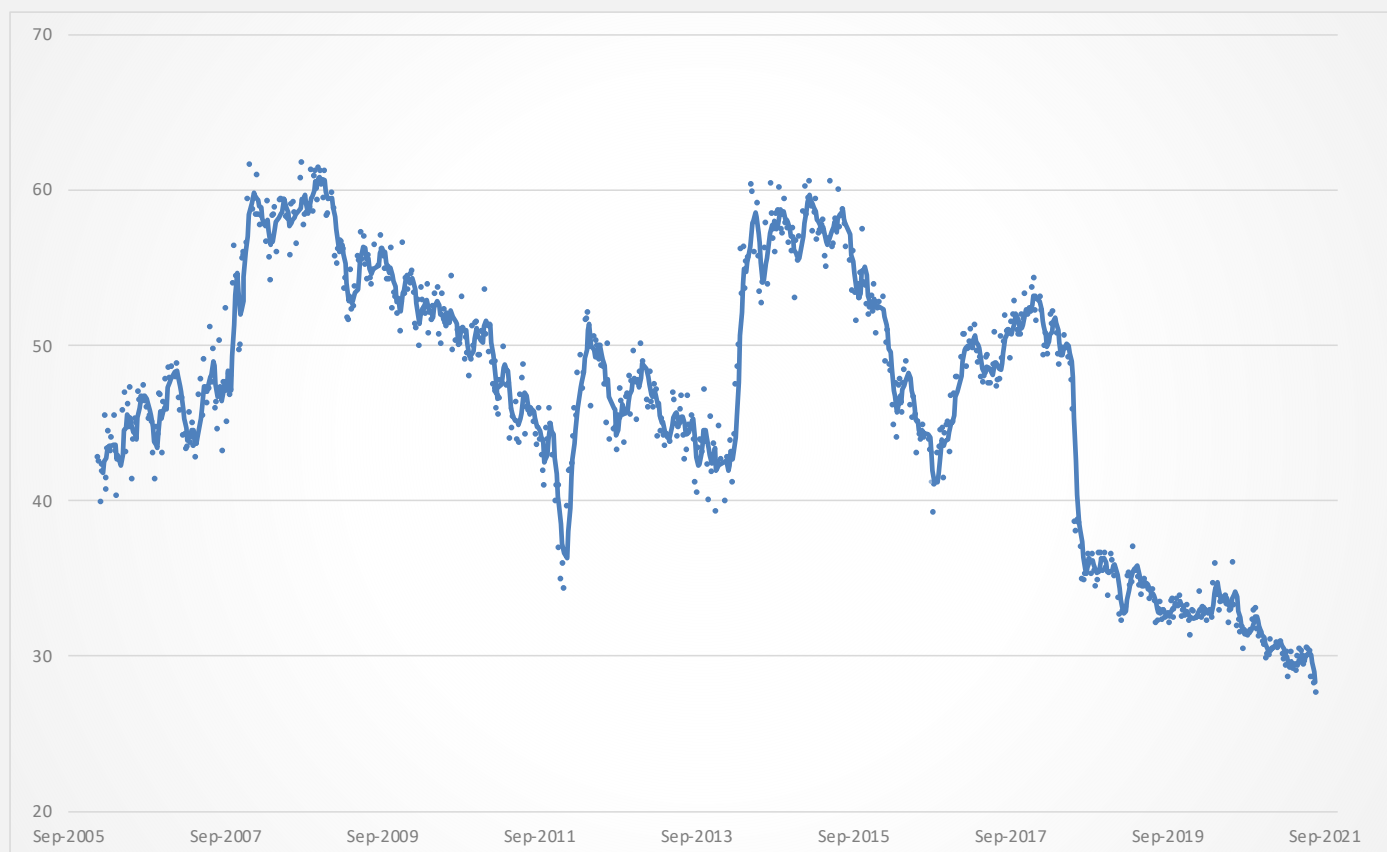


Figure 1: Approval ratings for United Russia (one-month moving average)

Source: Prepared by the author using data from ВЦИОМ

(<https://wciom.ru/ratings/reiting-politicheskikh-partii/>)

Forced to fight elections under these circumstances, the Putin administration responded by tightening its stranglehold on dissidents and opposition parties. Navalny, who had been receiving treatment in Germany following an attempted poisoning in the summer of 2020, was arrested at the airport upon his return to Russia in January 2021. A violation of the terms of his probation was cited as the reason for the arrest and the court subsequently decided to convert the conviction into a prison sentence. When protests broke out against Navalny's detention, authorities resorted to coercive measures and detained thousands of demonstrators. In addition, a law targeting Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation was passed in June. Under the law, leaders of organizations identified as "extremist" are deprived of their eligibility for election for five years, while others involved with these organizations are stripped of their eligibility for three years. [\*1] In fact, the Anti-Corruption Foundation was designated "extremist" immediately after the law was enacted, making it difficult for the foundation to continue its activities. Repression of opposition activities thus intensified in the run-up to the elections.

Repression by the regime also took the form of restrictions on candidates. For example, Pavel Grudinin, who ran as a Communist Party (CPRF) candidate in the 2018 presidential election and was expected to be number three on the party's list of candidates for the 2021 parliamentary elections, was dropped from the list because he had assets abroad. In the single-seat constituencies, self-nominated candidates lacking the support of a political party must collect the signatures of at least 3% of the electorate in their constituencies. Of the 174 candidates who sought to run in that fashion, only 10 were actually registered as candidates. [\*2] Aside from the difficulty of collecting signatures in excess of the minimal requirements, some candidates were denied registration for the elections because many of the signatures were deemed invalid by the Central Election Commission. Anton Furgal, the son of the jailed former Khabarovsk governor Sergei Furgal, was not allowed to run because 48.2% of the signatures were deemed invalid. [\*3] Thus, the regime has created an environment favorable to the ruling party.

## Election Results

Next, let's look at the election results. As in 2016, the 2021 State Duma elections were held using a mixed system, with 225 deputies elected by party list proportional representation (PR) and the remaining 225 in single member districts (SMD). According to the official election results released by the Central Election Commission, UR won a total of 324 seats, with 126 on the party list and 198 in SMD. Among the opposition parties, the CPRF and A Just Russia - For Truth won 57 seats (+15 seats) and 27 seats (+4 seats), respectively, while the Liberal Democratic Party won only 21 (-18 seats). [\*4] The four parties had been sharing seats ever since 2007, but the newcomer New People won 13 seats.

UR won 49.8% of the votes in PR, down 4.4% from the previous elections in 2016. However, its absolute share of the vote, i.e, its share of the overall electorate, was almost the same as in 2016, since the voter turnout was 51.7%, up 3.8% from 2016. Considering that UR's approval rating was below 30% in pre-election public opinion polls and that Sergei Kiriyenko, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration, mentioned that "the best-case scenario" for UR would be to win 45% of the proportional representation constituencies, the results were well within the administration's expectations. [\*5]

Looking at the results by region, UR received a high percentage of votes in the North Caucasus Federal District and the Southern Federal District, with the highest in Chechnya and other ethnic republics. Voter turnout was also high in these regions, indicating that the party retains a significant ability to mobilize the voters. On the other hand, UR received less than 30% of the vote in five regions, including Khabarovsk, where protests have continued since Furgal's arrest, and the Nenets Autonomous Region, where opposition arose against the planned merger with Arkhangelsk Oblast in 2020. In these regions, as well as four other regions including the republics of Mari El and Sakha, the CPRF won more votes than UR. Given the fact that there was no region in which UR received fewer votes than a rival party or less than 30% of the total vote count in the 2016 elections, these results illustrated the decline in voter support for UR.

Therefore, SMD became important for UR. In fact, it won 198 of the 225 single-member constituencies. Although it lost five seats vis-à-vis 2016, winning almost 200 seats in single-seat constituencies was of great significance for securing the 300 seats needed to make constitutional amendments. UR benefited from the SMD system, in which a candidate will be elected if he or she receives a plurality in the constituency.

Dissidents also recognized the importance of contesting SMD. Navalny has been promoting a "Smart Voting" strategy since 2018 in an effort to reduce UR's representation in SMD by encouraging disloyal voters to vote for the candidate most likely to beat the UR candidate. One aim was to increase the number of seats held by these parties and to strengthen the opposition's position in the parliament, the second-best option in a situation where opposition candidates are often blocked from running. Another goal of the Smart Voting strategy was to stop the widespread political apathy among voters. When the level of competition in elections decreases, voters lose interest in voting. In order to stop a decline in voter turnout that only favors the Kremlin, the strategy calls on voters critical of the regime to vote (Dollbaum & Noble 2021, 8). This strategy was seemingly effective to a certain degree in some local elections (Turchenko and Golosov 2021).

However, this approach was not successful in the 2021 State Duma elections, largely due to intensified repression by the regime. As noted above, the hurdles to running in SMD were high, and the activities of Navalny and his allies were constrained. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation was declared "extremist" and its Smart Voting app, which gives voters information on whom to vote for, was also removed from Apple's and Google's app stores on September 17. Under these circumstances, nearly all the candidates supported by the Smart Voting strategy ended up losing. [\*6]

UR's victory was attributable in great part to electoral fraud. In particular, the three-day voting period and the introduction of electronic voting are said to have had the effect of adding to the votes for UR candidates (GolosoV 2021). The share of votes cast for UR in Moscow was about 37%, but that of UR votes cast electronically was 44.8%, nearly eight percentage points higher. [\*7] Even though Smart Voting at polling stations in some Moscow districts had put the rival CPRF candidate in the lead, the electronic vote count reversed this lead in favor of the UR candidate in all these districts. The CPRF protested that these elections had been "stolen" from them and demanded that the results of electronic voting in Moscow be annulled. [\*8] Golos, an election monitoring organization, also pointed out restrictions on the right to political participation as well as irregularities in both voting and vote counting, and concluded that the elections were neither free nor fair nor in compliance with the Russian constitution and laws (Голос, 2021).

## Conclusion

The 2021 State Duma elections, which ended in a landslide victory for UR, will thus have two important implications for the current Putin administration. First, stability in parliamentary management was guaranteed until 2024, when Putin's current term expires. Having won an absolute majority in the State Duma in spite of the low approval rating was a desirable outcome for the administration. No matter who becomes president after 2024, UR's dominance in the parliament will be key for maintaining the current system.

Second, the election also contrarily highlighted the vulnerability of Putin's regime. In the 2000s, when UR built up its power base, voters supported it and the Putin administration because they had realized economic growth and improved people's living standards (McAllister and White 2008). However, the current Putin administration does not have much to offer to the people as the economy continues to slump and a sense of stagnation prevails in the society. It was this context that led to more repressive measures than ever taken by the regime in these elections. Problems such as regime repression and electoral fraud have existed for a long time in Russian elections, but the fact that they have been carried out on a larger scale than before is a sign that the legitimacy of Putin's government is declining.

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<sup>1</sup> Федеральный закон от 04.06.2021 N 157-ФЗ "О внесении изменений в статью 4 Федерального закона "Об основных гарантиях избирательных прав и права на участие в референдуме граждан Российской Федерации" и статью 4 Федерального закона "О выборах депутатов Государственной Думы Федерального Собрания Российской Федерации" ([http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_386199/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_386199/))

<sup>2</sup> However, such restrictions were also seen in the 2016 elections when single-seat constituencies were restored. In the last election, only 23 out of 304 candidates were registered. Although the percentage of registered candidates was higher in 2021, the difference was small and, more importantly, the number of candidates seeking to run as independents had decreased significantly in the first place.

«Самовыдвижение средней тяжести» *Коммерсантъ*. 14 августа 2021 г.

(<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4945452>)

<sup>3</sup> «Сын за отца не избирается» Коммерсантъ. 14 августа 2021 г. (<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4945461>)

<sup>4</sup> A Just Russia absorbed both For Truth and Patriots of Russia in January 2021 and changed its official name to A Just Russia - For Truth.

<sup>5</sup> «Кремль назвал оптимальным результатом «Единой России» на выборах в Госдуму 45% по спискам при явке 45%» *Эхо Москвы*. 21 января 2021г. (<https://echo.msk.ru/news/2777532-echo.html>)

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