

By Eva Hartog

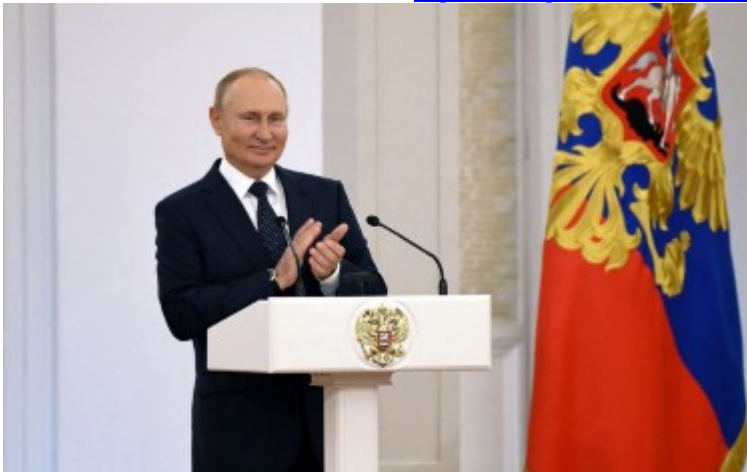
## Putin's United Russia wins vote — as designed — amid hints of discontent

The vote is a rare bellwether of Russia's political reality, after a year that has seen an unprecedented crackdown on dissent.

*Путінська "Єдина Росія" виграє голосування - як і було задумано - на тлі  
натяків на невдоволення*

*Правляча російська партія "Єдина Росія" здобула переконливу перемогу у виборах, які назвали найрепресивнішим з часів СРСР. Одним з порушень було залучення виборців з так званих ЛНР та ДНР -двох регіонів на сході України, підконтрольних підтримуваним Москвою сепаратистам. За даними незалежних ЗМІ, деяким виборцям видали російські паспорти саме тоді, коли вони чекали своєї черги.*

<https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-united-russia-election-majority/>



Russian President Vladimir Putin / Valery Melnikov/AFP via Getty Images

MOSCOW — Russia's ruling United Russia party on Sunday secured a landslide win in a vote that has been dubbed the most repressive since Soviet times.

But the long road it took to get there suggests all is not well in the Kremlin's self-fashioned paradise.

With some 85 percent of ballots counted as of Monday morning, United Russia — which backs Russian President Vladimir Putin — had won 50 percent of the vote, appearing to lose some seats in parliament but paving the way for it to retain its majority.

While gaining ground, the Communist Party still trailed far behind, with 20 percent. The nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and the A Just Russia Party, the fourth nominal opposition party in Russia's docile parliament, the Duma, stayed below 10 percent. A new party, A New People, appeared to have just exceeded the 5-percent barrier needed to enter parliament.

While ballots were still being counted on Monday morning, there was little chance of a last-minute upset.

Three days of voting — an extended period the authorities claim is meant to prevent a spread of the coronavirus, but critics argue facilitates vote-rigging — brought with it a litany of violations.

In Moscow, results from electronic voting had still not been made public after 12 hours, a delay that critics decried as a sign of tampering.

And as in previous elections, footage shared on social media showed brazen ballot stuffing and harassment of observers. At least one new tactic also surfaced — the use of pens with disappearing ink, presumably in order to “correct” ballots after they had been cast.

Another first was voters being bused in from the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics — two regions in eastern Ukraine under the control of Moscow-backed separatists. According to independent media, some voters were issued their Russian passports right as they were awaiting their turn.

From the more than 4,500 violations the independent election monitor Golos[registered](#), Russia’s Central Elections Committee confirmed only a minuscule fraction.

And for the first time since the Soviet Union’s collapse, election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe were absent after the Russian authorities capped the number of observers allowed to attend.

It was the culmination of months of machinations by the Russian authorities that left some Russians and media outlets refusing to use the term “election” altogether.

“This was a carnival,” Kremlin adviser turned critical political analyst GlebPavlovsky told the TV Dozhd television channel.

In the months preceding the vote, Russian authorities used every trick in the box to keep opponents off the ballot and crush Kremlin critics.

Signaling the end of an era in which real opposition was barred from mainstream politics but was more or less tolerated, high-profile Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny was jailed and his movement outlawed as “extremist.”

The one hope remaining for opposition-leaning Russians was Navalny’s “Smart Voting” strategy. Through online platforms and lists, Navalny’s team issued voting advice to support candidates most likely to defeat United Russia in specific electoral districts. The logic: In an election where the real opposition was set up to fail, at least United Russia should not be allowed an uncontested victory.

Seemingly jittery, Russian authorities in recent days ramped up efforts to fight Navalny’s tactical voting plan. The day voting began, U.S. tech firms Google and Apple limited access to the Smart Voting app, reportedly after receiving threats from the Russian authorities that local staff could be prosecuted.

On the eve of the main voting day on Sunday, Google also blocked one of Navalny’s videos on YouTube, which featured the names of candidates at the authorities’ behest.

Both Apple and Google have so far not commented.

Even Telegram, an encrypted messaging service popular with dissenters in authoritarian countries, limited access to Navalny's information channels.

Those concessions bode ill for Russia's opposition. Critics of the authorities have long relied on foreign, or encrypted, platforms to get their message out. YouTube especially is a core amplifier of Navalny's corruption investigations.

Now those platforms appear to be siding with a repressive government. "They have opened Pandora's box. All of this will end badly," Navalny ally Leonid Volkov said on Telegram.

Under Putin's personified ruling style, the Duma has been reduced to a supporting role and the three-day parliamentary vote was never likely to produce a real shift in policy.

And yet the vote is a rare bellwether of Russia's political reality — after a year which has seen an unprecedented crackdown on dissent and ahead of the end of Vladimir Putin's next term in 2024.

"Putin needs these elections to reaffirm the legal authority of his regime, including to the elite, who must not be exposed to any temptation to start casting around in search of a successor," political analyst Tatiana Stanovaya, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, recently [wrote](#).

For years, United Russia has been the bedrock of Putin's rule. In 2016, riding a wave of patriotism following the annexation of Crimea, it managed to secure a supermajority, with almost three-quarters of 450 seats.

But a series of unpopular measures — such as an increase in the retirement age in 2018 — and few high points to make up for it, has seen support drop. And the preliminary election results suggest that at least part of the electorate is looking for an alternative. Before the vote, state pollsters reckoned support for United Russia hovered around 30 percent — the lowest number in at least a decade.

"The slow erosion of the party of power as a key pillar of the regime is exacerbating fears for the future and, more interestingly still, is devaluing Putin's role as the chief hardliner and guarantor of stability," according to Stanovaya.

That could explain the increase for the Communist Party, from 13 percent to 20. In absence of any real opposition, it has been cast by voters as the only party which might offer some resistance.

The question is whether, in Russia's tightly managed political system, it will be allowed to play the part.

"Voting for the Communist Party is a new type of protest vote," says political analyst Yekaterina Schulmann in a TV Dozhd broadcast. "The party has strayed off its patch, the question is what will follow."