

# Russia's opposition parties fail to win broad support in regional elections

By Andrea Peters  
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Regional elections held last weekend in Russia have returned broad majorities to the ruling United Russia (UR) party and its political affiliates. Kremlin-backed candidates held onto governorships and control of local parliamentary bodies in the 83 regions of the country where voting occurred.

Despite widespread discontent with the government over the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, anger over the economic crisis hitting the country, and emerging signs of political opposition in areas of Russia, opposition candidates failed to make headway except in a handful of municipal races in Siberia.

In Arkhangelsk, the far northern region that has been the site of protests over the stationing of a large landfill in the ecologically sensitive area, the Kremlin-backed gubernatorial candidate garnered 69 percent of the vote.

In Komi Republic, the neighboring province that shares the borderland where the dumping ground is to be built, the Stalinist Communist Party (KPRF)—considered the main challenger—won just 14.9 percent of the vote for the regional assembly. While United Russia saw its support cut in half compared to five years ago, it will continue to be the dominant force in the Komi state council because of the election of allied candidates and the role played by so-called “spoiler parties,” new political outfits set up with the Kremlin's support that drew votes away from the KPRF.

In the Siberian city of Irkutsk, where another Communist Party candidate was vying for the governorship against an incumbent who had been installed by Moscow after the “forced-voluntary” removal of the previous KPRF leader, the Kremlin-backed Igor Kobzev won 70 percent of the vote.

In the Republic of Tatarstan, sitting President Rustem Minnikhanov will continue to hold office. To little electoral effect, just prior to last weekend's vote Alexei Navalny's anticorruption organization published details from its investigation into the Minnikhanov family's real estate operations.

The electoral efforts made by Navalny—the Kremlin oppositionist currently hospitalized in Germany due to an alleged poisoning that Western government and media outlets are pinning on the Putin government—saw modest success in just two regions. In the southwestern Siberian cities of Novosibirsk and Tomsk, a handful of Navalny-backed candidates won seats on local councils.

Across Russia, turnout was generally low, an expression of the population's fears over coronavirus and disenchantment with the entire political system, those in power and their supposed opponents. In Novosibirsk, just 28 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. In Tomsk, that number stood at 19 percent. In Arkhangelsk, Irkutsk, the Komi Republic turnout hovered around 28 to 30 percent.

The “official” and “unofficial” opponents of the Putin government—an admixture of Stalinists, far-right nationalists, Kremlin insiders, and pro-Western free marketeers—have thus far failed to win mass, active political support. Whatever the disgust felt towards the current Russian president and his political adjuncts in the regions, millions instinctively sense that the KPRF, the far-right LDPR, the “opposition” Just Russia party, and all the various other political permutations have very little different to offer.

The so-called “liberal” opposition grouped around Navalny and other outfits like the Yabloko party continue to be correctly viewed as allies of Western imperialism and proponents of right-wing

socio-economic policies whose main aim is not to secure prosperity for Russia's working masses but profit for sections of the capitalist class. The recent, near-fatal illness of Navalny, which Germany in particular has seized upon as a cudgel to wield against President Putin, did not bring sympathetic voters to the polls. Navalny's "smart voting" program—by which voters were encouraged to vote for "anyone but Putin" and given a list of candidates for whom to cast their ballots—appears to have had little impact on the current election cycle.

An investigative commission set up by the federal Duma, Russia's parliament, declared Wednesday that it had uncovered foreign interference in the regional elections, ranging from "ballot stuffing" to "disinformation on social media" to "round-the-clock hacker attacks on the Central Election Commission." Commission Chairman Vasily Piskarev said that "NGOs from Germany, France, and Poland conducted a series of online seminars and educational courses with the involvement of American and Lithuanian political strategists, including on the organization of provocations in the course of observing the elections."

The electoral victory of United Russia at last weekend's polls does not resolve the political crisis confronting Putin. Coronavirus cases are once again climbing, with there now being more than one million recorded infections and nearly 6,000 deaths in just the last 24 hours. The murderous "herd immunity" policy being implemented everywhere in the world is also in place in Russia, and it is reaping its predictable harvest. Earlier this week, news broke that Russian opera star Anna Netrebko has been hospitalized with COVID-19, after a series of early September performances at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater. Schools have been reopened across the country with no virtual precautions in place and no plans for a potential move back to online classes.

At the same time, Russia is confronting intensifying geopolitical pressures over Navalny's alleged poisoning and the eruption of antigovernment protests in the allied state of Belarus. This week, the European Union announced that it will no longer recognize Alexander Lukashenko as the legitimate president of Belarus after his term expires in November.

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