DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 13.09.2023 | Alexey Yusupov

Russia's show elections

Over the weekend, Russia held another election, with expected results. But beneath the surface lurk clues to the 2024 presidential election

Over the weekend, Russia held another election. In other words, it held the so-called 'Unified Election Day', which bundles together various votes at municipal, city and regional levels once a year and is an important domestic political event in the complex, formal-federal structure of the Russian Federation. Voters were invited to elect 21 regional chiefs, 16 regional and 12 city parliaments, as well as a number of municipal bodies. In total, 4,000 individual election campaigns were conducted.

In the third Putin decade, and with a repressive machinery ramped up beyond precedent even for the last few years, one sometimes wonders why the rulers of the Russian Federation still allow 'elections' at all. Candidates as well as voters and election observers have to shimmy their way along ever new bans and regulations. Nevertheless, elections are part of the indispensable plebiscitary equipment of the system. Local elections in particular open up spaces for discontent and the articulation of social problems, which can be taken up by those in power without putting the actual question of power up for grabs.

The initial projections show that so far, everything is going according to plan.

Elections also serve to demonstrate the unbroken popularity of Putin and his elite to the state apparatus – and must consequently not be one hundred per cent manipulated. Finally, just like constitutional jurisdiction and federalism, they are part of the institutional self-image of Russian 'democracy' led from above: authoritarian in structure, but not despotic, harsh against opponents of the regime, but not illegitimate. However, the balancing act between cementing the monopoly on power and regularly acquiring legitimacy is becoming increasingly difficult.

The initial projections show that so far, everything is going according to plan. All previous incumbents at the governorate level remain in power, United Russia as the Kremlin party is clearly leading, even in the occupied regions of Ukraine, despite only partial territorial control and chaotic conditions in the registration system. In the annexed territories, election day was considered 'successfully conducted'. Nevertheless, it is worth taking a longer look at the peculiarities of these elections, because underneath the surface of the routine, the course is being set for the presidential election in March 2024.

A normalisation trap

Conditions in Russia are not exactly ideal, which is the reason for such a pseudo-democratic performance. The Russian population's nervousness is rising (such emotional social states, unlike political attitudes, can be studied quite well sociologically). There is no or only bad news from the front, rumours of a coming second wave of mobilisation are spreading, the rouble is falling and concerns about a new inflationary shock are manifesting. The increasing number of drone attacks and the violent end of Yevgeny Prigozhin and his mutiny are fuelling fears for the future.

Despite all this, the Russian government has made great efforts not to forego the election. This is part of the Kremlin's still ongoing 'normalisation strategy'; efforts are being made to strengthen the impression that they can afford a long war and, in parallel, an orderly, planned mundanity in the political sphere, thereby dispelling the impression of over-exertion. The successful holding of the 'Unified Election Day' increases the likelihood that the presidential election will also be held next year. Until now, it was considered conceivable that the Kremlin could postpone Putin's re-election for another six-year term until a more convenient time, with reference to the war. But that would mean officially accepting the exceptional nature of the current situation and officially confirming it as real – something that continues to be undesirable, definitely also out of concern for cascading effects of uncertainty in the lulled, stability-centred population.

Analogue voting has become too inconvenient for the regime.

And so, these elections are something like a great test balloon for 2024. Two important instruments from the time of the pandemic, which were introduced at that time as population protection measures, were increasingly used this time as instruments of manipulation: on the one hand, 'electronic remote voting', a kind of internet election, and

on the other hand, the extension of the time for voting to a whole three days. What originally actually led to fewer people meeting each other in the polling stations has now become a convenient forgery tool, because electronic voting eludes any third-party verification, while the extended voting time allows physical manipulations of ballots and ballot boxes to be carried out undisturbed, especially at night.

Particularly in the case of 'electronic remote voting', it can be assumed that this will encompass more and more segments of the population and that by the time of the presidential election in 2024, up to half of those eligible to vote will only be able to register to vote digitally. Analogue voting has become too inconvenient for the regime.

Elections were also held in the occupied or illegally annexed territories of Ukraine, thus completing another step towards the incorporation of the new 'constituent states' into the Russian state system. United Russia triumphed here, too, across the board. The degree of disregard for the current legal situation is remarkable: some polling stations were closed without further ado at noon after 'reaching the necessary turnout', and Ukrainian passports and driving licences were accepted as proof of identity. The whole thing was garnished with propaganda about the 'heroic voters' who were fulfilling their civic duty despite shelling and bombardment.

No desire for war rhetoric

In contrast, it is similarly remarkable how strikingly unpopular war issues were in the election campaigns within Russia's recognised borders. While United Russia was still nominating veterans and organising solidarity campaigns with the fighting troops at the beginning of the agitation campaigns, the restrained reactions of the electorate in the course of the last weeks showed that most voters reject this kind of direct confrontation with the war in their everyday lives. Thus, towards the end of the election campaign, one could observe how United Russia candidates increasingly concealed their frontline experiences and erased them from their CVs, while the focus of public events shifted more and more to 'soft' issues, such as fundraising for the families of soldiers, and to concrete local issues.

Apathy and fatalism are allies of the Kremlin when

This is the price the Kremlin has to pay for its 'normalisation strategy'. A demobilisation of its own population practised over decades leaves its

it wants to stop Russians from doing something, but they become major obstacles when the system suddenly wants to demand active allegiance.

mark; it is not only directed exclusively against potential dissent, but it also corrodes its own base of supporters in the same way. Apathy and fatalism are allies of the Kremlin when it wants to stop Russians from doing something, for example anti-war protests. Nevertheless, they become major obstacles when the system suddenly wants to demand active allegiance. The war remains an elite project, difficult to communicate to people struggling in the local labour market and infrastructure.

In the West, it is often argued that as long as Russian popular support for the war does not wane, the Kremlin has no reason to stop. This is a strangely unrealistic notion of will-formation in non-democratic systems. The causal effect in a postmodern autocracy like today's Russia is an exactly opposite one – it is not the desire of the population that changes policy, but the change of course at the top that changes majority opinion. And until then, United Russia will remain unshakably in first place. This should not surprise us.



Alexey Yusupov

Alexey Yusupov heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Russia programme. He was previously the FES' office director in Myanmar, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. He also supports political actors as an adviser and moderator.