**Russia Election Alert #2**

**The outcome of the regional elections in Russia (8th September 2019) and the violations encountered by independent observers**

**More than five thousand elections on different levels were held in Russia on September 8, on the so-called single voting day. Russian citizens were electing governors of 16 Russian regions, deputies of 13 regional parliaments, mayors of cities, councilors of city and municipal councils. The average turnout was 41.2%, which slightly exceeded last year's turnout. In gubernatorial elections, all candidates designated and supported by the Kremlin have won in the first round, including president Putin's close associate Alexandr Beglov in St Petersburg. However, in the elections to the regional and city councils, where there was relative competition between parties, United Russia scored much less than in previous elections – 16% less on average. The greatest losses United Russia suffered were in the Khabarovsk Oblast (44.5% less votes compared to previous elections), Mari El Republic (30% less), illegally annexed Crimea (22.5% less) and Sevastopol (almost 40% less). United Russia's most publicized failure has been the Moscow City Council election – the proportion of United Russia deputies there decreased from 85% to 55%[1]. This result can be considered a relative success of the 'smart vote' strategy promoted by Alexei Navalny, i.e. the call to vote for indicated candidates from all parties except United Russia.**

**Numerous gross violations of the standards of democratic elections were reported by independent observers**, the most serious concerning the gubernatorial elections and elections of deputies in Moscow, St Petersburg, Tatarstan and Tuva. **The number of violations reported by observers and members of commissions on the election day has quadrupled compared to last year's elections**. Representatives of the media, observers, and members of commissions with an advisory vote, whose task was to monitor the compliance with the procedures, were obstructed in making photos and videos, refused to familiarize themselves with the documents of the commission, and their movement around the polling stations was prohibited. Several cases of **attacks on observers** were recorded. All this was accompanied by **a media campaign discrediting public observation**. Observers of the Golos movement were accused of entering outdated information in their 'Map of violations' crowdsourcing service. Golos representatives argue that outdated information was deliberately entered in this system as part of a provocation that allowed the Central Election Commission to immediately accuse Golos of irregularities and point to concrete erratic data. At least four Golos observers were temporarily arrested, three of them faced searches.

The experts assess that **electoral rights of citizens are being systematically curbed**, and this includes **the restriction of competition by restricting the candidates' passive suffrage** (such as the 'municipal filter' in gubernatorial elections that enables blocking almost any candidate)**, the artificial constraining of freedom of expression, censorship, lack of political pluralism, pressure on candidates and their supporters, biased stance of electoral commissions, as well as forcing large groups of voters to participate in the election**.

On the election day, election commissions continued to massively violate the procedures for counting votes, which made the assessment of its fairness very difficult. During vote count, the most notorious and glaring violations were **infringements of the statutory procedure for counting votes, delays in the count, failing to count the ballots by shifting them and showing marks to all the present observers**.

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[1] From 38 to 25 deputies (out of total 45).

Moreover, election commissions notoriously refused to accept statements and complaints filed by observers, which is another violation of the fair elections standards.

Apart from the biased election commissions, **a novelty factor in the 2019 election campaign was an excessive role of law enforcement bodies,** who meddled in the course of the elections at all stages: the refusals to register candidates were often based on the findings and data of the Ministry of Interior, police actions interfered with the campaigning of candidates, and on the day of voting their inaction actually prevented observation and covered up possible fraud.

The so-called **administrative resource** (the use of official positions and connections to government institutions to influence the outcome of elections) was abused in a systematic and institutionalized way. Since almost all real competitors had been already excluded from running, the administrative resource was mainly directed at **mobilizing the electorate which is dependent on the state** (workers of state companies, teachers etc.) by using **administrative coercion and bribery**.

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*This text is part of a series of EPDE Policy Alerts on election processes in the Russian Federation. It focuses on legal framework, performance of election management bodies and positions of main political actors. Please feel free to forward and share our analysis.*

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