

RUSSIA POLICY ALERT #10

Single Voting Day 2022 held amid war and restrictions of fundamental freedoms

During Russia's multi-day local and regional elections held from September 9 to 11, 2022 - the so-called "Single Voting Day" - 4,728 municipal elections were held in Russia, including elections for heads of 14 regions, deputies to six regional parliaments and numerous local elections. The elections were held under conditions of censorship and restrictions on freedom of assembly, exclusion of entire social groups from the possibility of running for office as well as massive repression of political opponents, independent media and election observers. Voting that lasted up to three days, a lack of transparency in the work of election commissions, increasingly widespread electronic voting, and restrictions on access to footage of video cameras at polling stations greatly hampered independent monitoring. Russia's leading election watchdog organization "The Movement for Defence of Voters' Rights Golos" stressed that it was impossible to determine the true will of voters. Just days after the vote, some candidates called the election rigged and refused to accept seats.



Executive Summary

On the so-called Single Voting Day (SVD), September 9 – 11, 2022, 4,728 elections took place in Russia, including elections for the heads of 14 regions, deputies to six regional parliaments, and numerous local elections.

The SVD in Russia was conducted amid the ongoing war against Ukraine and restrictions on fundamental freedoms at home.

Overall, freedom of speech and expression are under attack as independent voices and sources of information have been systematically shut down. Simultaneously, the election conditions were fundamentally unfair, as candidates were blocked from participating. They were blocked either at the registration stage or via commission decisions to suspend certain candidates.

Elections have also become less transparent with the Central Election Commission (CEC) blocking access to information concerning the course of voting or results. This obstruction of information has included making data on electronic voting, as well as the live video broadcast from polling stations, unavailable this year. The three-day voting has also made public oversight over the elections more difficult. Additionally, the rights of observers, media, and candidate representatives were violated on the voting days, with instances of violence being used against observers.

This intense suppression and procedural issues led to low interest and participation in these elections. Turnout has fallen in many cases, even in comparison with its low figures for the same elections five years ago.

Russian leading election watchdog “The Movement for Defence of Voters’ Rights Golos” stressed that, under these conditions, it is impossible to determine the actual will of the voters. A few days after the vote, some candidates have already called the elections rigged and refused to accept their mandates (candidates from the Communist Party lists in Krasnodar and Moscow).

On the SVD, September 11, 2022, 4,728 elections took place in Russia, including elections for the heads of 14 regions, deputies to six regional parliaments, and numerous local elections.

Voting took place in the context of a restriction of the space for free expression and a massive attack on the remnants of freedom of speech in Russia. The voting process

at polling stations was accompanied by numerous scandals and reports of violations of electoral legislation.

A significant number of citizens has been deprived of the opportunity to receive alternative political information and to freely express their opinions. This deprivation was done both technologically and substantively. Technologically by blocking a large number of media outlets and social networks not controlled by the authorities. Substantively through police and judicial persecution of those who dare to publicly criticize the actions of the authorities.

Unconstitutional restrictions on the right to be elected have narrowed the pool of registered candidates, and as a result, some political forces have been cut off from legal participation in the electoral process. The decrease in electoral competition was also affected by the explicitly politically motivated nature of many CEC decisions to suspend candidates. For example, reasons given for suspensions included "extremism" and "discrediting the army". Another factor for the reduced competition was the increased pressure on the opposition, which has been turning into political repression.

Relatedly, media coverage of election campaigns was virtually absent. Many of the candidates did not make even minimal efforts to mark their presence in the electoral process. Simultaneously, the use of administrative resources to create advantages for pro-government candidates for campaigning became practically uncontrollable. Official government portals have become virtually indistinguishable from state-owned media, and together they have become an apparatus for the promotion of administrative candidates at the expense of taxpayers.

Before the 2022 elections, public oversight of elections was significantly undermined by legal changes. Non-voting members of election commissions, who had the right to get acquainted with the documents of election commissions and were the most convenient legal status for observation of the voting process, were abolished. Furthermore, The CEC created obstacles to free access to official information about the course of voting and its results. Instead of introducing machine-readable formats for the presentation of election results, mechanisms have been applied that prevent the downloading and analysis of electoral data. In addition, public video surveillance was abandoned, yet it had become an integral part of voting at polling stations during the 10 years of its use.

The voting itself took place in different regions, according to different rules. Some voting procedures took place in one day, whereas others lasted over two days. However, in most cases, the procedure was stretched over three days, which created additional difficulties for public control. In eight regions, a system of remote electronic voting (referred to as "Distant Electronic Voting" or DEV) was used,

provoking criticism from observers and opposition candidates. There are currently no mechanisms to verify the validity of the results of such voting, and there was a multitude of reports of coercing voters to participate in electronic voting.

The practice of pressure on members of commissions, candidates, observers, proxies and media representatives, including via force, has returned to a significant level. On the voting days the candidates, their representatives, and journalists faced mass limitations of their rights: movement around the polling station, photography and video shooting, and access to the documents of election commissions were all prohibited. The practice of extrajudicial removal of observers from polling stations by police also intensified. Cases of beating and other forceful acts on observers have been recorded.

The rhetoric of hatred aired by the senior persons of the electoral system toward civil observers created a corresponding atmosphere in the lower commissions. Observers and members of commissions started to perceive each other as enemies and expect mutual provocations. The commissions stopped reacting to official complaints in a meaningful way, dragging out their considerations, and replying with formal replies or formulaic answers. Police officers seldom reacted to the appeals of observers about the violations by commission members.

The coercion of voters to participate in elections has become a characteristic problem of Russian elections. In 2022, most information about coercion came from Moscow. In the capital, the main administrative mobilization was carried out on a working Friday, when budget employees were forced to vote through the DEV. Employees had to confirm their voting to the management or vote under their supervision right in the workplace.

Reports of ballot stuffing, rewritten protocols, and other falsifications by observers came from at least eight regions. In particular, Krasnodar Krai stood out, where polling stations were found to have entered pre-filled-in ballots hidden by commission members, neat stacks of ballots in ballot boxes, and rewritten protocols. Turnout calculations by observers and the commission sometimes differed by an order of magnitude, and there were cases of ballot swapping at night between voting days. The same problems were found to have taken place in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kemerovo, Moscow, Saratov, and Tambov regions, and Tatarstan.

The use of the remote voting system was of particular concern. Experts and participants of the elections did not have an opportunity to analyze the software code of the system for vulnerabilities. The configuration files of the system, which contain key information on the settings of electronic procedures, were not published either. Simultaneously, two key problems persist in the remote voting system: the ease of administrative mobilization of voters and the issue of voter identification.

Therefore, observers cannot be certain that all votes are cast by voters in person. In addition, unlike the "paper" voting method, there is no possibility of a controlled recount of votes, as a result, it is impossible to verify the correctness of the election results or to appeal them.

Analysts also drew attention to the fact that different software codes were used during the testing of the SVD and voting. Additionally, the system became even more closed than it was during the 2021 elections of the State Duma, when after the data from the SVD were entered, representatives of United Russia won in all 15 constituencies of the capital, although voters opted for the opposition at the polling stations in 9 of the 15 districts. According to the Moscow City Election Commission, 1,748,616 people participated in online voting in 2022, and 695,214 at the polling stations. In many districts, voting results from the precincts again diverged significantly from the remote voting results.

In Moscow, for the first time in Russia, the "Electronic Voter List" (EVL or VL) information system was used to eliminate the use of paper lists in precinct commissions. In the middle of the first day of voting for an hour and a half, many polling stations experienced problems with access to the VL, which made it difficult to issue ballots to voters. There were also incidents at polling stations with voters who wanted to receive a paper ballot but were told that they had previously voted using the VL. The introduction of the electronic version of the voter list led to a situation when the electoral commissions were in fact disconnected from the VL's content. Making clarifications, deleting voter's entries or adding them to the list all took place on the technical level without the participation of the commission members.

All this led to a decrease in the interest of citizens in the elections, resulting in a low level of voting participation, despite the administrative coercion and lotteries at polling stations. The turnout in many cases has fallen even in comparison with its low figures five years ago when the previous elections were held for the same positions and the same bodies.

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