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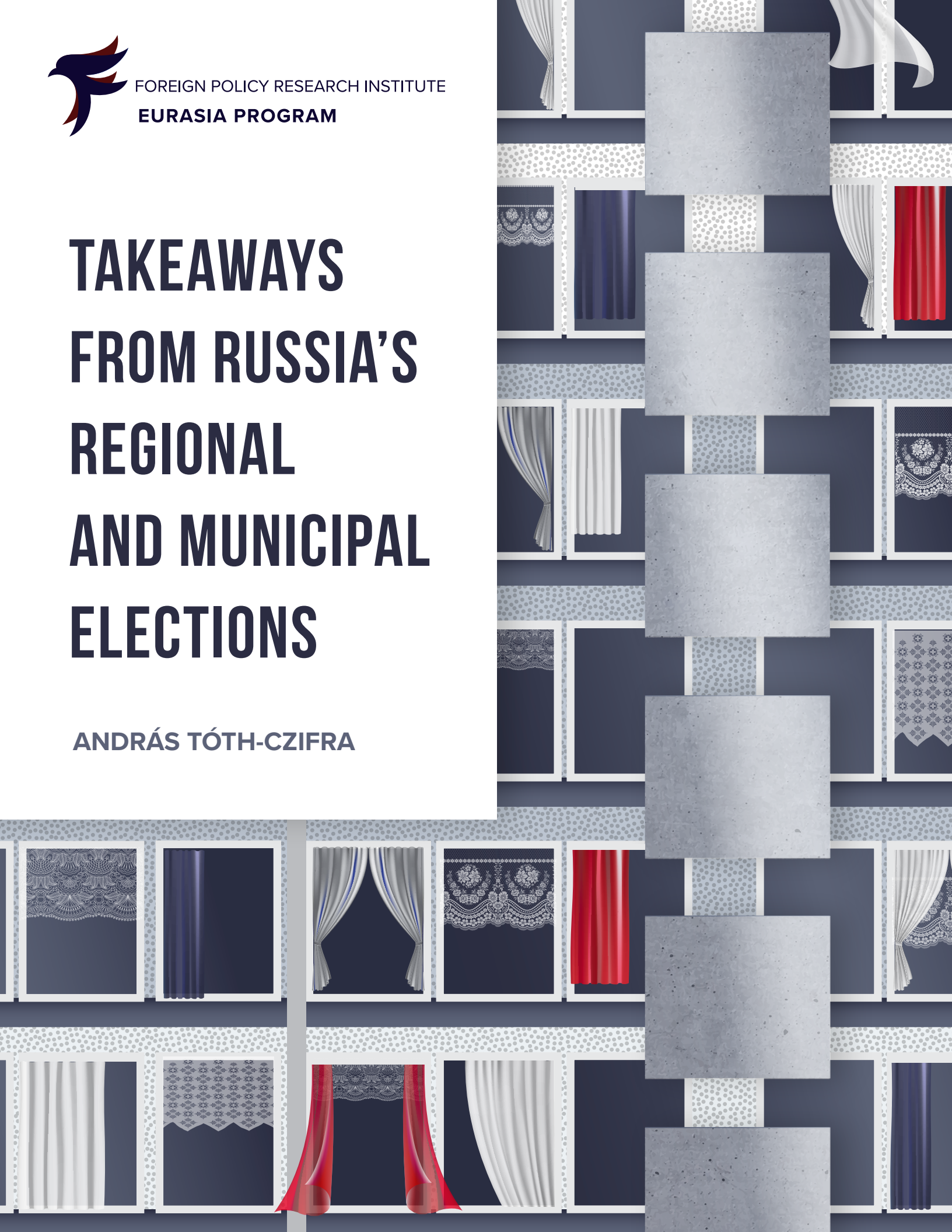

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October 2023

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KEY FINDINGS

- The Kremlin, for the most part, engineered the results it desired in Russia's 2023 regional and municipal elections. However, the campaigns showed that a positive portrayal of the war in Ukraine is not necessarily popular among Russian voters.

- In the occupied territories in Ukraine, elections demonstrated that Russian power remains firm, even in the face of Ukraine's counteroffensive. Since independent observers had virtually no access to these votes and they were held illegally, it is both impossible to verify the authorities' claims and futile to analyze the results as if real elections had been held.

- In many regions, the elections saw the demise of the Communist Party as the largest "alternative" party to Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party. A notable exception was the Siberian region of Khakassia, where the incumbent communist governor was able to see off a threat from his Kremlin-supported opponent.

- The extensive use of a still-opaque online voting system, along with the overt intimidation of election observers and opposition personalities, suggests that the Kremlin is eager to evolve and test its manipulation toolkits ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

INTRODUCTION

The 2023 regional and municipal elections held in Russia on September 8–10 were notable because of their timing. A year and a half into the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, domestic political actors—from political and business elites to voters—seem to have recognized, if not fully accepted, the reality of a long and costly war. If Russia is accepting a new normal, the contours of this new normal are still blurred.

In spite of the war, the Russian government chose not to postpone or scrap the elections. In 2022, Russia's decision to move forward with regional elections might have been explained by the fact that the shock of the war sent Russian domestic politics into a state of freeze, the economic problems triggered by international sanctions were still dampened by commodity windfalls, or that the regional votes took place in a relatively small number of mostly tightly controlled regions.[1]

In 2023, votes were even held in regions that had relatively competitive—or, from the point of view of the authorities and United Russia party, problematic—politics, such as Khakassia, Yakutia, or the Transbaikal Territory. With a legislative amendment in May, the government made it possible to hold elections in the occupied territories of Ukraine under conditions of martial law.[2]

The purpose of these latter votes was clearly a demonstration of power, similar to last year's "referenda" on the annexation of these territories in Ukraine. By holding the votes, which, according to official figures, registered high turnout and sweeping victories for the ruling United Russia party, the Kremlin aimed to demonstrate that despite Ukraine's ongoing counteroffensive, it still firmly controlled these regions and could dictate who gets what, when, and how.[3] Since independent observers had virtually no access to these votes and they were held illegally, it is both impossible to verify the authorities' claims and futile to analyze the results as if real elections had been held.

If Russia is accepting a new normal, the contours of this new normal are still blurred.

Within Russia itself, elections also play a role in legitimizing the regime, both by showing the support that the system can engineer in favor of desired political outcomes, and by testing its coercive capacity against political realities on the ground. There are three reasons why it is impossible to analyze the votes in Russia like democratic elections: the first reason is the Kremlin's relentless centralization of power over the past twenty

A voter casts her ballot at a polling station during local elections held by the Russian-installed authorities in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine, September 9, 2023. REUTERS/Alexander Ermochenko

years from regional institutions to the federal center; the second is the increased repression of political dissent in Russia, especially following the 2022 invasion; and the third is the authorities' control of electoral and supervisory institutions, which—as the independent election observation movement Golos pointed out—is overwhelming, albeit far from even across regions. Nonetheless, as long as even nominally pluralistic elections are held, these will provide Russian citizens elections with an opportunity to send a message to the Kremlin.[4] In 2018, for instance, anger over pension reform and other grievances led to several surprising electoral upsets for United Russia.[5] For the authorities, elections provide an opportunity to test the loyalty and the competence of the officials whose job it is to maintain political stability and send a message to potential dissidents. This is especially important six months before the 2024 presidential election and ahead of an increasingly uncertain domestic political and economic situation.

A SUCCESSFUL STRESS TEST FOR THE RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES

Looking at the results of the 2023 Russian regional elections, one can conclude that the political stress test that the authorities ran was successful. Incumbent governors were elected outright with significant majorities, according to the official results. The one outlier on this list was Khakassia, where the Kremlin-supported gubernatorial candidate, Sergey Sokol, withdrew days before the vote after his campaign against the communist incumbent, Valentin Konovalov, failed to gain traction (see below).[6] But even here, United Russia got the majority of seats in the regional legislature, as did the ruling party in several other regions with traditionally more pluralistic politics. United Russia had also required most incumbent governors to run not as independents but on the ticket of the party (not even Moscow's mayor, Sergey Sobyanin, was able to avoid the label) signaling a newfound confidence.[7]

Subtler forms of manipulation certainly played a role in several of these successes, beyond the effective barring of strong opposition candidates, the control over administrative resources, and run-of-the-mill rigging.

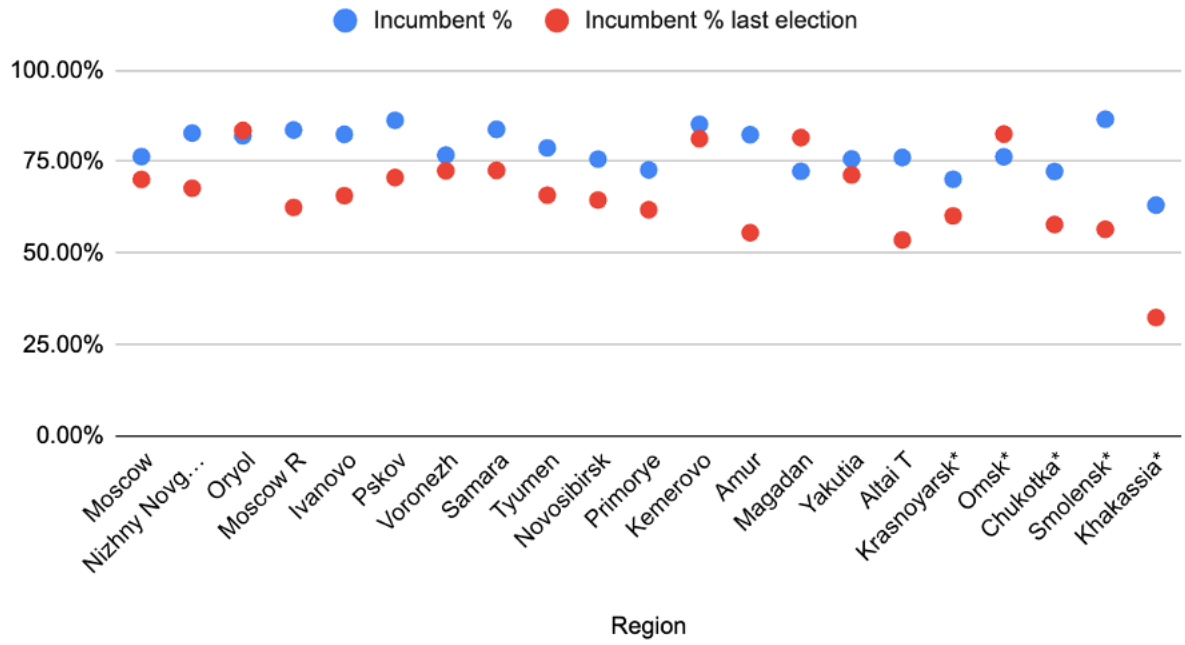
Subtler forms of manipulation certainly played a role in several of these successes, beyond the effective barring of strong opposition candidates, the control over administrative resources, and run-of-the-mill rigging.[8] For instance, regional legislatures increased the number of mandates distributed in single-mandate, first-past-the-post districts—where the ruling party has an advantage over a fragmented opposition—to help increase the number of United Russia's mandates.

United Russia required most incumbent governors to run not as independents but on the ticket of the party.

This was the most obvious in Khakassia, where the party's list finished only second, almost three percentage points behind the ruling communists, but triumphed in twenty-three out of twenty-five districts, giving it a two-thirds supermajority in the regional legislature. This allowed authorities to elevate the Kremlin's failed gubernatorial candidate to the position of speaker, to provide a counterweight to the region's communist governor.[9]

United Russia registered similar results in other regions (e.g., in the Transbaikal Territory, where it swept all twenty-five

INCUMBENT GOVERNOR % IN 2023 AND LAST ELECTION (*DIFFERENT INC.)



Incumbent gubernatorial results in gubernatorial elections in 2023 and the last time elections were held. Asterisk denotes that a different candidate was running. Source: CIK RF

single-mandate districts, or in the Ulyanovsk Region, where it won sixteen out of eighteen). The party will again firmly control both legislatures five years after losing its majority in both. In Yakutia and Buryatia, which have already elected their regional parliamentary officials at the time of this writing, the so-called "systemic opposition" was not allowed to have any position in the leadership of the regional legislatures.

In the Transbaikal and Ulyanovsk regions (and some others) the opposition spoke up against the manipulations and falsifications of elections.[10] In Ulyanovsk, the Communist Party even refused to recognize the results. While this highlights the unhappiness of some local elites with a Kremlin eager to redraw existing power-sharing arrangements, it is unlikely to lead to a revision of the results.

UNDERMINING THE PROTEST VOTE

The mix of repression and soft manipulation that Russia's political system runs on seems to be tilting towards repression. During the most recent regional elections, reports detailed the open intimidation of electoral observers (some of whom were handed draft notices or taken to the police) and the systemic opposition.[11] However, the thrust of the Russian government's election manipulation still appears to be repressing turnout while ensuring that the "right people" turn up to vote, either through coercion or positive incentives.

Protest voting has become more difficult due in part to more widespread and unpredictable repression, which encourages performative loyalty and conformism. The organizers and the beneficiaries of opposition voting campaigns face increasing hostility from the authorities, as Alexey Navalny's team has highlighted.[12] In many cases when protest voting was raised, opposition organizations simply suggested voters support anyone but the United Russia party (e.g., the Communist Party in the Altai Territory, the Novosibirsk 2020 organization in Novosibirsk, and Navalny's campaign across the country).[13]

However, in certain cities, it was still possible for opposition campaigns to support specific candidates and even to do so successfully. The Zemsky Congress, an alliance of independent local deputies, called on voters to support mostly independent candidates in municipal elections in a handful of regions.[14] Navalny's campaign supported specific candidates in Yekaterinburg—mostly those nominated by the liberal Yabloko Party—due to their running on an anti-war ticket.[15] Yabloko's candidates did indeed make it into the city councils of Yekaterinburg, Novgorod, and two smaller towns, showcasing both that it is more difficult for the authorities to exercise full control over elections in better-connected cities with strong local opposition politics, and that anti-war messages resonate with voters.[16]

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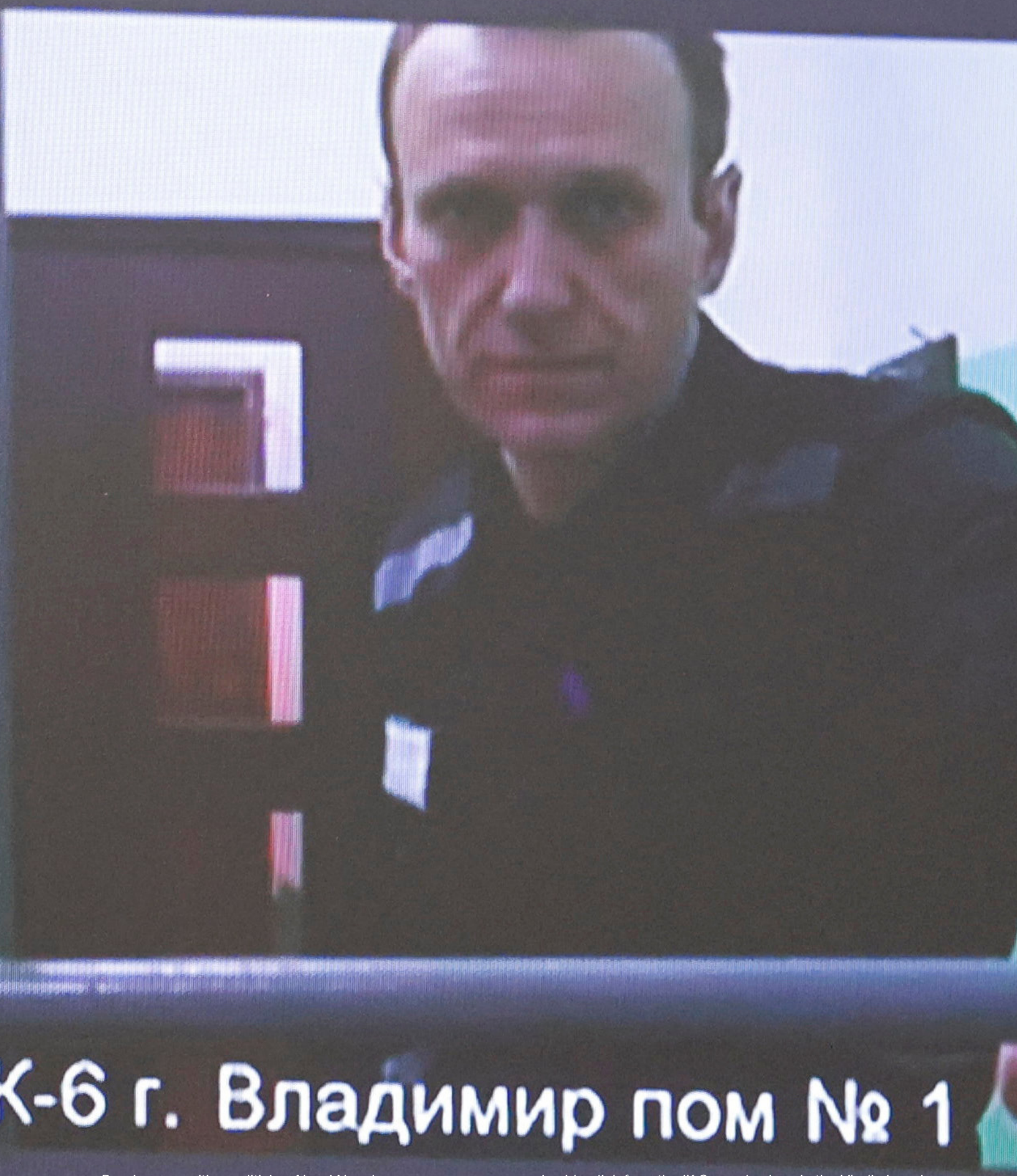
Another method of survival for local opposition organizations has been to ally themselves with systemic parties whose local chapters are often eager to react to issues of local importance. In the Leningrad Region, for instance, local conservationist activists running on the Communist Party's ticket defeated the authorities' candidates in municipal elections.[17]



Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny appears on a screen via video link from the IK-6 penal colony in the Vladimir region, during a court hearing to consider an appeal against his sentence in the criminal case on numerous charges, including the creation of an extremist organization, in Moscow, Russia September 26, 2023. REUTERS/Yulia Morozova

THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S DAYS AS OBVIOUS "CATCH-ALL OPPOSITION" ARE OVER

Over the past five years, in many regions, the Communist Party was the second-strongest (and in some cases the strongest) party, which has turned it into a catch-all party for local opposition movements, backers, and activists. Some of these had little to do ideologically with the communists (e.g., Viktor Vorobyov, the party's firebrand leader in the Republic of Komi, and a former libertarian). The official results of the regional elections signal that these days are almost certainly over.[18]

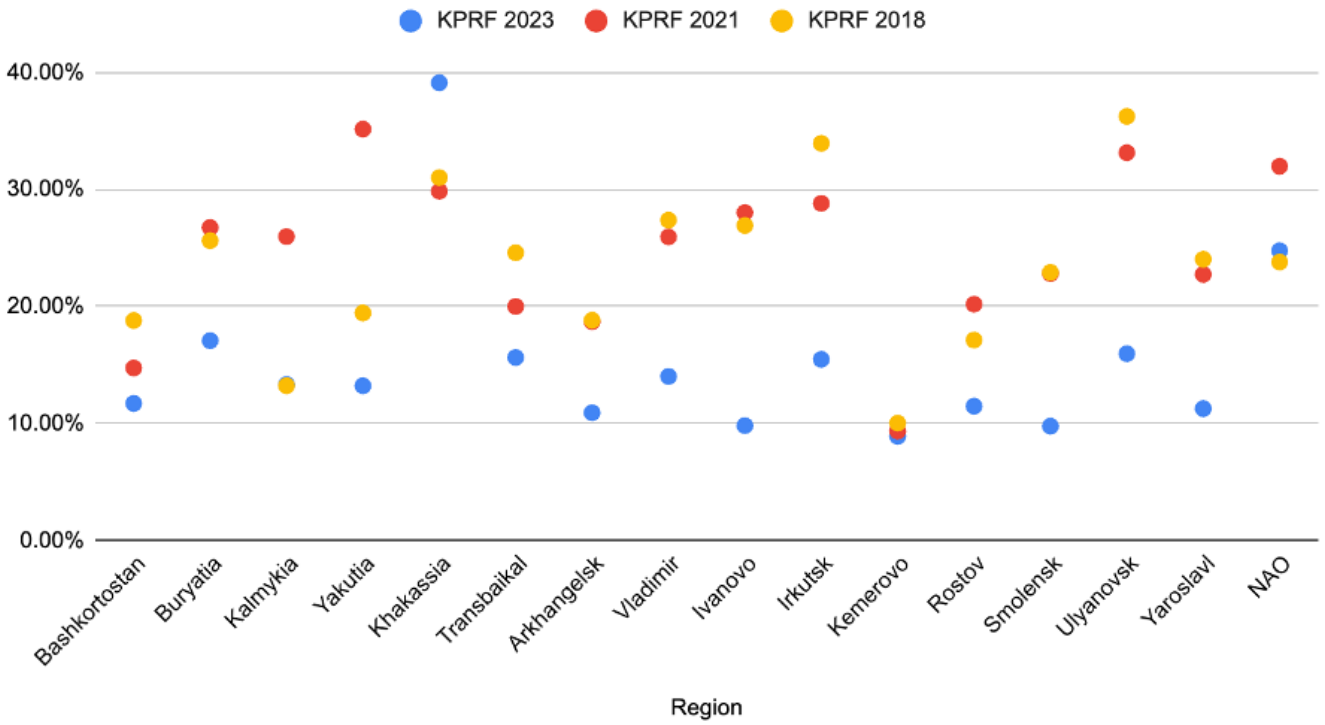
Over the past five years, in many regions, the Communist Party was the second-strongest (and in some cases the strongest) party.

A comparison of the Communist Party's vote share in the 2018 regional elections, the 2021 Duma elections, and 2023 shows the magnitude of the collapse. Apart from Khakassia (where United Russia did not have significant control of administrative resources), the Nenets Autonomous District (a sparsely populated region with a history of protest voting), and the Kemerovo Region (where, due to the strong control of the authorities over institutions, the Communist Party's result had already been low), its results were half or even less of what the party had previously obtained. And due to mixed electoral systems, discussed above, the results expressed in mandates are often even worse. In Khakassia, where Valentin Konovalov—the Communist Party's governor—managed to keep his position despite the Kremlin's best efforts, he will face a legislature with a United Russia supermajority.[19] The presence of ruling party officials at his swearing-in ceremony, however, indicates that the Kremlin will try to find a *modus vivendi*.[20]

The party stopped being the "obvious" choice for local opposition movements, activists, financial backers, and voters aiming to cast a protest vote.

In Yakutia, a region with relatively pluralistic politics, the New People party, whose campaign was spearheaded by Sardana Avksentieva, a popular former mayor of Yakutsk, came second. Avksentieva beat the communists who two years ago won the region's single-mandate district in the Duma election. Earlier reports had suggested that this was exactly the result that the

KPRF RESULTS IN R. LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS (2018, 2023) AND DUMA ELECTION (2021)



Communist Party results (party lists) in elections held in 2019, 2021 and 2023 in select regions (source: CIK RF)

local authorities desired, as they found the Communist Party more dangerous than New People.[21]

The causes of the Communist Party collapse are unclear. However, administrative pressure, increased repression of the party's activist base in certain regions, economic and political caution by regional business elites who would normally back systemic parties, a lack of an overarching campaign theme, and election rigging contributed to the Party's poor performance. The Yakut example, however, highlights one important benefit from the Communist Party's collapse for the authorities—namely, that the party stops being the "obvious" choice for local opposition movements, activists, financial backers, and voters aiming to cast a protest vote. Instead, its results will place it roughly at level with the far-right Liberal Democratic Party.

ONLINE VOTING IS NOT A KILL SWITCH, BUT IT MATTERS

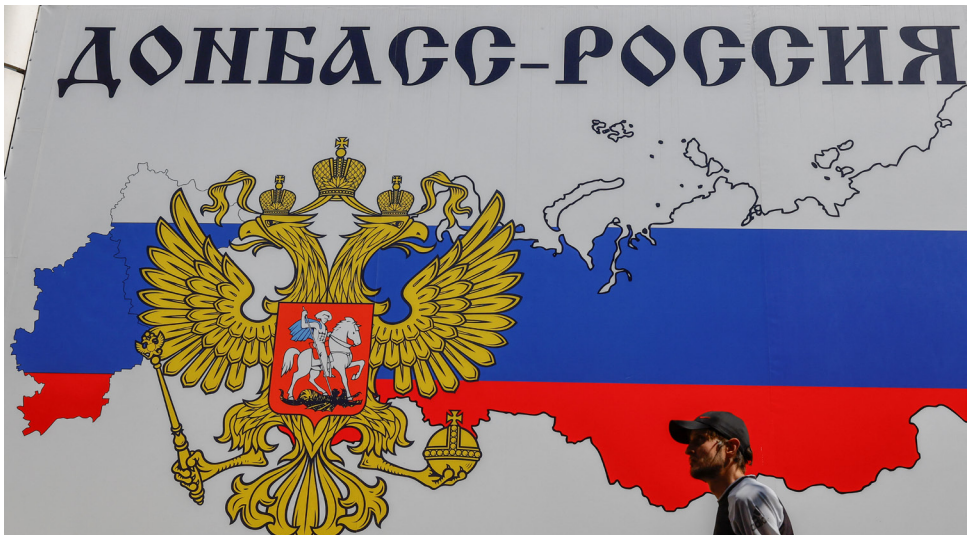
Online voting, which was rolled out in twenty-four regions across Russia besides Moscow (which has a separate system), played a bigger role in these elections than in any previous election in Russian history. The authorities are eager to introduce the system in even more regions before the 2024 presidential vote.[22] According to official data, around 3.8 million people voted online, of whom 2.7 million were in Moscow.[23] Here more than 80 percent of votes were cast through the city's public services portal. In regions where online voting was enabled, slightly more than 1 million voters did so.[24] There are regional differences, but the votes cast online, where this was an option, typically amounted to 10–20 percent of total votes in regional elections.

While there is an obvious difference between Moscow—where the lack of transparency and the strongly pro-government results of online voting raised suspicions of foul play in 2021—and the rest of the country when it comes to the weight of online voting, the system nonetheless matters.[25] While online votes do not seem to have made much of a difference in gubernatorial elections, they added up to 3.5 percentage points to United Russia's vote in regional legislative elections, especially in regions where the ruling party is traditionally weaker.[26] In Yekaterinburg's municipal election, the effect was 4.2 percentage points in favor of the party.

This came after countless reports of administrative pressure on public and private employees to sign up for online voting and to cast their votes online, both on and before election day.[27] Online votes also experienced "glitches" that gave grounds for suspicion that the system could be misused.[28] In Novosibirsk, for instance, the system reportedly did not let voters cast their vote in favor of the Communist Party's gubernatorial candidate for a brief period of time.[29] In the Nenets Autonomous District, voters experienced problems with online ballots.[30] In general, it is reasonable to assume that voters will self-censor in a system where administrative pressure, constant technical problems, and a rich history of data leaks undermine the security and the anonymity of the vote.

In conclusion, while online voting does not appear to function as a kill switch that the authorities can flip to generate a desired electoral outcome, evidence suggests that the system can be used to make previously used methods of electoral manipulation (e.g., pressure by superiors, increasing the turnout of reliably pro-government voters, keeping the electoral process hidden from observers, etc.) more effective and less reliant on local officials whose loyalty and competence may be questionable.

BRASH PRO-WAR CAMPAIGNING IS NOT A MAGIC WEAPON



A pedestrian walks past a banner reading "Donbas is Russia" erected ahead of the upcoming regional elections planned by the Russian-installed authorities, August 14, 2023. REUTERS/Alexander Ermochenko

In general, campaigns preceding the votes in Russia's regional elections underlined that loud pro-war messaging is not a magic weapon and that in some cases it can even backfire against Moscow. The highest profile "veteran" supported by the authorities, Sergey Sokol, withdrew from Khakassia's gubernatorial votes after repeatedly playing up his war record in the campaign, but Sokol failed to catch up or overtake the communist incumbent, Valentin Konovalov, in public opinion surveys. In general, very few war veterans were allowed to stand as candidates.[31] Throughout the campaign, both incumbent governors and opposition parties toned down war-related messages as much as possible, and focused, instead, on issues tangentially related to the war, such as social programs or investments.[32]

The political campaigns coincided with a series of scattered developments in the regions that suggested that there is a constituency for politely signaling frustration with how the prioritization of the war diverts resources from local issues. In Novosibirsk, for instance, voters initiated the sacking of a local deputy whom they accused of neglecting his duties after he became an advisor to the occupying government in Donetsk.[33] Several other mayors openly vented their frustration that funds allotted from regional budgets dried up.[34] In some cities, candidates running on openly anti-war platforms gained representation in municipal assemblies.

These developments, of course, are far too localized to induce any kind of major political change. Nonetheless, they signal the limits of using the authorities' frenzied war propaganda for domestic political purposes—food for thought for the Kremlin before the 2024 presidential election.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

There are limits to how much the recent regional elections will impact next year's presidential contest. While the authorities in autocratic countries are interested in keeping turnout low and voters demobilized in regional, municipal, and legislative elections (except in regions where the authorities exert very strong control over elections), the role of presidential elections is to provide a grand acclamation in favor of the incumbent, showcasing that he has no viable alternative. Another important difference is that while in regional elections the topic of the war can be circumvented by focusing on local issues, this is going to be less of a possibility in the 2024 presidential election, which, from the Kremlin's point of view, must be a ringing endorsement not only of Vladimir Putin, but of the politics that he represents (i.e., the continuation of the war until the bitter end).

Nevertheless, the regional votes still highlighted several important factors that the Kremlin will need to keep in mind when preparing for the 2024 election.

First, the elections highlighted the kind of "opposition" that the Kremlin wants to see in 2024: candidates with a degree of name recognition but without real mobilizing potential; and a field of alternative candidates without a clear frontrunner to attract protest votes. While political systems descending deeper into authoritarianism often balance between maintaining the semblance of actual political competition and hardening control of the electoral process, today's Russian government does not have a good reason—external or domestic—to insist on maintaining the semblance of competitive elections. The incumbent has to be without alternatives from the onset.

The elections showcased how the federal government is trying to move towards a more centralized and securitized control of the electoral process.

Second, the elections showcased how the federal government is trying to move towards a more centralized and securitized control of the electoral process. Under such a system, regional elites and officials—the traditional mobilizers and administrators whose loyalty could be questioned—play a comparatively smaller role, and centrally administered institutions, such as online voting, as well as institutions such as Roskomnadzor, Russia's communications watchdog, and the security services, play a bigger role.[35] For this reason, it will be important to watch, in the following months, how the Kremlin's relationship with regional elites develops and which players the security services try to crack down on.[36]

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