



Russia in Review: September 1 – September 21, 2021

Russia's Ruling United Russia Party Maintains Majority in Parliament by Leveraging New Electronic Voting Manipulation amid Declining Popularity

By Mason Clark and George Barros

Russia's ruling United Russia Party retained its majority in highly falsified parliamentary elections.

The State Duma, the lower house of Russia's parliament, conducted its five-year elections from September 17-19. The Kremlin-run Central Elections Commission (CEC) reported in preliminary results on September 21 that the United Russia party won 49.8 percent of the vote, securing 324 out of 450 seats, and announced a turnout of 52 percent.¹ United Russia held 343 seats before the election. The CEC will announce the final results on September 24. Independent statisticians have issued preliminary estimates that genuine support for United Russia was at 32 percent and turnout around 38 percent, mirroring pre-election polls placing United Russia's support at 30 percent.²



The Kremlin leveraged online voting to manipulate national election results for the first time. The Kremlin used a remote electronic voting system for the first time during the September 2021 Duma elections. Russian opposition parties reported voting pattern discrepancies in the elections after the CEC began counting electronic votes.³ Several Russian Communist Party candidates who were leading in many Moscow districts suddenly lost to trailing United Russia candidates after the CEC counted electronic votes, for example. The only way these shifts could have been legitimate would be if United Russia held a commanding lead among online voters; there is no evidence of such a lead. The Kremlin also engaged in

prolific conventional ballot-stuffing typical of Russian elections.⁴

Russian opposition parties did not hold significant protests following the Kremlin’s electoral manipulation. The Communist Party—which has long been part of the Kremlin’s “managed opposition” and not a true opposition party—rejected the egregious electronic voting results in Moscow and called for protests on Pushkin Square on September 20, 21, and 25.⁵ Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin immediately banned the protests, claiming they would violate COVID-19 public health regulations.⁶ Approximately 200 protesters gathered on Pushkin Square to support the Communist Party on September 20 and peacefully dispersed after a few hours.⁷ Russian police did not interfere or detain any protesters on September 20, likely to avoid provoking larger protests. Protesters did not congregate on Pushkin Square on September 21 and are unlikely to gather on September 25.⁸ Russian opposition elements are unlikely to organize meaningful protests against the Duma election results.

The Kremlin leveraged its illegal proxy republics in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova to boost support for United Russia and likely create justifications to support “Russian voters” abroad in the future. Charter busses transported residents of Russia’s proxies in occupied eastern Ukraine, the Donetsk Peoples Republic (DNR) and Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR), to polling places in Rostov, Russia.⁹ DNR and LNR residents also voted in the Duma elections via online voting.¹⁰ The Kremlin also established polling stations in Transnistria in de jure Moldova and in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, de jure Georgia.¹¹ Russian efforts to involve its proxy republics in Russian elections are likely intended to support false Kremlin claims that Moscow has legitimate legal reasons to protect its constituents in these exclaves. The Kremlin will likely increasingly leverage information operations about “protecting Russian voters’ rights” in former Soviet republics as a part of Russia’s hybrid war toolkit.

The Kremlin suppressed the opposition’s “smart voting” tactics through consolidated control of Russian cyberspace, including capitulation from Apple and Google. Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s team urged Russian voters to use “smart voting” tactics – voting for the candidate most-likely to beat the United Russia Party candidate in any given electoral district, regardless of their party affiliation or policies. Navalny’s team developed smartphone apps and other digital resources to help Russian voters identify which candidate to vote for in their district. The Kremlin cracked down on these resources on the first day of voting, September 17. The Kremlin compelled Apple and Google to remove smart voting apps from app stores in Russia and compelled Telegram messenger app CEO Pavel Durov to block a popular Telegram channel designed to disseminate smart voting tactics information.¹² The Kremlin has prioritized consolidating control over the Russian internet for several years and will likely increasingly rely on censorship and other forms of information control to stifle critics and preserve Putin’s regime. This effort will increasingly pressure Western companies to consolidate control of the Russian information space.¹³

The Kremlin retained United Russia’s two-thirds majority in parliament at the cost of further eroding Russia’s democratic facade and potentially alienating the managed opposition. United Russia requires a two-thirds majority in parliament to enact constitutional changes, such as those in early 2020 that reset Putin’s Presidential term limits and enabled him to effectively stay in power for life.¹⁴ With true support for United Russia around 30 percent, the Kremlin had to balance the need to falsify results with the need to avoid provoking a large-scale protest response. The Kremlin’s extensive pre-election crackdown on Navalny’s team successfully prevented protests in response to what is likely modern Russia’s most falsified vote to date. However, the Kremlin must manage the costs of further eroding Putin’s

vener of legitimate public support and risks growing discontent among the Communist Party and other managed opposition groups. The Kremlin and Untied Russia are highly likely to remain stable for several years, but the 2021 Duma elections indicate the Kremlin will likely need to expand its authoritarian toolkit ahead of Russia's next presidential election in 2024.

Russia Around the Globe

1. **Russia and Belarus signed a package of roadmaps for further integration under the Kremlin-dominated Union State on September 10, a major milestone in the Kremlin's campaign to gain control of Belarus through the Union State.** Self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to 28 Union State economic integration roadmaps in Moscow on September 9 and codified the agreements the following day.¹⁵ The roadmaps primarily create regulations and measures to unify Russian-Belarusian monetary and fiscal policies under the Union State, a Russian-dominated supranational organization. Putin and Lukashenko also discussed "building a single defense space and ensuring the security of the Union State," likely a reference to further joint military exercises and a possible permanent base for Russian ground forces in Belarus. Russia and Belarus also agreed to create a unified gas market by December 2023 and a government body that will create a "unified methodology" for addressing economic integration issues. Putin said Belarus and Russia are not ready yet for a unified currency but may create one in the future.

Lukashenko's acceptance of the Union State roadmaps is a major concession to the Kremlin. Russia and Belarus have negotiated the 28 roadmaps for much of the past year, and Lukashenko previously

refused to sign any roadmaps until all 28 were finalized, delaying Russian integration efforts.¹⁶ The Kremlin likely secured these Belarusian concessions by intensifying Russian military pressure on Belarus and promising economic support to counteract Western sanctions.¹⁷

2. **The Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Rapid Reaction Force conducted the joint exercise "Rubezh-2021" with Kyrgyz and Kazakh forces at the Edelweiss Training Ground in Balykchy, Kyrgyzstan, from September 7 to 9.** Over 1,000 servicemen participated, including a battalion-sized element (300 personnel) of the Russian 55th Separate Motor Rifle Mountain Brigade, unspecified Russian Central Military District military police elements, CSTO Central Asian Regional Collective Rapid Reaction Forces elements, Kyrgyz artillery elements, and unspecified Kazakh elements.¹⁸ Russian Central Military District army aviation Su-25 attack aircraft and Mi-8 helicopters provided air support.¹⁹ Tajikistan canceled its planned participation in Rubzezh-2021 on September 6 without providing a reason.²⁰ The exercise simulated a joint operation to destroy a militant force attempting to establish a base of operations on the territory of a CSTO member state.²¹ Russian and other partner forces have held multiple major exercises in Central Asia since July 2021 to prepare for potential operations to combat jihadist groups using Afghanistan as a base for international attacks.²² Rubezh-2021 was the first exercise near Afghanistan conducted by the CSTO's rapid reaction force. Previous exercises in the area since late July have been primarily coordinated by Russian forces directly. The Kremlin may increasingly leverage the CSTO as part of its military deployments near

Afghanistan to further normalize multilateral operations.

- 3. The Kremlin announced several infrastructure investments in Russia's far east and signed a key digital cooperation deal with Kazakhstan during the annual Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in Vladivostok, Russia.** Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted the forum on September 3.²³ The presidents of Mongolia and Kazakhstan virtually attended the forum, which the Kremlin uses to promote economic investment and infrastructure development in Russia's far east. Russia and Kazakhstan signed a memorandum of cooperation on "data-driven government" during the forum.²⁴ Kazakhstan will cooperate with Russian state-owned banking and finance company Sberbank on three digital initiatives to incorporate artificial intelligence and data analysis into Kazakhstan's bureaucratic procedures. Putin and Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev previously discussed the data-driven government concept in December 2020. The Kremlin seeks to build dependence on Kremlin-run systems across the former Soviet Union and integrate state bureaucracies under Moscow's direction. Putin also signed several domestically focused projects during the forum, including plans to establish a new city with a population of 300,000 near Vladivostok and several new infrastructure projects across Russia's far east.²⁵ The Kremlin has increased its investment in Russia's far east in recent years to increase its influence in Central and East Asia and compete with Chinese investment in Kazakhstan and other former Soviet states.
- 4. The Kremlin is leveraging a European gas crisis to pressure European authorities to certify the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.**

European gas prices exceeded \$950 per 1,000 cubic meters for the first time in history in mid-September, and Russian state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom refused to increase gas sales to stabilize the market.²⁶ Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov added on September 15 that Nord Stream 2's immediate launch would ease Europe's gas crisis.²⁷ The Kremlin is withholding Gazprom's gas sales to coerce Germany into approving Nord Stream 2 quickly. Russian state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom announced the completion of Nord-Stream 2's physical construction on September 10.²⁸ The pipeline is not yet operational due to ongoing European certification processes that will likely take until May 2022.²⁹ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated on September 15 that the Kremlin hopes to obtain necessary regulatory permits by January 2022 if not sooner.³⁰ Nord Stream 2's launch will diversify Russia's gas supply routes to Europe and allow the Kremlin to leverage those routes for political gain—both by increasing Germany's reliance on Russian gas and by depriving Ukraine of gas transit fees.

- 5. The Kremlin's proxies in eastern Ukraine announced plans to create a unified economic and customs zone from 2022 to 2024.** Leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Denis Pushilin and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Leonid Pasechnik announced plans to create a unified economic, tax, and customs zone between the DNR and LNR during a joint press conference on September 6.³¹ Pasechnik stated that the DNR and LNR would create the customs space "in accordance with" Russian laws.³² This economic integration measure is the Kremlin's latest effort to improve links between the DNR and LNR's economies, likely to improve living standards for residents of the DNR and LNR and make them easier to

manage by Russian authorities.³³ The Kremlin likely additionally seeks to build loyalty among Donbas residents who received Russian passports and voted in Russia's parliamentary elections September 17-19 to strengthen this new voting bloc for the ruling United Russia party. DNR and LNR leadership have unsuccessfully advocated for their full integration into the Russian Federation for several years; the Kremlin has not supported that goal and instead has pressured Ukraine to include the DNR and LNR in regular Ukrainian elections, seeking to reintegrate the Kremlin-run regions into Ukraine as permanent spoilers in Ukrainian politics.³⁴ Increased economic integration between the DNR and LNR would likely decrease the economic—but not political—costs for the Kremlin to fully annex those territories, though the Kremlin remains unlikely to seek direct annexation at this time.

6. **A reported deal between Mali and Kremlin-backed private military company Wagner will likely destabilize the Sahel region and provide Russia with a foothold in West Africa.** Reuters reported on September 13 that the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a diplomatic campaign to stop a deal for Kremlin-run private military company (PMC) Wagner to deploy at least 1,000 personnel to Mali for personnel protection and to train the Malian army.³⁵ Local Malian media additionally reported Wagner would protect gold and magnesium mines.³⁶ French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on September 14 that Paris would withdraw from Mali if Wagner entered the country and expressed concern that the Russian mercenaries would undermine counter-terrorism operations against al Qaeda and ISIS in the Sahel.³⁷ Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated no Russian forces are in Mali but did not deny the report of

negotiations between Mali and Wagner.³⁸

Wagner is highly unlikely to negotiate a major contract without the Kremlin's approval, at a minimum, and likely direct oversight from the Russian military.³⁹ Wagner and other Russian PMCs provide security and training services to several African states and protect mineral resources for Kremlin-run companies. A French withdrawal from Mali due to a Wagner-Mali deal would likely impede counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel region, as Wagner would be unlikely to fully replace the capabilities that French forces currently provide. The Wagner Group's presence in West Africa would support the Kremlin's campaign to secure new economic resources, develop additional international military ties, and reduce Western influence in the region.

7. **The Kremlin will likely meet Sudanese demands for further economic support in exchange for a long-planned naval base in Port Sudan that expands the Russian Navy's global footprint.** Kremlin-run news outlet Ria Novosti reported on September 12 that Sudan seeks to alter the terms of a deal granting the Russian Navy access to a naval base and logistics center in Port Sudan, and is asking Russia to provide unspecified economic assistance in exchange for five years of Russian access with a possible 25-year agreement extension.⁴⁰ The Chief of Staff of Sudan's Armed Forces announced a possible revision of the agreement, initially announced in November 2020, in June 2021.⁴¹ The Sudanese government appears to be backtracking on Russia and Sudan's announcement in mid-July that both states would begin the official ratification process of the deal and had already resolved Sudan's concerns.⁴² The Kremlin has not issued any official comment on the reports as of September 22. Sudan will likely be able to

secure some measure of economic concessions from the Kremlin, which has sought for several years to secure a naval base in East Africa to support the Russian Navy's efforts to reestablish a global footprint.

8. Russia's plan to suspend a multinational monitoring mission on Ukraine's occupied border with Russia could facilitate preparations for a Russian military escalation in the winter of 2021-2022.

Russian officials announced on September 2 that Russia will not support an extension of the OSCE Border and Observer Mission (BOM) at the Donetsk and Gukovo checkpoints on the Russian-Ukrainian border beyond the mandate's current expiration date of September 30.⁴³ Both checkpoints are in territory controlled by the Kremlin's proxies in eastern Ukraine. The BOM has operated at the Gukovo and Donetsk border checkpoints since July 2014 and has observed at least 102 Russian material convoys, likely including weapons, deploy to Donbas as of August 12, 2021.⁴⁴ Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate has previously reported that the Kremlin uses the two checkpoints to transit ammunition into Donbas and extract dead Russian servicemen from Ukraine.⁴⁵ The Kremlin's decision to end the OSCE observer mission at the Russian-controlled checkpoints could support preparations to intensify military operations against Ukraine in winter 2021-2022.

9. The Kremlin expanded its outreach to regional organizations in September to create a unified, and

Kremlin-dominated, response to Afghanistan in the former Soviet Union but did not make any major policy changes.

The Kremlin continued its "wait and see" approach to the Taliban in September, calling on remaining resistance forces to submit to the Taliban and praising NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan while declining to state a timeline for recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's government. Russia participated in several major regional summits in Tajikistan from September 15 to 17—a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) minister summit, a CSTO heads of state summit, and a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) heads of state summit—to align security responses to Afghanistan.⁴⁶ The CSTO issued a joint declaration calling for increased military cooperation, devoting funds to jointly strengthen the Tajik-Afghan border, and rejecting the possibility of a US or NATO base in Central Asia in response to instability in Afghanistan.⁴⁷ The SCO discussed aligning member state responses to Afghanistan but did not announce any concrete policies.⁴⁸ The Kremlin will likely continue to expand its military presence in Central Asia and seek to control a unified response to the Taliban to maintain itself as an essential actor in Central Asia.

Contributors to this Report:

Mason Clark
George Barros
Kateryna Stepanenko

¹ The State Duma uses a mixed voting system, in which half of the Duma's 450 seats are allocated through proportional party list voting and half are appointed through majority voting in 225 constituencies. Vote falsification, crackdowns on the opposition, and gerrymandering enabled United Russia to win two thirds of Duma seats with less than half of the (claimed and falsified) vote. "Voting System of the Russian Federation (Elections to the State Duma)," *State Duma*, October 29, 2018, <http://duma.gov dot ru/en/news/28612/>; ["CEC Processed 100 Percent of the Protocols for Elections to the State Duma,"] *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, September 21, 2021, <https://rg dot ru/2021/09/21/cik-er-pobedila-na-vyborah-v->

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²⁴ [“Signing Documents within the Framework of the EEF,”] *Kremlin*, September 3, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66584>.

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