

Regime and the Opposition at the Regional Elections 2020: Between the Demand for Change and the Status Quo

Semenov, Andrei

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Semenov, A. (2021). Regime and the Opposition at the Regional Elections 2020: Between the Demand for Change and the Status Quo. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 262, 2-6. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000458207>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Regime and the Opposition at the Regional Elections 2020: Between the Demand for Change and the Status Quo

Andrei Semenov (Center for Comparative History and Politics, Perm State University)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000458207

Abstract

On September 11–13, 2020, Russians elected 18 governors and 11 subnational legislatures. The “single voting day,” which due to the Covid-19 pandemic stretched over three days, took place in the shadow of the economic crisis and mobilization in Belarus and Khabarovsk. Consequently, the Kremlin prioritized the results over what remains of electoral integrity, filtering out independent candidates, pressuring electoral observers, and doubling down on forced mobilization. This article describes the outcomes of the latest round of subnational elections and argues that although the results confirmed the dominance of regime-backed candidates, the long-term changes in the electorate’s preferences and the tactical innovations employed by the opposition foreshadow a major battle over the parliamentary elections next year.

The September 2020 regional elections in Russia were significant in many respects. First, these were the first electoral contests to test the legitimacy of the Putin regime since the constitutional vote; they came amid the pandemic and in advance of the looming economic crisis. Second, they were the last elections before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2021, meaning that it was the last chance for political parties to get their golden tickets: being elected to regional legislatures allows them to avoid collecting signatures for the federal elections. Finally, the elections were held against the backdrop of major mobilizations in Khabarovsk and Belarus, changing electoral rules that further compromised the quality of the electoral process, and growing coercion from the regime. In short, the 2020 regional elections were the dress rehearsal for the major battle that will take place in the coming years between the regime and the opposition. And while the regime has thus far managed to retain the commanding heights, signs of voters’ dissatisfaction with the current system of political representation are emerging and threaten long-term regime stability.

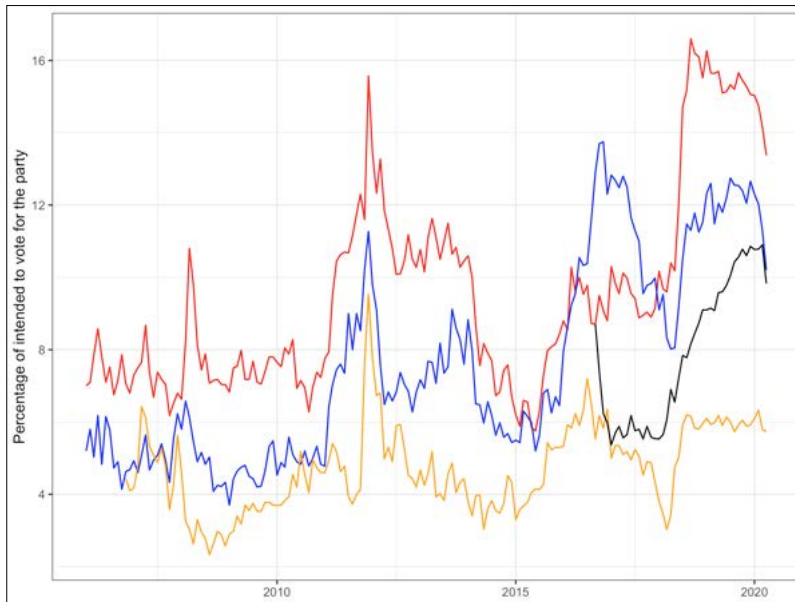
The Context

The September 2020 elections were the last in the 2016–2021 parliamentary cycle. The economy has not improved during the cycle, with a sluggish annual growth rate of near 2% in 2017–2019 and a projected contraction of 6% in 2020. Real disposable income remained negative for the entire period. The economic downturn, coupled with the highly unpopular pension reform of 2018, negatively impacted Putin’s approval rating, which, according to the Levada Center, fell from an annual average of 82% in 2016 to 66.8% in 2019. United Russia’s (UR) electoral rating also plummeted from an average of 50.4% in 2017 to about 33% in 2018–2019, hovering slightly above 30% before the September elections, according to WCIOM.

More worrisome for the Kremlin was the growing demand for alternative political representation: VCIOM polls show that support for the systemic opposition has been at best stagnant since 2017, while the non-systemic opposition is increasingly attractive to voters. Figure 1 overleaf shows the monthly averages of voting intentions among opposition voters, demonstrating that the parliamentary parties initially benefited from the pension reform but subsequently lost their appeal: the Communist Party’s (KPRF) rating fell by nearly 3 percentage points between September 2018 and September 2020, the Liberal-Democrats’ (LDPR) rating remains at 11–12%, and Just Russia (JR) is on the precipice at 6%. By contrast, the popularity of the non-parliamentary parties has grown steadily, reaching the levels of the KPRF and LDPR. Buoyed by undecided voters, their share exceeded 28% in August 2020. In short, the long-run trends in public opinion indicate indifference toward—if not latent dissatisfaction with—the status quo. The absence of political alternatives freezes the situation but certainly does not eliminate demand for change to the status quo.

Adding fuel to the fire of the economic situation was the 2020 pandemic: soaring unemployment, low global demand for oil and gas—Russia’s most-traded exports—and a weak ruble do not portend improvements to the well-being of ordinary Russians. Those affected by the crisis turn against the incumbent: in a recent panel survey, Rosenfeld and her colleagues report that support for Putin is lower among those who have lost their jobs due to the crisis or are at risk of losing them. Citizens who were dissatisfied with the president’s handling of the pandemic or who blamed him personally for its severity were also more likely to withdraw their support.

Figure 1: Dynamics of Voting Intentions (Monthly Averages) for Major Opposition Parties, 2006–2020. KPRF in Red, LDPR in Blue, Just Russia in Orange, and Non-Parliamentary Parties in Black.



Source: VTsIOM

the voting process on the Unified Election Day 2020 was the worst in 25 years.” This was compounded by the CEC’s addition of a captcha to their webpage, which prevented observers from exposing electoral fraud via electoral forensics, as is their general practice. The general logic of the elections was to deliver the necessary results without concern for improving electoral integrity.

Executive Elections

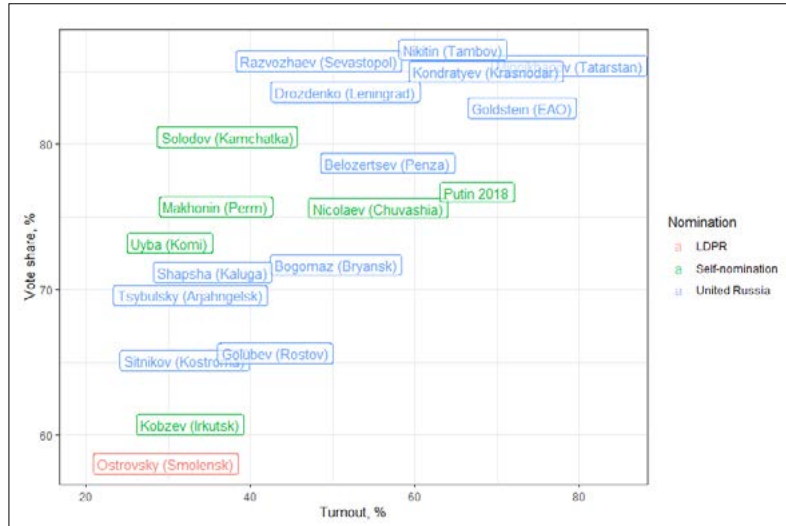
Regional executives occupy the most powerful position in Russian subnational politics. The regime’s primary goal was to ensure the victory of Kremlin-backed candidates; consequently, the incumbents did not risk even the slightest possibility of competition. Prospective challengers were filtered out at the early stages. For example, in Perm, the businessman Aleksandr Repin—who began campaigning aggressively during the pandemic, with massive advertising campaigns—was denied registration on the grounds that municipal councilmembers’ signatures were double-counted. In Arkhangelsk, another businessman, Shies ecoprotect supporter Oleg Mandrykin, won the nomination in an electronic primary organized by the Stop-Shies movement. Using the same clause about double-counting, the regional electoral commission denied him registration, leaving only safe contenders. In Sevastopol and the Jewish Autonomous Region, the authorities went one step further, disbanding municipalities to prevent them from supporting opposition candidates. Overall, the so-called “municipal filter”—alongside control over the municipalities—remained the key instrument at the regime’s disposal for managing entrance into the political races. Even a party’s status as “loyal opposition” did little to help its members survive this filter: seven Communist Party candidates failed to make it onto ballots.

Where filtering out opposition candidates was, for one reason or another, impossible, clandestine deals filled in. In Irkutsk, where Communist governor Levchenko resigned last year under pressure from the Kremlin, another red candidate, former FSB officer Mikhail Stchapov, challenged the “Varangian” from Voronezh, Ministry of Emergency veteran Igor Kobzev, who was parachuted into the region shortly before the campaign. Stchapov’s active campaign ended abruptly after he met with KPRF’s leader, Gennadii Zyuganov. Moreover, he avoided criticizing the acting governor altogether, effectively acting as a sparring partner rather than a real contender with strong leftist sympathies.

As a result, regime-backed candidates won all of the eighteen direct electoral contests for regional executive, with half of them receiving nearly the same or even higher shares of the vote than Vladimir Putin had in 2018. Figure 2 overleaf plots vote share against turnout. Apart from the clear correlation, which might indicate forced mobilization and a propensity for electoral fraud, another notable feature is that candidates not nominated by UR were generally located in regions with low turnout. Avoiding the dominant party’s label evidently served as a hedge against its anti-ratings in some regions.

Recognizing that the forthcoming regional elections would be difficult and threaten their dominance, the regime introduced a new wave of regulatory innovations that changed the electoral process. On the pretext of public health concerns and following a practice established by constitutional plebiscite in June 2020, the Central Electoral Commission established early voting outside polling stations for the two days before the “united voting day.” This novel approach hinders the work of electoral observers and invites falsification. In addition, the list of those criminal charges that serve as grounds for stripping citizens of the franchise was significantly extended. Moreover, the regime launched a smear campaign against independent electoral observers, with the result that, according to the electoral watchdog association Golos, “the regulation of

Figure 2: Turnout and Vote Shares in the September 2020 Elections for Regional Executives.



Source: Central Electoral Commission.

politicizing factors like an active municipal campaign in Novosibirsk City and gubernatorial elections in Komi, turnout was 27–28%. On the other hand, closed high-capacity regimes like Belgorod and Yamal-Nenets reported turnout close to 50%. On average, the ruling party garnered almost 48% of the vote via the proportional system—about 18 percentage points above its electoral rating. The opposition parties’ average electoral returns reflected their respective standing in the national polls. Surprisingly, the correlation between turnout and United Russia’s vote share was low and insignificant in this cycle (0.41, with p-value = 0.2)

Legislative Elections

Legislative elections were held in eleven regions spanning the entire country: from Magadan in the East to Belgorod on the Western border. All the regions employed a mixed electoral system, with half of the seats allocated via party lists and the other half through single-member districts (the exception being Kostroma, where the ratio was 25 to 10). The size of legislatures ranged from 21 in Magadan to 76 in the Novosibirsk region. On average, 8.5 parties competed in elections, ranging from only five in Kurgan (parliamentary parties and the Russian Party of Pensioners) to 11 in Kaluga and Kostroma. Table 1 presents the main results of the party-list elections.

Turnout also varied considerably: in Novosibirsk and Komi, despite

Table 1: Main Results of the Regional Legislative Elections, September 2020.

Region	Turnout	Seats	Parties on the ballot	Parties in legislature	UR	KPRF	LDPR	Just Russia
Komi Republic	28.1%	30	8	5	28.6%	14.8%	14.5%	8.6%
Belgorod Oblast	53.4%	50	7	4	64.0%	13.2%	6.6%	3.8%
Voronezh Oblast	42.9%	56	8	4	61.5%	14.5%	7.3%	5.7%
Kaluga Oblast	33.7%	40	11	6	42.4%	12.9%	8.6%	8.0%
Kostroma Oblast	53.4%	35	11	6	31.9%	17.2%	12.1%	9.2%
Kurgan Oblast	30.1%	34	5	5	44.6%	19.1%	14.5%	10.5%
Magadan Oblast	31.7%	21	7	4	58.3%	10.3%	11.6%	7.3%
Novosibirsk Oblast	27.1%	76	10	6	38.1%	16.6%	13.6%	6.1%
Ryazan Oblast	31.7%	40	10	7	47.7%	9.1%	12.0%	5.7%
Chelyabinsk Oblast	32.5%	60	9	6	42.6%	11.9%	11.3%	14.8%
Yamal-Nenets	46.2%	22	7	4	64.6%	8.8%	15.3%	6.1%
Average	37.3%	42	8.5	5	47.7%	13.5%	11.6%	7.8%

Source: Central Electoral Commission.

Overall, it seems like the proportional system was used mainly to reflect the regional balance of interests. In the Komi Republic, UR performed poorly, receiving only 28.6% of the vote (almost 30% less than in the previous elections); it retained its majority in the legislature only due to 14 wins in SMDs. Its performance was likewise lackluster (below one standard deviation from the mean) in Kostroma. However, in light of the ruling party’s long-term dynamics and its low electoral ratings, the September 2020 elections do not look particularly bad.

Figure 3 overleaf plots average vote shares and the associated standard errors that United Russia has received in each round of regional elections since 2007. The September 2020 results were better than in 2011 and 2018, when major

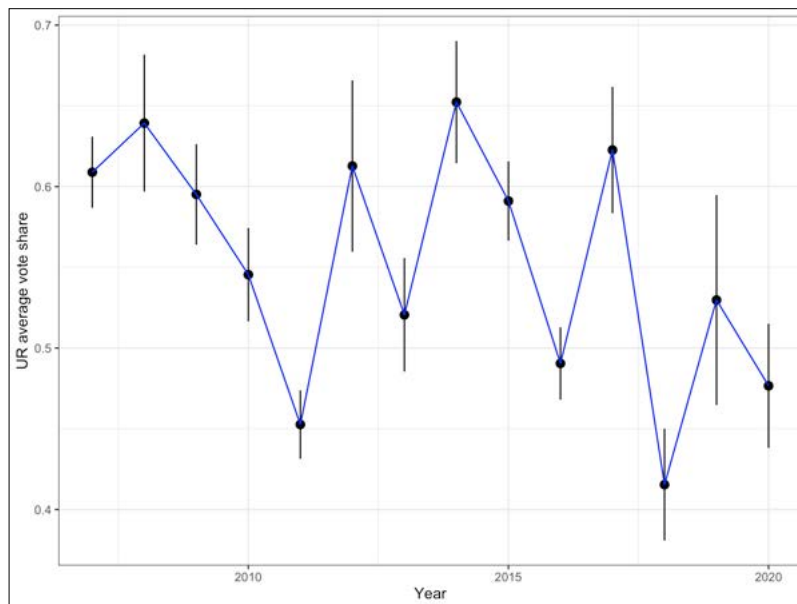
mobilization events happened, and almost identical to those in 2016. Given the unfavorable context, the absence of significant failures for the ruling party in this electoral cycle indicates that it will remain the key political player in the forthcoming federal elections.

The context did not much affect the opposition, either. As expected, KPRF performed best in those regions where the party had already gained a firm foothold. Even there, however, no breakthroughs occurred: in the Novosibirsk region, which has one of the strongest Communist Party branches in the country and where the regional capital is headed by the “red mayor,” Anatolii Lokot’, KPRF garnered only 16.6% of the vote (down from 24.5% in 2015). Victories in seven SMDs gave the party a sizable faction (14 members), but this was not enough to challenge UR’s hegemony. The LDPR capitalized on protest sentiment and economic deprivation in regions like Komi and Kurgan while retaining its status in traditional party strongholds like Yamal. Yet even the debacle with Khabarovsk governor Furgal, who was accused of murder and removed by the Kremlin in July 2020, sparking an unprecedented mobilization among locals, did not translate into additional votes for the Liberal-Democrats. Finally, Just Russia’s performance was quite volatile: it failed to surpass the threshold in Belgorod, with a mere 3.8%, but confirmed its substantial presence in Chelyabinsk (the stronghold of State Duma deputy Valerii Gartung) and improved its results in Kostroma, Kaluga, and Kurgan.

On several occasions, newcomers made their way into regional legislatures, thus avoiding the cumbersome signature collection process in the elections to come. The “Green Alternative” party received 10% of the vote in the Komi Republic, which translated into a single legislative seat. In Ryazan, the left-leaning “Za Pravdu!” party, headed by Zakhar Prilepin, and the ostensibly liberal “New People” party both surpassed the electoral threshold. The latter also managed to get elected to legislatures in Kostroma, Kaluga, and Novosibirsk. The best performer was, however, the Party of Pensioners for Social Justice, which received an average of 5.9% of the vote and achieved representation in seven legislatures. The results of liberal and democratic parties like “Yabloko,” “Party of Growth,” and “Civic Platform” were negligible.

The legislative elections mostly confirmed the status quo: United Russia managed to offset losses in the proportional system with its victories in SMDs and its cooptation of independents; the systemic opposition parties retained their position;

Figure 3: United Russia’s Average Vote Shares in the Regional Legislative Elections. The Vertical Bands Represent Standard Errors.



Source: Central Electoral Commission.

and the non-parliamentary groups tested their strength and were occasionally elected, supposedly with the tacit permission of or overt help from the authorities. Overall, the elections did not change the composition of legislatures, which mostly mimicked the national parliament.

Conclusion

On the surface, the Kremlin seemed to navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic and the economic downturn relatively successfully. It retained control over the regional executives by removing even a modicum of competition and improvising with nomination procedures. For their part, incumbent governors signaled to the Kremlin that they are loyal and capable of steering the electoral process in the right direction. Despite a decline in the average vote

share received by its party list, United Russia performed much better than public opinion polls would have predicted. The SMD elections further buttressed its continued dominance in the regional legislatures. The parliamentary opposition, on the other hand, did not benefit much from the situation. No breakthroughs akin to the LDPR’s 2019 performance in Khabarovsk occurred; the systemic opposition parties mostly reaffirmed their status. The non-parliamentary groups made some incursions into the regional legislatures, freeing themselves of the burden of collecting signatures in the next elections. Nevertheless, the balance of power remained mostly intact.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the major headlines were made by the non-systemic opposition on the local level. In the Novosibirsk City Council elections, the “Coalition 2020” group led by Team Navalny head Sergei

Boiko won four seats while supporting several other elected candidates. In Tomsk, two members of Team Navalny were elected to the City Council. And in Tambov, UR lost 17 of 18 seats in the local Council. Team Navalny attributed these victories to the “smart voting” strategy, a reference to opposition voters’ coalescence around those non-UR candidates who are most likely to successfully challenge UR incumbents. While the real effects of the strategy in these elections are hard to establish, “smart voting” might become a key coordination device for the opposition in the next federal elections. In sum, the September 2020 “dress rehearsal” elections revealed the range of tactical choices that the regime and the opposition will be able to deploy in the key battle for the State Duma in 2021.

About the Author

Andrei Semenov is the director of the Center for Comparative History and Politics at Perm State University. He is a political scientist focusing on contentious, electoral, and party politics in contemporary Russia. He has been published in *Social Movement Studies*, *East European Politics*, and *Demokratizatsiya*. Contact: andreysemenov@comparativestudies.ru.

References

- Rosenfeld B., Greene S., Morris J., Pop-Eleches G., Robertson G. (2020) Putin’s support is weakening. Will that show up in Russia’s regional elections this weekend? Washington Post, September 10, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/10/putins-support-is-weakening-will-that-show-up-russias-regional-elections-this-weekend/>
- Preliminary statement on findings of citizen observation on the Single Election Day in Russia, 13 September 2020. Golos website, September 15, 2020. <https://www.golosinfo.org/en/articles/144710>

ANALYSIS

The 2020 Regional Elections in Russia: A Rehearsal for the 2021 Duma Elections

By Mikhail Turchenko (European University at St. Petersburg)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000458207

Abstract

The September 2020 regional elections in Russia employed a new three-day voting scheme. This change, along with biased electoral rules, helped the Kremlin to maintain control over all gubernatorial offices, as well as—via United Russia—over all regional parliaments and a majority of city councils in regional capitals. At the same time, Alexei Navalny’s “smart vote” initiative was effective in big cities. Multi-day voting will once again be used in the Duma elections next year, but there the Kremlin’s landslide victory is in jeopardy due to United Russia’s declining popularity among voters and the ability of the candidates backed by the “smart vote” campaign to defeat UR nominees in a number of single-member districts.

Main Actors and Results

For the authorities and the opposition alike, the regional elections held in Russia in September of this year can be considered a rehearsal for the 2021 Duma campaign. The Kremlin’s primary goal was to test multi-day voting, with the main election day, September 13, preceded by two days of early voting. The official explanation for this change to the electoral process was that early vot-

ing would make the process “as comfortable as possible”¹ for voters. In reality, however, the authorities were trying to reduce the risk of unfavorable electoral outcomes at the regional level in advance of the national legislative races next year. Multi-day voting limits the effectiveness of electoral observation, facilitates the two-part task of mobilizing state-dependent voters to go to the polls and monitoring their activity, and simplifies the use

1 “V TSIK Rossii sostoyalos’ zasedanie ekspertnoi ploshchadki.” 16 July 2020. <http://www.cikrf.ru/news/cec/47052/>