

'Elections' in Russia

Why did Russia just bother holding a presidential election? Without any real opposition or choice (the Russian word for 'elections', *vybory*, is the same as 'choices')? There is no point in analysing it as a normal election, or even maybe in calling it such. But it is worth analysing the changing role of 'elections' within Russia's meticulously managed political system.

When the last presidential election was held in 2018, politics, or rather political technology, still had some residual functions. Since the mid-2000s, the only permitted players in public politics have been the 'Kremlin parties' – United Russia and its satellites. All have their niche. All are carefully scripted. All move in what I have called 'virtual political geometry'. But there was still a need to police the boundaries of the political system, to prevent challengers from disrupting the Kremlin's virtual monopoly and the harmony in which the virtual elements interact. One effective way to do that was by blurring the very idea of opposition. The 2018 election featured in, or near, the 'liberal' slot Zseniya Sobchak, whose father was Putin's mentor when he was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg in the 1990s. Was she in opposition or not? The confusion helped her to limp to a weak 1.7% - which, from the Kremlin's point of view, was a perfect result for a 'liberal' challenger. The other blurry candidate was Pavel Grudinin for the Communists, who was allowed to run as a types of Trumpian populist to stir up some interest. The next function of political technology in 2018 was setting tram lines: enough support to make Grudinin interesting and raise turnout, but not too much. In the end, he threatened to overshoot, and a U-turn on his media management kept him down to 11.9%. Grudinin and others also functioned as 'canary parties', warning of popular discontent or pre-empting (by faking) challenger movements. The new 'New People' party on 5.4% in the 2021 parliamentary elections could almost have been invented by a satirist.

A final function of political technology was turnout technology. Keeping interest and turnout high enough, but in the right areas: mobilising supporters and demobilising potential opponents. In 2018 Putin officially won 75.3% on a turnout of 67.5%.

How much of this was still necessary in 2024? Not much. The tracks were in a different place. As the leader of a disastrous and genocidal war against Ukraine, Putin had to be even more popular, and enthusiasm (turnout) even higher. Putin's vote was chosen at 87.3% and turnout at 77.4% (some initial reports had 74.2%) - and both were signalled by political technology 'opinion polls' predicting the fake result.¹ Playing with even blurry opposition like Boris Nadezhdin was too risky. The Kremlin is destroying all vestiges of opposition. The other three candidates were only semi-present. Who were

¹ See for example the FOM polls at <https://fom.ru/Politika/14988>.

they? There was a revival of the technique first used in Putin's second election in 2004; when Putin's nascent personality cult meant that he was opposed, not by other party leaders, but by second stringers playing due homage and confessing that they were only politicians not leaders. In second place for but not really for the Communists was Nikolay Kharitonov, who stood in both 2004 (13.8%) and 2024 (safely down to 4.4%). Leonid Slutskiy (3.2%) for the Liberal-Democrats kept mentioning his dead leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The Just Russia party didn't bother taking part.

There were steamroller tactics to get the vote out. Not to 84%/77%. Now traditional analysis of the vote distribution using the methodology of [Sergey Shpilkin](#) showed unnatural distribution at upper levels, indicating 'an estimate of 22 million fraudulent votes, or 35% of all offline votes in Russia'. 'Offline', however, means that the Kremlin has got skilled at covering its tracks. Fraud is easier online, and online voting 'cannot be analysed on a par with offline sites'; and was excluded from the analysis. An [estimated 71%](#) in Moscow voted online. But fake turnout and real fraud were at record levels.

The point was more to shape the voting process to get closer to 84%/77%, to give it some credibility. But also to demonstrate the Kremlin's capacity for fraud. Billions of roubles were spent on [upgraded propaganda](#), especially online. Russia imported the Belarusian 'technology' of early voting, three days in total: so the process was already over by traditional protest time – the announcement of the result – and so 'controlled populations' could be more closely monitored at the polls.

In the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine there was a political technology show of virtual support. There were soldiers voting [dressed as](#) civilians, and students bussed in for [massovki](#) – fake rallies. This was for the domestic audience and for international show; but was also a myth-confirming virtual exercise in itself.

The election was of course really a plebiscite. A mass exercise in the ongoing horizontal cooptation of Russians in support of the war. A way of getting the loyal majority to play their part in the virtual chorus. Russia has also become much more authoritarian since 2018. And the same [leaked documents](#) show plans, supposedly signed by Putin, for further post-election crackdown, 'solving the problem of opposition movements', 'accelerated mobilisation' of society, and 'dezapadnizatsiya' (dewesternisation), meaning further informational and cultural isolation from the 'Collective West'.