



Russia's Post-Soviet Elections

Introduction

Elections lie at the very heart of the two political systems that are most commonly implemented across the contemporary world, namely liberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism. As the political science literature argued since the 1960s, the functions performed by elections in these distinct political *milieux* are to a significant extent very similar, as they invariably relate to legitimisation and political mobilisation. There is also a crucial difference, however. In liberal democracies, elections serve as a crucial means of alternation in power, thus providing the citizens with an instrument for punishing or rewarding their rulers at the polls. In electoral authoritarian regimes, power transfer—if it happens at all—has little relationship to elections. In this latter context, elections are orchestrated in a way that not only ensures the autocrat's survival in power but also contributes to regime consolidation.

Throughout its post-Soviet history, Russia has undergone a dramatic and intellectually fascinating, but ultimately sad, transformation from the imperfect electoral democracy of the 1990s to today's rather robust authoritarian model. This process was thoroughly documented and explained in many insightful articles published in *Europe-Asia Studies*. This virtual special issue reproduces several of them with a view to comprehensively describe this process as reflected in contemporary scholarly accounts.

The selected articles narrate a very telling story. Elections of the early post-Soviet period, while not fully free and fair by strict international standards, did somehow allow for the meaningful expression of mass political preferences. However, even at that time, the role of elections in shaping Russian politics at the national level was severely undermined by the floating state of the country's party system. After Vladimir Putin's advent to power, the political executive invested significant efforts into building a political party that would be capable of serving as the new leader's electoral and legislative tool.

Such a party, *Edinaya Rossiya* (United Russia), succeeded in bringing the significant electoral resources of local elites to the service of national executive, thus incorporating sub-national authoritarianism into the new political order. Putin's authoritarian rise, while facilitated by the relative economic prosperity of the early 2000s, was also greatly assisted by the strategy pursued by the Kremlin throughout the 2000s and 2010s. The main elements of this strategy included placing the remaining opposition parties under the effective control of the presidential

administration; the devise of a purposeful system of electoral engineering to ensure ensuring United Russia's domination; the cultivation of popular support to autocracy through an enormous propaganda effort; and outright electoral fraud. In the aftermath of the 2011 *Duma* elections, this strategy backfired, as it provoked mass protests in Moscow and several other Russian cities. When observed in context, the narrow social profile of the protestors may suggest that the prospects for electorally induced change in Russia remain ultimately vague.

The 2018 presidential election, with its clearly predetermined result, has been prepared by the developments documented in the selected articles. This is why the imminent vote is very important to understanding the current state of Russian politics.

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Articles

[Lost in Transition? The Geography of Protests and Attitude Change in Russia](#)

Mikhail Dmitriev
Volume 67, Issue 2 (2015)

[Political Opposition in Russia: A Troubled Transformation](#)

Vladimir Gel'man
Volume 67, Issue 2 (2015)

[Russia's Regional Legislative Elections, 2003–2007: Authoritarianism Incorporated](#)

Grigorii V. Golosov
Volume 63, Issue 3 (2011)

[The Myth of Mass Russian Support for Autocracy: The Public Opinion Foundations of a Hybrid Regime](#)

Henry E. Hale
Volume 63, Issue 8 (2011)

[Metastasised Fraud in Russia's 2008 Presidential Election](#)

Evgeniya Lukinova, Mikhail Myagkov & Peter C. Ordeshook
Volume 63, Issue 4 (2011)

['It's the Economy, Comrade!' Parties and Voters in the 2007 Russian Duma Election](#)

Ian McAllister & Stephen White
Volume 60, Issue 6 (2008)

[The Politics of Dominant Party Formation: United Russia and Russia's Governors](#)

Ora John Reuter
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[Voting in a Floating Party System: The 1999 Duma Election](#)

Richard Rose, Neil Munro & Stephen White
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[Understanding multi-party choice: The 1995 Duma election](#)

Richard Rose, Evgeny Tikhomirov & William Mishler
Volume 49, Issue 5 (1997)

[The Russian elections of December 1993](#)

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[Changing the Russian Electoral System: Inside the Black Box](#)

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[El'tsin and his voters: Popular support in the 1991 Russian presidential elections and after](#)

Stephen White, Ian McAllister & Olga Kryshstanovskaya
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