

Poll: 53% Believe Duma Vote Will Be Rigged

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Many voters believe that upcoming State Duma elections will be merely an imitation of a political race and that authorities will rig the outcome, independent pollster Levada Center said Thursday.

The survey results support worries voiced by the political opposition and analysts about Russia's democracy before the elections in December, when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's United Russia will be vying to remain in power.

Asked if elections "will be only an imitation of a [political] struggle and the distribution of parliamentary seats will be determined by the authorities," 53 percent answered "yes."

Little more than a third of the 1,600 people surveyed in 45 regions between July 15 and 19 said the elections would represent a real competition among parties, Levada said.

United Russia will be hard pressed to maintain its two-thirds majority, opinion polls show, as dissatisfaction rises among voters over inflation, low salaries and inadequate government

services.

The party, however, is expected to stay in power.

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Melia said this week that Russia posed the most complex challenge to democratic reform in Europe and that it was important that observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe be invited to monitor the event.

Russia mostly uses a system of manual counting for ballots cast across 83 regions, opening the door to violations that have been criticized by both the opposition and nongovernmental organizations.

President Dmitry Medvedev pledged on Wednesday to eliminate electoral violations from 2015 by setting up digital vote counting, but such reforms will come too late for the Duma elections in December and the March 2012 presidential vote.

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