

Russian Opposition Calls Foul After Ruling Party Landslide in Parliamentary Elections

Controversial online voting cut the early leads of candidates supported by jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

By [Felix Light](#)

September 20, 2021



United Russia's vote share is drawing close to 50%. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

Russia's opposition called for protests on Monday after accusing the authorities of rigging highly anticipated elections to the country's parliament.

As polls closed on Sunday, early results from the Far East and Siberia had suggested that the pro-Kremlin United Russia party might lose ground in an election that had turned on difficult issues of rising poverty and inflation.

But in Moscow, as votes cast online began to be counted, early leads for candidates supported

by jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's tactical voting scheme began to vanish one by one. By early afternoon, Kremlin-endorsed candidates were declared the winners in all the capital's 15 districts, giving United Russia a two-thirds majority in the State Duma.

Even as the Kremlin described the vote as "free and fair," and United Russia's vote-share drew close to 50%, opposition anger was swift.

"I refuse to recognize this State Duma as legitimate," Yevgeny Roizman, a former mayor of Yekaterinburg and prominent opposition figure, [wrote](#) on Twitter.

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Having seen a string of candidates in Moscow leading their races only to fall behind at the last minute as the online vote was declared, the Communist Party's leadership refused to recognize the results of the electronic vote.

The party's influential Moscow boss Valery Rashkin — who himself only fell behind in his race as online results were declared — [called for](#) protests on Monday evening, alongside other defeated KPRF candidates.

"These results are totally implausible," Mikhail Lobanov, a Communist candidate and mathematics professor defeated in an opposition-heavy Moscow district by state TV presenter Yevgeny Popov, of United Russia, told The Moscow Times.

"That's why I'm calling for all the candidates who have lost to electronic voting to gather tonight to discuss what to do next."

Within minutes, the Moscow mayor's office [banned](#) the protests, citing coronavirus restrictions.

Still, a few hundred people gathered Monday evening on Pushkin Square in central Moscow to protest the election results. Communist Party candidates Rashkin, Denis Parfenov, and Sergey Obukhov were present and spoke to the crowd using sound equipment.

For several years before the elections, the popularity of United Russia — the pro-Kremlin ruling party that has won every nationwide election it has ever entered — had been on the wane.

A botched pension reform and sliding living standards had seen the bloc slide in the polls, consistently registering less than 30% in the run-up to the vote.

Allies of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, whose return to Russia and subsequent jailing in February sparked mass protests, had hoped his Smart Voting strategy — whereby opposition-leaning voters were encouraged to rally around the candidates best placed to defeat United Russia — might unseat a few pro-Putin incumbents.

But in the event, the only significant change was the arrival in parliament of New People — a vaguely liberal, reformist but pro-Putin party that looked set to scrape past the 5% threshold for winning seats.

Clean sweep

Nationwide, the electoral picture was murky, and appeared to depend heavily on the status of Russia's controversial electronic vote scheme, available only in Moscow and a handful of other regions.

Though United Russia lost ground in hitherto loyalist parts of Siberia and the Far East — where online voting was unavailable — it simultaneously ended up with a clean sweep of seats in Moscow, where it has traditionally performed poorly.

In the weeks and months leading up to election day, the authorities had been promoting online voting, an effort spearheaded by Alexei Venediktov, the influential editor-in-chief of the liberal Ekho Moskvy radio station.

In particular, state sector employees, a traditionally reliable source of votes for United Russia, were encouraged, and sometimes [coerced](#) into registering for online voting.

In response, opposition campaigns warned their supporters against voting online, cautioning that it could be used to falsify results.

The results of the 2 million votes cast online in Moscow — representing [over 90% turnout](#) — were announced 14 hours after the polls closed.

Related article: [Russian Communist Party Says Won't Recognize Moscow E-Voting Results](#)

Outside Moscow, it was a good night for the Communists — at least in those parts of the country where electronic voting had not yet been rolled out.

Having picked up the bulk of Navalny's Smart Voting endorsements, while also riding discontent over sliding living standards and incomes, the KPRF put in a strong performance beating United Russia outright in a string of Far Eastern and Siberian regions.

With the Communists set to take around 19% of the vote, and increasing their number of seats in the Duma from 43 to 57, it was one of the party's strongest results since its Yeltsin-era heyday.

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