

Kremlin party wins parliamentary elections amid low voter turnout

Andrea Peters
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In an election with notably low turnout, Russia's ruling party has won a supermajority in the country's parliament. In Sunday's contest, United Russia (UR) saw its number of Duma representatives rise from 238 to 343, giving the party, which is allied to President Vladimir Putin, control of over three-quarters of the votes in the 450-seat body.

UR garnered just over 54 percent of the total ballots cast. The party's control of the parliament is a product of the fact that election laws were recently changed such that half of the seats are no longer allotted proportionately, but rather in first-past-the-post contests in which UR candidates dominated. Compared to 2011, the ruling party saw its vote rise by just 5 percent. It is down by about 10 points compared to 2007, the final year of the Putin-era economic boom.

The Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), led by Gennady Zyuganov, and the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), under the control of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, each commanded about 15 percent of the vote and won 42 and 39 seats respectively. In a major reversal of fortunes, the KPRF lost 50 spots and the LDPR 17 relative to 2011. Speaking of his party's poor performance and near-equal level of Duma representation now with the LDPR, Zyuganov declared, "This is not just deception, it's a dangerous aberration, which will inevitably end up undermining stability."

The LDPR and KPRF were trailed by A Just Russia, which now has 23 representatives in the Duma, along with a handful of other groups that collectively have three seats. Constituting a loyal "opposition," all of these organizations have worked hand-in-glove with UR and the Kremlin for years to pass right-wing policies and promote Russian nationalism to shore up the government.

In a rebuke of the free-market, pro-Western policies of the country's leading liberals, the two most well known such outfits, Yabloko and PARNAS, commanded less than 1 and 2 percent of the vote respectively, failing to cross the minimum threshold to enter parliament.

Despite securing a significant win, United Russia's supermajority does not indicate the existence of deep-seated support for the Kremlin. Overall, turnout fell by about 12 points, falling to just shy of 48 percent from 61 percent just five years ago. It is the lowest it has been since the start of the 2000s.

Indicating widespread disaffection in Russia's economic and political centers, participation was worst in the country's two major cities, Moscow and Saint Petersburg, where just 28.7 and 25.6 percent of the electorate respectively went to the polls. Turnout in the country's capital has collapsed in the last five years. In the previous parliamentary cycle in 2011, after which antigovernment protests erupted, 66 percent of voters cast ballots in Moscow.

UR's popularity in that city is also much lower than in outer-lying regions. This year the Kremlin party won just 38 percent of the vote, far less than the overall total.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov declared that the supermajority meant that the government had received a "vote of confidence" from the population. While acknowledging that the level of support in the big cities was "a bit lower," he insisted that turnout in European elections is usually below that witnessed in Russia this year.

A political scientist speaking to the Russian news outlet TASS sought to make a similar argument, insisting that the fall in voter participation was simply the country catching up to broader "global trends."

Putin, however, sounded a more cautionary note. “Things are tough but people still voted for United Russia. It means that people see that United Russia members are really working hard for people even though it doesn’t always work,” he said.

Sergei Mironov of A Just Russia declared that the turnout problem lay in a lack of “faith in the electoral system,” such that “people think their vote won’t count.”

The far-right nationalist, Vladimir Zhirinovksy of the LDPR, denounced the population for abstaining. “More than 57 million people didn’t go and vote. It’s a disgrace,” he declared.

Mikhail Kasyanov, the leader of PARNAS, said, “Citizens had no faith in elections as an institution. This is the result of government policies. It’s their fault.” His party, however, was repudiated by the electorate, unable to win voters dissatisfied with the Kremlin’s policies. Allegations of voter fraud have surfaced. In Moscow, opposition leaders reported so-called carousel voting in which people move from one place to another, casting multiple ballots. YouTube videos taken in some southern Russian cities appear to show ballot stuffing.

In other locales, soldiers not registered to vote were seen lining up in large numbers regardless. One opposition leader claimed that in the Siberian mountain region of Altai, young people were casting ballots in place of older, registered voters. In Dagestan, youth attacked a voting place in anger over alleged ballot stuffing on the part of officials. Issues have also been reported of voting taking place on open tables, as opposed to in curtained booths. The election rights organization GOLOS says it has received over 2,000 complaints.

Ella Pamfilova, the recently appointed head of the Russian Election Commission and a well-established human rights figure, indicated that some investigations were underway. According to her, there are three regions where the vote may be invalidated. The elections were monitored by 264,000 observers, including international representatives.

At the Russian embassy in Ukraine, dozens of right-wing protesters sought to interfere with Russian citizens who came to cast ballots. At least one voter was assaulted. The European Union and the virulently anti-Russian, pro-US government in Ukraine are

refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the Russian parliamentary vote in Crimea. Moscow absorbed the peninsula after a popular referendum held there in the aftermath of the February 2014 coup in Kiev supported unification with Russia.



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