Russian elections overshadowed by COVID-19 surge

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Russia's elections to the State Duma (parliament) this weekend were overshadowed by the rapid resurgence of COVID-19 and a deepening social crisis. Because of the pandemic, the election was held over the course of three days, from Friday through Sunday, and it was possible to cast ballots online.

The ruling United Russia party, which is closely associated with President Vladimir Putin, won with close to 50 percent (down from 54 percent in 2016) of the vote. This will give the party a two-thirds majority in the parliament. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) was able to capitalize to some extent on growing social and political discontent and received about a fifth of the vote.

There were widespread reports of ballot rigging, and employees of state-owned enterprises, including many industrial workers, were forced to vote. Despite these measures, however, voter turnout stood at just 52 percent, a sign of growing popular hostility toward all the established political parties.

The KPRF has already declared that it will not recognize the result of the online vote. Online ballots were only counted on Monday, and they tipped the vote significantly in favor of United Russia.

In the run-up to the election, the Kremlin cracked down heavily on the liberal opposition gathered around the imprisoned Alexei Navalny. Navalny, who is backed by US and German imperialism, was arrested early this year and sentenced to over two years in prison.

Two weeks before the election, Russia summoned the US ambassador over alleged "election interference." The Kremlin indicated it had "undeniable proof" of US-based tech companies violating Russian laws in the lead-up to the elections, without specifying the allegations or the evidence.

Navalny and his staff, based on the so-called "smart vote" strategy, called upon people to cast their ballots for any candidate that was the most likely to defeat a rival from United Russia.

In many places, this meant that the Navalny team recommended candidates of the Stalinist KPRF. The KPRF is notorious for its anti-immigrant and Great Russian chauvinism and, to this day, staunchly defends and praises the worst crimes of Joseph Stalin. Following the line of Navalny, the Pabloites of the Russian Socialist Movement also backed KPRF candidates.

Apart from United Russia and the KPRF, three other parties will also be represented in parliament. The far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), headed by the anti-Semite and chauvinist Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and the Just Russia Party both received about 7.5 percent of the vote. The Novye Liudi (New People) party, which was only recently established by Alexei Nechaev, the CEO of a cosmetics company, got a little over 5 percent. The LDPR, as well as Just Russia and the KPRF, have functioned for over two decades as a "loyal opposition" to the Putin regime, working to channel social and political discontent in a right-wing direction.

Russia's stock market reached a record high on Friday as the elections began, even as cases and deaths surged and the economy remains mired in crisis.

The election was marked by an almost complete black-out of the burning social issues affecting the working class, above all, the COVID-19 pandemic. Several parties, including United Russia, signed an agreement with the Kremlin, obliging their candidates to not make any statements on the pandemic.

Cases skyrocketed again over election weekend, reaching daily numbers of over 20,000 on both

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Saturday and Sunday. In Moscow, which has the highest levels of vaccination in the country, numbers also rose once more to above 2,000 per day. The resurgence of the pandemic comes as a fourth wave that brutally hit the country's population in the summer has barely concluded. At least 790 people have died each day for weeks now, with a daily record of 820 deaths in late August. In July alone, so far the deadliest month in the pandemic for Russia, over 50,000 people officially died from COVID-19.

Amid widespread vaccine hesitancy, only 27 percent of the population of 140 million are fully vaccinated, and just 30 percent have received at least one dose. Almost all restrictions have been lifted on the federal level. The Kremlin has left it to regions to implement limited measures on a local and ad hoc basis.

The principal driver behind the new rise in infections is the reopening of schools and colleges on September 1. Since then, hundreds of classes and schools have been closed across the country because of outbreaks among students and staff.

Last week, 80 classes in 58 schools were closed in the region of Novosibirsk alone. According to the deputy health minister of the region, Yelena Aksenova, cases rose by 46.2 percent with close to 60 percent of them among children. Even before the schools had reopened, Russian officials acknowledged that half a million children had contracted the virus in the previous year and a half.

Russian officials have also indicated that the Mu variant of the virus, also known as B.1.621, has now been detected in the country, without providing figures as to how widespread it is. The WHO recently designated the Mu variant as a "variant of interest," which could be more resistant to vaccines.

Russia has now recorded a total of over 7.214 million cases, and 195,835 deaths. The real number of deaths, however, is believed to be far higher, by up to a factor of five. This would bring the true death toll close to 1 million people. A major reason for the high death toll, apart from the total lack of adequate public health measures and low vaccination rates, is the catastrophic state of Russia's health care system. Thirty years after the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, the country's hospitals are completely dilapidated, underequipped and understaffed.

Social inequality, which has been rising, and deteriorating living standards were issues of primary concern for Russians leading up to the election, according to polls. Real wages in Russia have declined for years, with the first quarter of 2021 reporting the largest quarterly decline in real wages (5 percent) since 2009. While the pandemic and economic crisis have resulted in income losses for the vast majority of Russians, the number of Russian billionaires swelled from 99 to 117 in 2020, and their collective net worth rose dramatically, from $385 billion to $584 billion, according to *Forbes* .

The parties that competed in the elections are virtually all run by this very class of multibillionaires and millionaires. Andrei Gorokhov, a leading candidate for United Russia, reportedly has an income of $256.8 million, Andrey Kovalev, a prominent member of Just Russia, has an income of $91.6 million, and Alexei Nechaev, the founder and leader of the New People party, has a reported income of $60.1 million. By contrast, the monthly average salary in Russia is just $802, with millions earning significantly less.

In an indication of the enormous social crisis in the country, on Monday, a mentally ill student at Perm University killed at least six people and injured another 28. The shooter was injured by the police and is reportedly now hospitalized in critical condition. Just earlier this year, in May, a 19 year old gunned down nine people in his old school in Kazan, among them seven children.

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