

## **Summary of the nomination and registration of candidates for the 13th September 2020 elections to the representative bodies and bodies of local self-government**

The elections that are to take place on 13th September 2020 are the final opportunity for political players to prepare for next year's election of deputies of the Russian State Duma.

In these elections, for the first time, innovations in the electoral legislation will be tested.

The most notable innovation concerns the candidates' registration process. It relates to the changes in the rules of signature collecting – specifically, a lowering of the rate of allowed faulty signatures to 5%, the introduction of the possibility to collect part of the signatures through the “Government's service” website, the establishment of unified forms of signature papers, the requirement for the handwriting of the surname, first name and patronymic by the voters etc.

In total, 13th September will see 9,071 campaigns. These are early elections to the State Duma in four districts, elections of 18 heads of regions, 11 regional parliaments, and 22 city councils in administrative centres. More than 78,000 deputy seats and elected positions are to be contested.

### **Key conclusions**

The percentage of rejected candidates clearly shows the intrinsic difficulty of registration by signatures in those cases where the candidate is in disagreement with the administration.

The most common grounds for disqualification from registration include discrepancies between the personal details as provided by the voters in the signature papers, and information about the voters in the databases of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Automatic System “Elections,” resulting in the ruling of signatures as faulty.

The electoral commissions and the candidates find themselves under pressure, both administrative and other.

Under the conditions of sanitary-epidemiological requirements brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic, the collection of signatures became additionally impeded.

The new rule, allowing the collection of a portion of the voters' signatures electronically – with the use of the Public Services internet portal – is practically not used at all. During the deputies' elections, this option was implemented in only one region – the Chelyabinsk district. Also, the system was not tested, and its use in the collection of voters' signatures was complicated by numerous technical problems.

Obvious preferential treatment is given to certain parties upon registration. Namely, some parties are allowed to register without needing to collect signatures. Up to 90% of the candidates from parties that aren't granted this privilege cannot overcome this barrier and register. Only a third of the self-nominating candidates reach the stage of registration. The parties benefiting from these

allowances are able to get 98% of their candidates through. As a rule, these are the candidates supported by the local administration, and competing against them is generally made difficult by spoiler candidates.

Not a single candidate from a party lacking such allowances was registered in either the Novosibirsk or the Chelyabinsk district. Not a single self-nominating candidate was registered in the Voronezh, Kaluga, and Kurgan districts.

The level of competition (4.5 candidates per seat) is one of the lowest for the period spanning 2014-2020.

Such a high level of disqualification among the candidates who were required to gather voter signatures is partially related to the tightening of the requirements for the collection and verification of signatures (the requirement for the voters to handwrite their surnames, first names, and patronymics, and the lowering of the allowed proportion of faulty signatures).

The method of disqualification has not changed for several years now – for these purposes, the discrepancies in the databases of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Automatic System “Elections” are ideal. In addition to that, the lives of the candidates were seriously complicated by the Coronavirus pandemic: people were often afraid to hand their passports to signature collectors, they were filling out the forms themselves, and that led to a rise in the number of errors.

A novelty of this campaign was the possibility collecting signatures through the Public Services website; however, this system was constantly breaking down and did not significantly contribute to the number of collected signatures.

According to the data of the Ministry of Justice, 41 parties had the right to participate in the 17th July 2020 elections. The results of the registration show that the number of parties participating in the more significant 13th September elections was reduced to 22.

The number of new parties registered this year is four. The speed with which these parties went through all the necessary registration procedures should not go unnoticed. In the majority of cases, they were able to register their candidates by submitting collected signatures. That can only be evidence of the friendly attitude adopted by the authorities towards these parties – as compared to the 50 or so parties registered in the years 2013 to 2019. Nevertheless, they appear to lack local mass support.

The overall picture of the parties’ situation is as follows: Four parliamentary parties registered lists in all 11 regions. Also, the Russian Party for Pensioners for Social Justice registered all its lists (nine, two through allowances and seven through signatures), as did the Party of Growth (five, all through signatures) and the Communist Party of Social Justice (four, all through signatures). “Patriots of Russia”, the Russian Ecological Party “the Greens”, and the Party of Social Justice each presented one list, all of which have been registered ( “Patriots of Russia” through allowances, the two others through signatures).

The successful passing through the signature filter by little-known parties (in particular the Communist Party of Social Justice and several other new parties), and the high level of signature disqualifications for a number of established parties that have already been shown to enjoy substantial support from the voters (“Yabloko”, “Rodina”, “Communists of Russia”), can be considered as the usual confirmation of the unsuitability of the signature filter and of the unequal treatment of different parties by the electoral commissions.

One of the widespread methods that, on the one hand, prevents voters from making a conscious and free choice, and, on the other, is directly related to the unequal treatment of candidates by the commissions upon verification of signatures, is the so-called “spoiling” technique – the nomination and registration of candidates that take votes away from a serious candidate or party by using similar names (either candidates’ or parties’ names), or similarities in the main theses of their campaigns.

The best example of this are the elections to the city council of Orel, where out of 28 electoral districts, 13 pairs of doppelgangers were nominated. Thus, for example, in the district contested by the self-nominating famous Orel businessman Vitaly Anatolievitch Rybakov, another self-nominating candidate was named Valery Anatolievitch Rybakov, who was earlier tried for theft, is unemployed, and resides in a remote village. Two more Rybakovs faced each other in the neighbouring electoral district number 22, while electoral district number 19 saw the simultaneous “formation” of four (!) pairs of doppelgangers: Alexander Sergeyevitch Vetrov (self-nominating) – Vladimir Ivanovitch Vetrov (self-nominating); Andrey Andreyevitch Yelesin (self-nominating) – Sergey Vladimirovitch Yelesin (self-nominating); Vadim Vladimirovitch Mosin (Communist Party of the Russian Federation) – Sergey Viktorovitch Mosin (self-nominating); Vladislav Alexandrovitch Chislov (“United Russia”) – Genady Viktorovitch Chislov (self-nominating). It is hard to imagine that such a situation could occur accidentally.

The candidate nomination and registration process that started in June 2020 is taking place in conditions of still-active limitations related to the difficult epidemiological situation. Thus, all mass events that could be used for the collection of signatures continue to be prohibited while the authorities appeal to the citizens to limit their contact with other people.

In these conditions, the collection of signatures is made additionally complicated. A substantial problem that a number of candidates named was the fear that voters have of contracting the coronavirus. As a result, they often refused to hand their passports to the signature collectors and instead verbally delivered information or filled out the forms in their own hand. Because of this, it became more difficult not only to “sniff out” the voters but also to avoid errors in the signature papers.

A full detailed report in the Russian language can be found at <https://www.golosinfo.org/articles/144628>