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RUSSIA ELECTION ALERT #5

Unlevel playing field in regional and local elections

The regional and local elections scheduled on 13 September 2020 are to be the first major electoral campaign in Russia to take place following the passing of the Constitutional amendments and the introduction of the epidemiological restrictions. A total of 9071 campaigns are taking place incl. State Duma by-elections in four districts, elections of 18 regional heads (governors), 11 regional parliaments and 22 city councils in administrative centres. More than 78 thousand deputy mandates and elected positions are to be filled. The election campaign has been overshadowed by the poisoning of the prominent opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the large protest movements in the Khabarovsk region.

We are providing an overview of the findings of independent citizen election observers who have monitored the entire course of election campaigns across the Russian Federation.



Sergei Furgal's supporters want him to stand trial at home instead of the Russian capital. Image source: news.sky.com

Analyzing [the legal framework of the elections](#), domestic election experts conclude that the current legal conditions are the worst in the last 25 years. Recent changes to the electoral law on the federal level as well as short-term amendments to the regional election campaign regulations have been introduced to further restrict the electoral rights of citizens, limit the opportunities for citizen election observers and the overall public control over elections.



The analysis of the process [of candidates' registration in self-government elections](#) shows an unproportionally high dropout rate of opposition candidates. In the main elections to regional parliaments and councils, parties supported by the authorities could nominate 98 % of their candidates, self-nominated candidates could register in over 60 % of cases, and parties without „administrative support“ were rejected in almost 90% of cases. As a rule, the exceptions among rejected candidates were so called "technical" candidates and spoiler parties.

The main features of the 18 gubernatorial races were the [restricted access for opposition candidates to the elections](#) and the replacement of promising candidates by “technical” sparring-partners nominated by new “technical” parties which have been created with strong support of the authorities. Even candidates of parliamentary parties were massively excluded from gubernatorial elections, while candidates with low approval ratings from “United Russia” began to run as self-nominated candidates. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation experienced the greatest pressure in the ongoing elections - its candidates were rejected in five of the 18 regions.

During the [election campaign period, a level playing field for candidates has not been secured](#). Candidates who were supported by the authorities could also count on support from local authorities, courts, and electoral authorities and often did not have to face the restrictions associated with the Covid 19 pandemic when conducting their campaigns. State controlled media dominated the public sphere and manipulated public opinion in the mass media by obstructing opposition candidates and creating advantages for "administrative" candidates. Media monitoring showed that the total mention of "administrative" candidates in the relevant regional media was seven times higher than the total mention of all other candidates participating in the elections combined.

Also see www.epde.org for more information.