

## RUSSIA: Weekend vote will reaffirm status quo across the country

- The governing United Russia (UR) and independent candidates backed by the Kremlin are set to win the vast majority of federal, regional, and municipal elections scheduled for 8-10 September.
- Authorities will likely present electoral victories as proof of widespread public support for the governing party and its (war) agenda ahead of the presidential vote in March 2024.
- Although few surprises are expected, some expressions of public discontent cannot be ruled out in remote ethnic-minority regions.

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Around 65mn Russians will have a right to vote in elections for various federal, regional, and municipal posts across the country. At the federal level, by-elections will be held for four vacant seats in the lower chamber of parliament (the State Duma). At the regional level, direct elections of governors will be held in 21 federal regions including the capital Moscow. In five more regions, including the four annexed regions of Ukraine, governors will be elected indirectly by regional deputies from the candidates proposed by President Vladimir Putin. In addition, twenty regions (including the annexed ones) and 16 regional capitals will elect legislative assemblies.

The governing UR candidates or independents supported by the Kremlin are set to come out on top in the vast majority of votes. Essentially all opposition parties have been banned and opposition leaders eliminated. Most of the remaining opposition contenders in regional governor elections were prevented from participating in electoral contests by the so-called “municipal filter”, a requirement for candidates to collect signatures from the heads of municipalities or local deputies, most of which come from the ruling parties. As a result, electoral lists are dominated by the four largest parliamentary parties supportive of the status quo. In addition, the so-called systemic opposition parties refrained from putting forward their most promising candidates and are running rather subdued campaigns. Finally, there has been a series of changes in electoral rules that favor UR, while remote electronic voting in several regions further reduces the transparency of the vote.

Russian authorities will likely seek to exploit the vote to demonstrate widespread public support for the governing presidential party and its agenda including their war in Ukraine; they hope this will give much-needed reassurance amid mounting war losses and Wagner’s mutiny. Meanwhile, the decision to hold votes in the four annexed Ukrainian regions – none of which Russia has a full control of – aims to demonstrate that these areas are now part into Russia’s legal and political system regardless of ongoing military activity.

More generally, the vote will test the compliance of local electoral bodies across the country and help ascertain the effectiveness of electoral tricks ahead of the presidential election expected in March 2024.

### Not much to watch

Unlike the [2018](#) and [2019](#) regional elections, which were accompanied by mass protests, this time such overt expression of public discontent is much less likely due to stricter repressive measures and a sustained clampdown on political opposition and civic activists in recent years. Still, some expression of discontent cannot be completely ruled out as Russia’s regions have been disproportionately affected by war-related spending cuts and mobilization. In addition, the 2020-2021 protests in the far eastern region of Khabarovsk over the removal of a highly popular regional governor demonstrated public sensitivity to local/regional governance issues. Protests would become more plausible in cases where the gap between the actual and reported election results is perceived to be too wide.

While UR is the clear favorite, systemic opposition parties might hope for some symbolic victories. In a small southern Siberian region of Khakassia, a popular governor from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) is on course to be re-elected after the UR candidate dropped out of the race citing health reasons. Other electoral competitions to watch include the mayoral elections in Khabarovsk as well as votes in remote ethnic-minority regions such as Yakutia or Kalmykia.

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