



Municipal elections in Russia: the opposition's chance

Key findings of the report

April 2020

Students of Russian politics rightly focus on the “vertical of power” that Vladimir Putin has created since he first became President of Russia two decades ago. Taking the top office in a country moving tentatively toward democracy, Putin’s “vertical” or “managed democracy” set the country back toward its authoritarian traditions. Without doubt, Vladimir Putin has control of the major sources of hard and soft power in a Russia. And many analysts believe this system has staying power, even after Putin leaves the stage.

Yet the authoritarian features of the Putin system are not all encompassing. While he and his team may control the major issues on the agenda, they do not dominate all politics. This is particularly evident at the municipal level, where, despite all the advantages enjoyed by Putin and his United Russia party, competitive elections take place and real opposition party candidates can win.

In this paper, produced by the Dossier Center, a project developed and supported by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the authors provide interesting data from recent local elections. These data provide some indications of how Russian politics may evolve. For instance, the authors point out that with greater mobilization efforts, opposition candidates could defeat and replace as many as 3000 United Russia representatives.

Historically, one interesting thing about authoritarian and totalitarian systems, is that they seem irresistible, until suddenly they are not. Recognizing this, we should be attuned to developments in Russia outside the big politics of the Kremlin. Municipal elections are a natural place to begin.



Ambassador (Ret.) John Herbst, Director, Eurasia Center, Atlantic Council

The report describes the status of municipal elections, the current situation with municipal deputies in Russia, as well as provides the assessment of the electoral prospects for opposition candidates in gubernatorial and municipal elections.

The 68,232 municipal elections held over the past 15 years across Russia were analysed. At least 973,520 candidates stood for these elections, some on more than one occasion.

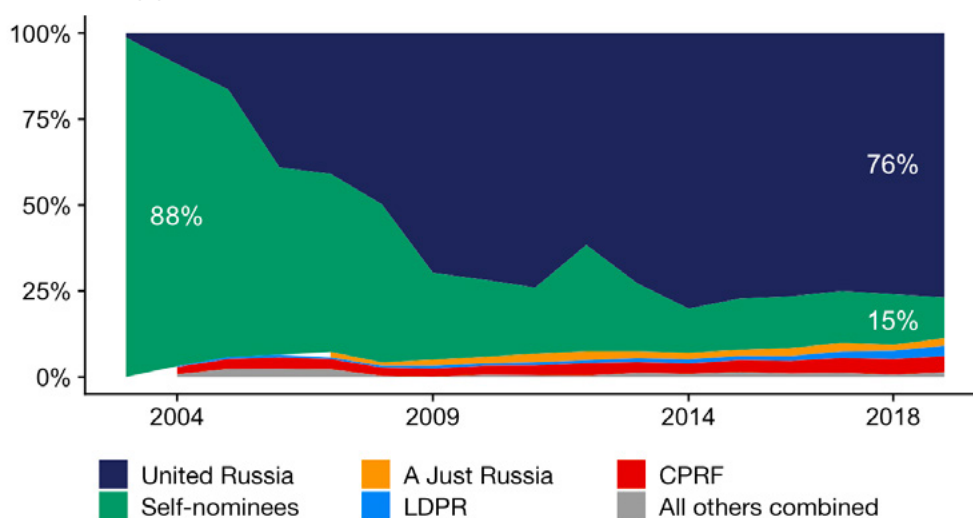
Following the collapse of the USSR, direct elections of regional governors were introduced in Russia. These were abolished in 2004, in favour of strengthening the “power vertical” after the Beslan school terror attack by Chechen rebels.

After civil unrest at the end of 2011, the authorities brought back direct elections of governors. In addition, a so-called “municipal filter” was introduced, which means that candidates must collect signatures of 5–10% of municipal deputies from three-quarters of a region’s municipal districts. Following this, the role of municipal deputies has increased.

Key Points

- 1 Currently, there are six parties in the Russian parliament: United Russia, LDPR, A Just Russia, Rodina, Civil Platform, and Communist Party (CPRF). However, apart from United Russia, no party can theoretically overcome the municipal filter in gubernatorial elections in any region of Russia without United Russia's approval. For more detail, see the [control map](#). Therefore, gubernatorial elections are fully controlled by United Russia, and the election of governors barely differs from designations.

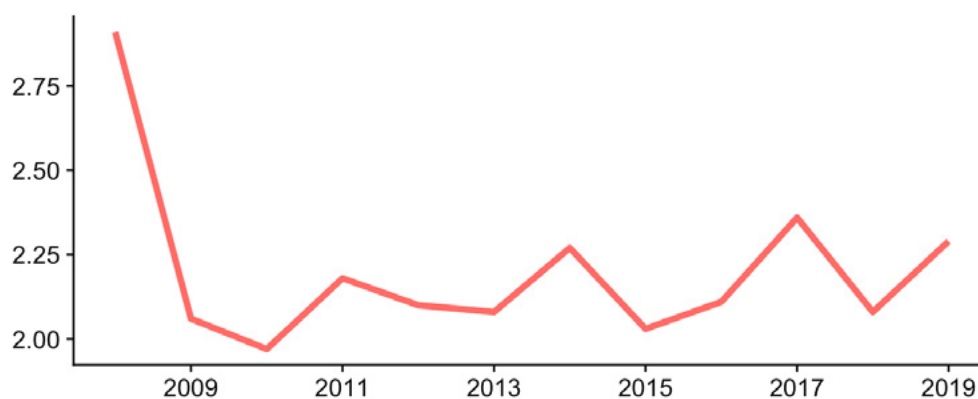
Share of elected municipal deputies in Russia, by parties



Source: CEC of Russia, Dossier.center

- 2 Until 2009, most municipal candidates were self-nominees. Since the introduction of the municipal filter, competitiveness in municipal elections has increased, although it still remains low in most regions and districts of the Russian Federation. For more, see the [map of competition](#).

Average number of competitors on municipal elections in Russia



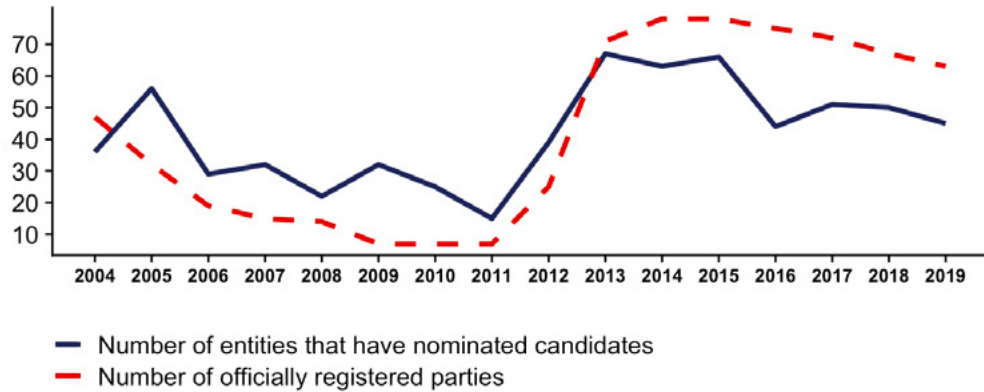
Source: CEC of Russia, Dossier.center

3

The main finding is the current semi-fictional state of the political system of the Russian Federation. Most parties avoid competition in municipal elections, and do not even nominate a sufficient number of candidates (except for Moscow, St. Petersburg and several large cities). Therefore, the majority of candidates, and hence deputies, represent United Russia.

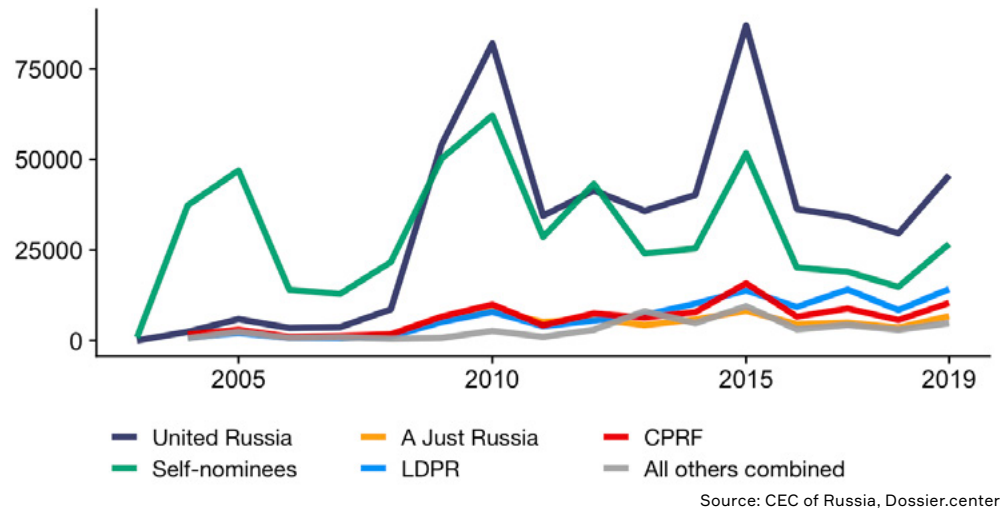
Number of parties or NGOs

nominated candidates on municipal elections in Russia



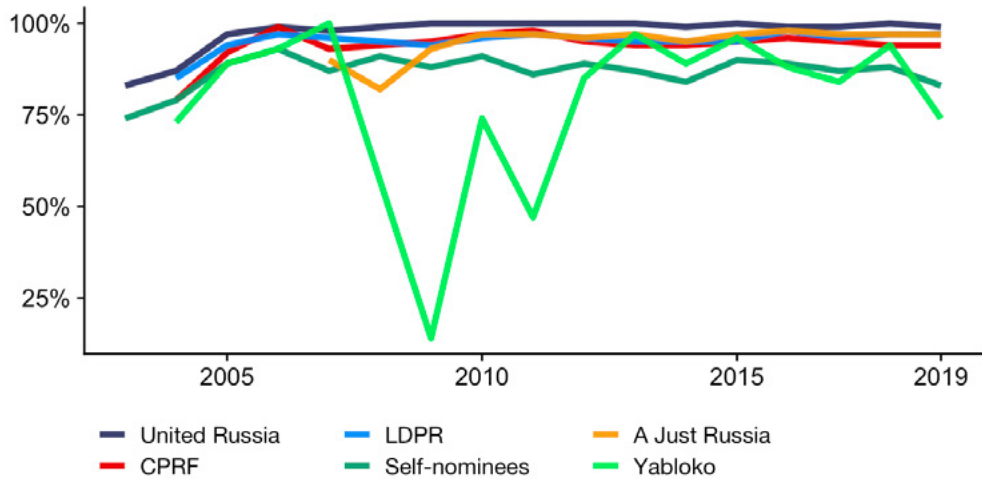
Number of candidates nominated

in Russia's municipal elections



- 4 Despite the obstacles faced by Yabloko party candidates in 2012 and independent candidates faced in 2019, representatives of the opposition have been able to successfully register over the last 7 years. Their results were just below United Russia's candidates.

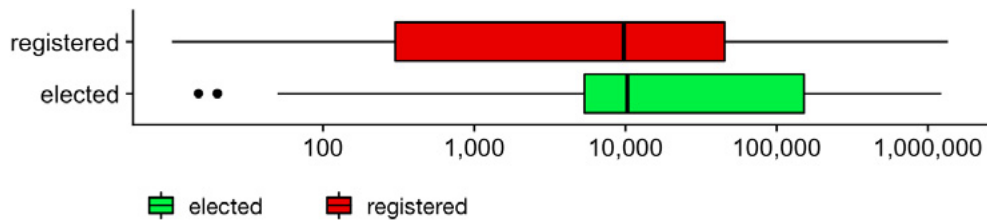
Share of successfully registered candidates on municipal elections in Russia



Source: CEC of Russia, Dossier.center

- 5 Candidates' official campaign spending is relatively low. Median costs are around 20,000 rubbles (about \$290), average costs are 147,664 rubbles (about \$2,120).

Campaign spendings of candidates on municipal elections in Russia

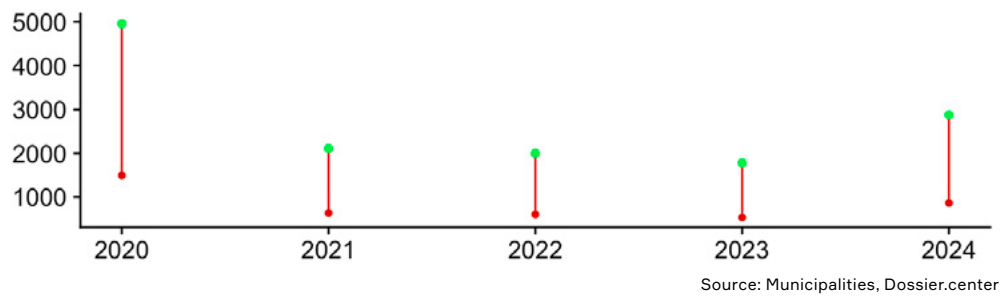


Source: Municipalities, Dossier.center

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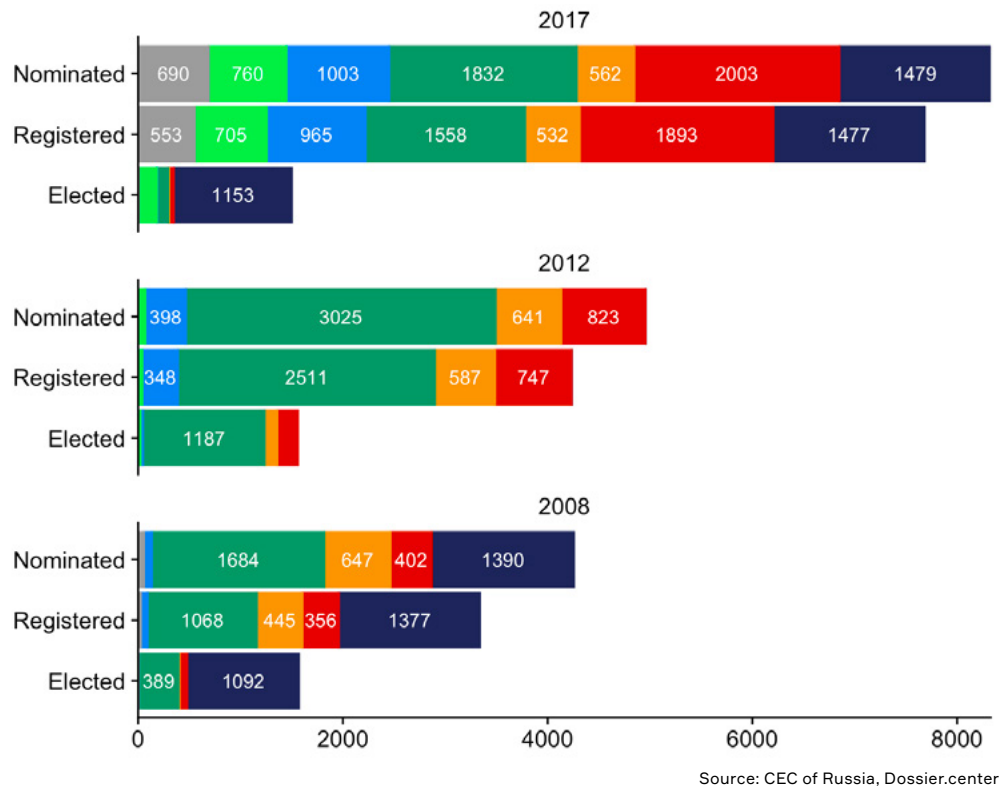
Analysis of the election campaigns in Moscow (2017) and St. Petersburg (2019) showed that with a sufficient number of candidates and the use of tactical voting and voter mobilisation initiatives (for instance, the United Democrats), opposition candidates can come up with good results. At the same time, in many other regions, the gap between candidates from United Russia and second-placed candidates is minimal; roughly 40–80 votes. The Dossier Centre has calculated that up to 3,000 opposition candidates could be elected annually in the next 5 years. These are small figures in comparison to the total number of municipal deputies, but they could alter the situation with the municipal filter and ensure the nomination of gubernatorial candidates, independent from United Russia.

Number of potentially elected municipal deputies from the opposition, with active mobilization projects (prediction)



Parties in municipal elections in Moscow

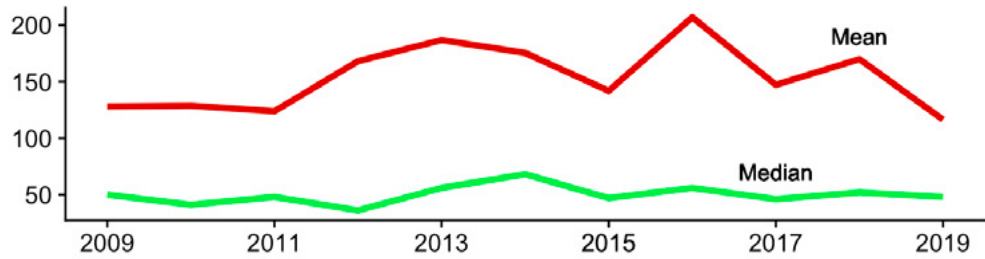
Total number of candidates by major parties



7 Opposition parties and political forces can and should nominate candidates in local elections — they have a good chance of being elected.

Average number of missing votes

to defeat United Russia's candidate



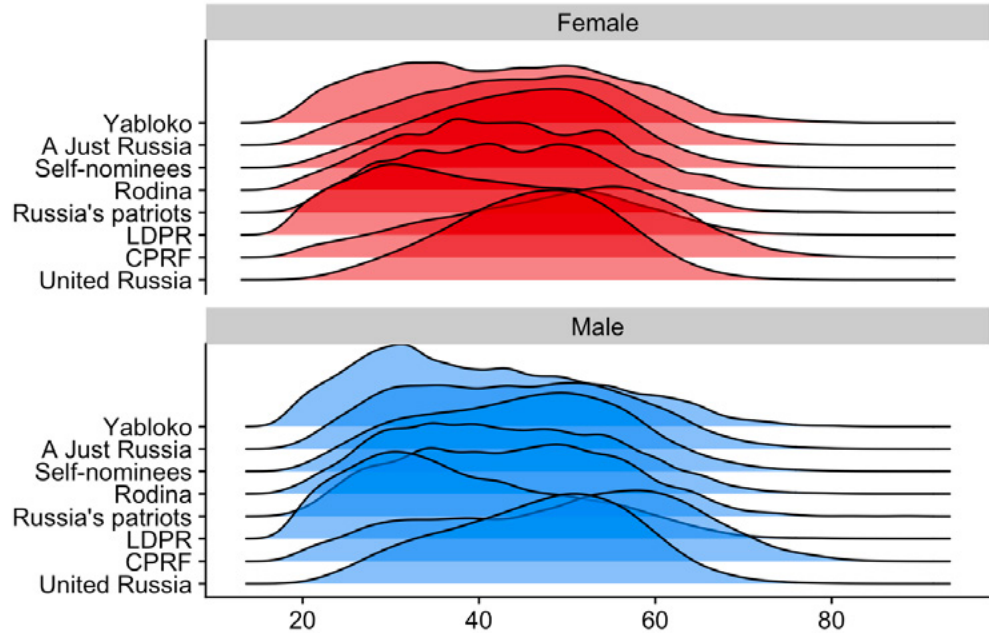
Source: Municipalities, Dossier.center

Note:

There are large variances in the demographic patterns between candidates from United Russia and other opposition parties in different regions. The majority of opposition candidates are male, while United Russia has approximately 50 percent female deputies.

Distribution of candidates from different parties

by gender and age at the time of elections



Source: CEC of Russia, Dossier.center

Concluding Remarks

- The analysis of parties participating in municipal elections in Russia shows that parties represented in the State Duma (with the exception of United Russia and Communist Party) nominate candidates for municipal elections only in certain regions, limiting themselves to large cities. **The lack of involvement of parties in the municipal political process suggests that the party system of the Russian Federation belongs to formal institutions semi-fictional and formalised institution.**
- **Overall competition for votes in most municipalities, regions and urban districts is low.** Exceptions to this include certain regions of Moscow and St. Petersburg, several regions in Dagestan, as well as other cities and administrative centres. Election campaign costs for municipal deputies are relatively low. This also indirectly implies low competition.
- Opposition candidates have generally been able to successfully register in municipal elections, and have been elected as deputies. There have been exceptions, particularly with prominent cases in the 2019 Moscow City government elections. Overall, however, **the low presence of opposition deputies in municipalities is not due to registration problems, but due to low interests in elections.** This results in a low number of nominated candidates.
- The vast majority of municipal deputies in the Russian Federation are from the United Russia party. Nevertheless, the real gap between elected United Russia candidates and others is marginal, and often amounts to only a few dozen extra votes. According to “Dossier” estimates, **voter mobilization initiatives, such as tactical voting, could help elect up to 3,000 municipal deputies every year to replace the United Russia deputies.**
- Today, United Russia is the only party whose candidates (in the regional elections) can overcome the municipal barrier in all the regions of Russia. **Therefore, the gubernatorial elections are fully controlled by the party, and the election of governors barely differs from the appointment of the heads of regions.** The “municipal filter” is therefore even more significant for voting distributions in municipal elections, since any opposition candidates’ victory subsequently affects the admission of opposition representatives to the elections of regional heads.
- **The gender composition of municipal deputies is relatively balanced.** Furthermore, in rural municipalities, the majority of deputies are female, whilst in the administrative centres and large cities (as well as certain regions of the Caucasus), most of the deputies are men. **This gender imbalance already appears at the early stages of nominating candidates.**
- United Russia have the largest share of female municipal deputies, with 51%, whilst other parties nominate mostly male candidates. **Moreover, regardless of gender, the chances of being elected are approximately equal, if they were nominated.**
- Without actively participating in municipal elections, any democratic movement cannot become a well-known, prominent player in Russian politics.