

# THE 2021 STATE DUMA ELECTIONS

**As expected, manipulations were used in order to secure the desired result for the ruling elite in the 2021 State Duma 'election'**

**Though formally still imitating the democratic process, including free elections, the credibility of the regime has diminished further**

**United Russia would certainly not be able to succeed at a comparable level if faced with real political competition without administrative support or a biased, controlled state media**

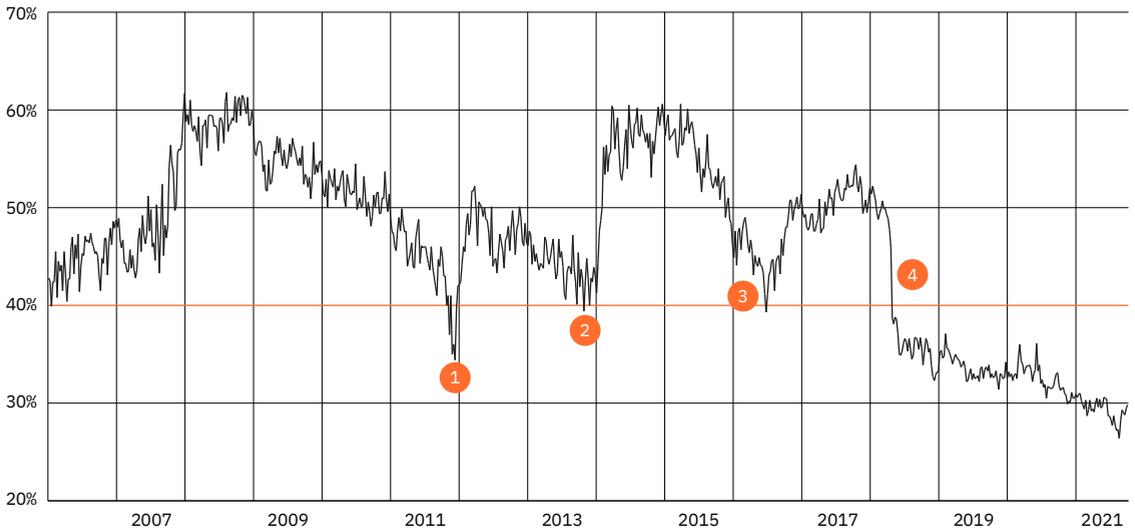
The State Duma election in September 2021 was a mere formality because any political opposition independent of Russia's central government had been completely barred from the election. In terms of restriction of free speech and repression of the opposition, the 2021 State Duma election can be considered the most undemocratic in Vladimir Putin's years in power. Formally, the election fits the mould of the Russian ruling elite's well-worn practice of imitating the democratic process, but in reality, political legitimacy has significantly diminished. This is another trend indicating a growing similarity between the current political regime's modus operandi and that of the Soviet regime.

To manipulate election results and to completely neutralise political competition, essentially the same methods were used as in previous years. Still, several elements were applied much more aggressively than ever before. The main methods used were:

- Administrative tools to suppress the political opposition's organised activities. These were utilised more intensively in 2021 than before.
- Barring unwanted candidates from participating in the election using formal pretexts. This has long been one of the ruling elite's most effective tools to ensure election results. The first serious setback in the use of this tool only occurred during the Moscow City Duma election in 2019.
- Biased media coverage of political parties and the muzzling of media outlets broadcasting views unsuitable for the power elite – another tool used much more forcefully in 2021.
- Direct support from the state apparatus to United Russia.
- “Administrative mobilisation” or pressuring state employees to vote as required.
- Obstruction of independent election observation.
- Falsifying election results.

The official results of the State Duma election were as expected – with the help of manipulation, a constitutional majority was ensured for the ruling political party, United Russia. The lower number of seats in the Duma compared with the 2016 election is explained by the ruling elite’s heightened caution due to the recent presidential election experience in Belarus. Given United Russia’s modest ratings, they shied away from announcing the same result as in the previous Duma election.

### Electoral ratings of United Russia between 2006 and 2021



1. Before 2018, the electoral ratings of United Russia mostly stayed above 40% and the only time the ratings declined below that level was in 2011-12. It was the culmination of a long-term decline in the popularity of the party, which had started in 2009. Late 2011 and early 2012 saw one of the first more serious slumps in Putin’s power system. The peak of that crisis was the extensive demonstrations motivated by the falsification of the results of December 2011 Duma elections.
2. In the first half of 2012, the ruling elite managed to improve the image of United Russia rather swiftly. Due to the presidential elections scheduled for March 2012, the first half of 2012 witnessed vigorous activity to maximise the popularity of the ruling elite, which led to positive results for United Russia. However, the success was short-lived and by autumn 2013, the electoral ratings of United Russia were once again around 40%.
3. The latest and also one of the longest lasting peaks in the popularity of United Russia was brought about by the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, euphoria faded by early 2016 when the popularity of the party decreased below 50% in January and continued to decline further. The timing was inconvenient – in autumn (September) 2016, elections to the State Duma took place, prior to which the electoral ratings had once again decreased to 40%.
4. Over the next few years, electoral ratings of the party improved. Another steep decline in the approval ratings of United Russia, which the party has not yet recovered from, resulted from the 2018 pension reform, which raised the retirement age. The popularity of the party was measured with a survey which asked potential voters to point out which political party they would vote for if the elections took place the following Sunday.

Source: VCIOM

## Electoral ratings of Vladimir Putin between 2014 and 2021



1. The latest peak in Vladimir Putin's electoral ratings was at the time of the 2018 presidential elections, when the impact of Crimean events was still evident and his popularity had been nurtured with active propaganda and manoeuvres of political technology.
2. However, the 2018 pension reform resulted in a sharp decline in popularity. Putin's electoral ratings have not recovered since and in 2021, there was another rapid decline. Due to lower ratings, it is no surprise that the ruling elite of Russia regards the use of force as the main instrument for maintaining power.

Source: Levada

While Vladimir Putin's personal electoral ratings have consistently been higher than those of Russian governmental institutions, they have also started to dip downwards in the last few years. The chart above visualizes this trend. As opinion polls are used by those in power to gauge the societal mood, it's undoubtedly true that growing repression in society is a reflection of the negative numbers: if other methods do not work, a heavy-handed response is deemed necessary to hold onto power. Putin's waning support also shows that assertions of Putin's perpetual reign or support that is autonomous of anything happening within Russia do not ring true.

In our assessment, manipulation played a decisive role in achieving an election result suitable for the ruling elite. United Russia would certainly not be able to succeed at a comparable level if faced with real political competition without administrative support or a biased, controlled state media. The ruling elite's efforts to restrict free speech and repressing the opposition in 2021 are as convincing a proof of this as can be.