

Russian Elections Reveal Federal Security Service's Growing Power

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Russia's September 18-20 parliamentary elections broke a record for the number of falsifications and repressive components. They also represented a new level of interference in politics by the security services and their conflict with the Presidential Administration. The Federal Security Service (FSB) has moved from disciplining officials to challenging aspects of the Presidential Administration. Its arrest of political scientist Aleksandr Kynev, who worked with a Kremlin-backed party, caught the Kremlin's domestic policy team unprepared. The FSB is also threatening anti-war Russians abroad. More repression and a sharper power struggle are likely, which could weaken the civilian officials who manage the war economy.

Independent Russian and international observers have established an unprecedented level of falsification in the Russian parliamentary elections of September 18–20. Based on the results, the United Russia party will form the largest faction in the State Duma's history, having received a constitutional majority. Independent Russian media report that the authorities began preparing the falsifications in 2025 and threatened to send independent politicians and activists to fight in the war against Ukraine (Verstka, September 21). In southern Russia, the authorities sent Cossacks and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to intimidate voters (see EDM, September 28).

The security establishment's interference in the elections was not limited to frightening voters and allegedly pushing for the ban of anti-war Yabloko party and similar local candidates (Verstka, September 18). Analysts at the Re: Russia project write that the Second Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) has gained significant authority over the management of "electoral processes" and is vying for influence with Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Chief of Staff Sergei Kiriyenko, who is formally responsible for elections (Re: Russia, September 22).

Such active interference by the FSB is not surprising, given that election organizers needed to create the illusion of total support for Russian President Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine despite indications that the public wants the war to end. Since at least summer 2025, even secret polls ordered by Russian officials, according to independent journalists, register war weariness. This attitude is notable not only among ordinary Russians, but also among the political elite (Novaya Gazeta Evropa, June 20). Mere falsification was no longer sufficient to distort the true picture so drastically. A full-scale mechanism of repression and intimidation was also necessary.

The strengthened role of the security services in political life has been a fact since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Over the last few years, Putin has broadened the powers of the FSB, leading to increased political repression in Russia (see EDM, April 23). After a short pause while the system adapted to wartime, the turnover of officials resumed, including removals through criminal charges (Center for Data and Research on Russia, September). Russian political scientist Aleksandr Kynev dates the return to a normal level of rotation in regional administrations to the second half of 2024 (Re: Russia, July 9, 2025). Since then, repression against regional elites has once

again gained momentum.

Experts note an increasing role for the FSB in such cases, as well as a rise in the number of arrests following the initiation of proceedings and in sentences involving asset confiscation. The value of assets seized by the state rose from 90 billion rubles (\$1.3 billion) in 2022 to 1.6 trillion rubles (\$19.1 billion) in 2025 (Center for Data and Research on Russia, September). Ministers, heads of regional governments, governors, and their deputies are becoming the primary subjects of these criminal cases. Overall, 8 percent of ministry-level managers and their deputies in regional administrations have been subjected to criminal cases (Re: Russia, September 29).

Analysts note that these campaigns of repression were used mainly to improve the efficiency of government spending, especially in the military sphere (Center for Data and Research on Russia, September). They did not seriously attempt to change the intra-elite balance at the federal level. Events following the recent elections showed, however, that the FSB's stronger role was not situational or tied exclusively to securing the "necessary" election results. Rather, the elections signified a shift in the balance of power among Russian elites, with the FSB openly challenging the Presidential Administration.

This hypothesis is supported by the arrest of Kynev immediately following the elections. The political scientist was reportedly severely beaten during his arrest and charged with large-scale narcotics trafficking (Radio Svoboda, September 28). Russian journalist Dmitry Kolezev writes that Kynev worked informally before the elections with the New People (*Novye Lyudi*) party, a nominally independent party widely seen as a project of Kiriyenko, whose team oversees Russia's Kremlin-approved parties. Kolezev therefore sees the arrest as a warning, and a serious blow, to the officials who run the Kremlin's domestic policy (YouTube/@Kolezev, September 29).

Kynev's detention took place with the participation of FSB agents and was "entirely unexpected" by the internal political bloc of the Presidential Administration and the leadership of New People (Verstka, September 25). Kynev's arrest, as a possible stage of the conflict between the FSB and Kiriyenko, suggests that the security service has entered a qualitatively new level of confrontation.

Another sign of the FSB's intensifying crackdown was the exposure of a network, linked to the security service, that had been plotting the assassinations of Russian dissidents in the United States. According to the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, the targets were Russian opposition politicians Garry Kasparov and Ilya Ponomarev (El Mundo; Radio Svoboda, September 30). At the end of the month, the FSB also opened a criminal case against London-based Russian Democratic Society head Ksenia Maximova for participating in the activities of a terrorist organization due to her cooperation with the Anti-War Committee of Russia (Meduza, September 30).

Such criminal charges are nothing new, especially since the Anti-War Committee was designated "a terrorist organization" (TASS, March 2). In this case, however, the matter was accompanied by a video in which FSB agents threatened Russian anti-war activists abroad. "We see their every step; their fates are sealed. We will not permit Khrushchev's mistake of amnesty for Banderites," the statement declared (TASS, September 28).

The post-election period in Russia is likely to see an intensification of repression and a sharpening of the power struggle at the federal level. Such a significant shift in influence in favor of the security services threatens to destabilize the system and further weaken the civilian administration, particularly the segment responsible for the economic underpinnings of the war effort.

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