

Electoral Reform during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Empirical Evidence from Russia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant transformations of electoral institutions, and provoked changes in the politics of electoral reforms in some polities. The paper claims that Russia has used a special model of electoral reform during the pandemic that differs from both its previous experience and recommendations of international organizations. The comparative historical method is applied to bridge internal and external explanations that may offer an understanding of the current reform of electoral rule in the Russian political context. The pandemic has become a reason for changing traditional electoral procedures and for implementing this reform. Empirical evidence suggests that the reform has been implemented by a depoliticized technocratic procedure ignoring the principles of political consensus. The reform process implies a shift of the government's main efforts from decision-making to increasing dependence on propaganda, and informational confrontation with opponents in the subsequent reform cycle. The approach to the implementation of the electoral reform casts doubt on the level of public support for the new procedures and exacerbates political risks.

Keywords

electoral reform – electoral governance – the COVID-19 pandemic – remote electronic voting – multi-day voting

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become the most drastic event in the history of electoral governance. As of February 2022, 160 countries and territories gained experience in conducting elections during the pandemic; in almost all cases, governments have been forced to make changes of one kind or another to the procedure and practice of holding elections. The process of making changes to the electoral procedure and practice during this period is unprecedented and different from all cases that have previously been considered by scholars specialized in studying electoral reforms. As Toby S. James states, “the global spread of COVID-19 has therefore forced countries and territories to radically rethink how elections should be run during pandemic situations.”¹

Governments face the problem of inventing and testing approaches to hastily adapt their electoral institutions to new epidemiological conditions. The uncertainty in electoral governance cannot be tackled either by employing previous experience or by implementing the recommendations that international organizations have published since the very beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. The response to this challenge is the emergence of new different models of changing electoral rules.

In Russia, the practice of reforming electoral institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic can be assessed as a special model, which differs significantly from the recommendations proposed by Western-oriented international organizations, its own previous experience, and paths taken in the same situation by other countries. It can be assumed that the electoral reform in Russia during the pandemic not only aligns with the political regime established in the country, but becomes a step in this regime’s further development.

During the pandemic, two “unified voting days” took place in Russia: regional and municipal elections were held in September 2020, federal parliamentary elections and a large number of regional and municipal elections were run in September 2021. Unlike all other countries, Russia held a special electoral event – “All-Russia Voting On The Question Of Approval of the Amendments to the Constitution” – at the very beginning of the pandemic. Since the legislation had no provisions for this electoral event, there were no formal restrictions in its procedures setting; it became a testing ground for procedural innovations, most of which made their way into the electoral law later.

The study of the practice of changing electoral rules during the pandemic is still at the initial level. Cases from many countries are considered by scholars,

1 Toby S. James, “New development: running elections during a pandemic”, *Public Money & Management* 44, No. 1 (2021): 65-68. doi:10.1080/09540962.2020.1783084.

including the I. Krivonosova's report on the practice of conducting elections during this period in Russia.² In 2021, the Russian journal "Electoral Politics" published results of the discussion on remote electronic voting, which began to be actively used in Russia during the pandemic.³

The focus of this paper is not so much on the specifics of the changes introduced into the Russian electoral legislation during the pandemic, but on the process of making and implementing these changes. This study builds on the historical-comparative approach for considering electoral reforms. The article starts with a look at the methodological issues of studying the electoral rule changes during the pandemic. The next section presents the overview of the changes in electoral rules during the pandemic in Russia. Thereafter, the process of political decision-making is examined, as well as political resistance to electoral reform, and efforts to build public confidence and trust in the change of electoral procedures. Finally, some conclusions are drawn from the analysis.

2 Methodological Considerations

Three methodological approaches are the most widely used among electoral reforms researchers: the rational choice approach, institutionalism and the historical-comparative approach.⁴ Examining electoral rule reform in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic entails some methodological challenges that impact their effectiveness.

Up to the beginning of the 21st century, the study of electoral reforms in political science didn't move beyond a rather narrow range of cases and was limited by some constraints, in particular by the scope of reform. Only "major" electoral reforms, involving changes in the electoral formula that refer to proportionality, were considered worthy of study. Such were the cases where states switched from majoritarian to proportional systems, for instance, the adoption of a Mixed Member Proportional system in New Zealand in 1993. In 2011, Monique Leyenaar and Kristof Jacobs articulate the need to develop

2 Iuliia Krivonosova, *Electoral events in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic: remote electronic voting, outdoor voting and other innovations* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2020).

3 Maria Bainova, Yurii Bocharov, Andrei Buzin, Nikolai Vorobyov, Nikolai Grishin, Aleksei Elaev, Yurii Korgunyuk, Boris Nadezhdin, and Olga Pokrovskaya, "Elections and the Pandemic", *Electoral Politics* 5, No. 1:7. URL: <http://electoralpolitics.org/en/articles/vyborny-v-usloviiakh-epidemii/> (accessed 15.01.2021).

4 Gideon Rahat, "The Politics of Electoral Reform: The State of Research", *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 21, No. 4 (2011): 523-543. DOI: 10.1080/17457289.2011.609618.

a research agenda and methodological orientation for considering electoral reforms issues. Leyenaar and Jacobs propose to increase the focus on “minor and technical” electoral reforms that concern a shift in the types of electoral systems as well as more particular electoral procedures.⁵ This view broadens the concept of electoral reforms, since it includes issues related to changes in other stages of the electoral cycle, including the specifics of ballot access, electoral campaigning, electoral observations, etc., in addition to the issues of the distribution of seats between the competing parties.

Studying electoral rule changes during the COVID-19 pandemic increases the demand for broadening the view of electoral reform to the highest degree. The period yields few major electoral reforms and electoral formulas changes (for instance, in Armenia and Georgia). Far more countries, including Russia, experience previously unprecedented situations, in which series of “minor and technical” electoral reforms are implemented almost simultaneously and accumulated together to significantly change electoral rules.

Another challenge is the type of political regime. Until recently, the experience of electoral reform studied in the academic literature mainly concerned democratic countries. These limitations are now overcome, and the need to study electoral reforms outside established democracies in “non-established”, “new” or “transitional” democracies are recognized.⁶ The field of electoral reform expanded to new areas requires methodological adjustments. Studying the change of electoral rules in hybrid and authoritarian regimes predetermines a shift in the types of actors participating in the reforms, their motivations and organization of their decision-making process. In well-established democracies, the main actors of electoral reform are considered to be political parties and politicians, i.e., persons directly involved in the electoral process as candidates. In countries with governments dominated by the executive authorities and administrative elites, political parties and public politicians may have less weight in decision making. As long as electoral rules are set by actors who are not themselves participants in the electoral process,⁷ the motivation for making decisions is different. The explanatory power of the rational choice approach for an electoral reform in this political context is somewhat reduced.

5 Kristof Jacobs and Monique Leyenaar, “A Conceptual Framework for Major, Minor, and Technical Electoral Reform,” *West European Politics* 34, No. 3 (2011): 495-513. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2011.555977.

6 Monique Leyenaar and Reuven Y. Hazan, “Reconceptualising Electoral Reform,” *West European Politics* 34, No. 3 (2011): 437-455. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2011.555974.

7 Mikhail Turchenko and Sergey Shevchuk, “Veto Players and Major Electoral Reforms in Russia,” *Russian Politics* 1, No. 2 (2016): 203-221. DOI: 10.1163/2451-8921-00102005.

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuates the features of holding an electoral reform in non-democracies. The extraordinary epidemiological circumstances of the electoral reform deepen the divide between countries where existing institutions and decision-making procedures prove to be sustainable and countries where they do not. In the first case, the rational choice approach remains highly promising for analyzing situations when decisions are a result of a public struggle between different political factions. For example, in France, the opposition prevented the postponement of local elections in 2020. The institutional approach also retains its relevance for analyzing situations, in which institutions demonstrate their resilience. For instance, in Poland, the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the rapid transition to all-postal voting and blocks this reform in 2020. Likewise, in Catalonia, the Supreme Court prevented the government from postponing regional elections in 2021. However, in some countries that are not considered established democracies, the electoral reform takes a path that renders the use of the rational choice and institutional approaches insufficient. The high concentration of power provides for a rapid electoral rule change, reducing or not taking into account institutional restrictions or the procedures for formal participation of different actors. Most stages of decision making are concealed from the public, expectations of key players remain undeclared. The content of the reforming of the electoral rule significantly changes: the main government efforts are not dedicated to preparing innovations but to propaganda and the post-decision struggle with opponents.

The next methodological challenge is that the COVID-19 pandemic leads to a rare situation when an external cause of electoral reform comes to the fore. The rational choice approach prevails in studying electoral rule changes under “normal” conditions, when the start of reform is seen as a consequence of internal reasons and intentions of actors.⁸ Since the importance of the external factor has greatly increased for the first time, the internal account will not be sufficient.

The historical-comparative approach retains the necessary flexibility to address peculiar challenges that arise in studying the electoral rule change in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The electoral reforms may be assessed as an extraordinary historic event that reveals the features of the political regime and impact of various causes and reasons. Applying this approach dictates a holistic view a policy event, precluding a focus on isolated aspects.⁹

8 Pippa Norris, “Cultural explanations of electoral reform: A policy cycle model,” *West European Politics* 34, No. 3 (2011): 531-550. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2011.555982.

9 Salvatore Imbrogno, “A case oriented research strategy as a comparative method”, *Journal of International and Comparative Social Welfare* 10, No. 2 (1994): 137-148.

A large number of characteristics, including sometimes their interactions, are often taken into account.

Singular policy events may be examined using the historical-comparative approach. Charles Ragin distinguishes two types of comparative historical studies: the case-oriented research and variable-oriented research.¹⁰ The case-oriented research may focus on one instance of a certain phenomenon or an occurrence: a regime transition, an outburst of political violence, some political reform, etc.¹¹ Jukka Savolainen notes that, in contrast to quantitative research, the case-oriented comparative historical research provides for a detailed contextualized examination of various causal configurations and interaction conditions.¹² A case oriented research strategy has the potential as a means of studying electoral reform in highly complex social and political conditions, with a wide variety of contributing factors and events, simultaneously addressing the unique and distinct needs of states where electoral rules' development takes place.

A case-oriented research strategy conceptualizes and specifies all problematic situations in electoral reforms, without prioritizing either institutional factors, or the behavior of actors. There is a special toolkit for analyzing policy events in which the ratio between external circumstances and internal actors' reasons is not initially clear. John Ferejohn distinguishes external and internal explanations, of which the former is more or less causal and the latter is deliberative.¹³

External explanations give a view of agents' actions based on some causal influence. Structural accounts also refer to external explanations. Taken up in an excessive degree, the external account entails denying agency. *Internal explanations* identify reasons influencing actors and rationally leading to or producing the action. Internal accounts explain a policy event by showing how it is justified from the actor's perspective and reveal the intentions behind it.

John Ferejohn's approach offers both internal and external accounts of an action: rational choice accounts seem to rest on presumed causal regularities

10 Charles Ragin, *Fuzzy-Set Social Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

11 Pavel Osinsky and Jari Eloranta. "Longitudinal Comparative Historical Analysis: Challenges and Possibilities." In *Comparing Post-War Japanese and Finnish Economies and Societies – Longitudinal Perspectives*, edited by Yasushi Tanaka, Toshiaki Tamaki, Jari Ojala, and Jari Eloranta (London: Routledge, 2014): 10-17.

12 Jukka Savolainen, "The Rationality of Drawing Big Conclusions Based on Small Cases: In Defense of Mill's Methods," *Social Forces* 72 No. 4 (1994): 1217-30.

13 John Ferejohn (2004). External and internal explanation. In I. Shapiro, R. Smith, & T. Masoud (Eds.), *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics* (144-164). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511492174.007.

and objective factors as well. Causes identified by external explanations determine how similar actions taken by various actors under identical conditions are, while internal reasons and intentions relate to differences in these actions. Both accounts complement each other. However, this approach identifies an internal perspective as primary in analyzing the motivation behind the action.

3 Overview of the Changes in Electoral Rules during the Pandemic in Russia

In Russia, changes are introduced to the electoral legislation quite often compared to most post-communist countries.¹⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, this process accelerated even more. From April 2020 to March 2022, amendments to the federal electoral legislation were adopted fifteen times. At least eight of these instances were directly related to the new conditions of elections that have emerged since the start of the pandemic.

These legislative innovations covered almost all stages of the electoral cycle and can be systematized as follows:

- Changes to the procedure for postponing elections (federal law of April 1, 2020): the possibility of postponing election was introduced in the event of a high alert or emergency;
- Extension of conditions for early voting (May 23, 2020), including early voting outside the polling stations in outdoor public spaces;
- Introduction of the multi-day voting (July 31, 2020): in Russia this institution has significant procedural differences from early voting and cannot be held simultaneously with it;
- Extension of absentee voting, the most important in this case is the introduction of internet voting for federal elections, also extension of conditions for postal voting (May 23, 2020), establishing the right of electoral authorities to use internet voting in elections at any level (March 11, 2022);
- Extension of mobile voting facilities (May 23 and July 31, 2020), including possibility of voting outside the polling stations in adjoining territories, in common areas;
- Changes to the procedure of signing candidate nominating petitions (May 23, 2020): a part of signatures was allowed to be collected online;

14 Nikolai Grishin, "The Meaning of Elections in the Russian Federation," *European Politics and Society* 16, No. 2 (2015): 194-207. DOI: 10.1080/15705854.2014.962319; Cameron Ross, "Regional elections in Russia: instruments of authoritarian legitimacy or instability?" *Palgrave Communication* 4 (2018). DOI: 10.1057/s41599-018-0137-1.

- Canceling the Day of pre-election silence in case of the multi-day voting (April 30, 2021);
- Changes of rules of electoral observation (July 31, 2020): the restrictions on the number of observers appointed by one party were reduced.

These changes cannot be classified as a major electoral reform since they do not address the electoral formula. All in all, although these are minor and technical reforms, taken as a whole, these changes significantly amend the procedure for holding elections in Russia. The most significant and high-profile reforms are the introduction of the “multi-day voting” and the expansion of “internet voting” onto federal elections.

The multi-day voting is a novelty in the Russian electoral system, which appears entirely due to the pandemic. It was used for the first time in the modern history of Russia during the “All-Russia Voting On The Question Of Approval of the Amendments to the Constitution” and it lasted seven days from June 25 to July 1, 2020.¹⁵ This experiment was hailed by authorities and state media as a success. A few days later, amendments were introduced in the State Duma to allow voting at polling stations to be extended for up to three days for federal and regional elections. Three-day voting was used before, in regional elections in September 2020, and in federal parliamentary elections in September 2021.

Internet voting (remote electronic voting) was introduced in Russia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was not wide-spread. For the first time at the official level, this procedure was applied on a limited scale to the regional elections in Moscow in 2019. State authorities paid special attention to the development of internet voting even before 2020, and it can be assumed that this institution would have spread regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the “All-Russia Voting On The Question Of Approval of the Amendments to the Constitution” in 2020, Internet voting was used in two federal subjects (Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod region). After the decision to expand this experiment to the federal level, Internet voting was applied in seven federal subjects, including Moscow, Sevastopol, Kursk, Murmansk, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov and Yaroslavl regions, in 2021 parliamentary elections.

Most of the new institutional forms that appeared in Russia during the pandemic do not replace but supplement the old ones. In this regard, the powers of election management bodies are expanded since they have received the right to make decisions on the possibility and scope of use of certain procedures in particular elections.

¹⁵ Iuliia Krivonosova, *Electoral events in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic: remote electronic voting, outdoor voting and other innovations* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2020), 9.

To accurately characterize the content of electoral change in Russia, it is worth relating it to the types of policy approaches used in other countries in the field of elections in the COVID-19 context. The following policy approaches can be distinguished on the criterion of ensuring electoral rights and maintaining democratic election procedures:

1. Holding elections without or with minimal changes to regular procedures (Argentina, Belize, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, etc.).
2. The reduction of traditional procedures for citizens' control over elections, including limited monitoring and expanding of voting outside polling stations, without the introduction of any compensatory mechanisms (the vast majority of countries).
3. Modification of election procedures with the introduction of new compensatory mechanisms to maintain citizens' control over elections and countering dependence on administrative officials. Only few governments chose such a policy approach. During the pandemic these measures included creating a new monitoring body consisting of representatives of political parties and NGOs (France), introducing live video webcasting of polling stations (Bulgaria), reducing the number of signatures required to nominate candidates (Germany), allowing to collect signatures for nominating candidates online (Iceland, Norway, Romania).

The Russian government clearly took the second approach. However, there were conditions for choosing the third policy approach. It is indicative that prospects for introducing several measures expanding citizens' control and reducing dependence on administrative officials were proposed and actively discussed, but not followed through:

- live video webcasting of polling stations (Russia had extensive experience with this instrument since 2012, but its use was reduced and even phased out in 2021);
- reduction in the number of signatures required for candidate nomination (Russia has high requirements for the number of signatures, that poses a threat to public health during epidemic conditions);
- providing an opportunity to collect all signatures for candidate nomination using online technologies.

Regarding the third point, it can be asserted that technologically Russia was completely ready for this option due to the high level of electronic government service. This innovation was actively discussed in 2019, and it became especially relevant in the pandemic situation, but there was not enough political will to fully introduce it. Eventually, this measure was implemented only for regional elections and only in a few regions, and collecting more than half of the required signatures online is not allowed anywhere.

4 The Way of Decision-Making

From the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the international expert community has been developing recommendations on the manner in which the change in electoral legislation during this period should be made. Already in March 2020, the International IDEA published a technical paper “Elections and COVID-19” which states that decisions on changes in conducting elections during the pandemic “could – and ideally should – be agreed on through consensus between all political parties”.¹⁶ Many scholarly publications in the 2020 to 2021 confirm the need to comply with this principle. Thomas Molony and Robert MacDonald suggest that during the current pandemic “any updates or new laws should be created through a process of consultation involving actors from across the country’s political spectrum.”¹⁷ The head of the Commonwealth research project “Managing Elections in the Context of COVID-19”, Clara Cole writes that “where electoral calendars, processes, regulations or procedures may have to be modified in response to COVID-19, achieving political consensus is crucial.”¹⁸ Todd Landman and Luca D. G. Splendore claim that “electoral law reforms need a high level of consensus among political parties, civil society and all stakeholders.”¹⁹

The way of decision-making concerning changes in the electoral legislation of Russia during the pandemic diverges significantly from these recommendations. It rather confirms the thesis of F. Amat et al., who in the working paper focused on Spain asserts that the pandemic has induced higher demands for techno-authoritarian decision-making.²⁰

The Russian federal law No 267 contained the most important changes to electoral rules, including the institution of multi-day voting, was adopted rapidly and without political consensus. The amendments were submitted on July 13th, and already on July 31st the bill was signed by the President. To speed

16 International IDEA, *Elections and COVID-19: Technical Paper 1/2020* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2020). DOI: 10.31752/idea.2020.11.

17 Robert Macdonald and Thomas Molony, *Holding Elections during Future Pandemics and Other Emergencies: Evidence-Based Recommendations* (London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2021): 5.

18 The Commonwealth Secretariat, *Managing Elections in the Context of COVID-19: Perspectives from the Commonwealth* (The Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020): 24.

19 Todd Landman and Luca Di Gennaro Splendore, “Pandemic democracy: elections and COVID-19,” *Journal of Risk Research* 23, No. 7-8 (2020): 1060-1066. DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2020.1765003.

20 Francesc Amat, Andreu Arenas, Albert Fal-Gimeno and Jordi Muoz, *Pandemics Meet Democracy: Experimental Evidence from the COVID-19 Crisis in Spain* (Working Paper, 2020). URL <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/dkusw/>.

up the process, these new amendments were submitted to the State Duma not as a new bill, but the bill adopted in the first reading in 2012 during Dmitry Medvedev's presidential term and set aside for eight years. The amendments, introducing new electoral procedures, were made to this bill, subsequently it was put to a vote for the second reading. Three of four parliamentary factions declared violations in the parliamentary procedure. At the second reading in the State Duma on July 15th, only one of four parliamentary factions (United Russia) supported the bill, while two factions (The Communist Party and A Just Russia) voted against and LDPR abstains. On July 21st, the law was passed by the State Duma after the final third reading by the vote of two factions: the party in power was accompanied by the faction of LDPR. A day earlier, Mikhail Degtyarev, a member of LDPR, is appointed as acting governor of Khabarovsk Krai by the head of state.

Already on the 23rd of May 2020, the Federal law No 152 endowed the election management body with the right to apply new procedures in particular elections, without the participation of the parliament and its factions. The Central Election Commission (CEC), the main EMB in Russia, exercised this right twice: in 2020 for subnational elections and in 2021 for federal parliamentary elections. In both cases, the CEC opted for new procedures, primarily, multi-day voting, without formal consultations with political parties.

On July 24th 2020, less than two months before the date of regional elections, the CEC announced their decision to implement the three-day voting and right to vote outside the polling stations in adjoining territories. The head of the CEC declared that in the future, the commission will make a decision on this issue "depending on the epidemiological situation." Political consensus was not mentioned as a condition for such a decision. The Communist Party and "Yabloko" tried to influence this decision and filed lawsuits with the Supreme Court; in particular, plaintiffs noted that the CEC decision contradicted the legal framework as it was adopted after the start of the electoral campaign.

The decision to apply the procedures of multi-day voting and internet voting to the 2021 parliamentary elections was announced by the CEC on June 18th, three months prior to the date of the election. It was preceded by a public meeting with opponents of these changes. In May 2021, a round table with opponents was organized, with the primary purpose of convincing the opponents, literally, "dispelling all myths" about the danger of fraud during a three-day voting session, rather than hearing out their arguments. The session of the CEC in June 2021 was demonstratively "depoliticized": representatives of parliamentary factions did not even get the floor during the discussion; it focused only on the issues of health but not of political credibility. Anna

Popova, the head of the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing, took part in the session of the CEC and publicly proposed to use the procedure of three-day voting. The head of the CEC mentions that these changes did not receive support from several political parties, and expressed the opinion that in this case “we should not be manipulated” by political parties.

Despite the attempt to shift acceptance of this decision from a political to a technical level, it was not possible to achieve consensus even among electoral commissions’ staff. In June 2021, the NGO “Civil Control 2021” collected over 400 lower EMBS members’ signatures against the use of the multi-day voting. In September 2021, about 750 EMB members of different levels in Moscow signed an open letter calling internet voting a “tool for electoral fraud”.

5 Political Resistance to Electoral Reform

Political consensus as a basis for changing electoral rule during the pandemic is desirable but difficult to achieve. In Russia, the lack of opportunity for opposition political parties to influence electoral reform led to the shift of active political campaign against it to the post-decision period. Several influential political parties and officials took an active role in the public struggle against the new electoral procedures.

During the 2020 regional election campaign, a number of politicians challenged the hastily introduced changes. Besides the Communist Party and “Yabloko,” more than a hundred candidates for regional elections, associated with the alliance “United Democrats”, filed a complaint with the Supreme Court against the procedures of three-day voting and voting outside the polling stations in adjoining territories in August 2020. According to the plaintiffs, the CEC had no right to establish a new electoral procedure. All of these lawsuits were dismissed but raised public tensions around the election.

Among all political parties, it was the Communist Party, the second largest party in the country, that opposed the electoral reform most consistently. The Communist Party announced the campaign against the institution of multi-day voting in September 2020. Their resistance was expressed through the following actions: introducing bills to abolish new procedures, appealing against these institutions in court, holding protest rallies (including in provincial cities), and regular public statements. At the meeting with President Putin in October 2021, the leader of the Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, confirmed that the party did not recognize remote and three-day voting calling it “the scam of the century”. In December 2021, the faction of the Communist

Party introduced a draft bill to abolish internet voting. The Communist Party and the movement “For a New Socialism” organized collecting signatures against internet voting.

The political party A Just Russia also regularly took actions against new election procedures. In September 2020, the faction introduced a draft bill to abolish multi-day voting. In his statement Sergei Mironov, the leader of the party A Just Russia, declared that the party was against three-day voting, as this option expands the scope for fraud and makes monitoring difficult. The party supported the Communist Party initiatives against internet voting on federal and regional levels.

The party “Yabloko” is not represented in the State Duma, but remains the most important organization on the liberal flank of Russian politics. Among all the liberal parties, “Yabloko” was the most actively opposed to the new electoral rules. Nikolai Rybakov, chairman of the party, sent an open letter to the head of the CEC with arguments in favor of one-day elections to the State Duma in 2021. In his opinion, one voting day “reduces the risks of coercing voters to participate in elections and, through public observation, creates opportunities to prevent fraud,” but the multi-day procedure grossly violated these guarantees.

In September 2021, a number of Russian politicians and candidates representing different political groups made an attempt to create a broad coalition against internet voting. Marina Litvinovich announced the creation of the committee “For The Abolition of Remote Electronic Voting.” In the statement of the committee, its tasks include “to achieve the abolition of the use of electronic voting systems in the upcoming elections at all levels.” The petition was signed, in particular, by Lyubov Sobol, an ally of Alexei Navalny and Maxim Shevchenko, the Russian Party of Freedom and Justice. Subsequently, no actions were taken by this coalition.

Some other civil society institutions also took part in the fight against the new electoral rules. The Human Rights Ombudsman for Saint Petersburg Alexander Shishlov stated in his letter to the head of the CEC in 2021 that the practice of multi-day elections “creates conditions for electoral fraud and abuse”.

Opponents of the electoral reform employed the institution of electronic petitions. During 2021, several petitions were created on the website <https://www.change.org/>: the petition against multi-day voting was signed by fifty thousand people; by the end of the year, the petition against internet voting was supported by twenty-eight thousand people. There is no sign that resistance from political opposition to new electoral procedures will decline in the foreseeable future.

6 Public Confidence in Electoral Reform

Public confidence is essential for the success of any electoral reform and ensuring the legitimacy of new election rules.²¹ From the very beginning, the Russian authorities made significant efforts to build public confidence and trust in the change of electoral procedures. This campaign was carried out in a special form that can be characterized as a kind of “information warfare”.

The ongoing dispute over the reform with the political opposition significantly increases the risks of a decline in the legitimacy of new electoral rules. One of the messages of the information campaign was that the opponents of the reform were a relatively small part of citizens who are narrow-minded and afraid of progress and innovations. Public demonstration of disrespect for the opponents' point of view was expressed more strongly than ever before in the history of reforming electoral legislation in Post-Soviet Russia. In July 2021, the head of the CEC Ella Pamfilova stated that only “cunning politicians” and “people with a caveman consciousness” were against internet voting. The same month, Pamfilova called the proposal of “Yabloko” party to introduce additional measures of election observation “arrogant”. The opponents were withdrawn from the circle of dialogue. 2020 sees the dissolution of the Scientific and Expert Council under the CEC; the council had a significant share of liberal independent experts and academics who could not be reliable allies of the ruling party. It can be assumed that the advisory body was liquidated due to the critical position of many of its members on the issue of the rules of “All-Russia Voting On The Question Of Approval of the Amendments to the Constitution.” In 2021, some of them, who most actively criticized the electoral reform (including an influential expert Arkadii Lyubarev) were added to the “list of foreign mass media outlets performing the functions of a foreign agent” by the Ministry of Justice. The movement for defense of voters' rights “Golos”, independent and most authoritative vote-monitoring NGO in the country, was included in the register of “foreign agents” by the state authorities in August 2021.

There are no reliable sources to assess the level of public support for the electoral reform. In 2020-2021, several sociology organizations carried out surveys on citizens' attitude towards the new electoral procedures. The characteristics of these polls gave some reason to suggest that their purpose was to

21 Sara Birch, “Electoral institutions and popular confidence in electoral processes: A cross-national analysis,” *Electoral Studies* 27, No. 2 (2008): 305-320. DOI: 10.1016/j.electstud.2008.01.005; Abigail L. Heller, “Public support for electoral reform: The role of electoral system experience,” *Electoral Studies* 72 (2021), 102348. DOI: 10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102348.

shape public opinion and help ensure the legitimacy of new electoral rules. The official results of these polls were actively disseminated by the media to demonstrate that the absolute majority of the population supports the new procedures.

In July 2020, the Public Opinion Foundation conducted a survey focused on the population's attitude to the multi-day voting. According to the officially published results, 60% of respondents supported the introduction of multi-day voting, while 30% responded negatively to it. Among the published arguments of the opponents, administrative difficulties were named (the high cost of holding elections, the complexity of organization), but not political ones (such as the risks of electoral fraud, obstacles for public monitoring, etc.). In subsequent polls, the arguments of the opponents were not published at all.

Several surveys were conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM). In September 2020, the VTsIOM conducted a survey, according to results of which 70% of respondents were in favor of the possibility of using multi-day voting in the future, while 28% objected to it. The respondents were asked about the positive aspects of multi-day voting, but not about the negative aspects. Accordingly, the arguments of opponents were not revealed and made public.

In June 2021, the VTsIOM carried out the next survey; according to its official results, 21% of respondents reacted negatively to the multi-day voting; at the same time, 34% preferred multi-day voting. It is significant that these surveys concentrate on convenience, while lacking questions on trust in the new electoral procedures. In particular, the following formulation of the question deserves attention and speaks volumes: voters are asked to evaluate whether it is more convenient for them to visit polling station only on Sunday or during three days from Friday to Sunday.

In September 2021, the VTsIOM conducted a survey on several main electoral innovations. It was announced that positive assessments prevailed over negative ones: 51% over 35% regarding the internet voting, and 47% over 22% regarding the multi-day voting.

The CEC conducted its own public opinion polls using its internet resources. In July 2020, the CEC created polls in its accounts on different social media, asking readers to answer the question: "Do you find it convenient to practice voting over several days?" The results of this survey did not show support for the new procedures. More than 68,000 people took part in the poll held in social medium "Vkontakte", of which 90% gave a negative answer.²² According

22 CEC: Do you find it convenient to practice voting over several days? URL: https://vk.com/cikrussia?w=poll-151165928_383822864 (accessed 15.01.2021).

to information agency “Znak”, the results of the same poll on Twitter were even worse: during the course of six days, the number of opponents reached 93%, after which this poll and its results were deleted.²³

The situation with public support for the electoral reform in Russia is not clear enough. Be that as it may, this issue is not at the center of attention on the public agenda of 2020 to 2021.

7 Understanding Electoral Reform in Russia

Applying the historical-comparative lens suggests the interpretation of electoral reform in Russia using the John Ferejohn’s approach to bridging external and internal explanations.

External explanations identify the objective causes for electoral reform, which are extraordinary epidemiological conditions during the COVID-19 and impossibility of holding elections according to the normal procedures. The refusal to postpone regular elections by governments of countries, including in Russia, entails making more or less significant changes to their electoral procedures. Some features of these changes are also almost inevitable and turned out to be universal, regardless of political regimes; in particular, restrictions on election observers and extension of remote voting were introduced in many countries around the world during the pandemic.

Internal explanations address reasons and priorities in government policies that lead to variations in electoral changes in different countries under similar epidemic circumstances. Although the COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to ensure the citizens’ electoral rights and public election monitoring everywhere, the policies differ, with governments either taking advantage of this circumstance to weaken citizens’ control over administrative officials or trying to mitigate the impact and introduce some compensatory measures. Compared to other countries, the Russian government made a significant number of changes to electoral procedures. The carried-out reform demonstrates the willingness to discard some electoral procedures with traditional forms of citizens’ control and the reluctance to develop alternative forms of such a control.

The historical-comparative analysis contextualizes the electoral reform in Russia within the overall consolidation of the political regime. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic coincides with a period of acute regime transformations

23 ZNAK: CEC removes Twitter poll where 93% of participants said “no” to multi-day voting. URL: https://www.znak.com/2020-07-23/cik_udalil_opros_v_twitter_gde_93_uchastnikov_skazali_net_mnogodnevnomu_golosovaniyu (accessed 15.01.2021).

linked with the process of amending the Constitution in 2020 and the further concentration of power.²⁴ It is during this period that “the problem of the presidential election of 2024” became topical, and the head of state received the right to run for a third consecutive term for the first time in the Russian history. Under these conditions, the ruling group was interested in ensuring their full control over the electoral process and eliminating political tension arising out of it. This can be regarded as a motive for restructuring electoral governance and disposing of those electoral institutions, introduced in Russia earlier during the liberal period and associated with values that have been called into question at the current stage. The COVID-19 pandemic becomes a convenient excuse and justification for reducing the level of electoral transparency, weakening institutions of citizens’ participation in electoral governance and further strengthening the power of administrative officials.

John Ferejohn’s idea of the priority of internal explanations over external ones presupposes that the introduction of some electoral novation is the result of government’s intentions, rather than the epidemiological situation. Regarding the development of remote voting and restrictions on observers, the COVID-19 pandemic is not so much a cause, rather a trigger that accelerated the reform.

8 Conclusion

Russia can be classified as one of the countries in which the changes in the electoral institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic become the most significant. Voting procedures were changed fundamentally, while, unlike in most other countries, it is announced that the validity of new rules is not limited to the current epidemic, but continues in the post-pandemic future.

The Russian model for reforming the electoral rule during the pandemic differs significantly from the practice of most countries. Amending the electoral legislation is decisive and rapid; objections not only from critics and opposition but even from parliamentary factions are ignored and do not lead to any adjustments. No effort is made to create even the appearance of a political consensus. Actors intending to influence the issue do not get any chance to do so at the stage of decision-making, and postpone their activity and struggle

24 Derek S. Hutcheson and Ian McAllister, “Consolidating the Putin Regime: The 2020 Referendum on Russia’s Constitutional Amendments,” *Russian Politics* 6, No 3 (2021): 355-376. DOI: 10.30965/24518921-00603004.

against the new electoral rules for the subsequent period, increasing tension during elections and political risks as well.

Like many political events in modern Russia, the implementation method and the content of the electoral reform serves as an experiment, expanding the limits of the possible, setting new standards for the relationship between government and society, testing the susceptibility of society to propaganda and the possibility of implementing decisions without the approval from political parties.

One of the unique features of the Russian model of the electoral reform is that the EMB assumes all public and moral responsibility. The conditions of the pandemic are used to test a depoliticized approach to electoral reform, in which the influence of political parties and public politicians is superseded by government agencies responsible, among other things, for public safety measures. The vulnerability of this approach is obvious since public opinion in Russia perceives election commissions and executive bodies as partisan.²⁵ Both the content and the way the electoral reform is implemented have potential to increase political tension. Given these shifts, one may wonder whether the Russian model of electoral rule change ensures sufficient public trust in elections and legitimacy of elected officials. Analyses of future political events would help to address this question.

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