

VOTING FROM ABROAD IN RUSSIA'S ELECTIONS: MAJOR TRENDS

By the latest Duma elections (2016), United Russia and Yabloko had become the dominant forces in Russian diaspora voting

A chapter from the research project of our Center for the Analysis & Development of Russian-speaking Diasporas

September 2021

What are the voting patterns of Russian citizens living in the diaspora (which is virtually synonymous with Western countries)?

You won't find the answer to this question in Google. Moreover, just as with Russia's 'elections' inside the country, the precise answer is known at best to a narrow circle within its ruling establishment. The primary reason is that the data published by Russia's Central Election Board (TsIK) are not truly reliable and cannot be subjected to independent audits. But even those results of voting abroad that are actually published by TsIK are disaggregated and buried all over its website, making it quite difficult to locate them. Only for some of the elections, there is a special section on the website dedicated to the results of voting for national-level candidates or parties outside of Russia. Yet there is no such a section for the latest (2016) Duma elections. Instead, precinct-level information for voters abroad is dispersed across various regional election boards inside Russia, to which these precincts are attached for the purposes of single-mandate voting in these districts. (The subordination of precincts outside of Russia to these regional boards was determined by TsIK resolution of August 6, 2016.) Thus, the precinct of the Russian Consulate in San Francisco (that has since been closed as part of the punitive actions imposed on Russia by the Trump Administration) was subordinated to a city in the Samara region, while the other seven precincts created in the US were attached to a Moscow City neighborhood. The task of locating data on voting in Germany is even more complicated: its 16 precincts were distributed among the cities of Kursk, Kaluga, Cherepovets and several others, as well as neighborhoods of St.Petersburg City. Data on the Duma elections of 2003 – the first of those for which TsIK website provides precinct-level results – are similarly dispersed, only among a different set of territorial units.

There is no attempt to explain the criteria for allocating these precincts to particular regions across such a far-flung territory of Russia proper – perhaps because no powerful groups or opposition forces that would be showing any serious interest in these matters. Voting in the diaspora is virtually never discussed by Russia's expert community or its politicians. By and large, this can be explained by the low value of diaspora vote in the overall picture: thus, according to Tsik in Germany (the country with the largest turnout of expats to Russia's elections among all the traditional centers of Russian diaspora) there were about 30,000 ballots cast in Russia's presidential elections of 2018 and slightly over 8,000 in the latest Duma elections. The combined turnout at the 2018 presidential vote in the six largest centers of the Russian diaspora (United States, Canada, Germany, France, the UK, and Israel) was about 68,700 voters, i.e. less than 0.1% of the total. The number of voters that showed up at Russia's Duma elections of 2016 in all the 28 countries that at the time comprised the European Union was little more than 57,000 people, which was slightly above 0.1% of the entire turnout. And it is worth noting that 47% of all this EU-based vote came from the three tiny Baltic countries only. That should not be surprising given

that in Estonia only Russia's Foreign Ministry established nine precincts, which was more than in the United States and equal to the total number of precincts in France and the UK combined. This, in turn, was also to be expected: Russian citizens in the Baltic countries (almost all of them, with few exceptions, were residents of these countries back under the Soviet Union and have had to deal with the many consequences of that country's breakup which are for the most part quite unpleasant for them) have been overwhelmingly voting for Putin's United Russia and its satellite parties in the Duma – Communists, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR and Just Russia. Meanwhile, Russian vote in Western countries is much more skewed in favor of the democratic opposition.

Yet in spite of its small size and limited reliability, official data about Russian expat voting is much more informative than it might seem at first glance. This is so at least because it gives an idea of the Russians' voting in an open information system, where they have access to all the Russian-language information sources, including those websites that are being blocked in Russia. And the results that transpire at least in the Duma elections are substantially different from those inside Russia. Even though, as mentioned before, they also must be viewed with a grain of salt given the possibility of manipulations, it is highly likely that they are much closer to reality than the official data on voting inside Russia. One of the reasons is that precisely the minuscule number of voters at foreign precincts lowers the likelihood of ballot stuffing and other large-scale fraud, as in this case costs would outweigh the benefits, especially since the final data from these precincts are then thinly spread across many Russian regions, making their differences from the overall picture indiscernible for most people. Further, there are reasons to believe that the official expat voting results at the Duma elections in particular are more credible than were those of the 2018 presidential elections (whose official results show no major difference between domestic and diaspora voting): while delivering the requisite majority in the presidential elections is a necessary show of loyalty on the part of the Foreign Ministry, the Duma elections are used by the authorities at least to some extent for measuring the actual voting preferences and as a feedback loop for the general public.

Thus, for example, extracting data for the precincts abroad from TsIK's website and summing them up country by country shows that in 2016 Russian expats in five Western countries – the UK, the Netherlands, the US, Australia, and Sweden - gave the plurality of votes (from 29% in Sweden to 43% in the UK) to the liberal Yabloko party. Furthermore, adding Yabloko votes to the 11-13% cast for the center-right opposition party, Parnas (co-founded by Boris Nemtsov) would give anti-Putin democrats an absolute majority among expat voters in the UK, US and the Netherlands. In these three countries, the Yabloko vote alone exceeded the sum total of votes for all the four pro-Putin parties elected to the Duma. In addition, Yabloko gained second spot after United Russia in twenty other Western countries (including Germany, France, Canada, and Israel, which along with the US and the UK are the main centers of the Russian diaspora), and in a total of 17 out of the 28 states of the European Union. In eleven of these 20 countries, there were more votes for Yabloko than for the sum of the three minor pro-Putin parties seated in the Duma (Communists, LDPR, and Just Russia); and in one more (Belgium) the two quantities were equal to each other. Thus, Yabloko finished either first or second in twenty-five out of the thirty-three countries that comprise almost all of the Russian diaspora. (The remaining eight countries included Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, and Croatia, where the second spot was taken by the Communists (voting for the democrats in these countries was very low, and only in Slovakia Yabloko was able to finish third); and Greece, where Zhirinovskiy's party came in second.

An indirect evidence of the relative reliability of this data (as compared to other results published by TsIK, including those for the 2018 presidential elections for the same precincts) is provided by the voting for the amendments to the Russian Constitution strengthening Putin's power that was held in July 2020. Thus, for example, the UK, where Russia's democrats obtained the highest result in the Duma elections, also gave the largest share of expat voting against these amendments (80 percent). Beside the UK, more than a half of all those who participated in this poll in the US, Australia, New Zealand, and 16 out of 27 EU countries (including Germany and France) voted against the amendments. The roster of ten other EU states where the majority of voters supported the amendments – all three Baltic states, all five Balkan states (Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and Slovenia), as well as Slovakia and Italy - is nearly identical with the list of countries where the pro-Kremlin parties won the largest share of votes in the 2016 Duma elections. Finally, in Belgium expat vote on this issue was split even. (These results were presented in a systematic form in the appendix to the statement issued on July 6, 2020, by the American Russian-speaking Association for Civil & Human Rights, the International Indigenous Fund for Development and Solidarity 'Batani', and Committee of Russian Economic Freedom.¹)

From a historical perspective, comparing these data with those from prior elections from the start of the century (for a detailed breakdown of results precinct-by-precinct is provided by TsIK starting from 2003 only, hence there is no earlier data available for comparison) shows that in the main centers of the Russian diaspora Yabloko's support was growing. From the 2003 to the latest Duma elections, its share of vote abroad increased in all the six major diaspora countries; in the UK and the US, it grew nearly twofold – from 21-22% to 40 and more; in Germany, France, Canada, and Israel it added between 2 and 9 percent over these years. In the same period, the sum total of votes cast for the three minor pro-Kremlin parties in the Duma decreased in all of these countries - with the exception of Germany, where it grew by 0.2%. (In place of the Just Russia, that was only created in 2006, we added up the votes for the three predecessor parties from which it was formed.) And support for the right-of-center democratic opposition (from Union of Right-Wing Forces, which in 2003 polled first in many of the precincts abroad, to its successor Parnas – People's Freedom Party – in 2016) shrank quite substantially. Thus, on the electoral map of the diaspora United Russia and Yabloko established themselves as the two leading forces unrivaled by others, the two poles to which voters of the second-tier parties increasingly gravitate.

In analyzing this data, one has to keep in mind the extremely low expat voter turnout in Russian elections. This is not necessarily due to the lack of interest or unwillingness to participate. Thus, for example, according to the annual American Community Survey, in 2018 the number of people in the US who had been born in Russia amounted to more than 383,000, including close to 70,000 in New York City. Regardless of one's own individual decisions, low turnout is most often due to the absence of precincts within voters' reach and the lack of campaigning among expats by Russia's political parties - except for the indirect propaganda in favor of the regime by the so-called 'councils of compatriots' that are controlled by Russian government agencies but do not wield any significant influence in the diaspora and are ineffective at best (as evidenced, among other things, by the expats' anti-government voting). On top of that, Russia's confrontational relations with the US and some of its closest allies have created a political climate in which Russians living abroad - and emigres especially so - are trying to minimize their contact with Russia's official institutions beyond absolutely necessary, often so as to avoid drawing

¹ <https://amrusrights.wordpress.com/2020/07/06/russian-diaspora-votes-no-on-extending-autocratic-rule-in-russia/>.

excess attention to their already vulnerable Russian identity. This primarily affects those most socially and professionally active, trying to make a career and to integrate into the Western society (thus reducing the turnout among those for whom making a trip to a Russian mission would have been logistically easier than for a senior.) As regards the older generation, a significant part of it is still comprised of those former Soviets who were stripped of their citizenship upon emigration – which was practiced until 1992. Although since then Russian authorities have provided for a restoration of citizenship, at least on paper, in reality it involved so much red tape that few among the disenfranchised emigres bothered to try regaining their native citizenship. In light of all this, non-voting in the Russian elections by expats in most cases is determined by circumstances beyond their control that have nothing to do with their political views, including their assessment of the legitimacy of these elections.

(Further work-in-progress to follow)

APPENDIX

TsIK data on Russian expat voting in the 2016 Duma elections

1) In the six major countries of diaspora residence:

Country and precinct numbers	United Russia	Yabloko	Parnas	Communists	LDPR	Just Russia	Total turnout
US (8273-8277, 8320, 8375, 8376)	20%	40%	11%	7%	5%	2%	4,553
Canada (8148, 8150, 8151)	31%	26%	9%	9%	6%	2%	1,315
Germany (8315, 8317-8323, 8325, 8412, 8413, 8418, 8425, 8429)	35%	24%	6%	8%	6%	2%	8,033
France (8308-8314)	28%	28%	8%	8%	8%	3%	2,079
UK (8061, 8063)	17%	43%	13%	6%	4%	2%	1,647
Israel (8029, 8085-8089, 8091-8097)	34%	29%	7%	5%	5%	3%	4,343

2) In other EU countries (sorted from the highest turnout to the lowest):

Country and precinct numbers	United Russia	Yabloko	Communists	LDPR	Just Russia	Parnas	Total turnout
Latvia (8179-8184)	74%	1%	8%	4%	1%	1%	14,127
Estonia (8342-8350)	68%	2%	11%	7%	2%	1%	10,482
Bulgaria (8050-8052, 8400, 8403)	63%	8%	6%	6%	2%	4%	2,771
Lithuania (8187, 8188, 8190, 8379)	55%	6%	15%	8%	2%	1%	2,073
Czechia (8330-8332)	27%	24%	10%	7%	4%	10%	1,990
Finland (8304-8307)	32%	24%	7%	9%	3%	8%	1,627
Greece (8077, 8078)	64%	5%	7%	9%	2%	2%	1,374
Italy (8118-8121)	36%	15%	7%	8%	4%	4%	1,327
Cyprus (8158)	38%	16%	10%	9%	3%	6%	1,313
Spain (8114-8117)	30%	26%	9%	7%	3%	9%	1,118
Austria (8015, 8016)	29%	22%	13%	8%	3%	5%	1090
Hungary (8064, 8065)	43%	17%	10%	8%	4%	5%	786
Poland (8255-8258)	35%	21%	8%	7%	4%	10%	760
Belgium (8039, 8040)	41%	17%	7%	8%	2%	7%	749
Sweden (8336, 8337)	28%	29%	9%	8%	3%	6%	695
Netherlands (8238, 8239)	17%	41%	6%	4%	2%	11%	670
Portugal (8259)	43%	16%	7%	10%	3%	6%	497
Denmark (8079)	37%	25%	8%	6%	2%	5%	340
Slovenia (8271)	43%	18%	9%	6%	2%	9%	308
Ireland (8112)	31%	28%	11%	9%	4%	6%	265
Romania (8261, 8262)	54%	6%	12%	(8%	5%	2%	262
Slovakia (8270)	32%	11%	17%	6%	5%	5%	221
Malta (8199)	40%	15%	9%	11%	1%	10%	192
Luxembourg (8192)	35%	31%	3%	8%	4%	10%	173
Croatia (8326)	53%	3%	11%	6%	2%	1%	152
EU TOTAL (including Germany, France, and the UK)	28,713 (50%), of these more than a half came from Estonia and Latvia	7,146 (13%)	5,114 (9%), of these, more than a half from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania	3,586 (6%), of these more than a half from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Germany	1,205 (2%)	2,216 (4%)	57,121 (47% of these voters were in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania)

3) In Australia and New Zealand:

Country and precinct numbers	United Russia	Yabloko	Communists	LDPR	Just Russia	Parnas	Total turnout
Australia (8009-8014)	28%	31%	7%	6%	2%	11%	721
New Zealand (8241-8243)	23%	22%	7%	10%	3%	10%	410

FOR COMPARISON: Results of the 2003 Duma elections in the six major countries of diaspora residence

Country and precinct numbers	United Russia	Yabloko	Union of Right-Wing Forces	Communists	LDPR	Total for the three founding parties of the future Just Russia	Total turnout
US (5230, 5232, 5235, 5236)	16%	22%	37%	4%	2%	9%	4,661
Canada (5126, 5127, 5329)	21%	19%	22%	10%	3%	11%	746
Germany (5291-5295, 5342-5347)	27%	22%	24%	5%	2%	9%	4,211
France (5287-5290)	23%	20%	19%	5%	4%	14%	1264
UK (5048-5050)	21%	21%	26%	4%	2%	17%	760
Israel (5081-5091)	15%	24%	41%	3%	1%	9%	9,261