

What are the long-term implications of Russia's elections functioning as political theater for the stability of domestic accountability mechanisms and the consolidation of power within the Kremlin's elite?

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Executive Summary

Russia's elections, functioning as political theater, have long-term implications that consolidate power within the Kremlin's elite by fragmenting competing bureaucratic factions and insulating decision-makers from public accountability, but at the cost of undermining institutional resilience and adaptive governance. This system, characterized by managed legitimacy and top-down control, effectively co-opts lower-tier elites and provides short-term stability, yet it creates an information vacuum that delays the manifestation of fiscal and wartime strains until they erupt as fragmented elite defections rather than public pressure. Consequently, while the Kremlin maintains a strong grip on power, the erosion of formalized elite bargaining channels and genuine feedback mechanisms leads to chronic institutional rigidity, making the regime vulnerable to sudden instability, particularly regarding orderly succession.

Key Findings

Elections as Managed Legitimacy and Elite Bargaining

Russia's post-2022 elections operate as "political theater," accurately capturing a shift toward managed legitimacy where outcomes primarily validate pre-negotiated elite pacts rather than generating actionable policy feedback [7, 9]. The electoral system is deliberately structured to maintain the dominance of United Russia and remove genuine alternatives, serving as an instrument of top-down control to legitimize the regime [7]. These elections function as mechanisms for elite co-optation, offering lower-tier elites rewards, rents, and immunity in exchange for loyalty, which reduces the likelihood of unified opposition [3, 11]. The 2024 presidential election was described by a Kremlin-connected insider as a "well-designed simulation," confirming its primary function is to consolidate power within the Kremlin's elite [9].

This framing indicates that the erosion of electoral competitiveness represents a recalibration of elite bargaining rather than genuine accountability decay. The composition of the State Duma reflects the current balance of elite bargaining, indicating which groups secure privileged access to budgetary resources and regulatory influence [11]. However, this recalibration introduces tension; the protracted war has made it difficult to tout stability and has stalled career progression for elites, revealing that the power vertical struggles to survive without President Putin [5]. The Kremlin has systematically weakened established elite groups while redistributing influence to individuals personally loyal to him, making a parliamentary seat less of a protection and more of a target for scrutiny, causing many business elites to lose interest in parliamentary positions [11]. Despite this, elections continue to function as a "tire tread indicator" for gauging public sentiment and managing elite friction, preventing a total collapse of domestic accountability mechanisms [11].

Weakening Domestic Accountability and Information Vacuum

The systematic removal of competitive electoral mechanisms significantly weakens domestic accountability by replacing grassroots performance metrics with top-down loyalty indicators, creating an information vacuum that delays fiscal and wartime strain until it manifests as elite defections rather than public pressure. This insulation from grassroots metrics is evident in the abolition of direct mayoral elections in most major cities and the tightening of regional control, shifting accountability from voters to central directives [8]. Regional governors are increasingly assessed based on Kremlin-set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and their ability to mobilize loyalists, effectively insulating them from local public sentiment [3, 7, 11]. This centralization treats regions as territorial divisions of a centralized apparatus, where leaders are interchangeable and obligated to maintain loyalty to Moscow [8].

The broader removal of genuine competition creates an information vacuum. Wartime censorship restricts candidates from discussing substantive issues, including the link between the economy and the war [10]. Independent media are banned, and access to platforms is restricted, meaning the executive receives filtered data on elite loyalty but lacks accurate feedback on public economic hardship [10, 11]. This delayed strain accumulates until it erupts as internal elite friction. The Kremlin's centralization strategy risks intensifying tensions with regional elites and undercutting efficient policy implementation [8]. This is evidenced by a quadrupling of arrests of senior government officials in 2025 compared to the pre-war period, alongside high-profile anti-corruption

purges within the military in 2024 [11, 12]. As real incomes declined and federal and regional budgets faced serious deficits starting in 2025, the erosion of electoral feedback loops meant these strains were absorbed by the state apparatus [5, 11]. The Kremlin manages this through a "balancing act," systematically weakening established elite groups while redistributing influence to personally loyal individuals, causing fiscal and wartime pressures to manifest as fragmented elite defections rather than public pressure [8, 11].

The shift from competitive feedback to managed legitimacy was operationalized through a series of legislative amendments to electoral laws and changes to the political party system, primarily between 2020 and 2021 [1, 4, 7]. Key reforms include the 2020 Constitutional Amendments and the April 2021 Federal Law on Presidential Elections, which reset presidential terms, allowing Vladimir Putin to potentially remain in office until 2036 [1, 5, 6]. Federal Laws #153-FZ (May 23, 2020), #89-FZ (April 5, 2021), and #157-FZ (June 4, 2021) added new grounds for disqualifying Duma candidates, barring individuals sentenced for "medium gravity" crimes or involved in "extremist" organizations [1, 4, 12, 14]. Additionally, Federal Law #267-FZ (July 31, 2020) legalized multi-day voting, and Federal Law #91-FZ (April 20, 2021) prohibited designated foreign agents from participating in election campaigns [1, 4].

Power Consolidation and Institutional Erosion

The current transformation of State Duma seats into premium co-optation instruments with eroded legal immunity accelerates long-term power consolidation around the presidency by fragmenting competing bureaucratic factions, yet simultaneously undermines institutional resilience by eliminating formalized elite bargaining channels needed for orderly succession. The Kremlin has systematically weakened established elite groups while redistributing influence to individuals personally loyal to Vladimir Putin [11]. This shift has transformed parliamentary seats from robust protections against prosecution into targets of scrutiny, causing many business elites to lose interest in pursuing Duma positions [11]. High-profile anti-corruption investigations, such as the 2024 arrest of former Deputy Defense Minister Dmitry Bulgakov and over ten generals, were deployed to dismantle defense establishment corruption and assert direct presidential control over key bureaucratic establishments [12]. Consequently, the Duma functions less as an independent power base and more as a venue for ministerial bureaucracy to adjudicate policy disputes under centralized oversight [3].

While the State Duma remains the institution through which all major legislative changes,

including any legal framework for a future transfer of power, must pass [11], its hollowed-out nature compromises long-term institutional resilience. The erosion of genuine electoral competition means that elections no longer provide reliable feedback on public sentiment or underlying social trends, acting as a less effective "tire tread indicator" for the authorities [3, 7, 11]. Experts observe that the protracted war has exposed deep schisms within Putin's regime, leading to stalled career progression for elites and revealing that the power vertical lacks a viable mechanism for survival without him [5]. Because formalized elite bargaining channels have been replaced by personalized loyalty networks and managed political theater, the system struggles to manage internal conflicts or facilitate an orderly succession, leaving the regime vulnerable to sudden instability once Putin departs [3, 5, 11].

Chronic Institutional Rigidity and Economic Costs

The Kremlin's dependence on electoral theater to secure short-term regime stability ultimately outweighs its structural benefits by trading adaptive governance for chronic institutional rigidity, particularly as economic deterioration forces the state to prioritize elite co-optation over functional accountability mechanisms. While Russia's electoral system functions as a "well-designed simulation" that successfully consolidates power and manages internal conflicts in the short term, it systematically dismantles domestic accountability mechanisms [3, 9]. Elections serve primarily as tools for elite co-optation, offering lower-tier regime elites rents, legislative immunity, and a legal boundary to compete for resources without uniting against the Kremlin [3, 7, 11]. This managed competition provides immediate stability by preventing factional fractures and acting as an information-gathering "tire tread indicator" for public sentiment [3, 7, 11].

However, this short-term stability comes at the cost of functional accountability. The deliberate erosion of electoral competitiveness—marked by the removal of genuine opposition, widespread manipulation (such as an estimated 22 million falsified non-online votes in the 2024 presidential election), and heavy repression—strips the system of its feedback loops [1, 2]. As a result, policy decisions are driven by top-down control rather than responsive governance, creating an information vacuum that delays fiscal and wartime strain until it manifests as elite friction [5, 8]. As economic deterioration set in during 2025, characterized by serious federal and regional budget deficits and declining real incomes, the state prioritized elite co-optation over functional accountability mechanisms [5, 11]. The Kremlin accelerated centralization, nationalizing business assets, and promoting a "new elite" of wartime veterans to reward loyalty [4, 8]. For

example, contractors working with Russian Railways donated approximately 22 billion rubles (about \$240 million) to United Russia in 2024 [11]. Defense spending was projected at 17.4 trillion rubles for 2025, consuming nearly 40% of the budget, contributing to these deficits [12, 5]. In 2024 alone, at least 67 companies with combined assets of 544 billion rubles were nationalized, and by March 2024, over 180 companies worth more than one trillion rubles had been taken under state stewardship [8].

Ultimately, the reliance on electoral theater insulates the gerontocratic elite from grassroots performance metrics, making the system vulnerable to systemic shocks [3, 5, 13]. While current demonstrations are unlikely to cause immediate collapse, the chronic institutional rigidity and growing public frustration (with nearly 60% of Russians viewing the political situation as tense) lay the foundation for a major long-term backlash [3, 5, 13].

Accelerated Purges and Information Asymmetry

Russia's shift toward hyper-centralized, remotely controlled voting systems has historically sustained short-to-medium-term elite cohesion by functioning as a primary mechanism for elite co-optation and conflict management [3, 7, 11]. By offering parliamentary seats as rewards for loyal service, the Kremlin reduces the likelihood of influential groups uniting in opposition and provides a legal arena for rival factions to compete within institutional boundaries [11]. These constrained elections also act as a "tire tread indicator," allowing the executive to gauge public sentiment and monitor the mobilization capacity of subordinates like regional governors [3, 7, 11].

However, comparable authoritarian regimes demonstrate that this model also accelerates punitive purges and generates paralyzing information asymmetry over time. The centralized system relies on opaque remote electronic voting (REV) and three-day voting periods, which are prone to coercion and statistical anomalies, effectively masking underlying social trends from the leadership [1, 10]. As a result, the Kremlin often misreads public dissatisfaction until it manifests as elite friction or stalled career progression for regional leaders [5]. Simultaneously, the consolidation of power has triggered an acceleration in punitive purges to assert control over entrenched networks. In 2025, arrests of senior government officials quadrupled compared to the pre-war period [11]. High-profile anti-corruption investigations, such as the 2024 arrest of former Deputy Defense Minister Dmitry Bulgakov and over ten generals, were deployed to dismantle defense establishment corruption and force loyalty [12]. The NEST analytical center's 2025 report notes that Putin has systematically weakened established elite groups,

making parliamentary seats less protective and more of a target for scrutiny, which has caused many business elites to lose interest in political positions [11]. Ultimately, while the electoral theater maintains a veneer of stability and manages internal conflicts, it undermines institutional resilience, and continued repression is likely to increase public frustration, laying the foundation for future instability [5, 13].

Implications

The long-term implications of Russia's elections functioning as political theater are a paradox of consolidated power and inherent instability. The Kremlin has successfully centralized authority around the presidency by transforming elections into tools for elite co-optation and conflict management, effectively fragmenting competing bureaucratic factions and insulating decision-makers from grassroots accountability. This strategy ensures short-term regime stability and allows the leadership to absorb fiscal and wartime strains without immediate public pressure.

However, this consolidation comes at a significant cost to institutional resilience and adaptive governance. The systematic erosion of competitive mechanisms creates an information vacuum, delaying critical feedback on public sentiment and economic hardship. This rigidity means that policy miscalculations and accumulating strains are not addressed through structured political processes but rather build up until they manifest as internal elite friction, targeted purges, or fragmented defections. The personalized loyalty networks that have replaced formalized elite bargaining channels leave the system vulnerable to sudden instability, particularly concerning an orderly succession once President Putin departs. The current approach prioritizes maintaining the existing power structure over the capacity for the state to adapt to evolving economic and social challenges, laying the groundwork for potential long-term backlash and systemic shocks.

Limitations and Caveats

The research provides a comprehensive overview of the systemic implications of Russia's electoral theater but has certain limitations. Specific names of individual regional governors or ministerial bureaucrats who have been insulated from grassroots performance metrics are not identified, nor is there a quantified impact on their personal fiscal decision-making. Instead, the evidence focuses on systemic insulation through top-down institutional restructuring and budgetary control. While the research details the

acceleration of punitive purges and elite friction, it does not provide specific timelines for potential elite defections or identify which key sectors (e.g., military-industrial complex, energy) are most vulnerable to these delayed systemic shocks. The post-2022 purges of officials like Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and regional governors demonstrate the Kremlin's strategy of absorbing fiscal and wartime strain through internal optimization and centralization, rather than enacting corrective public policy, which has caused elite friction rather than widespread defections.

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