EK Strategic Communications Center

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UNITED RUSSIA 2026: Coercion Replacing Consent

How collapsing support forces United Russia to replace electoral consent with surveillance, coercion, and visible fraud

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EK Strategic Communications Center

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Executive Summary

United Russia's support has collapsed from its Q1 2024 peak, declining 11–13 points to 35–38% according to state and independent pollsters (VTsIOM, FOM, Levada). Independent analyst Sergei Shpilkin estimates real support at 31–33%, noting over half of the party's 2021 votes were falsified. War fatigue jumped from 47% (2024) to 56% (2025) per closed Presidential Administration analysis by Alexander Kharichev — an 11-point surge in one year.

For September 18–20 elections, Sergei Kiriyenko set a rigid target: "55% turnout, 55% for United Russia." To bridge the 17–24 point gap between real support and the target, authorities are deploying: GEO-SMS application to track public employee turnout in real time, expanded home voting, mass remote electronic voting (DEG), and door-to-door pressure. Falsification practices from previous cycles will be reused.

Material pressures are eroding the dependent electorate. Inflation remains the top concern for most Russians, compounded by healthcare crisis (personnel shortages, wage declines, reduced access), rising taxes, and expensive credit. The public-sector employees who must be mobilized to vote are experiencing these crises directly. Digital repression (internet shutdowns, forced state messenger MAX) is backfiring — VPN usage is widespread and everyday sabotage normalized, especially among urban and younger populations.

The "elite renewal" via war participants has failed. They received only 2.3% of contested mandates in 2025 versus a 10% internal target. Presidential Administration revised projections from 150 State Duma seats for war veterans down to 50–70. Expert Aleksandr Kynev identifies "administrative overreach in local results" as the key vulnerability — falsifications that could trigger protest mobilization. Aleksei Makarkin flags risky regions: those with non-United Russia governors (Chuvashia, Oryol, Khakassia, Ulyanovsk), high protest potential (Sverdlovsk, Tomsk), or elite splits (Samara, Vologda, Tambov).

Why it matters

The legitimacy gap is now structural. Achieving 55% with 31–38% real support requires fraud at a scale that becomes politically visible and potentially mobilizing. The 17–24 point gap in 2026 makes electoral manipulation a political vulnerability rather than just a technical operation.

War fatigue creates an impossible bind. United Russia cannot campaign for peace (contradicts Kremlin militarization policy) or for continued war (alienates 56% who are fatigued). The party has no independent positioning — it's purely an administrative instrument executing Presidential Administration orders. This ideological paralysis occurs precisely when the regime needs electoral legitimation most.

The dependent electorate is no longer reliable. GEO-SMS can track turnout but cannot always guarantee voting choices in secret ballots. Public-sector workers experiencing inflation, healthcare collapse, and wage pressures may comply with mobilization demands but vote differently. The regime's traditional formula — economic benefits for political loyalty — is breaking down under sanctions, military spending priorities, and systemic resource constraints.

Regional fault lines amplify risk. Governors from other parties have no incentive to deliver inflated results for United Russia. Regions with protest history or elite conflicts may exploit visible falsification as a mobilization opportunity. The centralization of control under Kiriyenko signals the Presidential Administration's lack of confidence in distributed management and fear of elite defection.

Conclusions

September 2026 tests whether administrative coercion can substitute for legitimacy when the gap becomes this visible. The 17–24 point difference between real support (31–38%) and the target (55%) transforms falsification from a technical operation into a political vulnerability. Each coercive act to hit the target validates the perception that United Russia governs without consent.

Key vulnerabilities: (1) visible fraud at unprecedented scale risks triggering mobilization; (2) war fatigue at 56% creates ideological paralysis for a party with no independent positioning; (3) material crises destabilize the dependent electorate that must deliver votes; (4) regional fault lines where governors or elites could exploit electoral overreach; (5) digital resistance normalizing circumvention among key demographics.

The fundamental problem is structural: societal demand for de-escalation directly contradicts regime commitment to militarization. United Russia, lacking independent legitimacy or ideology, cannot bridge this gap. The party's dominance rests entirely on coercion, making the September elections a test of whether authoritarian control can sustain itself when material pressures, war fatigue, and visible fraud converge simultaneously.

In a situation of mass repression, intimidation, more than 1,000 political prisoners, censorship, and other restrictions, large-scale public discontent is hardly to be expected. However, a significant gap between the real votes for the ruling party and the choices expressed by voters, combined with severe economic challenges, is likely to lead to an increase in protest sentiment and street actions. It is also likely to result in a much greater receptiveness to independent information — which in Russia now has to be accessed via VPNs — not among the opposition, but among voters in the regions who have traditionally been loyal to the Kremlin.

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