Voting in Russia: Please Don't Call it "Elections"

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On September 8, numerous Russian regions voted in the framework of a so-called "single voting day". Most significantly, Moscow voted for the members of City Council ("*Duma*"), and Russia's second-largest city Saint Petersburg was to elect its governor. It would be a mistake, however, to draw any conclusions on the sentiments of the Russian people from the results as the voting process was skewed at every stage of the so-called "elections".

During Putin's reign, the government has always controlled the regional elections in Russia and they never brought many surprises. "United Russia", the ruling party, easily wins the majority in most of the regional legislatures, as well as the governors' positions. Given the size and diversity of the country, some "irregularities" happen (such as the rare victory of "systemic opposition"), but they have never been a severe challenge for the regime. Moreover, since 2000, Putin's government has succeeded in the "centralization" of a formally federal country, having built a so-called "vertical of power", which has deprived the local legislatures of most of their controlling powers. In Moscow, a city of more than 10 million inhabitants and 7,2 million registered voters, a *Mossovet*, a vibrant city parliament with 450 members and control powers has turned to the 45 members rubber-stamp Duma. In the essential question – the city budget, which exceeds 37 billion Euros a year – the city "parliament" has just an advisory vote.

Unlike federal elections, local campaigns are not subject to international scrutiny and public attention is weak. The authorities do their best to lower public awareness even further. It is not at all accidental that the campaign in the two biggest Russian cities was scheduled for August which is the traditional vacation time in Russia.

Against all expectations, however, this year's regional "elections" have become a pretext for significant political turbulences which triggered the most massive mass protests in Moscow since 2011-2013. Authorities stifled peaceful protests with unprecedented brutality and the prosecution of protesters on various grounds are still ongoing.

Searching for logic where there is none to be found

Russian and western media analyze the results of the "elections", trying to find some political logic, seeing the signs of upcoming change. While the revival of the mass protests in Russian regions is indeed indicative, calling the September vote "elections", in my opinion, would be fundamentally wrong. Discussing the "elections" and their results indeed diverts the Russian and international public from the nature and the trends of contemporary Russian politics.

In the following paragraphs, I will explain this point, basing primarily on the vote for Moscow City Council and the Governor of Saint Petersburg due to their political importance. Similar processes and practices, however, are taking place in other Russian regions having voted on September 8.

To begin with, it was an election without any meaningful choice. Every free and fair election must be based on the voters having at least some choice among the candidates representing a political spectrum, and, at best, the opportunity to be elected. The Russian system of candidates' registration is not only the beginning but also a crucial part of manipulation. The electoral laws and controlling authorities imposed numerous unrealistic requirements on candidates which make the registration unfeasible. The broad discretion of the electoral commissions empowered them with the authority to dismiss any undesirable candidate from nomination. In Moscow, each independent candidate, including some popular politicians, such as Ilya Yashin, a head of the municipal council in one of Moscow's districts, had to collect 5000 support-

ing signatures within a short period. Most of the opposition candidates complied with this draconical requirement and the process was visible in the city. The local electoral commissions, based on "expert opinions" rendered some of the signatures invalid. The candidates' appeals to courts failed. Election officials generally threw out the signatures, often claiming that the signatories did not exist, even when these people, some of them well-known in the city, such as constitutional law professor Elena Lukyanova, insisted that they had indeed signed the candidate's petition.

In Saint Petersburg, all independent candidates had to proceed through so-called "municipal filters" (collecting votes of municipal deputies), and, as a result, the ruling party effectively blocked all candidates that could have threatened the acting governor. The only remaining candidate who could collect some votes, a representative of the "official" communist party and well-known film-director Bortko withdrew from the "race" a few days before the vote.

Heavy restrictions in the registration of candidates coupled with the elimination of "protest" options, such as "against all" voting and minimum turnout requirements, have led to the disappearance of any meaningful choice. In order to "win" the vote by a simple majority, the ruling party's candidate merely has to eliminate any potentially strong candidate.

Secondly, the campaign itself was organized in a way to discourage the active part of the electorate, and "mobilize" the passive. Media coverage was almost non-existent. The ruling party candidates, even regional leaders, in Moscow did not indicate their affiliation with unpopular "United Russia", and declared themselves as "independent". In Saint Petersburg, the same "camouflage" was used by the acting governor Alexander Beglov. Opposition leader and candidate for Moscow's mayoral election in 2013, Alexey Navalny, introduced a system of "smart voting", a modification of the tactic which brought fruits in the parliamentary elections of 2011. It offered his supporters the possibility to vote for the most popular candidate other than the one supported by United Russia party. In many cases this tactic was successful but some "smart voting" stories are ridiculous. For example, Alexander Solovyov, a man whom voters have never even seen, has the same name as an opposition candidate in that district who was barred from running, and the authorities initially put his "double" on the ballot only to confuse voters. As a result, the "fake" Solovyov won more votes than the openly pro-government candidate.In any event, "smart voting" could not prevent the pro-government majority and just underlined the absurdity of the campaign.

Thirdly, the vote itself was traditionally marked by good old practices of "administrative resource" and electoral fraud. The turnout, slightly more than 21% in Moscow, should be seen against the "administrative resource" background. Almost every public hospital or school employee received instructions from its administration to appear on the polling station. Some were told to take selfies at the polling station to "prove" to their superiors that they have "fulfilled their civic duty".

When the manipulator is not even trying anymore…

In Moscow, for the first time, the Russian state-affiliated sociological services refused to publish the results of the exit-polls, claiming that voters refused to answer the questions *en masse*. The results of the ruling party must also be seen against this background. The results have been achieved by a simple majority, so the regional legislatures and leaders have been "elected" by a marginal part of the population. The results of the vote in Moscow and in other regions, where the candidates of the ruling party surprisingly failed due to "smart voting" are also indicative.

"Elections" like those of September 8 do not and cannot say anything about the real political preferences of the Russian people, as well as the state of the Russian society. It is equally difficult to judge the belief and trust of the Russian people in democratic institutions. We simply do not know what people in Russia think. Giving any weight to these "elections" means making the same mistake as relying on the public opinion polls and supporting the Russian government's myth of eternal support of the Russian regime by the population. The fact is that Russians are increasingly disappointed by the endless Putin's rule,

and the Russian civil society is becoming more vibrant and demanding. But this is not reflected in the September vote.

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