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Why Russians Don't Vote

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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State Duma elections rarely generate much interest among Russian voters. The Duma has no real authority and is powerless to control the government. When Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov made the scandalous statement that "parliament is no place for discussion," he was only voicing what everybody already knew: There is nothing and nobody to debate in the Duma.

And yet the public has never been so clearly indifferent to Duma elections as it is now. Four years ago, many discussed whom to vote for in the Duma elections. Now they wonder whether they should vote at all.

Some, for example, argue that the best approach is to invalidate the ballot by writing a large "X" over all the names, while others still insist that the very act of voting in these false elections is supporting the farce and not worthy of self-respecting citizens. The authorities themselves are not overly concerned about how people vote because the final result is all but a foregone conclusion.

What they are truly interested in, however, is voter turnout. When fewer people vote, it

becomes more difficult for the Kremlin to claim that the elections were "legitimate." Moreover, fewer ballots in the boxes mean that elections officials will have to work that much harder to manipulate the results.

Thus, a low voter turnout is the only thing that could possibly inconvenience the Kremlin. This is one reason why boycotting the elections has become a popular protest option.

These elections in many ways resemble the elections in Egypt before the Arab Spring revolts. In a Catch-22 situation, candidates not representing pro-Kremlin parties have no chance of being elected because many of their supporters will not bother to vote. A similar situation in Egypt led to the election of a parliament with 90 percent of the seats held by members of the president's party. This deprived the Egyptian parliament of any legitimacy in the eyes of the people and was a large factor that fueled the public unrest.

Ironically, the only thing saving the Kremlin from falling into a similar trap is the Communist Party, which relies on the same type of inert and apolitical — yet loyal — voters that United Russia does. By participating in the elections, the Communists give the Kremlin what it wants — the impression that there is at least some pluralism in the Duma.

Of course, many Russians will still vote on Dec. 4, a large percentage of whom will undoubtedly vote for United Russia. But they will cast their votes not because they have a strong political conviction or a sense of civic duty, but purely out of habit. Polls show that the people who do vote are largely apolitical, see no connection between the choices they make and the political and economic course in the country and generally do not view voting as a democratic function.

Thus, we are left with a paradoxical situation. Those who are most interested in politics tend to get the most disgusted in government as a whole and, as a result, don't vote.

Conversely, the less Russians are interested in politics, the more likely they are to vote. For them, the act of dropping their ballot in the ballot box is a perfunctory ritual, like decorating the Christmas Tree or giving flowers to women on Women's Day. The only difference is voting is less pleasant.

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