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The Birth of Civil Society

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The best result of the State Duma elections in December and the presidential election a week ago was the emergence of civil society in Russia.

The 28,000 people who volunteered to act as election observers nationwide on March 4 are a clear sign that people are willing and able to organize a large civil movement. On that day, 28,000 people were pitted against the roughly 14 million names that the authorities reportedly padded on voting lists to support the incumbent candidate, Vladimir Putin.

Putin's victory was not a surprise, of course. What was unexpected, however, was that 28,000 volunteer election monitors spent hours counting votes. Thanks to their efforts, they proved that his victory was illegitimate.

At the polling station I monitored, everything was fair and honest and Putin received 33.4 percent of the vote. At the polling station where opposition leader Garry Kasparov volunteered, Putin won 32.6 percent. When a bunch of pro-Kremlin Nashi youth began stuffing ballots at the polling station where opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was observing, half of them ran away as soon as they saw him. The other half that continued to stuff wasn't of much help; Putin still won only 38 percent at that polling station.

I also monitored a second polling place that day, No. 946, where I personally saw voters brazenly bused in to vote for Putin. Even there, Putin won just 57 percent.

Given all of the evidence from monitors, it is hard to believe that Putin actually pulled down more than 40 percent of the Moscow vote as a whole.

Yes, Putin won on paper, but it was illegitimate. Imagine if U.S. President Barack Obama banned the Republican Party; took control over Fox News and turned it into his own propaganda machine; ran "documentaries" on the new Fox about his chief political opponent in the upcoming November election, Mitt Romney, being a secret agent of al-Qaida; and organized millions of voters to stuff ballot boxes for him. He would probably win also, but you wouldn't call him the legitimate leader of the country.

In the fall, Russia will hold regional elections. By that time, authorities may allow the Republican Party led by Vladimir Ryzhkov to be registered and field candidates in the vote. Participation in local elections is extremely important because this is where democracy begins. It doesn't start at the top. It ends there, with presidential elections.

The 28,000 volunteer monitors that turned out for the presidential vote on March 4 were impressive, but we have seen other examples of civil society over the past years like Yevgeny Roizman's organization against narcotics and Alexei Navalny's RosPil website, an online community that resembles a political party without actually being one. A third example is the Blue Buckets movement that focuses public outrage against the blue flashing lights that high-ranking officials and their friends use to push other drivers to the side and race to where they want to go. Now the Blue Buckets are planning to follow the example of RosPil by creating an organizational structure that will enable them to help the victims of such accidents.

Since Russia has no true government, that means all of us have the unique opportunity to build civil society from the ground up. If we do, we will undoubtedly change this country for the better. If we don't, we will have only ourselves to blame.

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