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New Strategy for Opposition

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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When the authorities allowed new political parties to be registered this year — including the Republican Party-Party of People's Freedom in August — many hoped this was a small step toward more political pluralism. But it soon became clear that this was just another Kremlin decoy.

The authorities shifted from a complete ban on registration to nearly absolute freedom for all new parties. As political analysts predicted, the result has been the widespread creation and registration of new parties, with almost 40 now on the Justice Ministry books. Many are extremely similar to each other and fall into the standard categories of communist, socialist, patriotic and liberal parties.

The vast majority were created by the authorities themselves with the clear goal of misleading voters and splitting the vote between the real opposition and spoiler parties. These pseudoparties were already used with some success against the Communist Party, A Just Russia and the Republican Party-Party of People's Freedom in the regional elections on Oct. 14. That is why those parties won fewer than their usual number of votes.

To be sure, generous administrative resources have helped United Russia claim victory in recent elections. The party's standard tools were used to guarantee victory: pressuring government employees to vote for United Russia, restricting monitors access to polling stations, busing pro-United Russia voters from one polling station to another and other ballot-stuffing methods.

But apart from the outright electoral fraud and manipulation, there is another side to United Russia victories. In its own distorted way, the party has learned to conduct effective political campaigns. Over the past decade, United Russia has built a powerful electoral machine. During election campaigns over the past couple of years, United Russia has mobilized thousands of canvassers who knock on almost every voter's door.

In addition, the party systematically holds numerous meetings with voters, bringing with them local officials who immediately write down and promise to carry out "voters' demands." That is exactly the type of campaign that guaranteed victory for Oleg Shakhov in the mayoral race in Khimki, just outside the Moscow city limits.

And that is exactly how many United Russia candidates campaigned in Barnaul for the Oct. 14 regional elections. What is surprising is that despite the enormous financial and administrative resources the ruling party invested, it produced only modest results. Consider Vladivostok. Even after billions of rubles was spent on developing the city and the region prior to the APEC summit, only 12 percent of voters turned out for the municipal Duma elections, and of those, about 40 percent voted for United Russia. That means only about 5 percent of all voters in the city supported the ruling party.

United Russia is experiencing a deep crisis of voter confidence that even widespread falsifications and modern and costly election campaigns cannot cure. When United Russia candidates attend public meetings with local officials in tow, they are greeted not only with a flood of questions, but also with a barrage of curses.

Considering the deep crisis that United Russia is experiencing, the opposition has a chance to win regional and local elections, despite the enormous resources the Kremlin provides the ruling party.

But the opposition must do a great deal of work to achieve that goal. It must find a large number of strong, active candidates and train its own political analysts and headquarters staff. It must create its own network of canvassers, volunteers and elections monitors. It must learn to plan and manage modern election campaigns and learn to organize attractive political programs that answer the needs of the local population.

The opposition forces must respond to United Russia's administrative resources and outright electoral manipulations with the four main weapons that it has at its disposal: activism, hard work and diligence, professionalism and faith in the morality and rightness of its cause.

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