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Authorities Use Fair Means in Rigged Elections

By Nikolai Petrov

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Elections will definitely reappear in Russia at some point, but it is still too early to say it has already happened. The recent elections in Moscow and Yekaterinburg were more of a test run, and although they did not cause any radical changes in the country overall, they do serve as positive examples to be emulated elsewhere. Gubernatorial elections were also a little better this year than last. The substance and purpose of elections seem to be gradually returning: They are now more interesting for the political elite in the regions as well as for voters.

The authorities at all levels have made many attempts to manipulate these elections. These include the decision to hold the elections in early September in order to avoid a normal election campaign; the careful selection of candidates with the culling out of those deemed even a little bit dangerous; criminal cases and threats by the siloviki against numerous opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny, Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashev and Yevgeny Roizman; the refusal to register individual candidates; and the removal of entire party lists under various pretexts. I will not even mention all of the tricks that officials play on Election Day itself.

Overall, the authorities made an attempt to use fair means to win what is essentially a rigged contest and the elections proceeded in the usual way in most places.

Observers often emphasize the positive aspects of the new and more competitive model of elections put forward by Kremlin ideologist and deputy head of the presidential administration Vyacheslav Volodin. These include the appointment of two acting governors that do not belong to United Russia, the decision to allow opposition figures Alexei Navalny and Yevgeny Roizman to run as mayoral candidates in Moscow and Yekaterinburg, respectively, and limitations on attempts to discredit and remove candidates deemed undesirable by local officials.

I would like to take a closer look at the actual implementation of the Kremlin's new model of elections that was used on Sept. 8. The main question is: What is happening to the party system? Thanks to the efforts of the authorities, it is deteriorating even further. By loosening the rules by which parties are allowed to register, dozens of new and variegated "political seedlings" have sprouted — largely at the express intent of the Kremlin, which is deliberately blurring the notion of the "party of power." No longer is the party of power United Russia, the notorious "party of crooks and thieves" whose image the Kremlin has no interest in attempting to improve. Neither is it the All-Russia People's Front, a Kremlin toy, or Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party, which many people in the regions saw as a promising junior partner to the ruling party. With tacit consent from the elderly leaders of the "systemic" Duma opposition parties — who are willing to play along to preserve their privileged positions — the Kremlin has created a broad and amorphous left-center-right proto-party coalition that enables it to speak over the heads of the political elite to address voters directly.

Consider the Moscow elections, where the real contest was between two individuals with no clear party affiliation — acting Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and Alexei Navalny, whose ideology differs greatly from the party to which he is formally registered, Party of People's Freedom. In fact, Sobyanin and Navalny spoke little of the parties that nominated them.

What we are seeing now is, in the words of Vladimir Gelman, a crack in the wall of electoral authoritarianism. But it is not the collapse of that wall. In the mean time, this system of electoral authoritarianism is pursuing a scorched earth policy, leaving nothing of political substance in its wake.

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