

Finally, a Clean Election

By [Yulia Latynina](#)

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Yulia Latynina

I spent all of Sunday monitoring elections at several polling stations. I was impressed. Fair elections have returned to Moscow. Not a single vote cast for change was made in vain. True, one vote for opposition leader Alexei Navalny was counted as only about nine-tenths of a vote, but that's how the game currently works. The first task is to win according to those rules, and that's doable.

This was the first time I have seen an elections commission that was not trying to falsify the results. It wasn't because the members were so upright and honest, but because there

were so many observers present and they lacked the gall to do it openly.

In this sense, it is absolutely wrong to whine that these elections were rigged. Just the opposite is the case. Now I have the right to say to everyone: "Go to the polls. Act as observers. Everything depends on you."

Second, Mayor-elect Sergei Sobyenin himself wanted to win the election without fraud. Instead, his campaign staff called every single senior citizen, brought each one 6 kilograms of groceries and invited them to cast their votes in portable ballot boxes used for pensioners who rarely make it out of their apartment. This is because they know that seniors get most of their information from state-controlled television and do not use the Internet. As a result, most have never even heard of Navalny and could be counted on to vote for Sobyenin.

At the same time, however, Navalny achieved impressive results: more than 27 percent of the vote with the help of excellent organization. In December 2011, an unorganized crowd of 100,000 managers and intellectuals gathered on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, and that was far from all of the people who supported Navalny. In Sunday's race, Navalny received 600,000 votes. Most of his supporters are not just people who protested in the streets but ordinary citizens whom Navalny and his campaign staff had managed to contact and persuade in the few short weeks before these elections. It is very likely that this trend will continue to grow in future elections.

Fourth, with Navalny coming just a few votes short of forcing a second round of voting and opposition candidate Yevgeny Roizman winning the mayoral race in Yekaterinburg, the siloviki will have more reason to run to the Kremlin screaming, "We told you to wipe out the opposition, but you didn't listen."

In this sense, I am glad that there was no second round of voting, just as I'm glad that there was no violence during the protests in December 2011, because a second round would have forced President Vladimir Putin into a corner. In fact, from the psychological standpoint, Putin is not so much an evildoer as he is an undersized punk. He can throw his weight around and bully others only when he meets the least resistance. But when he encounters strong opposition, he backs down.

Thus, Putin will find it much easier to convince himself that Navalny won as many votes in a free and fair election than face the reality that he would have to initiate a full-scale dictatorship to extinguish the opposition movement.

The result of these elections is very simple: Navalny will not go to jail, and Russia now has an opposition with which the authorities must contend.

Yulia Latynina hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio.

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