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United Russia Wins Elections But Not Respect

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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On Sept. 14, 2014, Russia once again held local and regional elections throughout the country. United Russia won a landslide victory while the other "systemic" parties with representation in parliament fared badly and support for the "non-systemic" opposition parties was even weaker than usual.

Does that mean the Kremlin has finally overcome the political crisis — a crisis of confidence and legitimacy — that it faced in late 2011 and early 2012 with the mass rallies on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova in Moscow?

In fact, just the opposite is true. These elections revealed not the authorities' strength, but their weakness. The Kremlin and regional elite achieved this victory by stooping to the most shameful electoral practices and against a downright depressing display of voter apathy. United Russia leader Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev urged party members not to "succumb to euphoria" over their victory, but in fact they are more likely to shake their heads in dismay than get carried away with happiness.

All 30 regional governors who ran in these elections were re-elected to their posts. Following a 10-year hiatus in which the Kremlin effectively appointed governors, gubernatorial elections have been held for the last three years now. About one-half of all governors currently serving were elected during this brief period, but even more importantly: Not a single governor who ran for election was defeated.

Somehow, they all get re-elected — whether they are residents of the region where they serve or arrived only recently, whether they are popular or unpopular, and whether they have substantial experience in office or are new to the job. It appears that gubernatorial elections are not free or competitive and that the Kremlin continues to determine the winners in advance.

There were so many happy gubernatorial winners that the election results resembled the controversial elections held in Turkmenistan in December 2013. Fully 16 of Russia's 30 governors garnered more than 78 percent of the vote. What's more, Samara Governor Nikolai Merkushkin only recently arrived in the region from Mordovia and yet pulled down 91.4 percent of the vote — a figure normally only seen in elections in Chechnya. Even the comparative "losers" who won about 60 percent of the vote enjoyed victories more indicative of an authoritarian political system than a democratic one.

The authorities achieve that degree of electoral happiness by stripping gubernatorial elections of all real competition, primarily with the help of the so-called "municipal filter," the requirement that candidates get signatures from serving deputies in order to run.

That is exactly how opposition member and popular Khakassian candidate Oleg Ivanov and State Duma Deputy from St. Petersburg Oksana Dmitriyeva were prevented from running in last year's elections.

Only one regional head, Altai Republic Governor Alexander Berdnikov, failed to exclude his main rival — the republic's former Prime Minister Vladimir Petrov — from the race. Through a bit of luck and probable electoral fraud, Berdnikov managed to avoid a second round of voting that he was virtually certain to lose. The final tally: Berdnikov 50.6 percent and Petrov an impressive 36 percent.

The example of Altai reveals the weakness of the current government: the moment a genuine opponent competes in elections, however unfair or rigged they are, the ruling authorities immediately face the very real prospect of defeat. The same thing happened during the Moscow mayoral election last year when anti-corruption whistleblower Alexei Navalny earned 27 percent of the vote against acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and nearly forced a second round of voting.

By eliminating the strongest rivals at the registration stage of elections, the authorities nip all competition in the bud. Elections lose all meaning and become nothing but a referendum on support for the incumbent governor.

And because the vast majority of governors are unpopular, and more than a few are very unpopular, the residents of the regions avoid going to the polls and expressing their support out of principle. The authorities actually encourage a low turnout by holding elections at the end of the dacha season and the last warm days of the year, when many people are out

of town.

As a result, Russia's governors won record-high percentages from a record-low number of voters. When direct gubernatorial elections existed back in 2000-2004, voter turnout averaged 50 percent — 60 percent nationally. Now that number has dropped to 35 percent to 45 percent. One-half to two-thirds of all voters simply ignored these gubernatorial elections, and a record number of winners gained their "mandates" from a shrinking minority of voters.

Voter turnout for regional parliamentary elections is even lower, reaching, for example, a record low of just 21 percent in the Moscow City Duma elections. The reason is the same: The Moscow authorities prohibited the most well-known opposition figures from participating. These include Olga Romanova, Maria Gaidar, Vladimir Milov and Andrei Nechayev — not to mention candidates associated with Alexei Navalny.

In killing off the competition, the authorities had to take care not to kill off the elections themselves. After all, a significant danger always exists that no one will turn out to vote.

Faced with such lifeless elections, the authorities resort to artificial resuscitation — corralling and coercing everyone they can to the polls. University chancellors threaten teachers to vote, and teachers threaten their students. Directors of state-owned companies threaten employees, generals force their soldiers, and social service agencies "nudge" pensioners to the polls.

Many regions asked the hard-driving directors of various firms and organizations to "oversee" the process of absentee voting, with the result that absentee ballots accounted for more than 20 percent of the vote in many regions. Without forcing people to the polls in this way or creating non-existent voters with absentee ballots, voter turnout would not exceed 25 percent to 30 percent.

And finally, the authorities rolled out their entire arsenal of "enticements" on voting day: buying votes with money and vodka, falsifying results by stuffing ballot boxes, and "correcting" the results so that, for example, Samara claimed an absurdly high voter turnout of 62 percent and Merkushkin claimed to have won an even more ludicrous 91.4 percent of the vote.

However, once Russia finally holds truly free elections, this Potemkin village of "popular support" will burn to its very foundations. The authorities are weak and unpopular, the people are apathetic and lack faith in their leaders, and no amount of cheap food at polling stations or threats to either vote or get fired will improve the situation.

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