The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians Are Loyal to Russian State, Not Putin

By Gleb Kuznetsov

June 23, 2015



When trying to get some perspective on elections by classifying them according to general principles, it becomes obvious that narrowly defined "political technologies" provide little insight and are of no interest to anyone but the few who work in that field.

Some might claim that Party X won the elections and "opened a new political era and achieved a technological breakthrough" by using Twitter to raise voter turnout, calling for a referendum on this or that subject, opening a community liaison office or disseminating propaganda in WhatsApp.

But a second group would say "No, Party Y in a neighboring country did all of the same things but lost the elections. Party X won because it successfully rode the wave of voter sentiment opposing immigration or supporting feminism and liberal values," and so on. A third group might argue that Party X won because it had a strong leader who was able to rally voter support during the campaign.

All of these arguments are worthless when it comes to understanding reality. They have meaning only for those in political marketing who earn their living from election campaigns. One sells voter databases for direct mailings, another takes money for writing ads and a third reaches the masses by coaching the candidate.

What difference does it make if a candidate appeals to voters through Twitter, Facebook, television or printed fliers? The goal is the same: convincing people to vote for the right candidate.

The main question is not the eternal and artificial conflict of "the medium vs. the message." After all, one cannot exist without the other. Nor is it the "message" or "narrative" that a party or candidate delivers. In any political conflict — and elections are always conflicts — there is one main question, and victory inevitably goes to whichever side can best articulate it.

That question is sometimes directed at voters and might concern political traditions or touch on the most vulnerable aspect of the political system itself. The main thing is that it sets the ground rules for the political "war" — and it is always the rules that determine the winning side.

That main issue in the November 2014 midterm elections in the United States was: "Do you want to send a message to the president?" Because voters always want to voice their displeasure, the political party holding the White House has won midterm elections only three times in U.S. history — just once in the three midterms under former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the most popular Democratic leader of all time, once under former U.S. President Bill Clinton and once under former U.S. President George W. Bush — and that following the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

What point is there to even discussing the methods and ideology of the conservative Tea Party movement if the Republicans were destined to win the 2014 midterms anyway, no matter how hard the Democrats tried?

The question to voters during the last French elections for the General Council of departments was: "Are you as fed up as the rest of us with the socialism of President Francois Hollande?" The overwhelmingly positive response to that question determined the winners in that election.

In fact, two more right-wing parties besides those of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Marine Le Pen managed to benefit from that question and win strong results, simply by applying the correct political formula in that situation.

In Turkey, the main issue in the parliamentary elections was: "Are you willing to give everything to Turkish President Recep Erdogan?" Of course, the inevitable answer was: "No, we are ready to give a great deal, but not everything." As a result, Erdogan was able to win the most votes, but not enough to achieve his primary goal of transforming the country into a presidential republic and concentrating all power in his own hands.

The main question in Britain was: "Is it possible to manipulate a traditionalist political system during a period of stability and with a political agenda that citizens find uninteresting?" The answer: Yes, if you focus exclusively on the weak points of the system

and use key indicators to highlight them, you've as good as won.

British Prime Minister David Cameron got the whole country in an uproar with a proposed referendum on the European Union, but it was only a cover for a campaign by his Conservative Party to target "wavering" districts to counter a self-satisfied, "national" campaign by the Labour Party.

The question before Russian voters is both simple and obvious: "Do you have faith in the state or not?" Every election in Russia invariably reverts to a referendum measuring voters' faith in the authorities as well as their loyalty to the ruling regime and willingness to place the interests of the state far above their own. Such an agenda naturally eclipses all issues related to the candidates' personalities, party platforms and political messages.

That is the perennial core issue in Russian elections. It will play the central role in parliamentary elections in 2016, presidential elections in 2018 and so on, ad infinitum. It is this ritual expression of faith in the Russian state — and definitely not the authorities' various manipulations of the electoral system and the vote count — that ensures victory for the ruling party and sky-high ratings for President Vladimir Putin.

The main issue is really the fact that the basic question before Russian voters changed from "Which path of development do you choose?" in the wild 1990s, to the subsequent "Do you place the Russian state above all else?" It is not the president's unique skills and personal qualities, as the loyalists argue, or widespread electoral fraud, as the opposition argues.

The whole point of political technologies and strategies is to find the optimal formulation of the basic question to put before voters. Or, if that issue or question is already set in stone — as with midterm elections in the United States — to focus on "damage control" and to fight for minor victories on "gray" or politically marginal issues. The Russian opposition does not demonstrate this ability. It focuses on technology instead. Its members fail to understand that the people continue to vote for Putin because they see elections as a referendum on their loyalty to the state — regardless of whether the opposition runs an Internet campaign, in the "most free and unrestricted venue," or appealed to people's deep dissatisfaction with government corruption and the condition of health care.

It is that issue of loyalty to the state as such, this so-called "Russian conservatism" that remains the core idea enabling the ruling authorities and their party — whatever its name at the given moment — to consistently achieve victory in national elections.

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