

Legitimized Elections: The Kremlin Plays a New Game

By [Peter Hobson](#)

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Ella Pamfilova is a democratic survivor within the system. But is her appointment to the Central Election Commission more than window dressing?

There was nothing unusual about the weeks running up to the 2009 Moscow City Duma election. United Russia, the party of power, hogged airtime on television and radio. Opposition candidates were routinely barred from running. Municipal workers ripped other parties' fliers from the city streets.

Maria Zheleznova observed the election. She spent the day in a school sports hall near the city center, watching people vote. When evening fell, she began to count. Among the scattered papers that spilled from the voting boxes, two stacks of ballots, each 1.5 centimeters thick, slid out onto the tables.

Their neatness struck her as strange. They could not have been dropped individually into the box. She pointed the inconsistency out to her colleagues, a group of around 10 mostly bored,

middle-aged municipal workers who had been counting elections for years. "Do you see this?" she asked several of them. They ignored her.

She riffled through the papers in the stacks — every one of them was a vote cast for United Russia.

When Zheleznova sat down to fill out an official complaint about the incident she was asked to leave. None of her colleagues would co-sign the document.

The next day, official results were announced. Zheleznova checked them against the tally she had taken the night before. Opposition parties had lost up to 80 percent of their votes. United Russia gained a landslide.

Bad Cop

This kind of election fraud became increasingly widespread in Russia in the 2000s. It was overseen by Vladimir Churov, head of the Central Election Commission.

In a nine-year career leading the committee, the white-bearded, short-sighted Churov came to symbolize the failure of Russian electoral institutions. Churov had been a colleague of President Vladimir Putin in 1990s St. Petersburg. When appointed to lead the election committee in 2007, he proclaimed that "Putin is always right" was "Churov's first law."

In 2011, he oversaw massive vote rigging in national parliamentary elections, earning the nickname "the magician" for his achievements. He waved away criticism, insisting that video footage of fraud had been filmed in specially built replica polling booths to discredit the vote. But public outrage spilled into nationwide street protests, the largest of Putin's period in power.

Five years later, new parliamentary elections are looming in September. Russia's economic situation is worsening, and authorities fear social unrest.

So the Kremlin made an unexpected move. Putin earlier this month appointed a widely respected rights advocate, Ella Pamfilova, to the commission. She is expected to replace Churov and become the new, friendlier face of Russian elections.

Good Cop

Pamfilova's history makes her a perfect choice for the role. Her political career precedes Putin: She entered Boris Yeltsin's government in 1991 as a minister under liberal Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar. She is a rights campaigner who has occupied official positions, most recently as the Kremlin's human rights ombudsman, and has worked with civil society groups.

She has also been principled, defending a journalist from harassment by pro-Kremlin youth activists in 2009 and resigning from an official post in 2010 to protest a lack of progress.

If appointed head of the Central Election Commission, she would influence registration of candidates and vote counts. But analysts say her power would be minimal.

The appointment is "decorative," says Gleb Pavlovsky, a political analyst and former Kremlin

adviser.

Pamfilova would be tasked with controlling an election commission that on election day will employ more than 1 million people across the largest country on earth. What's more, the commission is controlled from the Kremlin by Putin's presidential administration.

And the administration has a plan.

Electoral Tricks

That plan works on multiple fronts, analysts say.

On the face of it, the elections in September are set to be more plural than five years ago. More parties will be registered to run, and half of new members in Russia's State Duma will be directly elected, rather than appointed through party lists. According to a member of the parliament, at least 50 percent of current deputies will be replaced.

But the administration's goal is to maximize control — over the candidates, the campaign, and the results.

No candidate whom the Kremlin judges a genuine threat is likely to participate. Criminal convictions and investigations have been used to stop well-known figures such as anti-corruption campaigners Alexei Navalny and Leonid Volkov from either standing or campaigning. That threat hangs over all opposition candidates, says Grigory Melkonyants of Golos, an independent election monitor.

Opposition figures face a paradox, says journalist Sergei Parkhomenko, who has been a monitor at previous Russian elections. "The task of an opposition politician is to hide, to disappear — for god's sake not to show themselves — so they aren't noticed and can register. But then they won't have any chance of winning because no-one knows them."

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is sponsoring alternative opposition parties to divide support for independent politicians. In parliament, these sponsored parties are unlikely to oppose United Russia. "The most important thing is that candidates are obedient, and easy to manipulate," says Parkhomenko. "After the election you can always dress them in the right little costumes."

Gerrymandering has sharply reduced the number of purely urban districts, where support for the opposition is strongest. As in previous elections, state media will work for state-sanctioned candidates, and it is through such media that most Russians see the world.

Finally, when polling day arrives, there are new restrictions on election monitors. The government blamed the protests of 2011 on these observers, according to Melkonyants. He paraphrased their logic: "No monitors, no trouble."

Under new laws, election observers can observe at only one polling station, and must register at least three days before a vote. The result, Melkonyants says, is that "authorities receive advance warning of the areas under scrutiny." In these districts, "they can do everything more or less correctly;" in others, they will have free reign.

New Mood

However, Russia's ongoing economic crisis creates uncertainty. Falling living standards could empower parties willing to unleash their rhetoric. Under Putin, the Communists and the Liberal Democrats — the two largest opposition parties — have been slavishly obedient to the Kremlin. "They will inevitably become less controlled as the crisis deepens," says Pavlovsky.

But it is unlikely that such sentiment will be allowed to get out of government control. Russian society has changed since 2011 in ways that damage the chances of any genuine opposition.

Five years ago, there was greater plurality of views in society and more skepticism of authorities. These features have disappeared beneath a wave of patriotism that followed the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. The government has also initiated campaigns against "foreign agents" in civil society and encouraged demonization of opposition figures.

The price of dissent has risen, says Pavlovsky: Now, there is a dominant idea that enemies are blocking the will of an "overwhelming majority" in favor of Putin.

Pamfilova vs. Volodin

As head of the election commission, Pamfilova would be largely powerless to stop any of this. She would be constrained by tightened legislation. And with only six months between her likely appointment in late March and the elections, she would have little time to undo Churov's system.

Her one weapon would be to resign, says Parkhomenko.

The real force behind the elections is Vyacheslav Volodin, the official in the presidential administration who has genuine control over the election commission.

In previous elections, the administration would stop at nothing to obtain a specific, pre-planned percentage of votes for United Russia. This year, according to an advisor involved in the elections, the Kremlin "will not need them to break their necks to get that."

Planning has become more subtle, the advisor told The Moscow Times. It has two key principles: There must be no protests. And the parliament which results from the elections must be controlled. To guarantee that, candidates for direct election will be screened for loyalty, and opposition parties will be held in line.

Volodin's methods are designed to take the unpredictability out of election day. "The real elections happen long before people come to vote," says Parkhomenko. Direct election fraud is a method for emergencies only, according to Pavlovsky.

For Volodin, failure is unlikely to be an option. These are the first major parliamentary elections that he has managed. "They are an exam for him," says Pavlovsky. In 2018, Putin will either stand for reelection or hand power to a successor. If Volodin fails in September, "he won't be fit to run the presidential election. He'll have to leave."

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