The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Will Russia's Opposition Draw the Right Lessons From Electoral Defeat?

By Eva Hartog

September 20, 2016



People gather at office of Central Election Commission before a news conference on the preliminary results of a parliamentary election in Moscow, Russia, Sept.19, 2016. **Sergei Karpukhin / Reuters**

The Russian opposition on Monday awoke to an electoral hangover — in some cases quite literally — after suffering a crushing defeat in the polls that has relegated it to the fringes of political life.

"The opposition has lost again. Who's to blame?" the cover of the opposition-minded New Times magazine asked, in a question that has dominated much of the liberal media since the Sept. 18 vote.

Even though no one expected any major victory for the opposition, the outcome of the parliamentary vote nonetheless came as a blow. Not a single liberal opposition party made the five-percent threshold required to enter the State Duma. Even worse, neither the leading opposition party Yabloko nor the less popular Parnas managed to garner at least 3 percent of

the vote in order to qualify for federal funding.

It also means none of the parties will be able to put forward candidates in future elections without going through the tiresome and obstacle-riddled process of gathering signatures.

The parties also failed to make any headway in single-seat constituencies, resulting in a new Duma that is wholly dominated by United Russia and the traditional "troika" of Kremlin-friendly parties — the Liberal Democratic Party, the Communist Party and A Just Russia.

Critics of the Kremlin rushed to blame the Kremlin and "its" election, which they argued was hopelessly skewed in United Russia's favor. "They were 'elections without a choice'," exiled oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky wrote on Facebook. "People showed their attitude, with a turnout that is the lowest in years."

Some of the candidates appeared to share some of the responsibility for the electoral flop. "I wasn't able to convince my voters to come to the voting booth while those who were urging not to go were stronger," Open Russia's Maria Baronova wrote on Facebook, after losing to a United Russia candidate in a central Moscow district.

"I want to say that I am sorry," Yabloko's Lev Schlosberg said during a broadcast on the Dozhd TV station late on Sunday. "We couldn't get through this iron curtain to our voters. We failed to engage our voters in discussion. They don't believe in elections anymore, and they stayed home. This is our fault, and our responsibility."

Dmitry Gudkov, who for years was known as the only real opposition member in the Duma, also saw a parliamentary seat slip through his fingers into the hands of veteran Kremlin sanitary chief Gennady Onischenko. "You can't elect yourself into the Duma, if people don't have faith in the elections," he wrote on Facebook. "It turns out our enemy wasn't Onishchenko, but the turnout — or the absence of it. Distrust. Indifference."

There is little doubt the opposition was at a disadvantage. Anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, who in 2011 surfaced as a leader of the opposition, has been sidelined from politics by a barrage of charges, widely considered to be politically motivated. Not being able to run himself, he made no secret of his controversial decision to boycott the vote altogether, rather than use his popularity to encourage Russians to vote for rivals.

His lesser known candidates are further hampered by a lack of access to state media. "They're playing a game in which 100 percent of the rules have been designed by the ruling party," says political analyst Kirill Martinov.

Much of the liberal elite has explained the low turnout, and the subsequent results, as being the consequence of a conscious boycott among opposition-minded voters. Political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin on a Dozhd TV show described the low turnout as the result of a "sofa sit-in."

Many are furious. "You think you voted with your feet. But you voted with your fat behinds," prominent journalist Sergei Parkhomenko wrote on Facebook. "Did you learn some Sanskrit? At least several words? Then tell me what's Sanskrit for: I'm a brainless, lazy and cowardly idiot."

It would be a mistake, however, for the liberal elite to lean too heavily on the low turnout as they lick their wounds, says sociologist Denis Volkov.

The belief in the supposed existence of a large electorate who, through passivity or active sabotage, stayed at home but would've otherwise voted in the opposition's favor, is flawed, he argues. “The quantity of people who would vote for the opposition has fallen in the past 10 to 15 years,” he says. “There's practically no electorate left for them.”

That has put the burden entirely on effective campaigning which, during this election, was found wanting, he argues. While Gudkov arguably led one of the best campaigns this election, analysts say he is the exception that confirms a rule of generally uninspired campaigning by the main opposition parties Yabloko and Parnas.

“The opposition had nothing to offer. It had no message. And couldn't convince anyone,” says Volkov. The problem is made worse by infighting among opposition politicians that has undermined unity and failed to provide a cause to rally around. “In focus polls, even their supporters don't know what they stand for,” says Volkov.

Five years ago, the situation was different. “People understood what they had to do — even if it was to vote against the United Russia ruling party,” says Martinov. “Now Russians didn't understand why they would go to the polling station in the first place and, second, what to do once they got there.”

This year, party leaders had some airtime on state television, in carefully orchestrated debates that were more an opportunity for less-known candidates to show their face than any real discussion of policy. Some now argue the opposition made a strategic error even at such crucial moments.

Though the pre-electoral campaign saw the emergence of various promising young candidates, including Gudkov and Konstantin Yankauskas, voters were presented with Yabloko's long-time leader Grigory Yavlinsky. That makes Yabloko seem just as traditional as other parties, which also have veteran politicians at their head, contradicting its message of renewal and change.

“There's hypocrisy in that,” says Volkov. “In focus groups, people say: Remove that guy already!”

There is little confidence that the opposition will draw a lesson from Sunday's defeat and and unite around a single cause. Instead it is likely to remain divided and become increasingly marginalized as it is pushed toward the fringes of political life.

“Opposition-minded Russians now have no one who can present them legally in the public sphere,” says Martinov. “This vote has made a civilized path in the battle for power even more difficult."

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