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What to Tell an Alien About Russia's Upcoming Elections

Is there an elixir of life that can revive the country's zombie institutions?

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Anna Pavich for MT

On Sunday, there will be gubernatorial elections in several Russian regions, including the Sverdlovsk region, which are essentially non-competitive. There will also be municipal elections in Moscow, with the participation of independent candidates running. (Let us not forget, here, that this concerns different levels of government.)

The difference between the two reflects an ongoing dispute in Russia between those who hope to revive the country's lifeless institutions, such as the elections, and those who consider that goal nothing short of utopian.

If an alien were to ask for a brief description of the Russian political system, you could say: Look, there are laws and rules, parties and organizations, an election procedure and the media.

You might also point out that parties can only register according to certain rules, that specific barriers prevent just anyone from taking part in elections, and that a thousand other things make modern Russia's political system work the way it does.

The difference between the first and second understanding is a substantial one.

According to the first level, for example, Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov can be described as members of the political opposition. In the second, they are part of the establishment themselves, and therefore "the opposition." Terms such as "elections" and "political parties" similarly take on quotation marks.

On the first level, there is no room for principles: everything is accepted at face value. In the second, the entire discussion is confined solely to principles and an effort to understand how things really stand.

In real life, there is no clear distinction between the two. But it is important to understand that such a difference does, in fact, exist.

Aliens aside, consider that many Russians actually believe the first version – that is, they take what they see strictly at face value. When a system exists long enough, the passage of time helps make it seem normal. People get tired of hoping that it will eventually live up to their hopes or demand a higher standard. Life is too short for such dreams. Alternatives dry up, the quotation marks are erased, and the vacuous concept is seen as the real thing.

Making the bizarre seem normal is the Russian leadership's primary strategy. From wars in neighboring countries, to state media's reporting, or the way prisons and elections are organized.

To be fair, a few good things are also becoming the new normal. There are initiatives to expedite the processing of paperwork that have sprung up all over Russia, and wider and smoother streets in larger cities.

And a handful of independent candidates are even allowed to participate in municipal elections.

But nonetheless, the main strategy is still to normalize the terrible. If elections are eviscerated beforehand, they can be held in strict accordance with the law. Unsurprisingly, the authorities have focused on the legality of what they pass off as the September "elections" instead of their legitimacy based on voter turnout or political competition.

This is "Putin's plan," because "legality" is one of his favorite concepts. But what matters is not who is behind it, but the strategy. What matters is that the Russian people never see "behind the curtain" and realize how weak and artificial the entire political structure is. The strategy is to make a show of following the rules and of holding elections so that if challenged by a rogue dissident, leaders can honestly say: "Yes, we observe the law."

However, the rule of law is not and will never become a reality because those in power consider the current system a legal utopia. The state and its senior officials, often fail to observe their own laws, if only because they write and forever rewrite them in order to catch their enemies in an act of non-compliance.

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The most recent example is the high-profile case of artistic director Kirill Serebrennikov. At a superficial level, it is about enforcing the law. But go deeper and it is an act of repression. It serves as a reminder that the double layer extends beyond politics, to strategic businesses, media, and high-revenue theater.

Many people do see the backside of this stage dressing: the Russian media space is heavily distorted, but not an entirely closed system.

Approximately 60 percent of Muscovites and 30 percent in the rest of the country regularly use alternative sources of information. That serves to highlight the particularities of the Russian political construction.

Of course, there are many young, naïve, and otherwise occupied people who take the political reality at face value. However, many – and possibly a great many — do understand that the state institutions and openly sham elections are nothing more than set decorations with no substance.

The state, and especially an authoritarian state, is constructed like a bank: the minute that citizens-depositors lose faith, they withdraw everything of value. So far, Russians have not made a run on this bank: they continue to support hollow institutions in the hope that they will eventually fill with life, and hope that sleeping institutions will awaken.

That the first and second interpretations will gradually merge, in anticipation that a sprinkling of the elixir of life will bring back its zombie-like institutions. Could Moscow's municipal elections be the first step towards that transformation?

That is the question. And despite the illusory nature of such hopes and the doubts as to whether such an elixir even exists, the view triumphs by mere force of the number of people who believe it does.

Whatever the outcome of Sunday's election, it is a fact that Russia's non-competitive political system relies for its existence more on the trust of its citizens than on the cunning of its architects or the strength of those who guard it.

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