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Truly Strange Duma Elections

By Konstantin Sonin

The Duma elections are very strange. They had seemed to be nothing more than a formality to re-elect members of a senseless and useless lower house of parliament. Then the elections turned into no more than a referendum on extending President Vladimir Putin's presidency and legitimizing the disregard for the Constitution that prohibits a consecutive third term. And with only two weeks remaining before election day, what was thought to be a foregone result is now unexpectedly in question.

Although a high percentage of the population has expressed its trust in the president, Putin's constituency refuses to turn this into a genuine, nationwide show of support. And even with the media under the Kremlin's control, regional administrations towing the official line and pollsters unable to detect even the slightest popular support for any alternative, people are still not turning out in droves for rallies that call for Putin to stay on for a third term.

This lack of enthusiasm could be explained as "satiated indifference" from voters enjoying higher incomes as result of a 7-year economic boom. But the "carpet bombing" of the electorate by the state-controlled media in support of Putin and United Russia has nevertheless failed to raise their ratings. In fact, according to opinion polls, their support has been falling for the last month.

It has been clear for some time that these so-called elections would not be able to provide any real legitimacy for Putin's regime in the eyes of the outside world. In theory, you might overlook the undemocratic election laws, such as the high entry threshold for political parties, the absence of single-mandate districts, the prohibition on negative advertising and the domination of television airtime by a single political party.

These could all be dismissed as the natural shortcomings of a young democracy. But the visa restrictions placed on some observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe removes all doubt as to the real nature of these elections. But now the elections might be void of domestic legitimacy as well: Even if governors report voter turnout of 100 percent with 90 percent in favor of United Russia, as long as there are no independent observers to corroborate the claim, this will speak to the governors' influence on the local election commission, and not to any popular support from the voters.

But if you judge by what you see in the media, Putin is facing real opposition for the first time. The Union of Right Forces was recently the object of a negative propaganda campaign supported by the Kremlin's resources: searches, seizure of its promotional literature, provocation in the media and the exclusion of its candidates from regional voting lists. The attacks against the Union of Right Forces were surprising because their ratings were so low anyway. Thus, an all-out campaign against this unpopular party would seem like a big waste of "administrative resources."

When the Union of Right Forces began its election campaign, it was unable to unite the "democratic" factions in order to occupy even the smallest niche in the political landscape. But in the last two weeks, its position has become very clear: The Union of Right Forces is opposed to Putin holding on to power. The party filed an application with the Supreme Court last week calling for Putin's exclusion from United Russia's electoral list, arguing that it violated election laws.

This truly is a strange campaign. Only two short weeks ago, you could have said that these elections were a foregone conclusion, with no possibility of an upset. And now it turns out, would you believe, that it's possible to vote against Putin retaining his authority and, instead, vote for the Union of Right Forces.

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