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Kremlin Wins a Duma With No Legitimacy

By Konstantin Sonin

I drafted this column on Sunday before the results of State Duma elections were in, but I do not need to change much after the Central Elections Commission announced their preliminary results on Monday. The most important result of these elections was not the number of seats gained by three pro-Putin parties and the Communists. The most significant consequence is that we have a parliament with very little legitimacy.

The crucial reason for this lack of legitimacy is that the laws that governed these elections did not meet even the minimum democratic standards. Furthermore, compliance with these laws was extremely selective. On top of this, the majority of international observers were excluded from monitoring the elections. Although the positions of foreign governments have little influence on the dynamics of Russian politics, this decision undermined the legitimacy of the elections.

The problem is that the large-scale use of the Kremlin's so-called administrative resources to achieve dominance of these elections significantly undermined the legitimacy of the Duma in the eyes of most Russians. In September, some Russia-watchers speculated that Russia was taking steps toward establishing a modern autocratic regime by vesting power into the United Russia -- somewhat similar to China or perhaps Mexico, both of which have institutionalized single-party regimes.

The election campaign defeated these expectations, however. United Russia won a lion's share of Duma seats, but this happened after its campaign centered exclusively on the name of President Vladimir Putin. The intent was to institutionalize the party as a dominant political force, but it failed.

Regimes that are heavily structured around individual leaders tend to survive during times of rapid economic growth but falter during downturns. They often rally the electorate by raising the alarm about a foreign enemy, but that tactic won't help govern the nation effectively in the long term.

The main consequence of these elections is that every institution has been weakened, including United Russia and the Kremlin elite. The only center of power that has strengthened is Putin.

The main issue is not which method Putin will use to retain power after his second term ends. That topic, which has high entertainment value, is much discussed but is ultimately of little importance. Whichever method Putin uses, the result will be the same as the results of the Duma elections: Power will be preserved with the help of a popular president, a complacent population and the combined power of the government's huge administrative resources. But the government does not have legitimacy in the liberal-democratic sense of the word because it does not stem from a broad-based popular support. It is difficult to speak of the legitimacy of a popular party when the ruling regime is semi-autocratic. Its only sense of legitimacy stems from the sheer strength of Putin's authority itself.

This makes it all more likely that the next Duma elections will be held before its four-year session is completed. Autocratic regimes based on individual personalities are fraught with instability. In the event of instability at the highest levels in the Kremlin, the simplest and most natural demand that Putin's opponents could make would be to call for new Duma elections.

Inasmuch as the current Duma has so little legitimacy, such a demand would enjoy wide popular support. If the instability is rooted in the general population -- either due to inflation, rising expectations or to general disillusionment with Putin -- an additional demand could easily be put on the table: the return of Duma seats chosen by single-mandate districts, which were abolished by the Kremlin.

The fact that Russians are willing to put up with a nonrepresentational government during a time of prosperity in no way means that they will be equally compliant once the economy slows. It is particularly during bad economic times that we feel the government's lack of legitimacy the most.

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