

To Stuff or Not to Stuff

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By Konstantin Sonin

In a normally functioning democracy, the authorities cannot influence the outcome of elections after citizens have already dropped their ballots in the ballot box. But things are a little different in Russia.

After the polls close on Sunday, the authorities will be faced with a difficult choice: Which results should they announce? In the State Duma elections on Dec. 4, electoral fraud was not confined to ballot box-stuffing.

In many cases, the Central Elections Commission announced results in favor of United Russia, whose official leader is Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, that were significantly higher than those listed in the protocols signed by election observers. Such electoral sleight of hand would not have been possible without permission from regional governors, mayors or the federal level.

Based on a comparison of random samplings by the Citizen Observer group and other independent observers at Moscow polling stations, the authorities inflated United Russia's results by 11 percentage points during the Dec. 4 elections. It would be logical to expect a similar stunt with Sunday's election. If this happens, it is all but certain that mass street protests will follow in the weeks and months after the vote.

In the past week, the country's leading polling organizations have issued one rosy forecast after another regarding Putin's chances of winning in the first round with more than 50 percent of the vote. But there are reasons to question the reliability of these polls. Thus, there is a real possibility that Putin will receive less than 50 percent without falsification.

If only 45 percent of the people vote for Putin and the authorities announce that he received 52 percent of the vote, the resulting protests will probably be relatively small. But if Putin receives only 35 percent to 40 percent of the vote but declares that he won 52 percent, the protests might be so large that the authorities would be forced to hold new elections.

That might sound implausible at first, but large-scale electoral fraud in favor of the incumbent leader followed by massive peaceful protests that resulted in new elections has played out in dozens of countries over the past quarter century.

The worse-case scenario would be if Putin receives only 25 percent to 30 percent of the vote but declares himself the winner with 52 percent. Given the current level of political activism, tens of millions of Russians — from ordinary citizens to senior state officials — would refuse to tolerate such blatant electoral fraud and Putin would find it impossible to govern the country. This could result in a serious political crisis on the same scale as what we saw during the Soviet collapse in 1991.

There will probably be less falsification in St. Petersburg and Moscow in an effort to limit damage where the anti-Putin protest sentiment is at its strongest. If so, Putin will likely get no more than 30 or 35 percent of the vote in these two cities, and this would probably mean a second round in the election. But if he keeps his hand out of the electoral cookie jar, he might manage to get into office without sparking a new round of protests.

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