

Protesters and Observers Make Russia Great

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By Konstantin Sonin

It has been said by both Russian and foreign observers that this country is not ready for full-fledged democracy, including free, fair and competitive elections. They cite the myth — and it is only a myth, no matter how strongly some Russians believe it — that democracy naturally results only when a country attains a given level of prosperity.

They also argue that Russians have little experience making political choices. That is true. But if Russians begin exercising that right now, in a few years they will have overcome the problem. I became convinced of this after the March 4 presidential election.

"Carousel voting," administrative pressure, removal of observers from polling stations, ballot stuffing and falsification of the vote tallies are the kind of tricks that people who are determined to stay in power at any price have used since time immemorial. But these manipulations are impossible in countries where the people refuse to tolerate them.

The best way to put an end to carousels and other election fraud is for thousands of citizens to spend their time, energy and money to photograph carousel participants in the act, grab dishonest local elections committee members by the arm, and turn out for rallies and street demonstrations.

On March 4, I saw with my own eyes that there are thousands of people who were willing to spend their time and energy to guarantee that the vote is counted honestly. University students and professors from top-ranked departments, editors of prominent newspapers and magazines, well-known authors and popular television anchors, executives from the country's largest companies and simply ordinary citizens worked to ensure that the vote was counted honestly and that the people had freedom of choice.

I am always amused when somebody says former U.S. President Ronald Reagan or former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher "defeated communism." What could be more stupid than that?

It was the people who made Russia a free country 20 years ago. At that time tens of thousands of citizens also took part in rallies and protests, took off from work to get involved in politics, and went door-to-door to convince their neighbors to vote against the party bosses and the entrenched authoritarian regime.

It is not their fault that the hardened Communist leaders who were in power were willing to destroy their own country instead of giving up power peacefully in the late perestroika period. Those who were unafraid to join the rallies in 1989 and who in 1991 faced down the tanks deployed by leaders prepared to hold onto power at all costs were the brave ones who gave Russians new freedoms.

Those who claim that this country is unable to choose its next leader do not consider Russia a great country. Tens of thousands of citizens gathered on Pushkin Square in central Moscow not because they like or don't like a particular politician, but because they want the president to be someone who was elected honestly and according to the law. They are the ones who see Russia as a great country, and they are the ones who want more freedoms.

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