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Russia

Elections in Russia: Outcome and Perspectives

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Parliamentary elections were held in Russia on 17-19 September. They were accompanied by unprecedented fraud and intimidation. Despite all the efforts of grassroots activists, Vladimir Putin's "United Russia" party retained a constitutional majority in the State Duma (Russian parliament). This means that "United Russia" does not need to enter into a coalition with other parties to pass the laws the regime needs. The Russian people expect another 5 years of intensified state repression and the continuation of austerity policies.

What changes, albeit insignificant at this stage, did the elections bring? And what should we do now? To answer these questions, let's go back to the beginning of the campaign.

On 6 June an important event took place in Moscow, the nomination of Mikhail Lobanov, a candidate for the elections to the State Duma in 2021. Mikhail Lobanov is a democratic socialist and trade union leader. His main agenda is protecting parks and forests from the construction business, building a high-quality and affordable education and healthcare system, increasing pensions and the minimum wage, lowering the retirement age, and defending civil rights and freedoms.

The Russian Socialist Movement, which includes a group of members of the Fourth International, actively supported Lobanov's nomination. We agitated residents of the district where Mikhail was nominated, put stickers, and distributed our newspapers and leaflets. All the money that had to be spent for the purposes of this campaign was donated to Lobanov by ordinary voters.

Despite the fact that Lobanov is not a member of any party, he was nominated by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). Mikhail agreed to this for several reasons. Firstly, self-nomination would require him to collect about 15,000 signatures from voters in his constituency, which was practically impossible for a number of bureaucratic reasons. Secondly, the election from the CPRF made it easier for Mikhail to appeal to people who pin their hopes on this party. These were both people who supported the Communists for their socio-economic program and people who voted for the Communist Party because they represented the most effective alternative to "United Russia".

In the absence of developed parliamentarism in Russia, voters had to vote not for the most politically suitable candidate, but for the one who could defeat the candidate from "United Russia". The flagship of this method was so-called "Smart Voting", invented by political prisoner Alexei Navalny and his team. A few days before the elections, "Smart Voting" web-site and application published a list of recommended candidates, including Mikhail Lobanov. Despite the fact that Alexei Navalny is a former right populist, most of the recommended candidates came from the CP. That is why a paradoxical situation has developed in Russia, when people positioning themselves as liberals voted for the communists in these elections.

In 2019, thanks to "Smart Voting" by the Moscow City Duma for 25 deputies, supported by "United Russia", 20 opposition deputies were elected. Therefore, focusing on the opposition mood, the authorities resorted to falsifications through the electronic voting system.

"United Russia" members, striving to stay in power, have done everything possible to retain the majority of votes in parliament. More than 5,000 violations were recorded, but I am going to describe in detail only one example of the shameless policy of the authorities.

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In St. Petersburg, a candidate for the city's Legislative Assembly was Boris Vishnevsky, a member of the liberal "Yabloko" party. Two more candidates have registered as candidates in his constituency. Their names were ... Boris Vishnevsky and ... Boris Vishnevsky. These were two pro-Kremlin candidates, Aleksey Shmelev and Viktor Bykov, who changed their names and appearance shortly before the elections. Distinguishing the opposition candidate from his "spoilers" was almost impossible. And after the elections, on September 22, when the real Boris Vishnevsky went to complain about numerous violations, he was beaten right near the city district administration, and among the attackers were other candidates.

During the voting there were attacks on observers, there were pens with disappearing ink given to voters, and at some polling stations the observation cameras were "suddenly" shut down. In the city of Cheboksary, the chairman of the commission even ate the list of voters to cover up his violation.

And even in such conditions, "United Russia" lost 19 seats in parliament, and the Communist Party won 15 more seats than in the previous elections. You can even notice small changes in people's moods, they are slowly shifting to the left. Thus, the far-right populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia lost 18 seats in the State Duma, and the center-left "A Just Russia — For Truth" received 4 additional mandates.

It is also obvious that people can turn not only to the left as an alternative, but also to liberal ideas. At the same time, they see that the old liberal parties do not help them in solving social problems, and are looking for new formations to express their opinions. Thus, it became a sensation that for the first time since 2007, not four, but five parties passed to the State Duma - the new party was the "New People" (which, however, was accused of having an obvious connection with the Kremlin). However, the success of the party can be attributed not so much to affiliation with the authorities, as to the abundance of street agitation. But the old liberal "Yabloko" party won only 1.34% of the vote, due to the fact that party leader Grigory Yavlinsky urged supporters of the "Smart Voting" not to vote for "Yabloko".

For the first time since 2003, "United Russia" won not all regions of Russia. In the Khabarovsk Area, Sakha-Yakutia, Mari El and the Nenets Autonomous Area, more people voted for the CP than for Putin's party. In most of these regions, there were people's discontent and bright leaders who became points of attraction for the dissatisfied. This means that there is a prospect for the growth of organized protest not only in the large cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also in the "periphery".

In order to achieve the victory of Mikhail Lobanov and prevent numerous violations, observers of the candidate were present at most polling stations. This allowed Lobanov to win by 10,851 votes!

But, unfortunately, none of the grassroots activists could influence the electronic voting, which was organized in 6 regions of Russia. If you live, for example, in Moscow and you have a right to vote, then you can choose how to do it, traditionally or electronically. Many workers in state and municipal enterprises complained that their directors forced them, under a threat of firing, to write a statement of their "desire" to vote electronically. It seems that no one was forced to vote for specific candidates. However, there is no independent way to verify the results of electronic voting. The authorities simply announce the result to us.

On 19 September opposition candidates, including Mikhail Lobanov, won in 9 out of 15 Moscow districts by the results of traditional voting. However, on 20 September the authorities announced the results of the electronic voting. It "turned out" that the elections in Moscow were won exclusively by the candidates from the authorities! Mikhail Lobanov and 8 other opposition candidates "lost", but they "lost" because the authorities apparently rigged the results of the electronic voting.

On the same day, 20 September, in the center of Moscow, the Communist Party organized a rally, which was

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attended by several hundred people. This is a lot, given that the event was announced several hours in advance, it was a working day and it was raining. At this rally, the CPRF announced that it does not recognize the results of electronic voting and is fighting for those candidates who honestly won the elections to become deputies.

When Mikhail Lobanov spoke, the crowd chanted: "Lobanov! Lobanov!" Our candidate announced: "During these months we have proven that we were capable of many things. A movement arose that destroyed the expectations of the Russian authorities. We have seen people vote against the egregious inequality that is tearing our country apart. They voted against inequality, in which a pitiful handful of rich people have everything."

Lobanov did not forget to mention the need to build a grassroots movement: "Real politics is not only about elections. Real politics is about a struggle in our universities, in our neighborhoods, in our districts. This is a struggle in our enterprises for our common interests. And we will continue this struggle. We have become stronger, and, therefore, we are able to achieve more."

Not all of those present at the rally supported the communists with all their hearts, so Mikhail announced from the stage: "I believe that it is my duty as a candidate, for whom people with different views and positions voted, to defend what unites us. The first is the struggle against political and economic inequality. The second is the fight against political and other repressions. I urge all candidates to unite and come up with common demands."

On social networks, rallies have already been announced on 23 and 25 September, where people can gather and demand the abolition of electronic voting. Frightened by a possible increase in popular discontent, the authorities have already announced that they will revise the results of electronic voting (albeit, having warned that this revision will not have legal force).

It should be borne in mind that e-voting is only one of the myriad ways to rig elections. Independent analysts point that the authorities could have faked more than 13 million votes, which is 30 per cent of the total number of voters. The Central Election Commission will announce the final results of the elections on 24 September. However, the real outcome of events depends on whether opposition candidates, grassroots activists and ordinary Russians will be able to take to the streets and demand that the real, and not fake, election results be recognized.

22 September 2021

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