The Russian Establishment Takes a Hit

Unexpected Results from the September 2013 Elections

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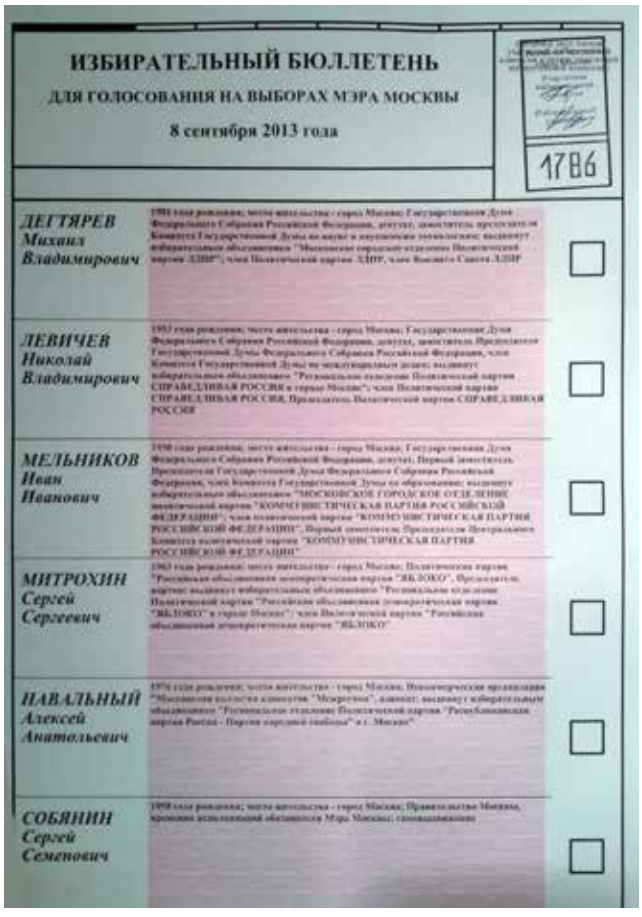
In evaluating the results of the September elections, we should take into greater account the specificity of the political regimes in post-Soviet countries, which just *pretend* to resemble modern constitutional states. These are regimes that Max Weber called "patrimonial," and Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba termed "pre-civil," meaning a state in which the population is not involved or only very passively involved in the formation of policy. The role of the authoritarian leader is much greater in such societies than in Western democracies where the law plays a more important role. This is especially true for patrimonial societies, which Weber referred to as "sultanic," similar to the regimes in Central Asia and Chechnya. One distinguishing feature of patrimonial regimes is the huge role played by rituals. Even elections have a ritualistic significance there rather than a rational or pragmatic purpose. However, completely ritualistic elections and public policy is more typical for the eastern patrimonial "sultanic" regimes. In such regimes, instead of political struggles there are struggles among the clan leaders to be closest to the "Sultan" figure. For the foreseeable future it is unimaginable that an oppositional politician could come to power (at any level —local, regional or national) in, for example, Kazakhstan on the sole grounds that the candidate won the election. All of Nazarbayev's real competitors, candidates for the presidency of Kazakhstan, died unexpectedly, except for those who emigrated in time, like the "Sultan's" former son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev or the former prime minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin. After these lessons, no one has voiced any ambitions to be president; everyone is waiting for the "Sultan" to choose a successor.

In Russia, the situation is different now, and the September 2013 elections demonstrated this. In Yekaterinburg, Yevgeny Roizman, a well-known opposition politician and one of the leaders of the billionaire Prokhorov's *Grazhdanskaya platforma* (Civic Platform) Party, won unexpectedly and is now mayor. In Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia, the previously unknown Galina Shirshina, won with her own, independent campaign which was extremely critical of the administration in Karelia. Another big surprise was the result of the Moscow mayoral elections, where prominent opposition politician Alexei Navalny came in second with 27.3% of the vote and

far ahead of the other candidates. The current mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, won with only 51.4 % of the vote, which by Russian political standards is an almost shameful result.

The Russian model of self-preservation of the political elite differs from Kazakhstan's. *In Russia, power is not used as much to mobilize the population around the father figure of the nation, as it is in Kazakhstan, but just the opposite – it is used to demobilize the majority of the population and encourage political passivity*. In the face of such passivity, until recently it was easy for Russian authorities to falsify election results as well as the voter turnout. However, in recent years, this political model in Russia is increasingly in crisis. There were unprecedented mass protests in Moscow in 2011 and early 2012. By the end of 2012, the government seemed to have completely suppressed them. However, in reality, the protest spirit in major Russian cities was not crushed. The protest changed in its form, and after several demonstrations of general discontent with the political system, it transformed into riots against migrants. If in Egypt or Tunisia politicians often rally their base around religious issues, in Russia politicians use ethnicity to unify their supporters.

Regardless, the Russian political elite understands the precariousness of its situation and is trying to find new means of self-preservation under the new conditions. After a period of using the political stick and increased repression, the authorities decided in 2013 to use the carrot for a change, and allowed relatively free elections to take place in some regions. This explains the results in Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk and Moscow. It might seem that in other regions of Russia, the traditional model of ritual elections was preserved, and representatives of the ruling party had implausibly large victories in September 2013, but it is not as simple as that. Unexpectedly for many, for the first time in several years these results led to protests in the Russian provinces. Since Putin came to power, the provinces had been completely passive, whereas now in the Yaroslavl region, five opposition parties signed a memorandum declaring the election results of September 8



rigged. In Volgograd, not only did all the parties represented in Duma, including the Communists, protest the election fraud, but there were also spontaneous riots in the streets. On September 10, demonstrators blocked the central avenue of Volgograd, which until recently was one of the most conservative cities in Russia.

In the south of Russia, for example in the Republic of Kalmykia, there were not any protests of note, and in the September elections "United Russia" maintained its dominating role in the local parliament (Narodniy Khural). "United Russia" received two thirds of the mandate, but for the first time, 9 seats, or 30%, went to the opposition. They went not only to Communist candidates, who were already in the Khural, but also to members of Prokhorov's entirely new liberal party "Civic Platform" and members of "Patriots of Russia," which has much in common with Russian nationalist parties. Until recently Kalmykia was considered completely politically passive and subordinate to one person (Kirsan Illyumzhinov), just as Chechnya is to Kadyrov and Kazakhstan to Nazarbayev. But now a multi-party parliament has emerged in the republic — this is quite an event — and a clear sign of changes in Russia.

But in the neighboring region of Astrakhan, there was less change. In September, they held elections for the City Duma of Astrakhan, which were carried out according to the traditional model and provided a complete victory to the party in power. However, there was one novelty — there was unprecedented low voter turnout. In some areas of the city, turnout was only 16-18% of those registered. We can say that people voted with their feet against all candidates from all parties. And this, in my opinion, better reflects the will of the people than the elections for the Parliament of the Chechen Republic, for which voter turnout on September 8 was 92%, and "United Russia" garnered 85% of the vote. The Chechen Republic still sets the bar in Russia for "managed democracy."

In the Stavropol and Krasnodar regions the September elections were only held for certain city and village councils. Their legislatures were elected earlier this year. It's important to note that at the time (July 2013), a very popular party in Stavropol oblast', the Russian nationalist party "Novaya Sila" (New Force), was not allowed to partake in the elections. However, the party in power began to incorporate its ideas. Just during the September elections, the Pyatigorsk city government, which is the administrative center of the North Caucasus Federal District, demanded the demolition of a mosque, which "Novaya Sila" had previously insisted upon. The current administration, in this city and elsewhere, wants to rely on Russian nationalism to strengthen its faltering legitimacy. Other political forces in Russia are drifting toward Russian nationalism as well.

WHAT ARE THE POLITICAL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE SEPTEMBER ELECTIONS?

Firstly, they demonstrated the growing crisis for the authorities, and that the crisis is growing more apparent not only to experts, but to the general population.

Secondly, it has become noticeable that the atmosphere of protest is spreading from the capital out into the regions.

Thirdly, the political opposition has acquired an obvious leader – Alexei Navalny.

If Gorbachev and Yeltsin were products of the Soviet party nomenclature, then Navalny is a politician of the post-Soviet era, who bears no responsibility for the sins of the Soviet Union or for the difficult 1990s. He is a talented public politician and a fabulous orator. After more than a decade of rule by Putin's faceless bureaucrats filling the daily news, a new figure has appeared in the Russian media. His eye-catching Aryan appearance, his ironic wit, and aphoristic speeches have revived Russia and its cultural centers, which had grown weary of public politics. Public opinion surveys show that Navalny's popularity and visibility are growing rapidly, which distinguishes the bright young politician. However, some of his qualities frighten people, including some members of the opposition:

1. The reappearance of 'leaderism,' and the cult of personality. It is difficult to say whether or not it is possible, in modern Russia, to create an opposition movement that is attractive for its goals and program alone without the support of a strong personality. For example, the program of the representative of the party "Apple," Sergei Mitrokhin, should have appealed more to the liberal electorate than that of Navalny. But it is completely clear that today, the public hungers not for ideas, but for charismatic leaders. For this reason, Navalny's followers are attracted to his personality rather than his ideas. In any case, this politician is turning the so-called "non-system" opposition into the "movement of Navalny," while normal opposition institutions in Russia stumble. As one observer noted, "The Russian opposition has turned into the Alexei Navalny Show."

2. In political terms, Navalny is a populist — a mixture of a xenophobe and a liberal. In the election, he received support from both liberals and Russian nationalists. Not that long ago, such a situation would have seemed implausible. Liberals, standing up for the rule of law and human rights, were the enemies of the nationalists, who for their own part, hated liberals as conduits of Western ideas and defenders of ethnic and religious minorities. Now, the shift of those who called themselves "Russian liberals" towards nationalism has become a visible trend. If Navalny openly demonstrates Caucasus-phobia and Islamophobia, then a different figure

in these elections, Evgeniy Roizman, goes further and combines these phobias with a deep hatred towards Roma. Yet another well-known liberal politician, Vladimir Milov, is actively drifting in the direction of xenophobia and supporting Russian nationalism. This is all, in my opinion, dangerous, insofar as a growth in the popularity of Russian nationalism intensifies the retaliatory nationalism of minorities and their religious consolidation, especially in the Islamic regions of the North Caucasus. The terrorist organization *Caucasus Emirate* is well aware of this fact. In 2012, its leader, Doku Umarov, announced a moratorium on terrorist attacks against civilians in Russian cities after the mass protests by the opposition against the federal forces, but in the beginning of 2013 he announced the annulment of this moratorium. After the elections showed a boom in Russian nationalism, the danger of a new rise of terrorism has grown.

3. Acknowledging European values – freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and the freedom to travel to the West – Navalny's followers are increasingly viewing European elites as complicit in the raiding of Russia as stolen billions are now reliably stored away in foreign property. Just like Putin supporters, they are sick of Europe's sermons and Americans' double standards and deception. Navalny supports imperial goals in Russia's foreign policy; he feels that Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine should be united once more to form one great state. He passionately supports the 'independent' states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, created by Russia after they were annexed from Georgia in the course of the 2008 war. He is even prepared to recognize the independence of Transnistria – the Russian enclave in Moldova. With statements such as these, it is clear why his foreign policy views can cause alarm in the West.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN RUSSIA AFTER THE SEPTEMBER ELECTIONS?

Theoretically, there are two scenarios:

1. **Political reform from the top down**. In this case, the leadership expands the scope of freedoms, guaranteeing free elections on all levels, and supporting the engagement of the populace in governance and political life, thus retaking the initiative from the liberal-nationalist Russian opposition. I consider this the best option for Russia, but extremely unlikely, particularly after the September elections. These elections demonstrated to the authorities that, in those regions where they showed liberalism and provided greater freedom for grassroots political activity, they either lost completely, as in Yekaterinburg and Petrozavodsk, or won with an uncomfortably narrow margin, as in Moscow. The recent elections will, most likely,

strengthen the position of the conservatives, who would like to install a regime in Russia similar to that in Kazakhstan. These elections reinforce their belief that they must not show any weakness and that oppositional unrest must be quelled with repression. But believing in the effectiveness of such a strategy is delusional – attempts to carry it out would only hasten the system's failure and increase the likeliness of another scenario that is hardly dependent on the authorities.

2. **Political change from below. Revolution.** Now that the opposition has a thoroughly articulate leader, who is ready for battle, the likelihood of radical measures has increased. This scenario would occur even if Navalny is sent to prison to serve his 5-year term, sentenced by the Kirov Court. Revolution, of course, is not inevitable, but one cannot ignore the possibility.