

Direct Elections Won't Help Russia's Opposition

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One of the few things the mass protests in the winter of 2011-12 achieved was the return of direct elections for State Duma deputies representing single-member districts. They will be held in September 2016, and half of the parliamentary deputies (225) will, for the first time in 13 years, be elected by specific cities and regions. The winners in each of these 225 districts will be the candidates who receive more votes than any of their opponents.

Parliamentary parties, non-parliamentary opposition groups and the Kremlin are already hard at work in preparation for these elections. A foundation with ties to the Kremlin, the Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research (ISEPR), recently released its forecast for the elections, working from the current composition of the Duma.

This ISEPR report ("Acting State Duma Deputies in their Districts — 2016") is important and noteworthy, not only as an expert study, but as a formative one. The parties, candidates and regional elites themselves, knowing ISEPR's relationship with the presidential administration, will reach practical conclusions about the current internal political path of the

federal government, and about what directives will be given to the governors regarding the Duma elections of the coming year.

It's interesting, first, that the Kremlin is preparing for a significant change in the body of the Duma. According to ISEPR, there are no obvious favorites from among acting deputies in about 40-50 percent of the single-member districts, and this means that 100 or more new politicians may be elected to the Duma in these districts.

The institute predicts that only 148 of the 450 current deputies have the authority and connections necessary to achieve victory in these territories. All the rest will try to get into the Duma the easier way — through a place on a party list. But taking into account this unavoidable turnover, even the remaining Duma seats chosen through party voting could lose up to 200 acting deputies, and go to new members.

The parliament saw this kind of significant change in the last elections of December 2011 (202 new deputies, or about 45 percent). This major rotation of seats is beneficial to the Kremlin, helping to ensure that parliamentarians are more loyal to and dependent on the executive branch. It also lowers the political status and weakens the political influence of the Duma, which always sees political newcomers prevailing as a result of major turnover.

Second, it's clear from the report that the Kremlin is quite satisfied with the current loyal, four-party structure of the Duma. All four received equally high ratings in the report (in addition to United Russia, the ruling party, those are the Communist Party, LDPR, and A Just Russia.) The authors foresee excellent chances for each to form a faction in the seventh Duma, as well as to get a number of candidates elected in single-member districts.

They have a total of 148 promising deputy candidates, including 81 from United Russia, 26 from the Communist Party, 25 from A Just Russia, and 12 from LDPR. This assessment sends a clear signal to regional authorities: they will need to create favorable conditions for the four parliamentary parties and their candidates. What is more, these 148 candidates are named in the report, so the governors don't get them mixed up, and know whom they should support, or, at the very least, not oppose.

Third, the objective of legitimizing Duma elections and the future Duma will be achieved in part through wins by representatives from non-parliamentary parties in single-member districts, including some current deputies. ISEPR found 10 deputies who, were they to return to the Duma through direct election, could represent such parties as The Workers' Party of Russia, Rodina (Motherland), Automotive Russia, National Liberation Movement, Russian Party of Pensioners for Justice, and others.

So formally, the new parliament may not consist of four parties, but of 10 or 11, and can be said to have increased "democracy and pluralism."

Fourth, the report practically recommends that the four parliamentary parties reach a coalition agreement to divide the single-member districts among themselves, to prevent the accidental victory of a dark horse or "third force." The experience of recent years leaves little doubt that the presidential administration itself will take on the role of intermediary and leader in brokering this "package deal," to reduce the risk of unsanctioned victories and defeats as much as possible.

Fifth, ISEPR expects an increase in the total number of seats held by the ruling United Russia party (today, it has 238 deputies, or a little more than 50 percent of seats). This is due to the current high popularity enjoyed by President Vladimir Putin and the party itself.

This prediction will also send a signal to governors that they should use all their political and administrative abilities to avoid ending up "worse than their neighbors" after the votes are counted. Most likely, as before, the governors will receive an unofficial "target number" of votes for United Russia — probably in the region of 55 percent, as well as an approved list of expected (desirable) winners in single-member districts.

The parliament in place today, working from a foundation of loyalty to Putin and the nationalistic-paternalistic consensus, suits the Kremlin perfectly. Therefore, the coming elections will be no less under the management and control of the authorities than previous ones.

The strong resistance that opposition candidates from outside the system encountered in regional elections this year (for example, the refusal to register the Parnas opposition party in Novosibirsk elections), vividly attests to this policy.

Despite the return of direct elections in single-member districts and the promise of competitive and legitimate elections, it will be no easier than in previous years for true opposition candidates to achieve victory.

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