

5 Lessons From Russia's Local Elections (Op-ed)

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Alexei Druzhinin / Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / TASS

Russians went to the polls on Sept. 10 in elections for different levels of government.

There were 5,810 election campaigns and 242 local referendums in all but three of the country's 85 regions. Voters also elected 16 governors, six regional parliaments, two new State Duma deputies, 13 City Dumas and 125 Moscow district municipal legislatures.

Here are several general lessons we can take away from the vote:

– Low Turnout Means High Risks

Generally, the administrative policy throughout was to tightly control the gubernatorial and mayoral elections, where turnout is seen as key to the legitimacy of the outcome.

Where it concerned the election of collective bodies — regional or local legislatures — there

was a greater chance of participation, with local legislatures largely left to fare for themselves. That is, if turnout was not directly suppressed, as was the case in Moscow.

There, the authorities deliberately tried to keep the turnout low, and attract to the polls the electorate which they more or less control — state employees, housing and communal services workers, the military and pensioners.

They do this because a high turnout is seen as unpredictable. It also makes it more difficult to falsify the outcome.

To keep Muscovites away from polling stations, the authorities had several tactics — failing to inform voters that elections were happening at all, keeping mum on the location of polling stations or destroying campaign leaflets and posters.

The annual City Day celebrations, which are usually held on the first Sunday in September, this year were moved to election day. The idea was: whoever stayed in town for the weekend, would rather celebrate than vote.

Despite those precautions, the outcome of the Sept. 10 vote showed that a low turnout can be unpredictable, too.

The result of all of the authorities' politicking was that the only people who did show up were one of two types: the administration-controlled voters, as intended, or highly motivated, so-called “angry citizens.”

The outcome? The authorities lost control over 28 of Moscow's 125 municipal councils, including almost all the central and some of the northern and south-western districts.

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Moscow now has an “arc of protest,” named after the shape the opposition-controlled councils make on the map.

– The Appeal of the New

The authorities have a range of instruments at their disposal to keep control over the elections, ranging from funding certain media and campaigns, to using law enforcement to exert pressure on activists and volunteers and tinkering with the final results.

All of these are excellent tools, but the main obstacle to competitive elections in Russia is still the participation barrier.

Existing legislation favors “systemic” parties that are already in government and incumbents. The rule is: “Once you're in, we help you stay in.”

This technique is meant to preserve the status quo. But it comes with its own risks.

With none of the parliamentary parties seen a meaningful alternative to the ruling United Russia party, people lacked an incentive to vote for them. You might as well vote for United

Russia itself, or cast a protest vote, they think.

As a result, the parliamentary parties — the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party and A Just Russia — lost ground compared to earlier elections in 2012 and 2016 throughout Russia.

New faces did much better. Dmitry Gudkov's United Democrats triumphed in Moscow and the liberal opposition party Yabloko won 8.5 percent of seats in the Pskov City Duma elections.

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Those who were successful didn't necessarily need to be liberal or "democratic," as long as the candidates were seen as new and in opposition to the status quo.

For example, the Russian Party of Pensioners for Justice outnumbered the parliamentary A Just Russia Party in Vladivostok. The Rodina Party did well in Tver, and candidates from the Libertarian Party defeated United Russia in city council by-elections in Pushkino in the Moscow region.

– No Nationalism

Interestingly, there was a complete absence of nationalist grassroots movements. There is no "Russia Is for Russians" movement. Neither is it possible to imagine a regional party being hijacked by a group of radical churchgoers who see it as a vehicle to political power — no matter how much such rhetoric appears to dominate the headlines.

Nationalists usually cite police repression as a reason for their absence from the formal political process. But the lack of nationalistic rhetoric in local elections also says something about Russians' state of mind.

This shows that, while there is an undefined sense of patriotism and anti-Americanism, which comes to the surface around specific political issues from time to time, it is mostly background noise and lacks a broader political appeal.

– Local Victories Matter

Moscow municipal deputies and Pskov City Duma members don't have much power, since real power is vested in the executive.

But neither is their influence negligible. Municipal deputies are given a platform and access to information. They can heckle the authorities, ask questions and demand answers, talk to the electorate and expose local bureaucracy, which is used to operating in silence and obscurity.

Municipal deputies, even if they come from the opposition, become part of this bureaucracy, entitling them to some of the status and respect the position entails.

It is one thing to be an opposition activist on the street, but it is quite another to be chair of the district municipal council. Some of the new deputies will undoubtedly fall prey to the

temptations of power, but others will use their positions to give political weight to their original agenda.

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– The Allure of Victory

More importantly, the local victories matter because of their symbolic value.

Winning in central Moscow, on the Kremlin's watch — and in the district where President Vladimir Putin himself cast his vote — emanates victory.

It's a misconception that Russians don't participate in elections because they are afraid. In fact, there are no risks attached to voting, and even attending a protest rally, as long as it's been approved by authorities, is mostly risk-free.

Much more importantly, people don't want to back a losing horse. They'd much rather back a winner.

For Russia's successful opposition candidates, breaking this tradition of failure will bring more benefits than the actual prize.

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