Elections in Russia – a measure for nothing or relevant after all?

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Russians go to the ballot box on 17 to 19 September. Most commentators consider the election as a non- event as all indicators point to the continuation of the present regime. Although major shifts in the parliamentary set up are unlikely it can be argued that small changes are not necessarily insignificant. Even though the present regime has made the emergence of significant opposition close to impossible, the changes in Russian society cannot but manifest itself in the election results. Even small changes may have an impact on the Kremlin balance of power. Some elements of analysis:

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- Russia is not a one-man dictatorship. Within the Kremlin power structure various interest groups are represented: siloviki and oligarchs, more liberal and more

conservative elements etc. President Putin has the last word in deciding on compromise decision making that requires the rallying of all groups once the decision is taken (remember that old soviet principle of "democratic centralism"?). The compromise reached will depend on the relative strength of the various interest groups. A change in the composition of the Duma will affect parliamentary decision making but even more the balance of power in the Kremlin leadership. Although of lesser importance than in the West, public opinion and changes in public opinion (i.a. as revealed in the popular vote) is a non negligeable element of the Russian political life.

- Where do possible swings in public opinion come from? To begin with, the Yeltsin decade with its freedom verging upon chaos has shaken the centuries old authoritarianism of the Russian socio-political system and to a certain extent forced people to think for themselves. The Putin stabilisation (restauration?) has not eradicated the positive and negative collective memories of the 1990s. The economic growth of the first decade of the 21st century has given rise to a new phenomenon in Russian society: the emergence of a middle class, caring about their own economic status and perspectives and not eager to leave their destiny to an allegedly corrupt, self-serving, and incompetent leadership that has not lived up to its initial promise of ever-growing welfare. The recent erosion of welfare, inflation, change in the pension arrangement, the messy handling of the covid crisis has more widely (beyond the middle class) affected the average Russian's perception of government. A new (demographic) evolution has recently impacted the political scene in all urban centres in Russia: the emergence of a vocal group of youngsters that have never known (directly or indirectly) the totalitarian Soviet regime and demonstrated against corruption and the various forms of curtailing of freedom. The regime may be losing its youth: protesting youngsters have replaced the Nashi-youngsters of a decade ago. Navalny was the catalyser of this movement and although not a majority of Russians were supporting his action, the impact was strong enough to make a significant dent in the existing power arrangements with a possible danger of provoking a snowball effect.
- Navalny had to be eliminated because for the first time the opposition had a credible "face": a charismatic leader with a rallying theme (anti-corruption) an anti-corruption foundation (FBK) and a pragmatic electoral tactic: smart voting. The Kremlin acted swiftly and decisively. The handling of opposition movements was taken out of the hands of the "political technologists" that in the past have been able to dismantle emerging opposition movements and was handed over to the siloviki that acted with ruthless efficiency. They proceeded to the elimination of Navalny and all his immediate collaborators, the expansion of the list of people that cannot be put on an election list (because of previous misdemeanours), the closing down of critical news outlets, the extension of the list of "foreign agents" (organisations and journalists/activists critical of government), depriving Russians (and in particular youngsters) of independent sources

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of information. However, the internet is not completely closed off (like in China) and Russians still have access to independent (i.a. western) internet sites.

How will all this influence the voting and the outcome of the elections? The attempted suppression of all critical voices will certainly diminish the strength of opposition votes, but it will not completely eliminate them.

- The present Duma is dominated by United Russia let by the Putin faithful Minister Sergey Shoiga (76 % pf the seats) and supported by the three "systemic" opposition parties: the conservative left Communist Party led by Gennady Zyuganov (9,3 %of the seats), the populist ultranationalist (not using a stronger adjective) Liberal Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovski (8,6 % of the seats) and the centre left Just Russia party led by Sergey Mironov (5,1 %of the seats). This leaves hardly any place for real opposition parties (3 seats out of 450) and allows the Kremlin to pass any legislation including constitutional changes.
- Where will the 2021 election lead Russia? Fully aware of the limitations of interpreting opinion polls, they are the only source of information and handled with care they can yield some interesting possible tendencies.
    - United Russia's popularity has been affected by the reduction in living standards, reform of the pension system and some successful citizens protest (against the removal of a popular governor in Khabarovsk e.g.) Whereas in the last election they had a score of about 50 %, some independent pollsters put the United Russia score down to 30 %.
    - Smart voting aiding, the score of the systemic opposition goes up in the polls. In particular, a stronger presence of the Communist Party (according to some polls, moving up from 13% to 18 % of the vote) could have an impact on the power balance, also in the Kremlin. Moreover, some individual Communist politicians have been openly criticizing the government, including for its repressive actions against opposition voices.
    - Apart from a shift within the systemic opposition, there is a new vigour in the real opposition parties: the veteran centre right liberal party Yabloko is credited with a 50 % increase of its score (modest though to 3 % of the votes). The Greens quadruple their score to 2,5 %, and interestingly, a new liberal party, "New People", focussing on the entrepreneurial middle class (but not exclusively) has appeared on the pollsters' score board with an amazing more than 5 % of the votes. Is the liberal opposition (blamed for everything that went wrong in the Yeltsin-days) resurrecting from its ashes after being annihilated in the early 2000s?

    These (marginal) shifts are significant in themselves and will certainly not pass unnoticed in the Kremlin circles. However, their impact in terms of Duma representation will be damped because of the mixed electoral system in Russia.

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Half the 450 Duma seats are elected on a federal proportional representation system and half on the basis of a "first past the post" (majoritarian) single constituency system. In the present Duma, elected in 2016, United Russia translated its 55 % of the vote of the proportional federal system into a 60% of the seats (140/225). In the majoritarian single constituencies, its 50 % of the votes translated in 90 % of the seats (203/225), giving United Russia a comfortable 76 % of the seats in the Duma (343/450). To protect United Russia from further erosion of the number of seats, recently the Duma has decided to transfer 15 seats from the proportional to the single constituency system. The bias of the majoritarian system is almost certain to guarantee United Russia a majority in the Duma.

Conclusion

No major changes can be expected from the upcoming elections in Russia: Putin will remain solidly in power. However, the relative strength of the various actors within the Kremlin may be affected, even by small changes in the election results, indicating shifts in the public opinion, based on the deterioration of the socio-economic situation and the evolutions within Russian society. Some indicators will be important to watch:

- The participation rate in the election (in 2016: 48 %)
- The shifts between United Russia and the systemic parties as well as the strengthening of the non-systemic opposition parties in the Duma.
- The impact of the system-favourable bias in the single constituency part of the election and the reaction of systemic and non-systemic opposition and public opinion on this bias.
- The legitimacy of the result i.e. the degree of (perceived) electoral fraud (including the single constituency bias).

The reaction of the public opinion will reveal how much of a "democratic fibre" is left (or is developing) in Russian society. For foreign policy analysts it will be crucial to decode the comments from the Kremlin and the measures taken in the wake of the election in particular reshuffling of the government.

Even a complete status quo (what many observers predict) will be important to analyse. Either the societal changes in Russia are less important than some analysts argue, or the political system has shown a capacity for manipulation and resilience, overriding these socio-economic, cultural and demographic changes.

One way or the other, the upcoming elections are not an irrelevant event. They will be an important source of information about trends in Russian society and a basis for defining and refining Western foreign policy vis à vis Russia.

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