DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 22.09.2021 | Peer Teschendorf

Putin still sits firmly in the saddle

Dissatisfaction among the Russian population is growing. Nevertheless, voteres preferred to play it safe in the recent parliamentary elections

For the Russian leadership, stability is perhaps the most important objective. And so the results of the three-day election to the Russian parliament, the State Duma, testify to a certain uniformity. The victory of Vladimir Putin's 'United Russia' party was beyond doubt. Even if it wasn't as impressive as the previous one, it will probably be enough for a constitutional majority.

Nevertheless, there are small changes this time around.

The Communists (KPRF) are clearly much stronger. KPRF candidates were disproportionately represented on the lists of dissident Alexei Navalny's 'Smart Voting' campaign, which enabled them to gather additional protest votes. Probably more significant is, however, that they addressed the discontent of worsening social inequality, high inflation, and sluggish wage growth more effectively than anyone else. Moreover, the more traditional, conservative-patriotic party had recently succeeded in recruiting a number of young political talents with clear left-wing positions, which created an atmosphere of optimism.

There is also a new party in the Russian lower house. The parliamentary newcomers call themselves the 'New People'. It is one of the latest political start-ups that received registration rather quickly. These parties have the reputation of having been sent into the race by the Kremlin to soak up protest votes.

The real and the systemic opposition

Fundamental changes, however, are not taking place. The Duma elections also don't truly change the balance of power. The parliament is relatively weak in the Russian institutional structure. Even with a majority opposition, the president's power to shape the country would not be substantially threatened. Nevertheless, the parliamentary elections

fulfil an important function for the Kremlin: they are a symbol of the degree of popular support for the Kremlin's power – and hence provide legitimacy.

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This is precisely what Navalny's 'Smart Voting' campaign was aiming at, indicating for each district the candidate with the best chance of beating the candidate of Putin's United Russia party. In this way, the campaign circumvented the problem of the constantly divided opposition and created a possibility for effective protest voting.

At the same time, representatives of the systemic opposition also gathered support this way – parties that pretend to be in opposition but at important moments align themselves with the party in power. The only decisive factor in the campaign was whether a candidate would weaken the party in power.

Many of those who see themselves as the real opposition and actually want to shape policy were critical of this approach. Its emphasis loses sight of the fact that there are also opposition candidates with their own agendas who want to implement concrete projects for their respective regions and are less interested in the broad political lines. This also overlooks the fact that there are indeed deputies in the Duma who stand up for issues, initiate laws, and emphasise problems through their enquiries. If the election is reduced to the question 'Are you with power or against it?', these small successes of political work risk being lost.

The Kremlin's fear

Should the Kremlin fear this question at all? Hardly. After all, despite growing dissatisfaction with the party in power, a large section of the population continues to vote for 'United Russia'.

On the one hand, this is because of the large state quota among employees who are directly employed by the state or state-related companies, as well as those who depend on state benefits such as pensions or allowances.

On the other hand, these are people who would like anything but a repeat of the difficult 1990s. They would rather vote for somewhat bleak stability than an unknown future. There are also core voters who are satisfied with the status quo. For them, what counts is that the economy remains stable, Russia is once again a respected world power, and Crimea

has become part of Russia. Even if these people might not appreciate the United Russia party, they would still choose it because it stands for a strong state and the president's policies.

What is risky about this confrontation is that the elections are increasingly being reduced to the question: 'Are you with the state or against it?'

Despite this relative security, the Kremlin appeared very concerned about the results. Compared to previous elections, it demonstrated a disproportionate amount of effort to achieve the desired results. One reason for this pre-election anxiety is related to foreign policy, which dominates all political areas in Russia. The guiding principle of Russian foreign policy sees the country surrounded by enemies who prey on any vulnerabilities to destabilise Russia. This concern is voiced again and again by politicians. Many therefore see elections as a threat to stability. With the colour revolutions of the last decades and the current developments in Belarus, it is important, according to this logic, not to allow any ambiguities or protests that would give foreign powers the opportunity to interfere. The elections must therefore be conclusive.

This perspective explains the uncompromising fight against Navalny's 'Smart voting' campaign. Among the broad majority of the population, there is a great disinterest in politics. The activation of a small but active layer against the Kremlin's policies is therefore seen as a threat to the stability of the entire country.

What is risky about this confrontation is that the elections are increasingly being reduced to the question: 'Are you with the state or against it?' The political discourse on substantive alternatives, which already hardly takes place, thus becomes completely impossible. Moreover, an increasing friend-foe dynamic in elections is creating precisely the instability that is so feared in the Kremlin. It's a lively debate involving the extremely diverse opposition that would be its best antidote.



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