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A hollow victory for the Putin administration? > Russia's regional elections look set to deliver gains, but fresh problems too

Efforts to boost the legitimacy of September's 'showcase' Moscow mayoral election reveal growing indecision on the part of Russia's leadership.

On 8 September 2013, millions of Russians will go to the polls to elect regional leaders and legislatures as part of the 'unified voting day'. In total, there will be a little over 6,800 elections in many of Russia's regions, in what is one of the most significant events on the political calendar.

For opposition candidates, these once-a-year elections provide valuable experience ahead of the next State Duma election in 2016, but for the Putin administration they represent a priceless opportunity to restore the regime's faltering legitimacy in the wake of the disastrous December 2011 State Duma election that saw widespread falsification and some of the largest protests in Russia since the early 1990s.

Over the past 18 months, attempts to revamp electoral politics have included the return of direct elections for regional governors and the easing of registration requirements for political parties, and both will play their role in the current election cycle. If in December 2011, there were 7 parties registered to compete in the elections, then for September's elections there will be 54, the majority competing in their first-ever election campaign.

Gubernatorial elections will take place in 8 regions. However, it is the campaign for the post of Moscow

city mayor that continues to draw the most interest, not least for the intrigue it has already generated.

The main intrigue in this important and high-profile election has been the somewhat unusual circumstances surrounding the involvement of opposition leader Aleksei Navalny.

Navalny, a fierce critic of Putin, was registered as a candidate on 17 July, but only with the unexpected help of incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyenin, who instructed the Moscow branch of United Russia to collect the necessary signatures from municipal deputies on his behalf. On 18 July, just hours later, Navalny was found guilty of embezzlement by the Kirov regional court and sentenced to a five-year prison term.

If the case against him had more than a hint of political motivation, then his surprise release was purely political – on 19 July, the court granted Navalny temporary freedom, pending his appeal, on the grounds that he should be allowed to continue his election campaigning.

In short, the authorities have gone to great lengths to ensure that the Moscow mayoral election will deliver the kind of legitimacy the electoral process should deliver. Not only will Navalny's inclusion increase turnout, it will confer an air of genuine competition and provide

the perfect platform for realising an idea voiced by Vladimir Putin in the summer of 2012 – that the non-systemic opposition should compete in elections to see how little popular support they actually have.

While Navalny could well tap into the significant anti-Putin sentiment in Moscow and win second place, perhaps forcing a second round of voting, all indications are that acting mayor Sobyenin, a capable city manager, will win a comfortable victory and successfully conclude this 'showcase' election.

However, the Moscow mayoral election may have intrigue, but it also has a fair number of contradictions that point to growing indecision among Russia's leadership. Although the inclusion of Navalny adds a much-needed element of competition, it was the Kremlin that approved Sobyenin's snap decision in June to call this election two years early, de facto reducing competition by leaving opposition candidates little time to organise their campaigns.

In a similar way, the inclusion of Navalny may increase turnout. Yet it was the Kremlin that approved the decision taken in 2012 to hold all regional elections on one day in early September, instead of the previous twice yearly elections held in March and October – despite warnings that

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summer holidays would lessen the effect of election campaigns and reduce turnout.

Likewise, Navalny's participation in the Moscow mayoral election may satisfy Putin's wish that opposition figures see the true extent of their electoral support, but the authorities seem unsure whether they want to let Navalny compete in elections or remove him from the political field altogether. In the end, this indecision has resulted in the worst possible outcome of giving him a platform and raising his profile, before a very probable stint in jail.

Even if Navalny's appeal is successful, it seems unlikely he will avoid a prison term. In the period 2012-13, five criminal investigations were launched against him, including three more embezzlement investigations, and any conviction will automatically bar him from holding public office in the future. Overall, there is a real risk that the handling of the Navalny affair will further radicalise segments of the opposition.

The result is that September's regional elections look set to deliver a hollow victory for the Putin administration. The extraordinary efforts taken to give the Moscow mayoral election a modicum of legitimacy do little to distract from the increasingly

dysfunctional electoral process in the country.

In addition, the Putin administration will have noted a number of problems beyond Moscow that will certainly require attention in the months that follow. Even if United Russia performs well in September's elections, it is difficult to ignore evidence of defections from the party and continuing problems with its image.

But, more worrying is the intensifying intra-elite conflict that is now taking place in several regions, where election commissions and even the security services have been used to disqualify opposition candidates. The irony is that this problem could well gain fresh impetus if, as expected, regional elites begin to use the 'Navalny formula' of dubious embezzlement charges in a bid to remove their troublesome rivals from the political scene.

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