

# Russia's Non-Competitive Election

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The Russian election occurred on Sunday with results that were consistent with what most people expected. Vladimir Putin won the election handily among widespread reports of election fraud, inflated vote totals from the northern Caucasus region of Russia, and general electoral misconduct. Putin, according to official reports, won roughly 63% of the vote, which was a higher proportion of the vote than some had anticipated, but his huge margin of victory, a full 45 points more than second place finisher Gennady Zyuganov, was less of a surprise.

The political, legal and media environment in Russia, as in many other non-democratic countries makes it extremely difficult for opposition political forces to emerge and become strong enough to pose a serious challenge to the country's leaders. Because of this, elections are less likely to lead to political change, although they can, as may be the case in Russia, initiate a process which changes the way politics occur or even meaningfully weakens a leader, despite his electoral victory.

Regimes like Putin's and many others in the former Soviet Union do not leave election fraud to election day, doing the bulk of this work earlier in the process, but a key component of this is precluding strong opponents from emerging. This makes it easier to assert that the leader may have used some election fraud to bolster his numbers, but he and his party are still popular with the voters. It is no surprise, nor any real evidence of democracy, that a leader whose opponents do not include anybody who can seriously be viewed as a potential president or prime minister, will have substantial support among the voters. However, this support is rarely very deep as it is grounded only in the comparison between the leader and the other less than plausible candidates.

For leaders like Putin, the primary political task, is not to win reelection, fairly or unfairly, but to use whatever means are needed to make sure a strong opponent does not emerge. This generally consists of shaping the politics of the country so that only weaker, less electable leaders, without the means to wage a real campaign are part of political life. This is the core challenge of semi-authoritarian leaders, but in countries where the state controls access to resources and there is no independent private sector, it is usually not very difficult to achieve this.

The absence of a strong alternative to Putin meant that what happened in the election was of secondary import. That Putin was running against a field dominated by figures from the past, people with questionable opposition and political credibility, and candidates about whom very few people knew anything is, in of itself, evidence of the non-democratic nature of Russia's political system.

Moreover, if there is no strong opponent, non-democratic leaders can make some concessions regarding fair elections, because the chances of losing are so slim anyway. Putin could, and probably should, have engaged in less election fraud in this recent election because the absence of a serious challenger all but guaranteed his election. This also means that efforts to ensure fair elections that do not take the broader electoral context into consideration, or that begin relatively late in the process are going to have very little impact on the overall state of democracy. It does

not really matter how smoothly election day runs, or even if there is less intimidation in the months preceding an election if the president, for example, has manipulated the field so that there is no strong and genuine opposition.

Russia is unusual in its size, wealth and role in the world, but considerably less unusual in its domestic political arrangements, particularly in a post-Soviet context. The lack of competition in the Russian political system, and the efforts undertaken by the Russian leadership to prevent any potentially serious opposition from developing, reflect the broader political environment, and absence of democracy, throughout much of the region. Putin's efforts to avoid having any other legitimate candidate in the political arena are also similar to efforts made by other leaders throughout much of the former Soviet Union. However, once these efforts fail, and a viable opponent emerges, the dynamic can change very quickly. The Russian people held Putin to 63% despite the absence of free media, fair elections or a legitimate opponent. If just one of those things had been different, Putin would have been in a much more difficult situation last weekend.