

The Future of Elections in Russia

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In last Sunday's election for the Russian Duma, the ruling United Russia party, while winning a clear plurality of the votes did considerably more poorly than many expected. United Russia's vote total is hovering around 50%, but the party will still maintain a clear majority in the national legislature. Additionally, this election occurred in a media and civic context that was far from free or open; and there have been numerous accounts of various kinds of election fraud during the voting. Following the closing of the polls there have been demonstrations in Moscow and elsewhere as the Russian people express their discontent about having another election stolen. Taken together this means that for the Russian leadership, more or less everything that could have gone wrong with the election did.

It is possible that these demonstrations will lead to reform in Russia as the governing party realizes that continuing to steal elections will eventually lead to even bigger problems, but it is also possible that the government will conduct a harsh and possibly violent crackdown against the demonstrators. Neither of these are outcomes would be good for the government.

Given all this, the Russian government may be asking why they bothered to hold the elections in the first place as the events have only caused them trouble. Russia is not a democracy where elections are about the people having a chance to choose their own government or to weigh in on governance or policy issues by choosing between parties or individual with competing visions for Russia. In Russia, and numerous other non-democratic countries that continue to hold elections, the purpose of elections is not for citizens to participate in democratic processes. Rather, elections serve two principle functions. First, they are an opportunity for the government to both reassert its power over the people by mobilizing them to affirm the existing leadership. Second, elections provide the non-democratic regime with an opportunity to show powerful democratic countries that they are at least a little democratic. There are other reasons, but these are the major ones.

Countries like Russia hold elections today because it is easier to fake being a democracy than to confront the criticism that comes from being an authoritarian regime that either has no elections at all or has elections where the winning party regularly gets 90% or more of the vote. The problems which confront Russia now is that fewer countries believe that Russia's managed elections are evidence that there is any democracy in Russia, so the leaders no longer get any credit for being democratic simply for holding elections where the fix is in months in advance. At the same time, their ability to control the elections and to commit widespread fraud without provoking a response from the Russian people also appears to have dwindled.

This recent election demonstrated that it is no longer easy for Russia to have a phony election with some appearances of democracy. This is good in many respects. However, the election also showed the Russian leadership that it may no longer be worth it to even try. Because elections and the environment in which they occur has been so poor for so long in Russia,

elections are no longer seen by many outside observers as having much to do with democracy and democratic development in that country. Accordingly, the Russian government is no longer able to strengthen its faux democratic credentials by holding bad elections. Similarly, because of the diminishing popularity of the ruling party it has become necessary to commit greater and more obvious fraud. Thus, elections are both risky and unproductive for the Russian government.

It is likely that if the Russian government, and other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, could do away with elections they would. However, this move would come with a cost both domestically and internationally. Citizens would be upset about losing what little influence they have over how the government is determined while powerful democratic governments would be upset about a clear move away from freedom and democracy. It is not at all clear what these governments could or would do in response, but even if they did nothing it would not make Russia's interaction with the democratic world easier.

Of course, if the Russian, or any other non-democratic regime, thinks it needs to abolish or reduce the significance of even undemocratic elections, it will. This would be a serious and risky move to undermine what international norms exist regarding democracy and elections, but it could happen. There is a clear, if depressing, logic to this type of decision particularly when considered by regimes that are almost solely focused on remaining in power.