



## Russia Election Alert #1

### Devaluation of Election Institution

#### Russia on the eve of regional elections 8 September 2019

The situation on the eve of 2019 regional elections shows several important trends. On the one hand, Russian electoral system is becoming extremely politically biased and repressive. On the other, there is growing social demand for participation in decision-making and rising protest activity, including protest vote and participation in street protests. The consequence of this is the degradation of party system and electoral institutions and the loss of public confidence in the institution of elections as such.

The state electoral system, including the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), is part of the politically biased machine working in the interest of the Kremlin. The electoral commissions' non-compliance with the principle of political neutrality in relation to candidates leads to a complete devaluation of the election institution. The members of the electoral commissions are in fact not the organizers of electoral process, but the main tool of hindering free and fair elections. When checking the candidates' documents, the CEC has taken the path of legal nit-picking and formalist interpretations that devalue the essence of the electoral process. Moreover, despite declarations by the CEC, the so-called 'municipal filter', i.e. the requirement that a candidate in gubernatorial elections collects a high number of signatures of municipal deputies to be registered, has not been abolished. **At the moment, no independent candidate in gubernatorial elections is able to comply with the 'municipal filter'**, and the voters are left with the choice between approving the candidates chosen by Moscow or not turning up to vote. As a result, the proportion of 'administrative candidates' designated by Moscow, with no previous connection to the regions of election, is increasing: in 2018 they made 17 out of 22 candidates, and in 2019 – 13 out of 16 incumbent governors, reappointed by the Kremlin a year ago. Moreover, their appointment or reappointment has not been consulted with regional parliaments. In the territories that are most problematic for Moscow (such as St. Petersburg, the Trans-Baikal Territory, the Astrakhan Region), candidates who were able to compete, were simply blocked.

**Election competition has been replaced with 'administrative resource'** (the use of official positions and connections to government institutions to influence the outcome of elections) **and repressions**. The most infamous case is the scandalous electoral campaign in Moscow, wherein almost all independent candidates were not allowed to run – the signatures they collected were massively invalidated. Their supporters took to the streets, however, peaceful protests were dispersed, and 3 thousand people in total were detained during July and August rallies and 15 of them arrested and charged with massive unrest. Also, many of the candidates themselves were arrested, including Dmitry Gudkov, Yulia Galyamina and Ilya Yashin (who is currently serving his fifth 10-day administrative detention in a row). They, their families and supporters have become subject of administrative, criminal, financial and psychological pressure by the authorities.

**A crisis is observed in the entire Russian party system.** It no longer fulfills its key function – to reflect the interests of society. Political parties exist in a sort of a political vacuum, depending largely on their agreements with the Kremlin. Systemic parliamentary opposition including the Communist Party does not participate in the majority of elections. In contemporary Russia, 'party brands' lose their attractiveness both for voters and candidates. This also applies to the United Russia, the so-called 'party of power', whose ratings are falling. More and more candidates associated with the authorities distance themselves from this unpopular brand and run as 'self-nominated candidates', which is enabled by a recent amendment to the electoral legislation. Independent and opposition parties are



either prevented from participation in political processes (Yabloko) or remain unregistered and thus formally unable to participate (Alexei Navalny's 'Russia of the Future' party).

**Since 2017-2018, protest moods have been on the rise**, both street protest activity and protest vote (a number of the authorities' candidates were defeated in 2018 local and regional elections). Another manifestation of this trend are the dropping ratings of authorities, including President Putin himself. The growing protest also gives rise to alternative candidates at all levels, which is best evident in Moscow, where a new generation of opposition leaders have emerged in recent years. The authorities are responding to this by mounting repressions and preventing all opposition candidates from running in elections. As a result, administrative resource is abused massively and the **elections have lost their original public and political meaning** as no independent candidates are allowed to run.

**The electoral experts' recommendations** include a number of amendments to the existing legislation and electoral practices. Firstly, it is necessary to ensure genuine transparency in the work of the electoral commissions. Secondly, the number of signatures required for registration should be reduced; among other ways, they should be collected via the web-portal 'State Services' which will reduce the arbitrariness of state experts, who freely 'filter' and invalidate the signatures. Thirdly, the rules for verifying the signatures collected should be changed: the list of grounds for invalidating a signature should be reduced, i.e. minor errors and typos should not be equated with falsification of signatures. In general, it is necessary to reduce the list of grounds for refusing registration. Finally, an electoral deposit should be introduced as an alternative criterion for the registration of candidates; after the election it should be returned to those candidates who receive more than 5% of the vote. **These changes would greatly reduce the level of arbitrariness of the electoral practices. However, their introduction is a matter of political will of the authorities and therefore seems highly unlikely at the moment.**

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