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[Single-candidate elections: boycott or sabotage?](#)



What can be done in a situation where the only real opponent to the ruling party's candidate is not allowed to run in the elections, effectively turning them into single-candidate elections? A more direct question would be: how can the position of the only true opponent be transmitted clearly and explicitly to voters if he has been barred from taking part in elections?

Why doesn't voting for "anyone else" work anymore?

Both parts of Russian society, pro-governmental and oppositional, are extremely inert. Ideas and slogans introduced at some point in history have been perceived as guidelines for action and universal truths for a very long time, unquestioned, without analysing their real effectiveness or relevance in the new circumstances.

In 2011, Alexei Navalny came up with a theory that voting for "any other" party would undermine the authorities and demonstrate voters' real attitudes to the United Russia party, while the parliamentary parties would radicalise and support the protests once they sensed the authorities' weakness.

This would have been a real breakthrough: such voting led to increased protest activity in 2011–2012. However, it is important to understand that it was only a theory, which turned out to be unsubstantiated in autumn 2011. In practice, such a tactically effective concept failed strategically, and merely demonstrated the impotence and servility of the parliamentary parties, along with the futility of any attempts to collaborate with them. Those who received their portion of the protest vote as "alternative parties" (the LDPR, SR and CPRF) never became allies of the extra-parliamentary opposition, and did not support the protests. On the contrary, the Duma of 2011 went down in history as the most aggressive, odious and loyal one ever elected, and the leadership of the notorious "parliamentary opposition" parties did their best to make their protest-voters regret their decision on many occasions.

This brings us to several conclusions. To begin with, votes given to candidates from any pro-governmental party only increase its status inside the system and are viewed as an expression of confidence in those particular parties and candidates. Firstly, this means that alleged supporters of pro-European, liberal ideology vote for Zyuganov to oppose Putin, and afterwards Zyuganov declares all his voters to be ideological Stalinists, and supports Putin in their name.

Secondly, not only was the idea to vote for "any other party" relevant in 2011, it was initially designed for parliamentary elections based on party lists. Its futility, if applied thoughtlessly, was already clear during the presidential elections in 2012, when many people voted for "anyone else", be it Mironov or Prokhorov: as we saw from the outcome, such tactics had absolutely no impact on Putin's victory and didn't affect his actions.

Boycott or sabotage?

The part of Russian society which is dissatisfied with de-facto single-candidate elections has essentially two options left: to boycott or sabotage the presidential elections.

Absenteeism is the most convenient and safe form of protest for the ordinary voter: all that is required is to

vote with your feet by not going to polls. Another advantage of this approach is that the authorities have no practical instruments to derail passive protest. The drawbacks are also obvious, and clearly outweigh the benefits. First of all, the elections will always be recognised as valid, irrespective of the voter turnout. Secondly, it would be impossible to declare that everyone who stayed away from the polling stations was a devoted opposition supporter and an opponent of the authorities—if only because a significant percentage of the electorate traditionally don't vote in any elections. Thirdly, the prospect of organised vote-rigging (when the blank ballots of citizens who didn't vote are used without their knowledge) should not be discounted.

Actively boycotting the elections is a combination of individual citizens' personal refusal to vote and a whole civil disobedience campaign. For example, members of electoral commissions resigning en masse on the eve of elections, pickets, demonstrations, or campaigning through distribution of posters and leaflets. Theoretically, some legal means of registering citizens who refuse to vote could also be developed, but the disadvantages of such an approach are clear. Preparing a nationwide campaign in Russia is fraught with difficulties: the authorities will counter all attempts to campaign for an active boycott, not to mention that it would be quite a challenge to work out an effective, easily accomplishable large-scale registration process for voters who refuse to participate in elections, that would be both legally acceptable and impossible to disrupt before the elections.

In the context of the elections, sabotage could mean urging all disgruntled citizens to go to the polls and perform certain pre-agreed actions which would register in the official election statistics in one way or another. The first thing which springs to mind following this logic is to ask citizens to deliberately spoil their ballots, for example, by writing the name of a candidate disqualified from the elections or some slogans on them. This ploy is easy to implement and impossible for the authorities to control. Its weaknesses are also obvious. Firstly, there is no reason to declare that all such ballots were defaced as a protest: there are invalid ballot papers in any election. Secondly, control over vote-counting is crucial. Experience has shown that, without it, there is nothing to stop spoilt ballots (or a good number of them) from being counted as votes for the "right" candidate.

In any case, as soon as citizens drop their votes into ballot boxes, they lose control over them and cannot be sure how they will be counted, if counted at all.

The only way for citizens to retain control over their votes is to keep their ballots. If this phenomenon would be sufficiently widespread, the electoral commission reports would in some way register the number of issued ballot papers which hadn't landed in ballot boxes. If Putin's opponents were to call for such action and receive a widespread response from society, this number could be quite considerable.

The ideal scenario would be to collect such ballot papers in order to demonstrate to the country and the world the sheer number of documented protest voters. However, this is hardly feasible under the current circumstances: coordinating the centralised collection of ballot papers removed from polling stations by voters, transporting and storing them could easily be halted by the state at any stage.

Let us hope that the theoretical ideas presented in this article will initiate a relevant public discussion regarding what Russian society should do if the presidential elections will repeat the meaningless ritual in which the results are preordained. Excessive optimism in making plans which are too difficult to implement is as dangerous and harmful as excessive pessimism.

Alexei Navalny and his team bear a special responsibility for selecting and channelling the opposition's reaction to the presidential elections: their social resources are vital, and they alone are able to mobilise a statistically significant, measurable number of Russian citizens to implement a given plan. On the optimistic side, all concepts invented by Navalny and his team have worked in one way or another, which means that they might propose something unexpected and effective this time too—in the sad but quite probable case that the authorities will organise the elections in their traditional manner, *i.e.* with predictable results and without any real opponents from the opposition.

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