

THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 2015

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The main political and economic events experienced by Russia in September 2015 were the single voting day – the final one before the federal elections to be held next year, and the beginning of Russia's military operation in Syria, officially approved by the RF Federation Council by unanimously supporting the appeal of President Vladimir Putin. The results of the September 2015 elections approximately matched those of the previous round of elections, in spite of the fact that United Russia had managed to slightly improve its electoral support.

The results of the September 2015 elections are as follows. In Kostroma Oblast, where elections had been held with participation of a democratic coalition, the electoral campaign had been fully competitive, and electoral commissions had not resorted to blatant falsifications *United Russia* gathered 50.9% of votes cast vs. 50.2% in 2010 (in fact, the 2015 regional electoral results should be compared not with the 2011 federal elections characterized by a high voter turnout, but with the regional elections held in those same regions four or five years ago). In the city of Kostroma, the Kostroma Oblast's center, where lots of election supervisors were at work, *United Russia's* results were even more modest – a mere 40%. In Novosibirsk Oblast, *United Russia* gained 44.5% of total vote (vs. 44.8% at the previous poll); in Magadan Oblast – 57.7% (vs. 50%); in Kaluga Oblast – 56.9% (vs. 53.4%); in Ryazan Oblast – 62.7% (vs. 50.5%); in Kurgan Oblast – 56.7% (vs. 41.2%); in the Komi Republic – 58.05% (vs. 50.5%); in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug – 70.1% (vs. 64.7%); in Belgorod Oblast – 62.3% (vs. 66.2%); in Chelyabinsk Oblast – 56.1% (vs. 55.7%); and in Voronezh Oblast – 73.8% (vs. 62.5%). Thus, the only significant leap forward achieved by *United Russia* was in Ryazan and Voronezh Oblasts. It should be pointed out that Voronezh Oblast appeared to be an electoral anomaly of sorts – *United Russia* managed to bag just 44.6% of the votes cast in the city of Voronezh, which comprises one half of Voronezh Oblast's population, while in the rural areas of that oblast it collected more than 90% of total vote. On the whole, *United Russia's* results remained on level with the previous round of elections (in spite of the small gains made by that party in some (but not all) of the regions). Thus, it seems that the September 2015 elections roughly repeated the scenario of the 2011 elections, where *United Russia* had gained slightly less than 50% of total vote. However, *United Russia's* results will apparently be higher than in 2011, when elections were totally based on proportional representation, because this time half the seats will be filled by single-member dis-

tricts. If single-member districts had existed in 2011, the Opposition would have won in no more than 15 to 20 districts out of 225.

It should be noted that at the September 2015 elections only the parliamentary parties managed to climb over the electoral threshold. The CPRF, the LDPR and *A Fair Russia* scored impressive successes at the ballot box. They passed the electoral threshold in every district, while a year ago the LDPR had failed to do so in a number of districts, and *A Fair Russia* had flopped in more than 50% of districts. As regards the liberal opposition, it put up a good fight in Kostroma Oblast, where both *RPR-Parnas* (a coalition of Michael Kasianov's and Aleksey Navalny's supporters) and *Yabloko* participated in the local elections. The party list of the former gained 2.2% of total vote, while that of the latter gained 2.4%. Probably the failure of the *RPR-Parnas* list headed by the Muscovite Ilya Yashin can be attributed to the fact that it contained people who were unknown to the local electorate. In any case, this coalition did not manage to pass the electoral threshold despite its campaign being amply funded. Having failed to gain seats in regional legislatures, *Yabloko* conquered a number of party-list seats in the city dumas of Kostroma, Vladimir and Tomsk (*RPR-Parnas* had not nominated its party lists for those elections). Thus, it can be said that the liberal opposition still has some electoral potential (bearing in mind that voter turnout at regional elections is traditionally twice as low as at federal elections). However, one should not overestimate the magnitude of that potential.

Thus, 14 political parties have so far gained the right to participate in elections without collecting signatures. Five of them (*United Russia*, the CPRF, *A Fair Russia* and *Yabloko*) are entitled to this right on the basis of their having overcome the 3% electoral threshold at the 2011 elections, while the other nine parties (*RPR-Parnas*, *Rodina* [Fatherland], *Civic Platform*, *The Alliance of Greens*, *Civilian Power*, *Patriots of Russia*, *The Right Cause*, *Communists of Russia* and *The Russian Pensioners for Justice Party*) have achieved

this right on the basis of their being represented in at least one regional legislature. The rest of Russia's political parties should collect at least 200,000 signatures to qualify for elections. Bearing in mind the specificity of Russia's law application practice, one can confidently assume that the process of signature collection will be very costly and will depend in the final instance on the good (or ill) will of the electoral commissions, because the existing procedure for collecting and verifying voter signatures is extremely intricate and convoluted. It also cannot be ruled out that the authorities will increase the number of legislatures where a political party must be represented in order to get vested with the right to participate in elections without collecting signatures. Even if the number of such legislatures is increased from the current one to two, 50% of the existing political parties will automatically lose the afore-said right.

As regards gubernatorial elections, the most interesting election for governor took place in Irkutsk Oblast. Having almost won in the first round by bagging 49.6% of total vote (with a voter turnout rate of 29%), *United Russia's* candidate Sergey Eroshchenko was defeated in the second round by the CPRF's representative Sergey Levchenko who gained 56% of votes cast (most likely because voter turnout had increased to 37%). It was for the first time since the mid-noughties and since Russia's return to gubernatorial elections in 2012 that an official candidate for governor had lost an election at the ballot box. In the rest of those regions where the elections were held, official candidates for governor won in the first round, although in Amur Oblast and the Mari El Republic they narrowly avoided a first-round upset. Thus, when competition between two candidates is in equilibrium, even a two-week gap between the first and second rounds of voting can result in a significant increase in voter turnout, an increase favorable to the opposition candidate and detrimental to *United Russia*, which has already almost exhausted its electoral potential in the first round. Being so far an isolated phenomenon, the gubernatorial election in Irkutsk Oblast is clearly insufficient as evidence to prove any far-reaching conclusion. Nevertheless, its results have indicated that people are capable of rapid self-mobilization when they feel that an election can replace the existing public authority with a new one.

In September 2015, RF President Vladimir Putin took part in the plenary meeting of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York. In the course of that meeting, he delivered a speech clarifying Russia's position on an array of issues, including war on terror. As a matter of fact, Putin announced that Russia was ready to embark on a military operation in Syria. Among other

things, he said: 'We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces, who are valiantly fighting terrorism face to face. We should finally acknowledge that no one but President Assad's armed forces and Kurds militias are truly fighting the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria'. The Russian President criticized the West for its unjustified vituperation of the Syrian leadership and for its actions, which he claimed had resulted in destabilization of the region. He also stated his belief that the 'ranks of radicals are being joined by the members of the so-called moderate Syrian opposition supported by the Western countries. First, they are armed and trained and then they defect to the so-called Islamic State. [...] And the recent data on arms transferred to this most moderate opposition is the best proof of it.' The standpoint of the Western countries on the conflict in Syria, which was confirmed at the General Assembly and is shared by such important regional players as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, can be summarized as follows: President Bashar al-Assad, who represents the Alawite minority, must step down (after a transitional period during which the President could remain in office) and a majority Sunni government be formed. The Western countries and their allies have placed the Islamic State group and Jabhat an-Nusra on the terror list, although they give moral support to the loose array of rebel groups called the Free Syrian Army, which controls Syria's northwest, including Aleppo, the country's second largest city, and southwest. So far, the Free Syrian Army has been receiving weapons (mostly small arms) through non-official clandestine channels. When Vladimir Putin's UN General Assembly speech was followed by Russian airstrikes against militants in Syria, tensions between Russia, on the one hand, and the Western countries, Turkey and Saudi Arabia on the other, immediately flared up. Russia's opponents accused her of targeting the Free Syrian Army rather than the Islamic State group. Russia's decision to get militarily involved in the Syrian conflict seems controversial in the following two respects. On the one hand, the current situation when the cutthroats of the Islamic State group control a territory populated by millions of people whom it turns into cannon fodder shall by no means be tolerated. But on the other hand, it is absolutely clear that the war against the Islamic State group cannot be won by airstrikes alone. The complete eradication of this group will not be possible without a significant deployment of ground troops that should be best provided by a 'coalition of nations', who would also share the costs of the entire military operation. Despite several months of promising negotiations, Russia has so far failed to reach an agreement either with the West or with the Sunni governments

involved in the struggle against the Islamic State group. The fundamental disagreement over Assad's role in post-civil-war Syria and over the future of his regime remains the key stumbling block between Russia and the Western-led coalition. President Assad, who represents the Alawites, a minority within Syria's Shia minority, has suffered a severe military defeat in the civil war and has lost most of Syria to his enemies. It would be better for Syria and for all the parties involved in the Syrian conflict to make an attempt at creating a transitional government of national unity, because Assad clearly lacks the strength to do so. Any increase in Russian military presence in Syria will have negative consequences for Russia, including adverse economic impacts. The possibility of Russia's reenacting in Syria the Soviet scenario in Afghanistan is being vehemently denied by the Russia authorities, who insist that they have no such plans. It should also be remembered that as Russia does not share a common border with Syria, the provision of sufficient logistic support to expeditionary ground forces would be next to impossible – unless Turkey, at leastwise, agrees to maintain friendly neutrality.

As regards economic matters, September 2015 saw a continuation of Russia's efforts to find additional budget revenue sources. The RF Ministry of Finance's proposal to increase the mineral extraction tax (MET) rate for oil companies was met with a lot of criticism. In response, the Ministry justified its proposal by claiming that oil exporters had benefited in ruble terms from the decline of the ruble, because their earnings are denominated in dollars and euro and their costs

are mostly in the local currency. However, the heads of all major oil companies categorically opposed the proposed increase in the MET rate. They insisted that that increased taxation would be ruinous for the industry already beset with a lot of problems, including the heavy debt-repayment burden, the lamentable fact that in 2014 Russia's crude oil output grew by a negligible 0.7%, etc. As a result, the RF Government decided that, for the time being, the MET rate for oil should not be raised. Thus, Russia's struggle to find ways of making her budget numbers add up has so far been futile. The budget revenue problem remains unsolved, and its solution cannot be postponed indefinitely.

In September 2015, Governor of the Komi Republic Vyacheslav Gaizer and a number of regional officials were arrested on charges of corruption. An ironic twist of fate indeed, because on the single voting day, 13 September 2015, just one week before his arrest, Mr. Gaizer had been heading *United Russia's* list of election candidates for the Komi Republic. Gaizer was replaced as Komi Governor by former Deputy Director of the RF Government Office Sergei Gaplikov. It is hard to say whether or not the criminal charges pressed against Vyacheslav Gaizer are based on sufficient reliable evidence. Certainly, he was not a very scandalous governor. Apparently his downfall, like the downfall of Sakhalin Governor Alexander Khoroshavin one year earlier, was mainly caused by some intra-elite conflict. The old Darwinian adage 'survival of the fittest' comes to mind... In any case, as far as situational control is concerned, Mr. Gaizer's arrest is definitely a very ill omen. ●