



DEMOCRATIC CHOICE NEWSLETTER

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September 14th, 2015

On results of the Russian regional elections held at the annual single election day (September 13th)

In this regional election campaign, “Democratic Choice” has prioritized participation in the joint campaigns for regional legislatures together with our Democratic coalition partners. Democratic coalition was founded in April 2015 by Parnas party chaired by ex-Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and Party of Progress chaired by Alexey Navalny.

The coalition have chosen 4 regions to run for regional legislatures, considering it an important test for our cross-regional ability to cross the 5% electoral threshold in next year's State Duma elections (scheduled for September 2016). However, in 3 out of 4 regions where we've chosen to run – in Novosibirsk, Magadan, and Kaluga – we were banned from participation. We consider these bans illegitimate and aimed at limiting potential competition to the ruling party, “United Russia”. These election bans for non-parliamentary parties is a common widespread practice in Putin's Russia.

We were only allowed to run in one region, Kostroma, after a long legal battle finally resolved by the Central Electoral Commission of Russia in end-August (local electoral commission initially have also attempted to ban the coalition from participating). Eventually, we were allowed to be registered and to begin campaigning only 20 days before voting day. This was tough: Kostroma is a large region (twice the size of the Netherlands) with just over half a million population widely spread among a large number of remote small towns and villages, some hundreds of miles away from region's capital. We also had to overcome low initial Parnas brand recognition in the region (around 20% at the beginning of the campaign).

Our campaign had faced multiple pressures from the authorities – former campaign head of staff is still under arrest on fabricated charges, our candidates and activists were physically assaulted many times, provocateurs constantly tried to ruin our meetings with voters, police even once demonstrably arrested our main candidate for the Kostroma regional legislature, Ilya Yashin, during his meeting with voters (Yashin was later released, no charges had been made against him, he was blamed for his “loudspeaker interfering with local residents privacy”). Authorities have spread tons of negative and libelous misinformation about Parnas and the coalition. There was widespread electoral fraud on the voting day.

Amid these developments, we have achieved only modest results in Kostroma, not being able to cross the 5% threshold. Our overall result was just over 2% across the region, in the capital city of Kostroma – 4%.

- There are currently discussions ongoing within the Democratic coalition as to the interpretation of this result and lessons to be learned. However, we in “Democratic

Choice” do not see it as big problem: we were able to get near the 5% threshold (even crossing it in some parts of the Kostroma city) in a very difficult region within a very short period of time, less than three weeks. We believe that this is an extremely useful experience of campaigning in deeply provincial regions, very important for the 2016 State Duma elections. The 2015 Kostroma election experience shows that the Democratic coalition is capable of gaining ground not only in large cities (which remain our natural focus), but also in more remote provinces.

We remain focused on participating in the 2016 State Duma elections as part of Democratic coalition. During the upcoming weeks and months, consultations will continue as to how this campaign will be shaped and what specific roles will be designated to different parties participating in the coalition.

It should be also said that in recent regional elections, despite attempts by the authorities to fully control the political field, the ruling party had demonstrated many of its weaknesses, and voters fatigue with long domination of “United Russia” at times became quite clear. For the first time in a decade, in one of the gubernatorial election campaigns, in Irkutsk region, incumbent “United Russia” governor was not able to win in the first round, and a runoff will take place on September 27th. “Democratic Choice” leader in Irkutsk, Sergey Bespalov, had actively assisted the campaign of incumbent's competitor, Sergey Levchenko of KPRF. (We see tactical cooperation with KPRF in regions as important to break through the total “United Russia” monopoly; as to gubernatorial elections, KPRF is so far the only force capable of gathering enough support of municipal council members to pass through a “municipal filter”¹). We believe that the potential defeat of a “United Russia” candidate in gubernatorial elections (first since early 2000s) will be a huge achievement for returning of democracy into Russian politics. In mayoral elections in big cities, this have already happened in recent years; in gubernatorial elections, not yet.

In some other regions incumbent “United Russia” candidates have also faced tough difficulties this time (although in these cases, we did not participate in these campaigns). In Amur region and Republic of Mariy-El, current governors have both narrowly escaped a runoff by just a fraction of a per cent, massively losing to main rivals in regional capitals, Blagoveschensk and Yoshkar-Ola, respectively. In Omsk region, incumbent governor have won more decisively, but was not able to reach 50% support in the city of Omsk, regional capital. In the city of Novosibirsk, where “United Russia” have lost mayoral elections in 2014 (and where Democratic coalition was banned from running in 2015), the ruling party had received only 34% at city council elections, under a very low turnout (a bigger voter turnout normally drives “United Russia” result seven further down).

Main conclusion from these developments: focus on big cities may boost democrats' chances in the 2016 State Duma elections, so our priorities clearly shift in this direction.

¹ In 2012, direct elections of regional governors in Russia were restored, but candidates need to pass through “municipal filter” - to be registered, you need to secure support of a large number of members of local municipal councils in the region (this is resembling a French system of “godfathering” for Presidential election candidates). Only large parliamentary parties can achieve this at present, and if coalitions are formed around an opposition candidate at gubernatorial elections, in most cases it will be a coalition around a KPRF candidate

Other campaigns

In this regional election, “Democratic Choice” was also independently participating in some regional and local elections, where it didn't interfere with our coalition agenda. Notable results: we have been able to secure two seats in local council elections in Pskov region, plus our leader in Krasnodar, Vitaly Solonchenko, have received 21% of the votes in Prikubansky district at the City Duma elections, finishing second after “United Russia” candidate. Although he didn't win a seat in Krasnodar Duma, this experience makes him a very good potential candidate for the State Duma single-mandate district campaign in Krasnodar.

Issues of the day

Most important issues for the upcoming couple of months will be consultations within the Democratic coalition as to preparations for participation in the State Duma elections of September 2016. We would need to agree upon the strategic plan of our campaign, set up a list of candidates for the single-mandate districts (225 of 450 Duma members will be elected through single-mandate districts, the rest – through proportional system), resolve the fundraising challenges. Main conclusions from the experience of past months are (1) the Democratic coalition has transformed into a successful working mechanism capable of taking on the State Duma election campaign; (2) the “United Russia” support, particularly in big cities, is not as strong as authorities would want it to be, and its popularity deteriorates further due to ongoing economic crisis, which adds some optimism to our plans.

The strategic goal is to establish a faction independent from the Kremlin in the State Duma for the first time since 2003, when “United Russia” was able to secure a “constitutional majority” (allowing it to adopt laws without the consent of other factions), and many restrictive laws were adopted, creating a current authoritarian political system.