
Russian elections, Putin's party set to win. Trophimov (sociologist): "No real political debate"

Over 108 million Russians are called to cast their votes - from tomorrow, September 17th, to September 19th - to elect 450 members of the Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, choosing among 5,800 candidates representing 23 political parties. There are 96,000 polling stations, with over two million Russians having registered to vote online. According to TASS news agency, elections will be monitored by over 250 international observers. A 334-seat majority is currently held by members of President Putin's 'United Russia'. Europe is following the vote with concern: Russia remains a difficult country for the West to understand, while diplomatic and political dialogue is experiencing a growing crisis. However, "personal, scientific, academic, as well as economic relations with the rest of the world are based on different criteria than those regulating the official relations", said **Sergei Trophimov** (*in the photo*), associate professor of Sociology of Mass Communications at the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow's Lomonosov University, in an interview with SIR, providing a different picture of the run-up to the vote compared to the one conveyed by Western press reports.

Preparations for these elections are proceeding as usual: there is no heated political debate on events or party programmes, and the emerging scandals are also of little interest to the broader public. Political ads on television are reserved to the main political parties for rather short election promos, but they are not interesting. Activists' gazebos have been set up in the streets of Moscow and other big cities, distributing leaflets or explaining the candidates' election programmes, but citizens ignore them. The political debate is not particularly noticeable on social media either. **Are specific issues being discussed in connection with the election campaign?** Many candidates have decided to focus on issues such as reversing unpopular decisions of the previous legislative period (e.g. raising the retirement age, reverting to the 'Soviet' education system, etc.) or improving the standard of living of citizens in rather generic terms. But on the whole it must be said that there is little interest in the forthcoming elections, and if there is, it's very small. **The main questions in our media regarding these elections is the lack of significant opposition to 'United Russia': is this really the case?** Yes, apparently none of the parties, including those excluded from the election campaign, can rival 'United Russia' in the country as a whole. Yet many of its officials are being subjected to pretty harsh criticism by voters. Some of the political parties, such as the Communists or the Liberal Democrats of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (currently deputy-president of the Duma), do not traditionally represent the opposition, although they have a programme and requisites. Moreover, the constituency of the other political forces is rather fragmented, with contradictory opinions. Especially in rural areas, no politician is known enough to face up to the challenge. **It is often said that Russian democracy differs from Western democracies. But there seems to be a very low degree of freedom of information, thought and expression: what is the situation really like?** Every country's political system is different: French democracy is not like Italian democracy, is it? There is nothing wrong with that. Every country has its peculiarities and its national character. *In my opinion, situations marked by limited freedom of information and speech are linked to isolated officials who fear change and are afraid to lose their jobs.* Unfortunately, we are confronted with an increasing number of such cases that lead to scandals. **Does this also apply to the Navalny case?** It's a complicated story with many unclear elements. In any case, he and his supporters did not represent a sufficiently strong political force to rival 'United Russia' in any meaningful way. **The OSCE, however, has questioned the honesty and transparency of the upcoming vote: is it a legitimate concern?** As a sociologist, I tend to address coherently argued positions. If I don't see the facts, I can't agree with the doubts. Elections are not yet over and they are already raising doubts? In periodicals available to me in French, English and Polish, I often come across this view, but I cannot find sufficient evidence to support it. Conspiratorial concerns also exist in Russia, where people are terrified that the country will be ruined by its enemies and the system will collapse, although this view

is rarely seriously argued.



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The Russian population feels nostalgia for a strong State, whose accomplishments they can be proud of. The older generation has this highly romanticised image of the USSR. Putin is seen as someone who offers hope of political stability in the country and success in the face of negative or hostile political forces outside the country. None of Russia's political leaders is an apt competitor. At the same time, the 'resilience' of many newly elected politicians has led to the emergence this year of the 'New People' party, which exploits the idea of political renewal. **What will change for the Russian people after these elections?** I doubt that the upcoming elections will bring about major changes in Russian life. Many people are worried about political instability and chaos should events develop along the lines of the Minsk 2020 scenario after the elections. **Yet the country is currently facing serious economic and social problems: will the political situation rise to the challenge?** To be honest, the serious economic and social problems in Russia are comparable to those of other countries, including European countries. Factories are closing down and wages are low in some regions, but there are also developing economic sectors, and social problems are being addressed. *I must point out that despite the sanctions imposed by the EU and other countries, Russian economy is successfully addressing the difficulties that have arisen. A stronger dialogue with Russia is the way forward.* **What is your opinion of the relations between Russia and the EU and European countries today?** Unfortunately, political relations between Europe and Russia have been extremely strained recently: economic sanctions, restrictions on interaction with Russian counterparts, allegations of spying against any Russian. I understand that this situation is the result of steps taken a long time ago that are far from unilateral. It's a situation that pains me and my European friends.

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