Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 24.10.2012 www.osw.waw.pl

Russia: the opposition's Coordinating Council has been chosen

Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga

On 20-23 October, elections were held to the Coordination Council of the Russian opposition movement, which began to organise as a result of massive street protests ongoing since the end of 2011. Over 170,000 people registered to participate in the online election, of whom just under 82,000 voted. From 209 candidates, 45 Council members were selected; they will have to deal with the planning and coordination of the protest movement's further activities.Above all the better-known activists, mostly from Moscow, were chosen. By far the most support (more than 43,700 votes) was given to Aleksei Navalny, a well-known blogger who has campaigned against corruption.

Commentary

- The elections may be considered a moderate success for the opposition movement. Despite significant differences between the candidates' programmes, the attempt to create a common platform was successful. The method of election (a free vote via the Internet) gives it a real mandate to represent the protest movement. The number of people who decided to register on the voters' list proves the existence of an extensive (for Russian conditions) base of opposition supporters who are ready to reveal their identities (it was compulsory to provide personal information). The procedure for forming the Council also set a precedent: public elections have never been held in Russia on such a scale until this time. The undisputed winner was Aleksei Navalny, who thus confirmed his position as the informal leader of the opposition.

- The establishment of the Council should not lead us to expect any significant breakthrough in the activities of the opposition movement. Its internal divisions are still strong, and it encompasses groups such as extreme nationalists, anti-fascists, liberals and communists. During the election there were disagreements; as a result, several well-known opposition figures decided not to run, and remain outside the movement's official representation (such as Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the Yabloko party; and Vladimir Ryzhkov, leader of the PARNAS party), and several other candidates withdrew (such as Ilya Ponomaryov of A Just Russia). In the near future, disputes may be caused by the election results, which over-represented activists from Moscow on the Council. The question has also been raised of how the opposition movement will develop; after the local elections, the creation of the Coordination Council was the last scheduled major

event which could have activated the opposition electorate. The Council may have a problem devising a programme and activities which will maintain the enthusiasm of its existing supporters.

- Although from an objective point of view, the opposition movement is not presently a serious threat to the government, the latter is trying to prevent its consolidation. The authorities took a number of measures to hinder the elections: criminal cases were brought against the organisers of the voting, accusing them of fraud; several candidates to the Council were accused of organising mass protests, two of whom were arrested; the election debates on the internet TV station Dozhd were interfered with; and during the elections, hacker attacks temporarily halted the voting. The Kremlin also worked to mobilise support for the government: on 20 October, Vladimir Putin signed a decree establishing a Directorate for Social Projects within the Presidential Administration, which is concerned with the promotion of patriotism.