

# Convergence in Post-Soviet Political Systems?

## **A Comparative Analysis of Russian, Kazakh, and Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections**

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*Nikolay Petrov*

*Carnegie Moscow Center*

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Next year will mark twenty years since the first more or less free and fair elections were held in the USSR in March 1989. Since then, numerous elections have been held in the Soviet, and later post-Soviet, space, providing us with rich material on the evolution of electoral systems in Eurasia and enriching our knowledge of broader political culture. Although this evolution has been shaped by different processes of sociopolitical development in the post-Soviet states, it has also been marked by many commonalities across them.

It does not seem to be by chance that the three territorially largest post-Soviet states, Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, almost simultaneously in 2005-2007 switched to a system of full proportional representation for parliamentary elections. Such a system encourages underrepresentation of regional political elites while revealing the weakening of federalist structures. Slightly different versions of this novel electoral system have been tried so far in four elections: the 2005 and 2007 Verkhovna Rada elections in Ukraine, the 2007 Majlis elections in Kazakhstan, and the 2007 Duma elections in Russia.

Still, the three electoral systems are not identical. Russia and Kazakhstan have a high threshold for entry into parliament of 7 percent of the vote, while in Ukraine it is

lower – 3 percent in the 2007 election (and 4 percent before that). In general terms, the Ukrainian electoral system is inclusive, while the Kazakhstani and Russian systems are exclusive. Also, Russia has regional party lists while the other two states do not.

Electoral practices vary greatly among the three states too. While in Russia and Kazakhstan “administrative resources” are totally controlled by a dominant political force, which uses them for its own electoral benefit, in Ukraine they are divided between three major political forces. As a result, United Russia, the party of power led by then-president Vladimir Putin received almost two-thirds of the seats in the December 2007 Duma election, while in Kazakhstan Nur Otan, led by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, got nearly ninety percent of the vote in August 2007, preventing all other political forces from entering parliament. By contrast, in Ukraine, Our Ukraine-People’s Self Defense Bloc, the coalition led by President Viktor Yushchenko, finished third with only 14 percent of the September 2007 parliamentary vote, while the party led by then-prime minister Viktor Yanukovich got 34 percent. Based on these results, it appears that Kazakhstan and Ukraine represent two different models of parliamentary elections and voting behavior while Russia occupies a position in-between.

This system of what we can call “overmanaged democracy” (OMD) in Russia is not a passive one. It has been regularly tried and tested in several elections and is capable of certain adjustments and corrections. It has an effective feedback mechanism that makes it possible to get real-time information about the course of campaigns and, if necessary, to “correct” them on the spot. Usually, however, such corrections are made afterwards. The result in practice has been a convergence with the more controlled Kazakhstani model.

Managed democracy in Russia did not appear overnight. Government authorities have sought to control elections ever since the first relatively free and fair election was held under Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989. However, when elections were still a new phenomenon, authorities did not know how to deal with them. In addition, ruling elites were not consolidated enough to provide effective control. Considerable public activism also made it difficult for elites to control elections. With time, the political elite became more experienced. Meanwhile, social disappointment in elections grew and public activism declined. While a clear trend to enhance control over elections appeared as early as 1993, the 1996 presidential election can be considered the first example of large-scale managed elections in post-Soviet Russia. Since that time Russia has evolved from a democracy managed haphazardly from various centers into a system of government managed in an organized way from a single center.

The 2003-2004 Russian elections, the first federal vote held after the creation of the OMD model, provides a general idea of the way the system looks and operates. The general result of the “experiment” can be summarized as follows: the OMD model works well although it does not look pretty. Its potential was not fully on display, however, because the general situation was rather favorable for the party of power and did not require the use of all the levers and technological tricks of the OMD

construction, which would include the legal ability to exclude any competitor from the race, cut off financial support, and exert significant administrative pressure on candidates.

In the end, the OMD system contains a basic contradiction. One cannot ensure predetermined election results while maintaining democratic decorum. The OMD model is thus unstable and must either drift toward tougher management or toward democracy. By excluding political forces and numerous citizens from participating in elections and, subsequently, decisionmaking, the OMD system not only undermines itself in terms of efficiency and legitimacy, it also turns potential systemic opposition into antisystemic opposition. Since the system also forgoes the day-by-day control of citizens, which would block channels for letting off steam, it can lead to an explosion that ruins it entirely.

The last elections in Russia were distinguished by significant changes in both the mechanism (increased centralization) and the rules of the game (two large revisions of the electoral legislation in Russia in 2000-2003 and 2004-2005). The changes include reformed electoral commissions, manipulated courts, the use of law enforcement agencies, the introduction of a system of presidential envoys, political offices of public grievances (*obshchestvennye priemnye*) established by the presidential envoys, and a switch to a mixed system for regional legislative elections and purely proportional representation for Duma elections.

The two electoral reforms conducted by the Kremlin were closely interrelated. The first one was tested on a nationwide scale during the 2003-2004 election cycle, which demonstrated their extreme inefficiency. Rather than reinstitute previously dismantled elements of democratic elections, however, the Kremlin proceeded to consolidate control. The second electoral reform, which was tested in the elections of 2007-2008, signaled a shift from managed to supermanaged democracy. A party now has to overcome a 7 percent hurdle to make it into the Duma, and parties could not form electoral blocs. Along with changes in the law on political parties – which raised the minimum number of members to fifty thousand and mandated that parties have local branches in at least half of the country's regions – this change allows the authorities to disqualify almost any political party on totally legal grounds.

The so-called “technical improvements” of the newly introduced electoral system fall into two categories. First, the Kremlin has made it easier to disqualify undesirable candidates and parties by using biased courts and election commissions beholden to the center. An example of this is the increasingly strict approach regarding the signature collection process required to register a candidate. Authorities used signature collection to eliminate candidates in the past, but it has now become easier to do so. Second, the Kremlin is trying to get rid of ways in which voters can have a direct effect on elections even in the absence of real competition, whether it is by voting with their feet and staying home on election day or by voting “against all.”

If “administrative resources” were used in previous elections, they have now been

consolidated under tighter Kremlin control. Collectively, the electoral commissions, law enforcement agencies, and courts have strengthened both the strategic and the operational control exerted by federal powers, and are thus becoming even more capable of having a dramatic effect on every electoral outcome.

Finally, with the elimination of single-mandate district elections (previously, half the 450 Duma seats were filled by deputies elected in majoritarian districts), parliamentary elections have become even less reflective of the concerns and expectations of voters. Strong independent deputies are kept out of the Duma. With full control over elections and political parties, and with members of the upper house of Russia's parliament requiring presidential confirmation, a switch to a fully proportional election in the lower chamber is but a variety of the rubber-stamping referendums of confidence in executive leaders seen in Central Asia.

It is not only that Russian-style overmanaged democracy has reduced politics to an imitation of an election struggle increasingly reminiscent of pro wrestling. It essentially represents a total lack of connection between elections and the operation of government. To the voter, such elections are not a mechanism of direct democracy, but a game or show, akin to the election of a high school student body president. If at school this vote is meant as training for real life, however, in Russian politics it serves as a substitute.

Like elsewhere, in Russia or Kazakhstan elections ought to be of vital importance to both government and society. For governments, transparent elections can provide legitimacy, help identify key social problems, secure channels for social energy and mobility that transcend corporate barriers, and, most importantly, serve as a mechanism of democratic reproduction and nurturing. For society, elections normally provide accountability, participation in decisionmaking, civic responsibility, political pluralism, and the power to shape the social agenda.

Large-scale evolution of the electoral landscape has taken place since the late 1980s and can be generalized as a demolition of sharp contrasts and of homogenization. Unlike in the early post-Soviet years, when it was possible to differ between two basic models of electoral behavior, urban and rural, and to approximate regional behavior by mixing these two models, intraregional contrasts have become weaker while contrasts between regions have at times become more durable. Thus, it is possible to observe proper regional peculiarities in electoral behavior and to look at the supranational features of an electoral landscape.

When dealing with continuity and change in electoral behavior the composition of the electorate is of great importance. After twenty years of post-Soviet development, there is now a new generation of voters who have grown up after communism's collapse. Although overmanaged elections do not typically allow a productive role for the younger generation, the Ukrainian example reminds us they have the capacity to protest and ultimately to decide the fate of elections in the case of large-scale electoral violations by a "managed democracy."

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