

# The Eve of Electoral Threshold: New Challenges in Russian Politics

Vladimir Gel'man  
October 1999  
PONARS Policy Memo 73  
European University at St. Petersburg

The ongoing cycle of Russia's national elections--parliamentary elections scheduled for December 19, 1999, and presidential elections, which should be held July 9, 2000 according to the constitution--represent a threshold in Russia's electoral politics. They draw a line between the uncertain period of post-communist transition and the formation (if not consolidation) of a new political regime. This new regime could be either a liberal democracy or a new (and even tougher) form of authoritarian rule: what emerges will be contingent upon the political outcomes of the new electoral cycle.

Despite the fact that since 1990 Russia experienced eight competitive national elections and three referenda (much more than the US during that time), their impact on Russia's political development has not been definitive. The elections were relatively free in terms of mass participation and opportunities for parties and candidates to run for public office. Although there is a lot of evidence of abuse of power, electoral fraud, and "dirty" electoral technologies, the political results of national elections have never been disputed. Some attempts to delay or postpone elections have failed, rejected both by the political elite and the general public. At the least, one cannot "bypass" voting procedures without a complete restructuring of Russia's political system. Reelection of new legislatures, governors and city mayors across the country serves as examples of real electoral democracy.

Nevertheless, elections in Russia have not yet become a mechanism for transition of power. No elections have resulted in a presidential or government turnover. Neither have changes of governmental policy had a direct or indirect relationship to electoral accountability. And no elections, even if they were free in terms of access of voters and parties to electoral competition, were fair because of the use of state resources in incumbent's reelection campaigns. Finally, despite the impressive quantity of elections penetrating all levels of power struggle, Russia does not have enough institutional guarantees to prevent the breakdown of elections or denouncing of electoral results if incumbents are defeated. The fate of both concrete campaigns and elections in Russia is too dependent on the balance of political forces, and their prospects will become clear only after the crucial electoral cycle of 1999-2000.

## **Elections as Transition**

The previous waves of 1989-1996 elections were a kind of referendum on the Soviet heritage--i.e., on the survival of the Communist regime in 1989-1991 and on its resurgence in 1993-1996. The 1996 presidential elections were a turning point marked by the failure of Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, who gathered 40.3% of eligible votes vis-à-vis Yeltsin, who was supported by 53.8% of voters. The majority of the Russian electorate voted against the Communist regime. But at the same time anti-Communism has been exhausted as well, reducing the salience of this issue in Russian electoral politics. The victory over Communists and the reelection of Yeltsin to a second term in office in 1996 resulted from the establishment of a broad anti-Communist (or, rather, pro-status quo) coalition, which included liberals, nationalists, state bureaucracy, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and enterprise directors. However, this coalition emerged from a negative consensus, which makes it a poor basis for consolidation of a new regime. Against the background of Yeltsin's physical and political weakening, Russia's new ruling class struggled over the "spoils"--grabbing public goods such as public offices, finance and property. It is not surprising that this coalition was speedily discredited; the 1998 economic crisis and permanent reshuffle of government (5 cabinets have been changed over 17 months) finally undermined the legitimacy of Russia's post-Communist regime.

In these circumstances the launching of new electoral campaigns seems to be a landmark of the post-Yeltsin period or, if you want, the war on Yeltsin's legacy. In a narrow sense, it means that the constitution does not allow Yeltsin to be reelected to a third term in office. In a broader sense, all political parties and leaders in the current campaign agree on the desirability of redesigning the policies and practices of decisionmaking during the Yeltsin period. However, the political consequences of this consensus are still unclear.

Moreover, Russia's institutional design is a great obstacle to these changes. Super-presidentialism, pending effective building of formal institutions, and the "winner-takes-all" outcome of presidential elections tend to provide incentives for informal ad hoc coalitions of political actors, based on the principle of arbitrary rule, rather than step-by-step strengthening of the rule of law. The absence of governmental accountability vis-à-vis parliament undermines the purpose of parliamentary elections and makes legislative activity and parliamentary party cooperation meaningless. Under these conditions, even if one could capture 100% of the Duma seats, it would not impact government politics.

Furthermore, asymmetric and highly decentralized federalism should mean the development of vertically integrated nation-wide political parties with strong local roots. Instead, political mobilization in the Russian provinces is controlled mainly by local political machines under regional bosses (which are represented ex officio in the upper chamber of Russia's parliament, the Federation Council). Thus, not one parliamentary party has a chance to pursue its policy and realize its program. This makes State Duma elections seem, in fact, like "primaries" on the eve of presidential elections.

## Contested Issues

The major actors in the new parliamentary campaign look similar to the previous one (held in 1995). The three general ideological camps--communists, liberals and nationalists--have remained nearly the same. Each camp is split between a number of parties, but only one party from each camp--respectively, the Communist Party (led by Gennady Zyuganov), Yabloko (led by Grigory Yavlinsky), and the Liberal Democratic Party (led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy)--has a real chance to overcome the 5% threshold to be represented in the new parliament. Although the current campaign has not repeated the 1995 experience--when 69 parties and coalitions announced their plans to run in Duma elections, with 43 of them included on the ballot list--Russia's party system remains highly fragmented. The only thing "new" on Russia's political landscape on the eve of parliamentary elections is the reorganization of the so-called "party of power." Russia's ruling groups currently tend to consolidate around two leading figures--former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov and powerful Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov--who seem popular enough as prospective candidates for Russia's presidency.

However, to look at Russia's parliamentary elections as only a contest of public relations agencies and campaigners would be oversimplified. At least four issue dimensions of these elections deserve the attention of policymakers:

- The future of economic policy in Russia is still not obvious. Although no one is satisfied with the "Kremlin" or "oligarchic" capitalism that emerged in Russia after the failure of Gaidar-Chubais politics and reforms, it is unclear whether Russia's politicians could adopt and implement alternative strategies other than a simple replacement of one clique of oligarchs with another;
- The prospects for constitutional reform depend too much on the will of the future president. This is because amendments to the current (or adoption of a new) constitution requires a high level of agreement among political society, while incentives for a future president to share his power with someone are weak;
- Federal-regional relations tend to decrease federal control over the regions. It is difficult to say whether federal authorities can recover their political initiative and authority in this respect. Moreover, the electoral success of parties and candidates (mainly of the "party of power") depends too much on the effective administrative mobilization of voters provided by regional elites, so that the winner will have to pay their clients for electoral loyalty. This may precipitate a new struggle over sharing the "spoils," which could finally weaken the federal state;
- Russia's foreign policy tensions with the West have recently been revitalized. This occurred with the abrupt U-turn of Russian Prime Minister Primakov's aircraft over the Atlantic Ocean at the very beginning of the Kosovo war. Against a background of growing Russian economic dependency on Western credits and investments, anti-Western attitudes have become mainstream among the Russian establishment, as well as the general public.

Nevertheless, the long-term outcome of elections themselves--including the formation of a new parliament, emergence of a new president and government, and quite probably constitutional reform--is more important than concrete electoral returns (including the specific composition of parliament, government policies, and the identity of whomever will succeed Yeltsin, whether Primakov, Luzhkov, or even Zyuganov). The latter are certainly of concern to Russia's short-term prospects. But in terms of the country's long-term prospects, the very fact of overcoming this electoral threshold by democratic means will have much more significance as a decisive step toward strengthening democracy and state capacity.

### **Cautions**

This "optimistic" scenario for Russia faces several challenges. The first and most important challenge concerns attempts to postpone or delay (or even hasten) elections by one or another means (state of emergency, coup d'état, or similar scenarios). Such actions are unlikely to succeed. However, if successful they could precipitate a full-scale breakdown of state capacity coupled with territorial disintegration, in a manner similar to the failed 1991 coup. The second challenge involves the peril of autocratic transformation of Russia's new presidency after the elections, and attempts by whomever is elected president to seek authoritarian solutions to the country's problems, based either on mass support, violence, or both. This scenario will doom Russia to a series of conflicts and the growth of regional and ethnic separatism. The third and even more dangerous challenge entails preservation of the status quo, further decay of state capacity and the "soft" disintegration of the federation in a *casiquismo* manner of some Latin American countries--where central authorities are unable to control most of their localities, which are governed by local criminal bosses. This peril is quite real for Russia, although it may be prevented through implementation of consistent federal policies.

Democracy in Russia cannot emerge by default through the popular election of certain leaders, even if they call themselves "democrats" and have good intentions. Rather, democracy is contingent upon the outcome of conflict between parties, movements and leaders. The building of democratic institutions in Russia is a long-term process characterized by the incremental accumulation of experience in institutional design, political competition, public participation, and power shifts. As one can see, from 1989 through 1996 Russia took its first--even though small and inconsistent--steps toward electoral democracy. The success or failure of this movement is dependent upon further steps that will be taken during the 1999-2000 elections.