

Assessing the Impact of Elections on Democratic Consolidation

Regina Smyth

October 1999

PONARS Policy Memo 76
Pennsylvania State University

US, NGO and Russian efforts to build effective political parties in Russia have met with limited success. Despite the clear potential for Russian parties to foster elite cooperation over policy solutions and popular control of government, elections have revealed parties to be little more than temporary campaign organizations for ambitious elites in Moscow and in the regions. Underdeveloped parties create the danger that Russian voters will become disaffected by the growing gap between state and society and the lack of governmental response to voter concerns, eroding public support for democracy.

As a result of lagging party development, the Russian democratic experiment remains fragile and demands serious, sustained attention. I advocate adopting more realistic measures to monitor democratic development. Election results and turnout numbers are not timely indicators of the state of Russian democracy. Once we observe large declines in turnout, a crisis is likely well underway; clearly if elections are cancelled, crisis has occurred. Rather than accept these limited indicators, we should view the effects of elections through the lens of party organizations to judge the long-term effects of competition and enhance our capacity to anticipate political developments. Importantly, a pro-active understanding of these effects will direct attention toward concrete steps to remedy the problem. The key to realizing the party system's potential to foster deepening of democracy in Russia is to increase incentives for political elites to invest political and economic resources in party structures.

Building Russian Parties is an Uphill Battle

The formation of party institutions requires appropriate institutional incentives, resources and time. Given that Russian party entrepreneurs and their NGO partners face a political environment lacking all three factors, they have made remarkable progress over the past ten years. To address the problems in the system, it is critical to recognize the structural constraints that impede party formation and provide incentives that mediate against party organizations that provide citizens with effective tools to hold elected officials responsible for their actions in office.

We Forgot about Existing Incentive Structures: It has become a familiar cry that US and IMF policies failed to consider Russian institutional structures when prescribing economic reform measures. This charge also applies to political reform. The institutional

structure adopted in 1993 was designed to protect the Yeltsin regime by ensuring that no opposition group could form a national base that would challenge its hold on power. The federal structure; sequential (as opposed to simultaneous) elections for president, parliament and regional offices; mixed single-member district/proportional representation parliamentary election law; and preponderance of power in the presidency rather than the parliament all mediate against the formation of cohesive, national party organizations. In this environment, governmental and NGO aid devoted to building party structures is severely handicapped.

The Soviet Legacy Rears its Head: The failure to consider the effects of existing institutional structures is compounded by the lack of attention paid to the skewed distribution of political resources within the elite. After 1991, few reformers controlled the resources that win elections--i.e., patronage or clientelist levers, strong reputations for providing effective services, cash, access to the media, and an organized party brand-name label. As a result, ambitious democrats across Russia competed for resources emanating from Moscow, wreaking havoc on established elite networks and hindering party development. The Yeltsin government has institutionalized skewed resource distribution and the pattern of competition among like-minded, well-resourced politicians reoccurs every electoral period.

Race Against Time: The process of forging stable ties between voters and leaders is difficult under any circumstances. Given this, we should moderate expectations but at the same time keep an eye on the trajectory of institutional development. Russia's recurring pattern of parties-in-ruins following electoral competition suggests that time alone will not promote the growth of stable, durable party organizations. Examples of this phenomenon are the mass defections from Democratic Choice of Russia (DVR) following the party's poor showing in 1993 elections or the disintegration of Women of Russia after the 1995 elections.

Lost Potential: Evidence that Elections Damage Party Organizations

My studies of nine key party organizations over two years reveal that the ability of parties to connect with voters on issues has been stagnant or diminishing. Recent experience shows that under the current system, proximity to elections slows the party-building process. Elite bargaining and coalition-formation in the past six months appears to have undermined parties' efforts to nurture stable ties to their voters. The data show that a number of coalitions bring together organizational partners that do not agree amongst themselves on political, economic, or cultural issues salient to the electorate. In addition, with this election as in the past, voters are faced with an entirely reworked political landscape in which some important contenders have declined precipitously while newcomers have emerged swiftly and with minimal information available to the public.

The Left: Survey data expose the deep schism within the Communist Party (KPRF) that recently provoked an official split in the party. While party functionaries generally agree on economic policies based on state ownership and control in both agriculture and

industry, they are divided on questions of social policy (nationalized medical insurance and the treatment of ethnic minorities) and national security (cooperation with NATO and trade regulation). The splintering of the coalition led by the KPRF has the potential to divide the electorate along these two issue dimensions and also along social/demographic lines. The latter trend is highlighted by the rise of the pensioner's party, and splits in the Agrarian Party and the Women of Russia movement. While this might be viewed as a positive step in party development, the degree of leftist fragmentation suggests that most splinter groups will fall short of the 5% electoral threshold, leaving large numbers of anti-system voters without representation in the national government.

The Emerging Center: With Aleksandr Lebed's withdrawal from parliamentary elections, newcomers dominate the political center. March 1999 evidence shows that the Luzhkov/Primakov coalition (Fatherland/All Russia) exhibits lower issue coherence than all parties except for Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR). This evidence along with the show of support of major regional machine bosses suggests that the bloc will campaign on short-term patronage or charismatic appeals rather than clearly articulated issue positions. Further, although opponents perceive Fatherland/All Russia as centrist, to the extent that there is agreement, party insiders articulate center-left positions advocating state activism and strong central authority evidenced by party members' positions on censorship of the press, treatment of minorities, and government ownership of industrial and agricultural property. Edinstvo (Unity), the newest electoral coalition to form, appears to have been fostered by the Kremlin to counteract the appeal of the Fatherland/All Russia movement. Because of its late entry onto the political landscape Edinstvo was not included in my study, but its position in favor of regional autonomy defines a potential rift with Fatherland, whose adherents support the president's right to remove elected governors. This bloc also draws significant support from disaffected regional governors, most of whom won their positions based on patronage-based appeals rather than clearly articulated issue positions.

The Right: The right or reform parties exhibit the highest levels of issue coherence over time. However, this masks significant intra- and inter-party differences across the three major parties. Democratic Choice of Russia (DVR) defines the far-right political spectrum. There is significant disagreement among DVR party functionaries on social issues. Both findings suggest serious constraints facing DVR's coalition partners, collectively known as "Just Cause." Just Cause brings together a number of well-known "young reformers" who have served (and been fired by) Boris Yeltsin over the past five years. In contrast, Yabloko, led by Grigory Yavlinsky, exhibits the greatest capacity to link to voters on the basis of consistently articulated issue positions across the whole range of issue bundles. Yabloko has steadfastly worked to build party unity and has eschewed formal coalition with other party organizations on the right side of the political spectrum. On key issues such as land ownership, national health insurance, and privatization processes based on efficiency rather than fairness criteria, Yabloko members appear to have moderated their issue positions relative to other right parties, so it falls closer to the center than either DVR or Our Home is Russia (NDR). Given its roots as the party of power in the Chernomyrdin administration, NDR has declined significantly since the last election as its access to governmental resources dried up.

NDR's right-leaning issue positions underscore problems inherent in a potential NDR-Edinstvo coalition and have proved an impediment to all other moderate coalition partners.

Finally, Zhirinovskiy's LDPR party, which is likely to compete as Zhirinovskiy's bloc because of a recent National Election Commission disqualification of the formal party organization, is difficult to place within a left-right rubric. Incoherence across party functionaries' positions and Zhirinovskiy's relatively low personal ratings suggest that party-voter linkages are based on very limited patronage appeals. However, the party remains unified on the issue of treatment of non-Russians within the federation, and this issue is likely to be an extremely salient issue in this election. In the past, pre-election polls have severely under-reported Zhirinovskiy's support and this is likely to be the case in this round as well.

Recommendations for Making Electoral Competition Compatible with Party-Building Goals

Institutional structures governing both electoral competition and national decision-making provide conflicting incentives for politicians interested in building parties. While it is not realistic to expect policymakers to reinvent the political system, there are a number of incremental steps that could be taken to reconcile conflicting incentives for elites to cooperate before and during the election period. Such steps would enhance elite capacity to integrate and represent voters' interests within party organizations. These steps are:

- Adopt mechanisms that require all candidates to affiliate with political parties and promote party control over ballot access;
- Tighten restrictions on pre-election coalition-formation to foster early cooperation among potential candidates;
- Synchronize national and regional elections and presidential and parliamentary elections to reinforce new incentives to strengthen parties;
- Increase electoral oversight and enforce limits on resources devoted to building personal campaign machines; and
- Encourage constitutional reform that strengthens the parliament vis-à-vis the president in order to strengthen party control over the policy process.