

The 2000 Presidential Elections: The Political Taste and Aftertaste

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The first relatively free and fair elections to the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR took place on March 26, 1989. These elections gave a strong impetus to the political development of the society and started a period of electoral democracy. Though shocked, the Soviet nomenklatura did not disappear. Adjusting to the changed conditions, the Russian nomenklatura came to the 1993 elections more or less prepared. The unstable array of political forces and the specifics of Yeltsin's regime construction made the 1995-96 presidential elections appear as a kind of political plurality.

March 26, 2000, represented the culmination of an eleven-year-long period of transformation from the Soviet decorative democracy into a Russian manipulative democracy. The circle closed: at the start of a new spiral, society returned to predetermined election results and the practice of approving the appointed leader. To question whether elections were free and fair misses the point, because those criteria are not applicable here: it is quite a different genre, like evaluating popular American wrestling by the rules of classic Greco-Roman wrestling. The 2000 elections could not be clean regardless of procedure given the tough clash of elite clans on the eve of elections, the negative mobilization of the electorate inspired by the Kremlin and the war in Chechnya, and the early resignation of the former president designed to give the maximum advantage to the new one.

A Shift in Fundamental Trends

The 1999-2000 elections were once again about the "preservation of power" and not about its transfer, despite recent expectations to the contrary. The Kremlin has a large advantage due to the colossal administrative resources under its control and the particularities of the election law. The law allows for the removal of inconvenient opposition candidates due to inaccurate reporting of information about themselves and members of their families (with official means to verify this information, it is not difficult for security services to find inaccuracies). The legal campaign spending limit is about one million dollars: given that the campaigns of current Duma deputies hit this limit and that, as a rule, gubernatorial campaigns are significantly more expensive, the financing law can be considered a Damocles' sword that can be dropped on the head of any candidate that opposes the Kremlin.

In other ways, this cycle of elections was different. First, there was a completely different sociopolitical background. The depth and severity of the most recent upheavals create a fundamentally different social reaction to the current war in Chechnya than that of 1996. This reflects a change that is significantly deeper than a situational reaction to the Moscow apartment bombings--dramatic acts of terrorism in Moscow that were orchestrated by "Chechen terrorists." It is possible to understand this change only as a letting of the negative energy that accumulated during the past decade. The first signal was the inappropriate reaction to events in Kosovo in the spring of 1999). It represents tremendous social fatigue with political and economic instability, disappointment in so-called reforms that did not bring positive results to Russian citizens, and a loss of faith in democratic institutions.

Much has been lost: the feeling of pride in one's country as a great power, support from the government and confidence in the future, social protection, and a belief in governmental fairness. The ordinary person--not long ago a Soviet, now a Russian--has received almost nothing in return. Indeed, he is now able to truly participate in elections, but he sees that the results depend more on financial and administrative resources and that change in personalities does not bring improvement in his lot. Yes, he has more possibilities open to him and his fate depends more on himself, but basic social guarantees have vanished and only a few really have access to the new possibilities. Society is acutely stratified between the very few "rich" and the oppressed majority, which considers itself swindled.

In Russian society, the psychology of state paternalism has always dominated. For a while, this psychology dropped into the background, but here, too, everything has come full circle. Having hurried too quickly into the future, society has lost its stability and is now taking a step back, trying to regain its balance. The forward-oriented society of the future is now turning to the past. A reaction is coming; it is only a question of where and how. Society has found itself in the role of a child who was able to free itself from its parents' control but was not able to become an adult or teach itself to live independently. Now, the child once more turns back towards its parent, which spans it but takes it under wing and takes care of everything.

Losers and Survivors

The candidates campaigned for only 21 days, but the campaign did not begin on January 5, 2000, when the Federation Council set the election date as March 26. That period was either a decisive stage in the transfer of power, or perhaps it was the legitimization of the transfer that had already taken place. In reality, a turbulent, cutthroat, dirty campaign took place during all of 1999, and the first stage culminated with the Duma elections of December 19. It was precisely during this first stage that the Kremlin assigned itself the task of "shutting out" all inconvenient and dangerous candidates.

None of those who a year ago were considered viable candidates for the presidency (Yuri Luzhkov, Yevgeny Primakov, Aleksandr Lebed, and possibly Yevgeny Stroyev and Georgi Seleznev) actually participated in the campaign. Strictly speaking, it is impossible

to even speak of a "campaign," since the race quickly became a contest for a consolation third or fourth place.

Engulfed in a wave of "scandals," Luzhkov was sunk by the destroyed image of Moscow as a bastion of order and welfare after the explosions, by the plugging up of financial resources and media channels, and by the transfer of control over security forces to the center. The government dispensed with Primakov more gently by conducting an information war highlighting his old age. He was also sunk by the radical change in public opinion after the apartment explosions and the beginning of the second war in Chechnya--under which circumstances he lost much of his support to the young and decisive Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. As for Lebed, on the eve of the Duma elections, a whole volume of scandalous documents connected with multiple expenditures above the legal limit during his 1998 gubernatorial campaign suddenly appeared. Then, after the apartment bombings, his image as a peacekeeper who stopped the war in the Caucasus came under attack by the mass media, which transformed him into a betrayer of the national interests of Russia and stopped just short of accusing him of being responsible for the terrorism in Chechnya.

The total domination of the Kremlin's candidate was already clear entering the Duma elections. Precisely because of this and in order to strengthen the advantage already held, Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation. The elections were needed by the Kremlin only as a legitimization of the transfer of power that had already occurred. It was also necessary to have the appearance of strong candidates to oppose the Kremlin's candidate.

For the Kremlin, the participation of Gennady Zyuganov was very important. In theory, the Communists could have called for a boycott of the elections, and given their control over about a fourth of all active voters, there would have been a serious risk the elections would be invalid. This option was discussed by the party leadership, but there was a risk involved: if the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) refused to participate and the elections were declared valid anyway (the Kremlin could pressure the governors, and Putin might have received considerable support from the KPRF's electorate), the KPRF would have disappeared from the political arena. The leaders' caution triumphed and as in 1993 and 1996, they opted for cooperation with the government. In the elections, Zyuganov played the role of the Kremlin's sparring partner. In return, the Communists received a considerable consolation package in the Duma (the post of Speaker and one third of the committee chairmen), and possibly something more after the elections.

In order to get the West to recognize the elections as democratic, the most important thing was the participation of the "main liberal" and "leader of the intelligentsia" Grigory Yavlinsky. The breakup of Yabloko was possible after its defeat in the Duma elections, but Yavlinsky agreed to give the presidential elections appropriate weight with his participation, acting in the role of "Zyuganov for the intelligentsia." Having received from the Kremlin support in the form of hired experts and money, he became the Lebed option of 1996. The difference was that Lebed had no real party while Yavlinsky had one. Moreover, he played a different role: not to bring out additional voters, but to

"verify" the democratic nature of the elections and to create a dissenting option for the intelligentsia, who are still unwilling to openly support the recent director of the FSB.

The Broader Implications for Russia's Party System

The presidential elections continued the trend of weakening and atomizing of parties. A process of "pocketing" parties by the Kremlin is underway, which is most noticeable in relation to the KPRF and Yabloko. This trend was sounded at the recent party congress of the pro-government Unity party, when for the first time since 1995, the government was presented with a new "plan of national party structure"--the dominating party of power plus the KPRF as the sole systematically formed party of the opposition, and maybe the Union of Right-Wing Forces as an ideological party with a future; Yabloko and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) were not given a spot in this plan.

What is happening to the parties with regards to the elections? The loose and amorphous Unity, which many predicted would disintegrate after the Duma elections just like a prince's knights (assembled for a campaign and then disbanded after it) was instead strengthened and has engaged in party-building (in the regions, this process differs little from that undergone by Fatherland/All Russia only a year ago).

The KPRF, which many predict with enviable regularity will disintegrate and its electorate will die out, demonstrates very good form and little threatens it in the foreseeable future. The same, however, cannot be said of the current party leadership and in particular about Zyuganov himself. Friction is evident between both the party leadership and rank-and-file deputies, and between the leadership and regional party members. This tendency is aggravated by the fact that a significant number of regional party leaders now find themselves in the Duma, a development which threatens to put more pressure on the faction leaders and to cause a split with the regions. Symptomatic of this tension is the fact that on the eve of the March 26 elections, in a poll conducted by VTsIOM, every fifth supporter of Zyuganov declared that in the event of a second round, they would support Putin.

The Union of Right-Wing Forces (URWF) came undone, apparently having had every possibility of promoting its own candidate--that being Konstantin Titov--and advancing him into third place. Here, the abundant ambitions of its leaders came into play. Some of the leaders--represented by Antoly Chubais and Sergei Kirienko as well as a large part of the URWF's Duma deputies--decided to cooperate with Putin, essentially preferring to make a one-time trade now that would bring more long-term benefits to the party, establishing a foundation for making political deals down the road.

Grigory Yavlinsky would appear to be victorious in that he at least appears to have avoided the quick political death that many had forecast for him not too long ago. Of course, his personal position within Yabloko is more complicated. The small size and weakness of the faction in the Duma, combined with its weakened position in the regions and the unfavorable results in the most recent gubernatorial elections, and finally,

Yavlinsky's current Lebed-style campaign based on the support of hired experts and not of internal forces, do not help to plug the hole created in the party ship during the Duma elections. Moreover, Yabloko--although primarily a leader-based party--is also strong in team play and the emerging split between the leader and the party activists may lead to a crisis for both.

The regional elite were called upon to play a particular role in these elections. Having again been defeated in their attempt at a more or less organized opposition to the center and in their active participation in the struggle for power in 1999, they have now shown their loyalty to the acting President, having actively supported his Unity party in December. After the election their position is more precarious: there were no alternatives to a Putin presidency and they themselves are up for re-election in the fall. One should not have expected less (and perhaps even more) mass falsification than that which occurred in the second round of the 1996 presidential elections and in the 1993 gubernatorial elections for the Federation Council. The situation is paradoxical: the result of the elections was almost pre-decided, yet there will be falsification--so that the regional barons could demonstrate their devotion to the candidate.

And yet another paradox: while federal elections are usually a time of intensive political bargaining between the regions and the center--of decentralization and weakening of the center--this time the opposite is occurring. The center, in the form of the acting president, is negotiating from a position of authority and the governors are not thinking about how to get more, but rather how to lose less. From this weakness follow their oaths of allegiance and their suggesting limits on their own power (such as returning to the appointment of regional heads, or enlarging regions for administrative purposes).

The overall result of the elections was a complete change of scenery--the depopulation of the political arena. Veterans like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Grigory Yavlinsky transited from the second tier down to the third. The set design was more spare and functional than in the elections of 1996 and 1999. Vladimir Ryzhkov's opinion that "there are no longer any parliamentary parties as such, but rather only degrees of pro-government orientation," (Segodnya, April 4, 2000) could be supplemented with another observation; there are no longer any politicians as such--merely leaders who support the government to different degrees.

Russia's political space has been restructured: from bipolarity, to the possibility of multipolarity, to its present unipolarity. On June 16, 1996, five presidential candidates showed results above 5%, sharing amongst themselves 95% of all votes cast. The leaders--Yeltsin and Zyuganov--received a third of the votes each (Yeltsin somewhat more than Zyuganov). This time, the leader, Vladimir Putin, received more than half of all votes. Zyuganov received almost two times fewer, and coming third with a tenth of Putin's total was Yavlinsky. The remaining eight outsider candidates were unable to grab even 3%, the minimum required by federal law in order not to have to repay federal campaign money. Only two of them, Aman Tuleev (2.95%) and Zhirinovskiy (2.70%) managed to pull in more votes than the number of votes cast against all candidates (1.88%). Two candidates, Konstantin Titov and Ella Pamfilova, received fewer votes than registration

signatures, while the remainder showed results in the range of a few hundred votes (Umar Dzhabrailov, Aleksei Podberezkin) and 3 to 4 tenths of a percent (Yuri Skuratov, Stanislav Govorukhin). To sum it all up: the second tier of forces essentially conceded to the first, while the third vanished altogether. The absence of new names and the sweeping marginalization of current politicians, and the squeezing of their electorate led to the creation of a political wasteland.

The Protest Vote and Voter Abstention Were Overestimated

The announcement of the election results did not cause any particular shock or even surprise comparable to the reaction to the LDPR's party-list victory in 1993; to the extremely strong result achieved by Aleksandr Lebed in June 1996; to Unity's surge in December 1999; or to the fiascoes for Russia's Choice and Fatherland/All Russia in 1993 and 1999, respectively. On the whole, the results were completely consistent with the general expectations and predictions of most sociologists. Still, this predictability does not mean that, as the campaign evolved, fears and expectations did not arise. The most serious of these erroneous predictions had to do with the problems of low voter turnout and of votes cast against all candidates.

It was thought that several factors might so lower voter interest that turnout would be below the 50% necessary for a valid election. It was expected that--given a predefined outcome, the absence of Primakov as a candidate, the lack of a strong candidate from the Right, the loss of polarized left-right opposition, and the anemic campaign--interest in the elections would be weaker than usual. Had the March 26 elections been invalidated because of insufficient voter turnout, it was expected that Putin's position would be weakened in the second elections. For the same reasons, and because of the lack of alternative candidates, a high number of protest votes were expected. One should remember that in the December Duma elections, the number of votes "against all lists" was 3.3% nationwide and in eight single-mandate districts was greater than the vote-total of the leading candidate.

Turnout was 68.7%, which was exactly the same as that in the second tour of the 1996 elections and 10% higher than the Duma elections three months earlier (61.9%). It is hard to explain why the gap between turnout in the presidential and Duma elections in this cycle grew compared to the last cycle, especially taking into account the more acerbic nature of these Duma elections (when compared to 1995) and the presidential elections (in comparison to 1996). In the last predictions before the elections, the leading sociological centers gave lower estimates--on the order of 64-65%. On election day, observers focused their attention on the sharp rise in the turnout figures in the evening as listed in the Central Election Committee's bulletins. In the regions, turnout was practically unchanged from July 1996, although in cases such as Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Komi, voter turnout was up 10-15%.

Explaining the lower than expected number of votes against all candidates is also not simple, insofar as the gap here is especially large. The tally of votes against all candidates

was 1.9%, which is a little more than in the first round of 1996 (1.6%) and a little less than in 1991 (2.0%). During the campaign, many had predicted 10% or more, while predictions on the eve of the election were on the order of 3% (and even the exit polls were 3.4%). The highest levels of protest were in Moscow (5.9%) and the Moscow region (3.7%), Khabarovskiy krai (2.7%), St. Petersburg (2.5%) and Kamchatka (2.4%). The lowest levels were in the republics and okrugs: Dagestan (0.2%), Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkariya, both Buryatsky okrugs (0.6%), Mordoviya and North Ossetia (0.8%)--and they were even joined by Orenburgskaya region (0.8%). Astonishingly, the majority of these regions had high turnout and a large number of votes for Putin.

Regional Patterns in Voter Support

Among the less significant surprises of the election was the higher than expected vote total for Zyuganov, whom many had predicted would take in around 25% (VTsIOM had even predicted 22-24%) and the lower than expected total for Yavlinsky. The reaction of both candidates to the announcement of the Central Election Committee results was the same; both alleged that there had been falsification and that their votes had been stolen to the advantage of Putin (Zyuganov) and Zyuganov (Yavlinsky). The candidates even specified concrete regions in which, from their point of view, large-scale falsification had taken place, including Moscow (transfer of votes from Yavlinsky to Zyuganov), Dagestan, Bashkiriya, Kabardino-Balkariya, Tatarstan, North Ossetia and others (transfer of Zyuganov's votes to Putin).

Putin was first in every region except for five: the Altai republic, Bryansk, Lipetsk and Omsk oblasts (where Zyuganov came in first) and Kemerovo oblast (where Tuleev emerged victorious). Note that in 1991 when Yeltsin won by a considerable margin (57.3% versus 16.8% for Ryzhkov), he also surrendered five regions including Kemerovo oblast to the same Tuleev and four national regions (including Altai) to the Communist candidate Ryzhkov. In 1996, Yeltsin's victory tally over Zyuganov was 46 to 43 in the first round and 57 to 32 in the second.

The spread of votes for Putin varied, from 25% in Kemerovo oblast to 85.4% in Ingushetia. Without these extremes, the spread varied between 38% to 76%, while in an overwhelming majority of the regions, the range was even narrower, from 40% to 70%. In 33 regions, Putin collected less than half of all votes. This occurred in the Far East and southern Siberia, certain central regions (Moscow and its south), and the regions along the Volga. The highest level of support for Putin came from those republics that had voted for Fatherland/All Russia three months earlier (Ingushetia, Tatarstan, Bashkiriya, Kabardino-Balkariya), in the northwest around his hometown St. Petersburg, and in the Urals. It is interesting to note that the pattern of voting for Putin is in no way connected with Unity (the correlation coefficient is 0.1 in all regions and 0.3 in all oblasts and krajs), and has much more in common with the aggregate voting for the three "parties of power:" Unity, Fatherland/All Russia and the Union of Right-Wing Forces (correlation coefficient of 0.6). The difference between the electoral base of Unity and that of Putin became evident on the night after the voting when the Central Election Committee

reported the results. The progression from east to west yielded a consistent lowering of Unity's results and raising of Putin's.

Regions varied in their donations to the campaign chests of the candidates, led by the "big seven" (Moscow city and Moscow region, St. Petersburg, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Krasnodarsky krai, Sverdlovskaya oblast). It is important to really understand the role of administrative resources in the key regions in situations of a similar kind. If, on average, we appraise the value of these resources at 10%--which would be a reduction for Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Krasnodarsky krai, regions whose leaders supported Putin--then it appears that without support from the leaders of the largest six or seven regions, Putin would not have been able to win in the first round.

Analyzing Zyuganov from vote to vote reveals the astounding stability of his support. The correlation coefficient between voting for the leader of the KPRF in March and for the KPRF three months earlier in the Duma elections was 0.8 in all regions and 0.9 in all oblasts and krajs (Table 2). The growth rate of his support was highest in Tuva (threefold), the Altai republic, Moscow, and Taymyr (twofold). The largest drop was in Dagestan, Kemerovskaya oblast, and Koryaksky okrug (Table 3, Fig. 1). Moscow, this time, gave Zyuganov a third of his votes. Compared to the Duma elections, Zyuganov did relatively poorly in Russia's northern Caucasus and in Astrakhan, and did very well (one and a half times better) in the Far East and Siberia. In the ten largest "Zyuganov regions," with the exception of Krasnodarsky krai, there was significant growth.

Yavlinsky in these elections collected practically the same amount of votes as Yabloko had in December, giving him grounds to claim a base of support. Analysis shows that there was a relatively high correlation between voting for Yabloko in December 1999 and its leader in March 2000: the coefficient correlation for all regions was 0.8 (0.6 for Yavlinsky and Union of Right-Wing Forces). If one looks only at the oblasts and krajs, the correlation between Yavlinsky and Yabloko does not change. The main story of the 2000 elections is the explosive growth of Yavlinsky's popularity in the city of Moscow (18.6%--his absolute record), where the leader of Yabloko, having doubled the December result, received one fifth of all his votes. Evidently, Yavlinsky picked up a significant part of the votes that had gone to Fatherland/All Russia, whose support in the capital had a fundamentally different nature (i.e., more liberal) than in the "all-Russian" national republics. Yavlinsky's position in the larger Moscow region also improved noticeably, although his support was below 1995 levels. The only region in which Yavlinsky and Yabloko enjoyed a steady growth of support in 1995 was Permskaya oblast. In sum, compared with 1999, Yabloko's position improved in 12 regions, while it remained practically unchanged in 12 others; in the rest it deteriorated.

The incredibly high correlation between the votes for Yavlinsky in March 2000 and votes against all candidates (0.9 in December 1999) evidently says something about the similarity of the two forms of protest votes.

Conclusion

What do presidential elections mean for Russian society? Developments since September 1999 can be understood as strengthening the state, which in itself is not bad. What is bad is the weakness of Russian society, which is totally dependent on the state. This makes inevitable the weakening and even the disappearance of some elements of the last decade's democratization. These developments originate from the weakness of the state, not from the strength of the society. In time, the weakening and disappearance of some elements of federalization connected with the weak center rather than with strong regions look similarly inevitable. However, the latter development is positive because what was called Russian federalism was in reality semi-feudalism, because the weak center did not intervene in the regions (including with respect to human rights violations) in exchange for the demonstration of loyalty by regional elites during national elections. Society found itself being divided along 89 pieces, getting dozens of authoritarian regimes instead of the single Soviet one.

Like summer in the tundra, the brief blossoming of Russian democracy in all its chaos has come to an end. The bloom period is over, ephemeral plants have faded, light frosts are coming, and Russian society is falling asleep. The question is how deep and how long this sleep will be, and whether any of democracy's shallow roots will survive.

We should not succumb to illusions about the future of civil society development in Russia, at least in the short term. We can console ourselves, however, by the fact that both the president and the Duma elected three months earlier are suited to society in its present state. Furthermore, regardless of how bad it looks, the current scenario (reminiscent of the "two-headed eagle" scenario suggested by Daniel Yergin and Thane Gustafson) is the best possible one. There was a choice between strengthening the state, represented by Putin (and earlier by Primakov), and further weakening the state, leading to chaos, violent elite clashes, and disintegration. Given this alternative, strengthening the state--even with the relative weakening of Russian society--looks preferable for the time being.