

Regional Elections under Putin and Prospects for Russian Electoral Democracy

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Elections are a cornerstone of Russian democracy and crucial to our understanding of its fragile and transforming nature. A dozen years of elections is, perhaps, the major achievement of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet transformation in Russia. It is due primarily to elections, for instance, that one is able to speak about Russia's transition to democracy, at least in the electoral sense. Elections in Russia play a dual role. They shape society, as they did at the beginning of transition when they stirred up public hope and interest in the country's democratic development. Elections also reflect in detail the state of society as a whole, serving at each particular point in time as a mirror in which society can see itself and make predictions for the future.

A new and significant electoral cycle is starting next year. The most recent Duma and presidential elections were marked by rather essential shifts when compared with the electoral cycle of 1993–1996. Moreover, Putin's regime brought some important changes to the political landscape and to society as a whole. It is important to understand the potential impact of all these processes on forthcoming elections and on democratic development in Russia in general. Recent regional elections offer an opportunity to analyze the current state of Russian electoral democracy.

Lessons From Regional Elections

To say that almost all recent regional elections (in Yakutia and Primor'ye, Nizhny Novgorod and Krasnoyarsky krai, Ingushetia and Kalmykia) were sullied and scandalous is not saying anything new. These recent elections, however, did highlight some novelties. The electoral experience of the past two years can be summarized as follows:

- The fate of elections is more and more often decided not at polling stations but in Kremlin offices, courtrooms, and election commission headquarters. Using courts and *izbirkoms* (election commissions) in favor of the ruling candidate is not new. What is new is that the Kremlin is able to exert new influence on electoral outcomes by manipulating court decisions. Now that the center—instead of the regional authorities—controls the courts, courts are ruling in favor of the center, and their decisions are final. There is no longer any hope

of unfavorable decisions being appealed to the center because the court's decisions reflect the will of the center.

- Although the average competitiveness of gubernatorial elections has not decreased, the essence of the balance of power in the regions has shifted significantly. What we see now is more a competition among different ruling elite groupings (including big business)—like the Family, headed by the presidential chief of staff Alexander Voloshin; the Old St. Petersburgers, headed by Anatoly Chubais; and the New St. Petersburgers, headed by the deputy head of the presidential administration Viktor Ivanov—rather than competition among political parties. Regional elections highlighted the competition among different central-regional administrative resources, including usage of courts and law enforcement agencies, state-owned mass media and budgetary assets.
- The situation in Russia now is reminiscent of the time of the Golden Horde, when the khan gave princes a *yarlyk*, or permission to hold a certain title. Now the Kremlin's *yarlyk* gives regional leaders a license to rule prior to elections, and includes the use of administrative resources so that these pre-selected leaders can switch on the electoral machine to their advantage. When the electoral system is controlled or manipulated in such a manner, the role of elections becomes one of legitimizing existing power rather than providing a mechanism for the transfer of power.

In comparing the latest gubernatorial elections with previous elections, two major distinctions emerge: the latest election saw a high number of incumbents not running for re-election, largely due to Kremlin pressure, and those who were permitted to run by the Kremlin generally did quite well. The secret services, police, and army generals served the role of a cadre reserve for the Kremlin in cases where it wanted to replace a governor. Governors were successfully replaced by generals in Kaliningrad, Ul'yanovsk, Voronezh, Smolensk, and Ingushetia. Attempts by the center to replace the governor of Kursk were, however, unsuccessful. Presidential envoys in federal districts played a very active, although not very positive, role in recent elections by promoting their candidates and interfering in the election process.

- It is a good sign that these electoral and political scandals are receiving publicity. This publicity, however, does not lead to revisions in election results or criminal prosecution for fraud. Although the press barks about these scandals, as the well-known expression goes “?????? ????, ?????? ????” [the dog may bark, but the caravan keeps going]—the caravan of fraud continues on. It should be emphasized, however, that most scandalous elections are not necessarily less democratic. Scandals show the existence of sharp conflicts and a certain pluralism in the mass media, while in numerous quiet elections, there is either total dominance by one political actor or a lack of publicity. (see Petrov on results of the study of democracy in regions based on 1999-2002 elections at <http://www.fednews.ru>).

The Reform of Electoral Legislation

Large-scale reform of electoral legislation began only after Putin came to power. As head of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) Alexander Veshnyakov stated, “We have not undertaken a systematic renewal of legislation in the past eight years.” (Veshnyakov’s interview to *Vlast’*, July 2, 2002). The reform strategy was laid out in a 2000 CEC report, “On the improvement and development of electoral legislation.” It began with the adoption of the law “On political parties” and amendments to the law “On basic guarantees of voters’ rights and of the right of Russian Federation citizens to participate in referendum.” These reforms primarily affected Russia’s regions: they introduced the mixed proportional-majoritarian electoral system, and the regional authorities’ control over election commissions has been weakened in favor of the electoral vertical, with CEC control over regional elections instead.

The new version of the law “On elections of the State Duma deputies,” in effect since December 2002, contains many innovations, including a fixed date for elections (the second Sunday of December), a shortened campaign period, a sharp increase in allowed expenditures from electoral funds (a two-fold increase from one to two million rubles for candidates in a single-mandate district and a six fold increase, up to 150 million rubles, for parties and electoral blocs), a more strict and formalized procedure for refusal of registration, and a very broad and amorphous definition of “electoral agitation,” putting the mass media at an increased risk of sanctions. The new version of the law increases control by the center and reduces non-sanctioned mass activism. Political parties are now the only groups sanctioned to nominate candidates in elections. Parties, however, are already under strong administrative control as a result of the law “On political parties.”

Federal legislative reforms were completed in February 2003, when the last blocks of amendments to the laws on banking activity, mass media, civil procedure, and criminal codes will be accepted. It will take more time to change regional laws but, in the second half of 2003, new rules for elections to regional legislatures will be obligatory. One of the major lessons to be learned from the most recent elections’ problems is of a political rather than technical nature. The law itself is sufficient; it is the practice of the law that needs to be improved. Merely changing legislation will not improve conditions when a division of power is absent both in its classic horizontal way, and in the vertical way typical for Russia pre-Putin. Public control of elections, which has been absent ever since the first revolutionary 1989–1990 voting, is what is really important.

Back to the Soviet-like Future

Seventy years of staged Soviet elections accustomed Russian society to regard elections as a kind of political theater rather than a serious event with important implications for both the individual and the state as a whole. The show has changed since the early 1990s: the revolutionary character of elections, the unpredictability of their results, the sincerity of nonprofessional actors, and the participation of the masses themselves have been replaced by various high-quality technical effects like professionalism or commercialization. Nonetheless, elections essentially remain a show in the eyes of the public. Although they became a necessary and expensive feature of Russian politics,

Russia's elections, unlike those in the liberal democracies of the West, have remained ornamental rather than evolved into a solid self-supporting institution

Looking to the future, there should not be either extreme optimism or pessimism with regard to Russian elections. Any election—even a staged one—is better than no election. Whatever shape or form elections take, their very presence signals their transformation into an indispensable element of public politics and the injection of democratic procedures into mainstream, normative ways of thinking (thus fostering the organic development of public interest in democracy and politics in general). Moreover, elections serve as a conduit for important feedback between society and the ruling class. Most importantly, stable and democratic elections will be a stimulus toward the consolidation of democratic reforms—at least among the elite, if not society as a whole. Finally, they provide a marker along Russia's path toward democracy that will allow additional goals to be set.

How stable is the institution of democratic elections in Russia? There has been much debate concerning this question following the inauguration of Vladimir Putin as president and the development of what many see as a mild version of a quasi-police regime. The question is a legitimate one; indeed, as Stephen White, Richard Rose, and Ian McAllister rightly point out, “Before an election, politicians debate not only who should win but also whether an election should be held at all.” The abolition of elections as a political mechanism in Russia seems unlikely, as there are too many parties interested in their continuation. The political elite needs elections to be legitimate. It goes without saying that businesses connected to elections have a strong vested interest in their continuation (even if not in the classic, liberal democratic sense). Civil society needs elections both to serve as a pillar of democracy and to understand its limitations. Thus the most likely outlook for the future is the continued transformation of elections in the direction observed in the 1999–2002 cycle.

Russia's electoral system has indeed made great progress toward the democratic ideal that its leaders have envisioned since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Nevertheless, while the formal Soviet system of elections with its facade of democracy has been reformed, Russia has retained many of its old values. Some basic antidemocratic features of Russia's present electoral system are reminiscent of its Soviet predecessor. Above all, these features are growing administrative control over elections through agencies such as electoral commissions, predetermined results that the public passively accepts, the use of law to promote desired candidates and exclude others and, finally, the decline in the importance of elected officials in public culture. What it all comes down to is the lack of public participation in the formation of the electoral process and the alienation of ordinary citizens.

Elections are discredited by the public for a number of reasons: public expectations of democratic institutions and the individuals who come to power through them are too high; Russian democracy's delegating nature, by which Russian citizens view democracy not as a system that needs to be nurtured from day-to-day but requires minimal yet sometimes heroic efforts to sustain it; the tendency of Russians to yield all the power to a chosen father of a region and expect him to solve all the region's problems; the fraud and manipulation of elections; the feeling that results are predetermined and independent of

votes cast; and an understanding of the weakness and inefficiency of elected bodies. This is not to say that society is absolutely indifferent; electoral protest was evident in Ufa, Saratov, Kursk, and Nizhny Novgorod, where up to one-third of the voters voted against all candidates. The problem is that nothing is being accomplished beyond this fleeting protest.

This brings us back to the original question: what does the mixed record of electoral transformation say about the progress of Russia's democracy? On the surface, the development of Russia's electoral mechanisms has brought neither real political parties nor the construction of a democratic civil society in the country. On a more profound level, rather than causing radical changes in society as a whole, this development has modified a part of it—namely, the system of nomenklatura. The elections mechanism, although currently insufficient to enact the host of changes needed for Russia's successful democratic development, remains an indispensable precondition for democratic development.

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