

# **The Duma Districts Key to Putin's Power**

PONARS Policy Memo 290

*Henry E. Hale*  
*Indiana University*  
*and*  
*Robert Orttung*  
*American University*  
*September 2003*

When politicians hit the campaign trail and Russians prepare to vote for a new parliament (the Duma), Western attention is invariably drawn to the familiar and colorful competition among parties seeking to elect their lists of candidates. But only half of the Duma is elected in this way. Moreover, this half has been and is likely to remain the least important in determining the Russian president's power and in shaping Russia's ability to implement key reforms in foreign policy, economic reform, and democratic (or authoritarian) development.

In the upcoming December 2003 vote, Putin's power in the legislature will depend primarily on the other half, elected among individual candidates, many of whom are independents, rather than in a contest among party lists. These individual district contests pose the greatest threats to Putin's own grasp on power and, accordingly, they will determine the fate of Russian democracy.

## **The Two Halves of the Duma Elections: Party Lists and Territorial Districts**

Russia's constitution guarantees its citizens two forms of representation in the Duma. In the first form, each citizen chooses one party for which to cast a ballot; 225 seats in the Duma are then distributed among party-determined lists of candidates in proportion to the share of votes received by each party that gets at least 5 percent of the total. An additional 225 seats constitute the second form of Duma representation: each citizen selects from among a set of candidates vying to personally represent one of 225 territorial districts; the candidate with a plurality of votes wins the seat. The Duma thus contains a total of 450 seats.

## District Deputies: The Key to Putin's First-Term Legislative Juggernaut

With the party-list vote divided among six parties in 1999, the territorial contests proved decisive in tipping the balance of parliamentary power toward Putin once he took office as the clock struck 2000. Media attention, both Western and Russian, focused almost entirely on the pro-Putin Unity bloc's relative success in garnering 23 percent of the vote in the party-list race, a mere percentage point behind the heavily favored Communists. But this was only 23 percent of 225 seats, the half of the seats filled by party lists. Even if one adds the 13 percent of the party-list vote won by Fatherland-All Russia (quickly swallowed by Unity despite its anti-Unity campaign), the party-list race failed to net for the president's forces even a quarter of the parliament's total of 450 seats.

But Putin did get his working majority, a very powerful (though not absolute) one. He did so primarily by uniting deputies elected not on party lists but in the territorial-district half of the voting. Although some deputies have shifted among parties over the past four years, *Kommersant-Vlast's* count found that, as of the summer of 2003, some 57 percent of Putin's coalition in the Duma consisted of district-elected deputies.

This victory in the districts has had major consequences both for Russian citizens and for the international community. Yeltsin never had a Duma majority and was in fact stymied in many of his reform attempts. Although he rammed many reforms into law using his decree power, numerous reform initiatives foundered in the face of parliamentary opposition. Putin, on the other hand, has been able to wield his working majority to quickly pass a wide variety of very important reforms through the Duma. Key policies enacted by the Duma at Putin's initiative include

- the radical 13 percent flat tax;
- reductions in the power of regional barons;
- ratification of the START-II and CTBT treaties; and
- a variety of reforms that restrict democratic freedoms, especially in the area of the media.

Of course, Putin's power over the Duma has never been absolute. Although many of the district deputies support Putin's policies, they often also maintain strong links to the governors of the regions they represent. In passing Putin's bills, they often water down the substance of the measure and insert clauses that reflect the governors' interests. This process is particularly visible in areas of direct concern to the governors such as local government reform. As Putin's local government legislation moves slowly through the Duma, the governors have been able to modify it in several ways to strengthen their own power within the regions.

## What Is at Stake in 2003

As the first Duma elections to take place under Putin's presidency, the 2003-2004 election cycle will almost certainly mark an important watershed. There is good reason to believe that nothing less than Russia's democratic future is at stake. Observing the Kremlin's assertion of control over all three major television networks and its pressure on other mass media, Freedom House earlier this year put Russia's media in the "not free"

column for the first time since 1989. The Duma, through Putin's district-based majority, has enacted a series of new laws designed to make Russian democracy more "manageable," including strictures on the activities of parties, candidates, and the media during elections. Many of these new rules and requirements involve highly subjective judgments, a major problem given the Kremlin's reassertion of control over election commissions and courts at nearly all levels. The new Duma will have power to hinder or accelerate such movement toward what both Russian and Western observers now frequently call "managed democracy." Such possibilities are important not only for the Russians whose democratic rights are at stake. As Timothy Colton and Michael McFaul note in a new book (*Popular Choice and Managed Democracy*, Brookings, 2003), they matter because all of the United States' most reliable allies over the years have been democracies and because an undemocratic Russia will always face difficulty integrating with leading global economic structures. Putin's ability to further his radical economic agenda, for which he has relied on Duma support, also hangs in the balance.

### **The Districts Will Likely Be Decisive Again in 2003**

Despite these encroachments on democratic institutions, political competition persists and Putin's team is by no means a certain victor in the 2003 Duma election. Despite vociferous Kremlin efforts, its most powerful loyal party (Unified Russia) still regularly fails to register the support of more than 30 percent of probable voters in the party-list competition, which would give it just 15 percent of the total number of seats in the Duma. Among the four other parties that recent polls project will clear the 5 percent hurdle and win seats in the party-list half of the Duma election, three have been quite critical of the Kremlin (the Communists, Yabloko, and the Union of Right Forces) and the fourth (the wildly nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovsky) is an expensive and partial ally at best for Putin, because it is rumored to demand large side-payments in return for its votes on critical issues. If the Kremlin is to win a reliable majority in the Duma for its loyalists, therefore, it will have to produce a landslide in the districts.

Although the Kremlin will thus almost certainly concentrate its efforts in the Duma districts, there is reason to question whether it can achieve the necessary level of success. For one thing, opposition parties are working hard to improve their showings, organizing, recruiting local notables, and carefully concentrating resources on seats they deem winnable. The key power brokers in the districts, however, are almost certain to be large politicized financial-industrial groups (PFIGs) and regional political machines led by Russia's 89 provincial "governors." PFIGs depend largely on the Kremlin for their fortunes, as Russian authorities have recently attempted to make clear by their prosecution of elites from the gigantic Yukos concern. However, this same "Yukos affair" cannot but suggest that PFIGs also have an interest in weakening the Kremlin to the extent that they can get away with it. Indications are that Yukos continues to fund anti-Putin parties such as Yabloko and even the Communist Party, and it is likely to provide powerful financial and organizational backing to some opposition independents as well. Governors, traditionally the key regional power brokers, are in a similar position. Although they tend to be highly dependent on the Kremlin, which can deal devastating blows to them both economically and politically, they are not unquestionably loyal to it. Indeed, because they have borne the brunt of many of the Kremlin's centralizing reforms, they have an interest in covertly working to weaken presidential power. Because the

Federation Council is no longer a powerful voice in federal decision-making, the governors have a very strong interest in electing allies to the Duma to ensure that they can still affect federal policy.

Overall, if parties, PFIGs, and/or governors prove strong and independent-minded enough to win even in a significant minority of districts, we might find that alternative sources of power have become rooted sufficiently deeply in Russia to rebuff even “superpresidential” attempts to fully control the process. If this happens, other opposition-minded politicians could be emboldened in their endeavors in future elections at all levels. The 2003-2004 elections could thus either mark the coronation of Putin at the head of a thoroughly “managed democracy,” or prove that political competition in Russia has put down roots and that future Russian leaders will be forced to take this into account. The result might not exactly be “democracy,” because a potential gubernatorial opposition to Putin would likely be based on regional machine politics, but it would at least involve some important role for citizens’ votes. Russians’ ballots in the Duma districts, then, could hold the key.

## Policy Recommendations

The chief implication is that both Westerners and Russians should avoid the temptation to focus on the much easier-to-follow competition among party lists and do the hard work involved in making sense of the district Duma contests. Indeed, the lack of media and analytical attention to the districts is *itself* a central element of the troubling trend toward managed democracy in Russia.

The disturbing fact about the importance of the district Duma elections is that this is the electoral arena where citizens are arguably least enfranchised because of a lack of adequate information on which to base their vote. Russian media coverage focuses almost entirely on the party-list race. Even Russian politicians themselves, not to mention voters, remain largely in the dark about broader patterns in the district campaigns beyond what is happening in their own region. The reason for this is simple: the party-list race is much easier to cover as there is only one race nationwide and this race pits well-known parties led by well-known politicians against each other. The idea of “parties” also seems quite familiar to Western audiences, seducing some into seeing a party contest as the essence of the competition.

To study 225 far-flung district races across a country spanning 11 time zones is far more difficult and costly. For one thing, the patterns are entirely different from the party-list competition; the majority of territorial-district winners in 1999 were formally *independents*, not party nominees. Coverage does not easily break down into a party contest, but instead requires sorting out a wide variety of local interests and disguised national interests as well as those party candidates that are running. State-dominated media in Russia have demonstrated no interest in providing systematic coverage, reporting rather on a handful of colorful contests featuring celebrities or scandalous figures such as well-known singers or Yeltsin’s infamous former bodyguard and drinking buddy. Independent media, beleaguered and poorly financed, have not had the wherewithal to provide and/or have not seen the profit in providing fuller coverage of such complicated events.

This absence of comprehensive media coverage is quite unfortunate because such information is vital for citizens to maximally influence the course of their government.

For citizens to have the greatest impact on government, they must know how their vote is likely to affect not only the outcome in their own district, but also the overall balance of power in the Duma. In Russia, unfortunately, whereas voters might be able to learn about the individual candidates in their own district, they currently have no way of knowing how the outcome in their district's race will affect the balance of power in the legislature because they have no systematically presented information on how the campaigns are proceeding in those other races.

This situation is doubly worrisome because an uninformed electorate is more easily manipulated by authorities, creating incentives for those authorities to deliberately distort the democratic process. Voters who cannot make informed choices as to how their district Duma ballot will affect the national balance of power in the parliament are thus less likely to vote on the basis of issues that depend on this national balance of power. Instead, they are more likely to vote on the basis of the candidate's personal characteristics or the promises of the candidate to bring specific patronage resources to the district. Because the Kremlin is a key provider of patronage, this only accentuates its power. It also enhances the power of local strongmen governors who maintain a tight grip on their regions' economies. The decline of issue politics and the rise, in turn, of machine politics, reduce incentives for the development of programmatic political parties. It is not surprising, therefore, that less than half of all deputies elected in the districts in 1999 were nominated by political parties and that this number represents a *decline* from the previous electoral cycle in 1995.

Those Russians and Westerners interested in furthering democracy in Russia would thus be well advised to improve the transparency of elections by supporting or directly providing publicly accessible coverage of these contests in a systematic way to the greatest extent allowable by Russian law. One project that could be expanded is coverage of regional Russian elections by Radio Liberty (*Radio Svoboda*) correspondents. The present authors also plan a small project to make sense of the district races and to publish reports on them. Planning for the future will also be an asset, assuming that the current elections do not take Russia too far beyond the realm of political competition for media to matter much.

© PONARS 2003