

The Last Governor
Regional Elites, Civil Society, and the Future of the Russian
State as Seen through the Volgograd Gubernatorial Elections
of December 2004

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Ivan I. Kurilla

Volgograd State University

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Why did they fight?

Four years in contemporary Russian politics is an era. From one election cycle to another we have witnessed great changes in Russian society. The particularities first introduced in 2000 have now become commonplace, however by 2004 new problems arose. The question is whether this rapid change should be evaluated as a democratic development or will it discredit democracy and disillusion the electorate? To a large extent, this perception depends on the evaluator's understanding of democracy and one's own political agenda.

The Volgograd gubernatorial elections of December 5, 2004 suddenly became one of the last regional elections in Russia as a result of Putin's federation reform. Despite that fact, there was significant competition in the election, and much money was invested in the race. What were the reasons for such an uncompromised fight? What aims were the regional elite pursuing?

Certainly, an incumbent governor hopes to get another term in power, thus protecting him from the possibility of the Kremlin's alternative choice for four more years. However, the new law on gubernatorial appointments recommends that elected governors ask the President to reappoint them. What difference does an election, which costs so much money and effort to hold, make compared to presidential appointment?

End of Mass Participation

Incumbent governor Nikolay Maksyuta was first elected in 1996 and reelected in 2000. He was supported by the Communist party and Russian oil giant LUKoil. His rivals during the 2004 elections were of different origins, but the most credible two (or even three) candidates were members of the Russian party of power, United Russia.

At first glance, the Volgograd campaign of 2004 did not appear as heated as some of the previous ones. Since the previous elections were deemed elections without choice, the electorate began to view all elections with prejudice, feeling it has nothing to lose by

abolishing the elections. It clearly reflected the shift of Russian election politics from mass participation to “political technologies” and PR tactics.

Every Volgograd resident could find in his mail free newspapers criticizing all the candidates except for the particular one who sponsored the publication. The quality of papers published by the major runners, as well as the number of billboards on major streets and regional roads, was now significantly higher (unlike in the previous elections). A member of the Central Election Committee, Elvira Ermakova stated after checking the Volgograd Committee on the eve of the election, “Judging on the financial flows that go through the campaigns’ bank accounts, all candidates were seriously prepared [for the race]. “

This acquisition of an extensive financial base by each major runner also marked the end of a period when people actively participated in rallies and “voted by heart” for a candidate of their own. Now it is clear that the 2000 election was the transitory one, with uneven resource bases of candidates and disproportionate use of PR-technologies. This time all of the major participants were equipped almost equally. However, no one can boast about having large popular mobilization behind him – another common feature of many elections in past years.

This last conclusion leads many observers to the idea that the Russian population is disillusioned with electoral democracy. President Putin cited this reason when denouncing open gubernatorial elections on September 13, 2004, in addition to the need for a more manageable governmental system in the face of terrorist threats.

Value of Free Elections: Understanding Democracy

It is true that the period of democratic romanticism of the early 1990s is over. Many Russian people are now very critical about democratic values in public opinion polls. But what about their understanding of democracy has changed to warrant such negative responses?

Most Russians have never lived under a real democratic form of government. Their experience with free elections has been very limited. Many believe that participation only, not procedures, is the main feature of democracy. Following this logic, when influential and rich elite members fight each other for the governor’s position, it is just considered their own affair.

However, there is also another understanding of democracy. It is the democratic ideal reformulated after a critique from the Elites Theory. Democracy, according to this formula, is the way of changing ruling elites. (Other possible ways are coup d’etat or revolution). This understanding is very concerned with procedural clearness and openness.

If we look at the Russian regional elections from this point of view, we will see a huge leap ahead from the early 1990s. The new Russian political elite has reshaped itself and has become accustomed to using elections as a way to define which of them will come to power. That was very clearly seen in the Volgograd gubernatorial elections. “Administrative resources” were also widely used in the 2004 elections, but mutual checks and balances began to be introduced. Interestingly, the regional administrative

resources did not work against strong competitors. The local court reestablished Volgograd Mayor Evgenii Ischenko as a candidate after he was rejected by the regional electoral commission and the incumbent governor needed to find assistance in Moscow federal Supreme Court, which finally decided the case in his favor.

In the long run, that development was good for the Russian democratic system, as the emergence of competitive elections was the major prerequisite for the appearance of political institutions, including political parties.

By abolishing the gubernatorial elections in Russia's regions, Putin closed the possibility of regional elites, making all appointments his own responsibility.

What have we seen?

The first and most obvious result of such a decision is a step back from the achieved level of Russian democratization. However, there are several others. While the president wants to create manageable vertical power, he instead will weaken Russian civil society, and, on the other hand, see regional elites regrouping in unrest.

From the example of Edinaya Rossiya (United Russia) one can see that the law's adoption will lead to a regional leadership struggle. In Volgograd, the regional organization of United Russia initially elected businessman Oleg Savchenko to be its leader. Savchenko spent tremendous resources to get into the Volgograd elite, when he moved to Volgograd in the late 1990s. He participated in the last gubernatorial elections in 2000 and placed second, after incumbent governor Nikolai Maksyuta (with 28 percent of the vote to 36 percent). In 2003, he was elected State Duma deputy on United Russia's list. However, in April 2004, the Central Committee of United Russia displaced Savchenko and recommended (appointed) Vladimir Goryunov to be the chair of the regional United Russia organization. Goryunov is a former president of the Volgograd soccer club Rotor, a State Duma deputy (elected in 2003 in the central territorial district of Volgograd), and Chair of the State Duma Sports Committee. Goryunov is neither a good public leader nor possessor of a large fortune or other resources, aside from some obscure Moscow connections. He lacked the necessary resources to accede to the position on his own. However, if we project the United Russia practice into gubernatorial appointments, we may see Goryunov as the next Volgograd governor.

His appointment started a crisis in the Volgograd United Russia organization that has not been resolved until now. Both Savchenko and Goryunov participated in the gubernatorial elections, as well as the third member of the same party, Volgograd Mayor Evgenii Ischenko.

This situation is further proof that United Russia is not a normal political party; the three candidates for the governor's position differed in their bases and affiliations, not just in their personal ambitions. What is more important, however, is that the decision "from above" clearly contradicted local balance and led to self-promotion as some form of a resistance.

Does Putin want to destroy the regional elite completely? If so, he may appoint a governor across regional borders – as it was used in the appointment of the heads of law enforcement agencies. We shall soon see. However, regional elites in Russia do exist, and by gradually pushing them to the corner of the political arena President Putin may

suddenly face deep unrest or a repetition of the Ukrainian elections scenario in Russia in 2008.

Elections Results

On December 5, the incumbent governor Maksyuta received 41 percent of the vote. His major would-be-rival, Evgenii Ischenko, was not able to reinstate himself as a candidate, so the other results were surprising. A representative of SPS (Union of Right Forces), Volgograd businessman Nikolai Volkov, took second place (13.2 percent). Third place was a vote “against all” (13 percent), while Oleg Savchenko came in fourth with 12.9 percent. The official candidate of United Russia, Goryunov, only came in sixth place (7 percent), ceding even to LDPR candidate Eugenii Golubyatnikov (7.2 percent).

The surprising combination of Maksyuta and Volkov for the second round of elections (even though at the time of writing – before the runoff – it is clear that the incumbent will remain in power) is due to Volkov’s massive campaign in the rural districts of the Volgograd region. He won second in the State Duma elections of 2003 in the Mikhailovskii district. It is hard to attribute his relative victory over Savchenko to his strong financial base as Savchenko is equally affluent. Maybe it also reflects the potential of SPS in Volgograd, against the party of power. In Volgograd two parties are considered to be in power. Besides United Russia, the Communists control the regional legislature and governor’s office.

Civil Society Dimension

The willingness of the regional elite to be elected suggests that it is eager to acquire some independent legitimacy. Unlike the federal authorities, the elite understand the existence of some form of civil society in Russia and is endeavoring to form an alliance with it for the future.

As a result of Putin’s reform, the building of civil society has slowed down. The projection of vertical power down to city mayors will be an even more dangerous trend.

If we consider together the federal reform with all the invectives of Putin and his fellows against non-governmental organizations in Russia, we see a gloomy picture of total retreat of the Russian state from all the democratic achievements of the 1990s. However, Russian society has already been changed.

Four years ago, commenting on the previous gubernatorial elections in PONARS Memo 158, I suggested that the lack of civil society and free elections produced strange outcomes, and federal authorities had two options: to strengthen civil society or to abolish free elections. We now see that the state chose the easier option.

However, what looked like strange outcomes in 2000, by 2004 have become the exceptions of some emerging rule or rather system of elites’ mutual checks and balances under some partial control of the civil society. This is reminiscent of the early stages of democratic development in the 19th Century United States.

By fighting simultaneously against regional elites, economic tycoons, and civil society, President Putin is creating a potential coalition out of an active part of the population that may refuse his legitimacy. At the same time, by taking power from other actors of Russian political spectrum, he is making the system unstable. All of the power

means all of the responsibility, and the civil society that has emerged in Russia during the 1990s in alliance with regional elite may make 2008 a hot year in Russia.

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