

The Fair Sex in an Unfair System

The Gendered Effects of Putin's Political Reforms

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In September 2004, in the aftermath of the devastating terrorist attack on a public school in Beslan, North Ossetia, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a series of proposed changes to Russia's political system. The intention of these reforms, according to Putin, would be to fight terrorism by "strengthening the political system" and ensuring the "unity of state power." Eight months later, Putin's proposals had become law, resulting in significant de-democratization of Russia's political realm.

The Putin administration's political reforms focused on changes to Russia's electoral rules, as follows:

- Eliminating Russia's single-mandate (first past the post) districts for elections to the lower house of parliament, the State Duma;
- Raising the threshold for political parties' entry into the Duma from 5 percent to 7 percent of the popular vote;
- Removing the legal possibility for parties to join forces by forming electoral blocs during election campaigns;

- Eliminating elections for the leaders of Russia's federal regions (e.g., governors), who will now be appointed instead of popularly elected.

This memo explores the new political rules adopted by Putin's administration and uses gender as a tool of analysis to highlight their anti-democratic effects. What are the practical effects of Putin's political reforms, and what specific impact will they have on women's representation in Russia?

The Gendered Implications of Putin's Electoral Reforms

Let us first examine the effects of eliminating Russia's single-mandate districts. Previous elections were held under an electoral system that split the Duma's 450 seats into two groups: 225 seats were filled through elections to single-mandate districts, where individuals competed for the plurality of the vote in each district, and 225 seats were filled by proportional representation, where the percentage of votes received by each political party resulted in a roughly proportional number of Duma seats. This was known as a mixed electoral system, sharing the features of a typical proportional representation (PR) system and a typical single-mandate district system (the system used in the United States).

What effect will the elimination of single-mandate districts have on women's representation? Women's representation in the State Duma has been declining; in the 1993 elections, largely as a result of the victory of the "Women of Russia" electoral bloc, women made up 13.5 percent of the Duma. In 1995, this fell to 9.8 percent, and in 1999, to 7.9 percent. After the 2003 elections, the Duma includes only 44 women, or 9.8 percent of the representatives, a slight increase over the 1999 figure.

Social scientists have demonstrated that women tend to fare better in party-list (proportional representation) systems than they do in single-mandate districts. In Russia, however, as Robert Moser has convincingly shown, the trend is reversed: women have been more successful electorally in Russia's single-mandate districts than on Russia's party lists. In the 1995 elections, for example, 31 women won election to the Duma in single-mandate districts, but only 15 won seats off of party lists (in 1999, 20 women won election through single-mandate districts and only 15 women won from party lists). One of Russia's more well-known parties (Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia [LDPR]) produced no female seat-winners at all in 1999, a situation that was nearly repeated in the 2003 election, where the LDPR generated only two seats for women from their party list.

In part, as Moser argues, Russian women's electoral success on party lists is limited because political party leaders fail to place women in winnable positions (i.e., women's names are rarely found in the upper

slots on the party list, and, thus, few women on the list make it into actual Duma seats). Should this practice continue, the transformation of Russia's system to an all party-list system will result in fewer women being elected to the Duma.

It is worth noting that the 2003 election was anomalous with respect to the numbers of single-mandate and party-list seats won by women: in 2003, 44 women entered the Duma, 20 from single-mandate districts and 24 from party lists, reversing the previous situation, where party lists generated fewer Duma seats for women than did the single-mandate districts. It may be that with the elimination of single-mandate districts in the 2007 elections, political parties will make more of an effort to include women toward the tops of their lists, and that women's representation in the Duma will increase under the new system. However, the extensive discrimination against women candidates evidenced by party-list formation to date would suggest that an increase in women's representation is unlikely. In the 1993 election (where the party lists were not yet divided into regional sublists), for instance, 90 percent of the women candidates on party lists across the political spectrum held slots below thirtieth place on their parties' lists. Moser points out that only three of the parties which crossed the barrier into the Duma were entitled to more than 30 seats, suggesting that women's chances of winning election on party lists was slight (compared to women's chances in single-mandate districts), due to their disadvantageous placement on the lists.

One reason why some political parties (outside of Russia) have served as a successful route to parliament for women candidates is the adoption of quotas for representation on party lists, either voluntarily by individual parties, or by law (statutory gender quotas). Mala Htun calculates that, as of 2003, a total of 55 countries were using statutory and voluntary party-list quotas to ensure increased representation of women. Yet there is little support for, and some outright mockery of, the idea of sex-based quotas for party lists among Russia's main parties. A proposal in February 2005 to introduce a 30 percent quota for women in the Duma, for instance, provoked the following response from LDPR leader Zhirinovskiy: "We can include wives and lovers in the party lists, but it is the men who will be doing their job for them." And in April 2005, the Duma defeated legislation that would have established a 30 percent quota for women in the State Duma and regional legislatures by a vote of 226 to 117. Legislation establishing party-list quotas (limiting the percentage of candidates on party lists to no more than 70 percent of either sex) were also defeated previously by the Duma.

Finally, according to Svetlana Aivazova and Grigori Kertman, in their close, data-driven analysis of Russia's recent elections, the origin of candidates on party lists is increasingly skewed toward candidates with extensive experience in the political and economic realms. Candidates from what is known as the "third sector" (the non-profit sector), where

women tend to appear in greater numbers, are decreasing on party lists. In short, eliminating the single-mandate districts will probably further decrease women's representation in the Duma.

The second major change to Russia's electoral rules entails raising the Duma entry threshold to 7 percent from 5 percent. This change, which will be in effect for the 2007 elections, will make the resurgence of a women's party, or the national-level success of something like the new party organized by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (the United People's Party of Soldiers' Mothers, founded in November 2004), slim indeed, although parties such as these do raise the profile of women in politics. In general, the 7 percent threshold means that nearly all political parties will be excluded from the Duma; in the 2003 elections, only four parties passed even the 5 percent threshold. According to Aivazova and Kertman, it is the outsider parties and blocs that have the highest percentages of women on their party lists, and such parties are highly unlikely to be able to clear a 7 percent barrier. The restriction on small parties jointly forming electoral blocs will be equally detrimental to women's representation, since the outsider parties (as well as the more popular and well-known liberal parties which enjoyed Duma representation until 2003) will be unable to join forces in electoral blocs from now on. Raising the electoral threshold from 5 to 7 percent and preventing the formation of electoral blocs will therefore limit the numbers of women winning Duma seats.

Finally, there are gendered implications for the elimination of elections for the leaders of Russia's regions. In December 2004, a system was established by law whereby the leaders of Russia's 89 regions (the "subjects of the Federation," which include oblasts, republics, krais, autonomous okrugs, and Russia's two largest cities, St. Petersburg and Moscow) would no longer be elected officials, but rather be appointed by President Putin and approved by regional legislatures (at risk of being dissolved if they rejected Putin's choice). Incumbent governors, presidents of the ethnic republics, and other regional leaders would serve out their terms and either be reappointed by Putin or removed and replaced. Lists of potential candidates for these positions may be generated by Putin's envoys to the seven federal superdistricts encompassing the 89 regions and are composed of powerful officials loyal to Putin. This is illustrated by the recent case of the replacement of the president of the Altai republic; the candidate list included a Duma deputy from the Putin-supporting political party United Russia and the director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in Chita oblast. Such high-level decisionmakers are unlikely to be women, especially in the security services.

At present, there is only one female governor among the leaders of Russia's 89 regions: Valentina Matvienko, a close ally of Putin, in charge of the city of St. Petersburg. Since executive power is disproportionately strong when compared to the power of the legislative and judicial

branches in Russia, the near exclusion of women from this political realm is significant.

As the regions' executives increasingly become a cohort of Kremlin political appointees, the likelihood that there will be many women governors among them is small. Governors and other regional leaders are likely to be appointed from the existing male-dominated ruling elite and from the *siloviki* (those associated with the power ministries), where women are few and far between. Putin's reliance on personnel from the military, law enforcement, and state security apparatus dictates against the appointment of women, who are rarely found in those areas in positions of power, as regional executives.

Conclusion

The Putin administration's revised electoral rules will have across-the-board implications for women's representation in Russia, and for the way that the population participates in politics more generally.

The contraction of the political sphere that becomes evident when we examine it through the lens of gendered representation is another aspect of Russia's movement in a generally anti-democratic direction. It is symptomatic of a trend whereby Russia's major political parties increasingly support the Kremlin, rather than endorse or criticize specific policies based on the demands of a popular constituency.

It is obvious that some of the reforms described above are de-democratizing by definition. Making the governors and presidents of Russia's federal components appointed, rather than elected, largely makes regional leaders accountable to (and reliant upon) Russia's president, rather than accountable to local populations.

While one could argue that raising the threshold for parties' access to the Duma will serve as an incentive for fractious liberal-democratic parties to join forces, rather than run for office separately and be defeated (as was the case in the 2003 elections), the injunction on the formation of electoral blocs makes this impossible. Unless the main liberal parties (such as Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces) actually merge, which seems unlikely (and could result in a loss of supporters from each party), they will probably fail to gain entrance to the State Duma in the next elections (having only won about 4 percent apiece of the party-list vote in 2003). This means that the political field will continue to be heavily dominated by United Russia, the Kremlin's party of choice. Russia's political system increasingly looks like one designed to exclude a viable opposition from the parliament.

Women are already something of a rarity in Russia's political system. The new electoral rules (or non-electoral rules, as the case may be) will further decrease women's representation. The centralized appointment of

governors and other regional leaders is likely to draw on an almost entirely male pool of candidates from among the existing incumbents and potential Putin loyalists within Russia's military and security institutions.

In this selection of Putin's political reforms, we can clearly see the further masculinization of an already male-dominated political field. Putin's decision to invoke the specter of terrorism as his motive for introducing these anti-democratic changes reflects the close association between militarization and masculinization so brilliantly elucidated by political scientist Cynthia Enloe. The absence of women in Russian executive politics reflects the results of a growing focus on security, narrowly understood. Security, from the perspective of the Putin administration, appears to mean the security of Putin's political loyalists in power.

Meanwhile, the Russian population's security – the kind of security that would stem from state power being increasingly representative, rather than being increasingly narrow – is being cast by the wayside. The hierarchical centralization and securitization of power brings risks; exclusion and marginalization of significant population groups over time will only exacerbate the tensions that result from a lack of democratic participation.