

Russian Political Attitudes and Political Parties

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The fact that the Russian Duma is not an institution designed to encourage small political parties will come as a surprise to no one, with the possible exception of the leaders of small Russian political parties. No fewer than 43 parties contended on the proportional representation (PR) ballot in the 1995 State Duma elections; 39 of them failed to clear the 5% hurdle necessary to secure any representation at all. As a result, the remaining four parties received disproportionately large shares of the PR seats--double their percentage of the popular vote. In the single-member district (SMD) balloting, a startling 269 parties were represented in polling in 225 districts. The winning candidate received more than 50% of the vote in only 13 of those districts.

Judged by any standard, this represents a spectacular degree of political fragmentation. It seems safe to predict that it cannot persist. Nevertheless, Russian political parties have failed to coalesce appreciably. Estimates vary, but early surveys suggest that if the Duma elections were held now, four or five parties would garner between 50% and 60% of the popular vote. Of that number, three (the Communist Party, Yabloko, and the Liberal Democrats) secured representation in 1995, while the remainder consist not of new parties but of blocs: the "Fatherland-All Russia" alliance, headed by Yevgeny Primakov and Yuri Luzhkov, and the "Union of Right-Wing Forces" alliance, whose most prominent members include former Prime Ministers Yegor Gaidar and Sergei Kiriyenko and former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov.

Whether or not the parties to these alliances will merge remains to be seen. At present, although the alliances presuppose a certain degree of ideological affinity, they more closely resemble marriages of convenience. The Agrarian Party and Women of Russia have offered to join the Primakov-Luzhkov bloc, and Nemtsov has explicitly stated that the purpose of the "Union" alliance is simply to make it over the 5% threshold.

Once parties begin to merge and jockey for popularity, they will base their platforms on related clusters of issues. This policy memo seeks answers to a necessarily speculative question: Which combinations of issues are likely to resonate with the Russian electorate?

Data

To answer this question I have analyzed data from a 1995 survey of Russian political attitudes conducted by the Moscow-based survey institute ROMIR (for a project led by Professor William Zimmerman, University of Michigan). This represents the most recent data of its type available; a prior survey was conducted in 1993, and (funding permitting) a third and possibly a fourth will be conducted in 1999-2000. The survey is exceptionally well suited to this particular application, as it contains questions pertaining to foreign policy, domestic politics, and personal belief systems as well as perceptions of crisis.

An array of survey items on these topics was subjected to factor analysis, a statistical technique designed to detect the existence of item clusters that reflect underlying issue-dimensions. When such clusters are uncovered, the individual items are assigned weights, or "loadings," on a scale of -1 to 1, that are indicative of their degree of correlation with the underlying dimension. For example, if one were to measure the height, weight, education, and income of a set of individuals, one might expect to find two underlying dimensions: one related to the individual's overall physical size, which would load heavily on height and weight, and another related to the individual's socioeconomic status, which would load heavily on education and income. Factor analysis continues to extract such dimensions from the data until the amount of variation that they "explain" drops below that which would be expected from a set of purely random responses.

In the Russian mass data, the factor loadings were not especially large, indicating that mass beliefs are somewhat inconsistent and occasionally incoherent. The questions and their loadings on each factor are reproduced in the appendix at the end of the memo (pg. 25), but they are of necessity somewhat lacking in intuitive appeal. I therefore construct five "ideal voters" whose attitudes reflect the five factors and describe them in a more coherent fashion.

Attitude Clusters of Russian Voters

Voter A's attitudes mainly cluster around insecurity and fear. Mostly these concerns are domestic in nature (economic inequality, environmental degradation, etc.), but concern over the relative growth of American military strength is the most prominent, and concern over the expansion of NATO is not far behind. Of the 18 survey questions included in the analysis, 9 refer to dangers to the state or threats to security; for Voter A, it is striking that those 9 have the highest positive factor loadings. The loadings are not terribly far apart in magnitude, which suggests that listing them in order of magnitude might not be very meaningful. It is nevertheless unsettling to note that the perception of threat from the relative growth of American military strength tops the list. There are no negative factor loadings of any appreciable magnitude, and issue items load very weakly, both of which serve to reinforce the interpretation that this voter is driven by simple and nearly undifferentiated fear.

***Voter B's** attitudes reflect both liberal Western values and a disaffection with many of the values associated with the Soviet state. B believes strongly in the value of economic and political competition and the defense of individual rights even if it means that the guilty sometimes go free. Of the security threats listed, B is most concerned with Russia's inability to rectify its internal problems; pointless involvement abroad runs a distant second. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that B would be quite likely to vote Republican if he were to find himself in an American election: free markets, economic competition, concern over internal disintegration and a tinge of isolationism receive positive loadings, concern over the environment and economic inequality do not load either positively or negatively, and government provision of housing and jobs and state ownership of heavy industry have strong negative loadings.*

***Voter C's** attitudes are oddly incoherent and probably not illustrative of a meaningful underlying ideological orientation. They may reflect nothing more than an inability to engage in abstract thinking. Like B, Voter C believes in economic and political competition, but also believes in state ownership of heavy industry. C believes strongly in both the defense of individual rights even if those rights put society at risk and the defense of society's rights even if the individual is endangered--despite the obvious contradiction. Many surveys contain some degree of "yes-man" bias: respondents who hear statements that are superficially appealing but who are unwilling or unable to think through all of their implications tend to agree with them. Most of the items that load heavily on this factor are of an abstract nature, and respondents tended to agree rather than disagree with them. It is tempting to ignore Voter C for that reason, but the temptation should be resisted: after all, Voter C still votes, and abstract but superficially appealing arguments are far more common in politics than in surveys.*

***Voter D** is particularly oriented toward economic issues and expresses interest in a type of reformed socialism. D is especially interested in ensuring jobs and housing for the people and in placing heavy industry in the hands of the state; nevertheless, D is also somewhat interested in reaping the benefits of economic competition. The four main positive loadings are all related to economics. The first two, relating to jobs, housing, and heavy industry, suggest old-style Communism, but the item with the third-largest positive loading relates to the benefits of economic competition, and the danger of growing economic inequality is virtually a non-issue. The negative loadings also suggest that D can best be understood in economic terms: nationality crises in particular are seen as uninteresting.*

***Voter E** is overwhelmingly concerned with social welfare issues. Foremost among them by far is the protection of society, in particular from dangerous ideas; E is the closest of all five to a single-issue voter. Concern over the status of society is also reflected in perception of danger from shortages and a desire for government provision of jobs and housing. On the other hand, E is largely agnostic regarding the benefits of political or economic competition and is unlikely to perceive threats from abroad. The item related to the prohibition of the expression of dangerous ideas has the strongest loading of any item on any factor: its magnitude is more than double that of the next highest. Strong negative loadings are on issues related to national security--the growth of American power, the*

protection of Russians in the former Soviet Union, and the expansion of NATO--and the strongest is on protection of Russian economic interests, indicating a distinct lack of concern over such issues on E's part.

The ideal-type voters are listed from most coherent to least; it should be emphasized that this ranking has nothing to do with how widespread the sentiments reflected in each voter's description are in society at large. Rather, coherence means simply that item responses are strongly correlated with one another overall. Therefore, it is correct to say that expressions of concern over the status quo (Voter A) are more closely related to one another than are the others, but it is not correct to say that a larger percentage of the population votes out of fear than out of any other motive. Coherence does represent political opportunity, however, in that a platform based on a coherent set of issues will have a stronger appeal than a platform based on an incoherent set of issues, all else being equal.

How enduring each dimension will be is impossible to predict absent more data, but some speculations seem safe. Voter A is most likely a creature of crisis whose coherence will rise or fall as conditions worsen or improve. Voter C represents no meaningful political ideology, but will probably remain potent. The remaining voters represent clusters of attitudes that are a bit more lasting and less likely to be affected by day-to-day events. Intuition therefore suggests that in the long run Russia's politicians will gravitate toward three underlying dimensions, represented by voters B, D, and E.

Implications

There is considerable good news in this interpretation. First, despite continued crises and desperate economic conditions, an attitude cluster representative of Western liberalism (Voter B) remains prominent. Even Voter D, whose attitudes have much in common with those of textbook communists, does not reject the notion that free market forces should have a role in Russia (though D's attitude about political competition, it must be noted, leaves something to be desired from the point of view of democracy.) No attitude cluster with lasting long-run potential, including D, seems to incorporate fundamental hostility toward the West. Great Russian nationalism is not a prominent element in any cluster, with the possible exception of Voter C, who could probably be convinced of the benefits of at least a somewhat nationalistic foreign policy--especially if it were presented in terms clearer than truth.

Nevertheless, given the glacial pace at which parties seem to be coming together, the long run could be a very long one indeed. In the short run, concern over Russia's internal and external crises is the most cohesive attitude cluster. This is the only set of attitudes that includes specific--indeed, dominant--concern over NATO expansion and the international role of the United States and. Accordingly, Russian politicians will have an incentive in the short run to lump an American (or Western) threat in with other crises in order to increase the appeal of their overall platforms. This underscores again America's interest in fostering stability and security for Russia and the need to avoid actions or policies that

might be deemed provocative. Such policies may prove especially difficult to implement in light of growing attention to the diversion of IMF funds and our own impending election season.

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APPENDIX

| Question | Voter A | Voter B | Voter C | Voter D | Voter E |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Security threat: growth of US military might..... | 0.36096 | -0.21092 | 0.24947 | -0.04996 | -0.20380 |
| Security threat: Russia's inability to solve internal problems..... | 0.25398 | 0.32764 | 0.00952 | -0.06793 | -0.00069 |
| Security threat: involvement of Russia in conflicts that do not concern it..... | 0.29177 | 0.22808 | -0.06062 | 0.09234 | 0.11204 |
| Security threat: expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe..... | 0.30070 | -0.11331 | 0.22977 | -0.17623 | -0.38866 |
| F.P. goals: defense of Russian economic interests..... | 0.08988 | 0.20855 | 0.10726 | 0.20928 | -0.42093 |
| F.P. goals: defense of interests of Russians in former republics of SU..... | 0.08382 | -0.07685 | 0.32434 | -0.31443 | -0.28397 |
| Danger to Russia: growth of crime..... | 0.32582 | 0.16867 | -0.04855 | -0.16433 | 0.13118 |
| Danger to Russia: internationality conflicts within Russia..... | 0.31452 | 0.19943 | -0.16345 | -0.20940 | 0.13141 |
| Danger to Russia: shortages of consumer goods..... | 0.29068 | 0.20416 | 0.02599 | 0.14848 | 0.22418 |
| Danger to Russia: worsening of the environment..... | 0.33133 | -0.00358 | -0.22335 | -0.02373 | 0.10564 |
| Danger to Russia: growth of economic inequality among citizens..... | 0.34466 | -0.02201 | -0.14146 | 0.07890 | -0.01680 |
| In society there will always be a need to forbid the expression of dangerous ideas..... | 0.03464 | -0.22959 | 0.16533 | -0.19337 | 0.53793 |
| Individual rights must be protected even if guilty people sometimes go free..... | -0.03987 | 0.20990 | 0.34835 | 0.04731 | 0.22794 |
| Society's rights must be protected even if innocent people sometimes go to jail..... | 0.08829 | -0.26816 | 0.42882 | -0.22130 | 0.24253 |
| Competition among political parties makes our political system stronger..... | -0.12665 | 0.36587 | 0.41189 | -0.10696 | 0.10508 |
| Competition between various enterprises, organizations and firms benefits our society..... | -0.09286 | 0.41561 | 0.33139 | 0.32817 | -0.00210 |
| All heavy industry must belong to the state and not be given over to private ownership..... | 0.19957 | -0.30593 | 0.21383 | 0.46257 | -0.00929 |
| It is the government's responsibility to see that every citizen has a job and a place to live..... | 0.14602 | -0.23375 | 0.08424 | 0.53781 | 0.17197 |