

The State of Democratization in Russia in Light of the Elections

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Now that Russia has entered the new millennium with a new leader and a new parliament, it is time to take stock of the democratization process in Russia. This memo addresses two questions:

- How far has Russia come? The answer is that Russia merits a grade of B in democratization. The progress has been immense since 1985, but its elections have not been satisfactorily free or fair. The greatest abuses, however, have taken place not at the federal but at the regional level and not on voting day but during and even before the campaign.
- Where is Russia likely to go? While it is too early to pass judgement on Vladimir Putin himself, it is evident that there are few "barriers to backsliding" in Russian political institutions and society to keep Putin on a democratic track if he tries to do otherwise. Since we can't change Putin, the West should focus on building such barriers, which include clear legal codes, a free press, multiple centers of economic power, political parties, and civil society

How Far Has Russia Come?

To fairly answer this question, it is important to take a hardheaded look at how democratic Russia's recent parliamentary elections (December 19, 1999), presidential elections (March 26, 2000), and recent regional elections have been.

How Democratic Were the December 1999 Duma Elections?

In answering this question, it is important to look not only at whether actual fraud took place at the polling places (on which most international observers focus), but also at three other areas where threats to democratic elections exist. The Duma elections are briefly assessed in all of these areas below. Overall, the elections merit a grade of "B," respectable but far from perfect.

- The Polling Place (Grade: A-).

While rumors spread widely in early 2000 about wholesale fraud robbing Fatherland-All Russia (FAR) and Yabloko of up to 10% of the vote and pushing the Union of Right-Wing Forces (URWF) and the Zhirinovsky Bloc over the 5% barrier, they appear to be nothing more than post-election politicking of the losers. The officially reported results in the party race were closely in line with all reputable polls as well as the pro-FAR and pro-Yabloko NTV's own exit poll. Even the Communists privately admit that there was no fraud--their own polls were in line with the rest and their network of observers (the largest in Russia) also found no evidence of massive fraud. The main deviations appear to have occurred in a few regions notorious for electoral manipulation, like Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, but these violations (mainly in favor of Fatherland-All Russia) were not significant enough to have affected the overall vote outcome in a major way.

- The Media (Grade: B-).

Media in Russia were extremely (almost absurdly) biased and politicized. The two state-controlled television networks, especially the biggest one (ORT), used their informational power to wage a major smear campaign against Fatherland-All Russia and gave favorable coverage to the pro-government parties. It must be remembered, however, that Fatherland-All Russia had its own "friendly" television media, which approached pro-government media in its geographic scope, and even the Communists had much favorable coverage in some major newspapers. Regional media were also heavily biased in one direction or another, but not always in favor of the Kremlin. The most important factor was not media bias itself but that the Kremlin used its biased media effectively, while FAR and Yabloko failed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Distorted sources of information mark Russia down in this category, but the fact that different views were available nearly everywhere keeps this grade respectable, if barely.

- Campaign Regulation (Grade: B).

Campaign law was enforced inconsistently both by the Central Election Commission (CEC) and local election commissions (detailed below). But the real problem was the law itself: it was very specific about what constituted a "violation" of electoral law, but was quite vague on exactly what kind of violation constituted grounds for disqualification. Thus the CEC disqualified the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) on the basis of one technicality (the failure of Vladimir Zhirinovsky to report ownership of a villa), but not Yabloko despite the fact that Grigory Yavlinsky himself failed to report a large sum of income. While the LDPR had provoked the CEC by nominating reputed criminals to its party list, these were not the grounds used for disqualification. Zhirinovsky did manage to register his party with the CEC under the name "Zhirinovsky Bloc," but the damage was done and it did not have time to nominate many district candidates. On the whole, however, the CEC appears to have honestly tried to enforce the law fairly--not disqualifying anti-Kremlin parties like Fatherland-All Russia or the Communists, as some pundits had feared it would.

- Regional Political Machines (Grade: C).

Most of the electoral abuses appear to have occurred in the district races and to have been perpetrated by governors' political machines. Since governors frequently control most

appointments to local election commissions, they were often able to disqualify candidates they did not like on technicalities, employing double standards by ignoring technical violations committed by friendly candidates. Bashkortostan, for example, struck two incumbent deputies off of its district ballots after they fell from local official grace (although it eventually let one of them back on to lose, the damage having already been inflicted). While this did not happen everywhere, it was a significant problem.

How Democratic Was the Presidential Election?

The grades for the presidential race closely parallel those for the Duma race except in the category of regional political machines. Overall grade: B+.

- The Polling Place (Grade: A-).

As with the Duma race, the major reputable polls were closely in line with official results, and these in turn agreed closely with the exit polls, suggesting no significant fraud. While Communist leader Zyuganov and others have raised the question of Putin's surprisingly high vote totals in the West and low numbers in the East, pre-election polls showed that Putin's support was indeed strongest in the West and low in the East and Moscow. This presidential election was as honest as any conducted in Russia, at least on voting day.

- The Media (Grade: B).

The European Media Institute and independent experts found the two major state-controlled television channels, ORT and RTR, to be providing significantly biased news coverage of Putin, although NTV's coverage was rather friendly to Yavlinsky and "subtly negative" on Putin. Yavlinsky also benefited from favorable coverage in Russia's two largest newspapers, with a combined circulation of over 5 million. ORT gave Yavlinsky and other candidates--though not Zyuganov--a particularly rough ride. For example, on March 23, ORT's Vremya news program showed a "press conference" of "gays for Yavlinsky" that was clearly trumped up to hurt the liberal leader's chances. ORT even refused to broadcast one Yavlinsky ad on the grounds that it violated the honor and dignity of the police. The media were biased, but in different directions, as in the Duma race.

- Campaign Regulation (Grade: B).

As with the Duma race, the CEC struggled to enforce an imperfect law, evidently letting its passions sometimes get the best of it. It disqualified Zhirinovskiy because his son failed to report one apartment as property (while Zhirinovskiy himself had reported some 80 other apartments!), although the Supreme Court eventually put Russia's favorite political clown back on the ballot. Perhaps the biggest problem, though, were the strict spending limits that hamstrung Putin's opponents in the face of the massive positive news coverage of the incumbent acting president. Yavlinsky mustered a major television ad campaign, but only at the expense of virtually ignoring the campaign at the grass-roots

level and coming under fire from political opponents for allegedly violating the spending limits.

- Regional Political Machines (Grade: B+).

The evidence suggests that regional political machines played little role in the presidential race. In fact, Putin's team gave stern instructions to the political machines of notorious election-manipulators in places like Bashkortostan not to use their "administrative resources" as they had in the Duma race and other elections. Putin thought he could win without them and did not want to "owe" them anything or compromise his legitimacy. Elections in such republics, therefore, were surprisingly fair (though far from perfect).

How Democratic Have Regional Elections Been? (Grade: C+)

While some Russian regions (Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk) have been models of competitive democracy, others have been steadily moving in a more authoritarian direction. In fact, regions like Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Kalmykia, and Primorsky krai have been steadily consolidating autocracy, not democracy, and learning all kinds of tricks to exclude opponents from the ballot and defeat those that manage to squeak onto it. The leaders of Tatarstan and Kalmykia actually ran unopposed in their last elections, despite the fact that this contradicts federal law. The number of incumbent victories is increasing and their vote shares are growing larger. Before 1997, only 50% of incumbents won re-election, whereas in elections with at least a first round by 1999, 24 of 35 won re-election and on March 26, 2000, all seven incumbents won with large majorities, and four of them received more than 75% of the vote. As things currently stand, therefore, democracy has been compromised more at the regional than the federal level in many regions and the trend toward "autocratization of the regions" appears to be growing.

Where is Russia Going?

Much will clearly depend on Putin himself, leaving us to make educated guesses about his intentions. For the purposes of this memo, suffice it to say that the jury is still out on Putin. His St. Petersburg experience, the intellectual environment in the places where he studied, and his public statements in favor of a free press and two-party democracy suggest that he is a real democrat, or at least no worse than his Western counterparts. But his KGB past, his harsh treatment of Chechnya, the chill (and sometimes worse) he has put on the Russian media, and the tactics he has employed to win election suggest that he may push Russia in the opposite direction. At this point in time, therefore, it is important to look closely at what barriers to authoritarian "backsliding" may exist in Russian society, to evaluate their strength, and assess how we might make them stronger.

Barriers to backsliding can include the following:

- **Civil Society.** Non-governmental organizations are very weak in Russia. Many of those organizations that do exist depend heavily on Western funding, which ironically sometimes orients these organizations away from the society they were funded to help.
- **Mass Media.** The state has large interests in two of Russia's "Big Three" TV channels (ORT and RTR) and has powerful tools to pressure the third (NTV), since the state-owned Gazprom holds a large part of NTV's debt. For now NTV is holding out--in this sense a bulwark for democracy--but its hold is rather fragile. Similar (if not worse) situations exist in the provinces, where the state typically controls the most widely watched television. While print media generally represent a far wider range of opinion, regional governments typically control most local publications.
- **Non-State Centers of Economic Power.** In some ways, the "oligarchs" have been good for Russian democracy since they have had conflicting interests and have backed different political movements and groups. This pluralism of the oligarchs, especially as reflected in mass media, may come under threat from a determined Putin wielding a major electoral mandate, however.
- **Political Parties.** While most observers deride Russian political parties as powerless, they have forged core electorates with whom Russian political leaders must reckon. The Communists have demonstrated consistent command of at least 25% of the population, Yabloko 6%, the Union of Right-Wing Forces as much as 9%, and the Liberal Democratic Party 3-6%, making for a total of over 40% of the electorate and over 30% of the Duma. Unfortunately, at the local level, these parties are seldom powerful enough to resist the will of a regional political machine, and few expect that they could put up significant resistance if the federal government tried seriously to crack down on them.
- **Popular Attitudes to Power.** Democracy is to some extent a self-fulfilling prophesy--if people think other people or institutions are committed to protecting democratic ideals, they are likely to resist fiercely when a leader starts to violate these principles. But when people expect the worst, and likewise do not expect other people or institutions to join them if they protest encroachment against democracy, they are more likely to simply give up. Russians are renowned for their pessimism, and their very recent political experience makes this view well-grounded. When a US CIA chief was elected president in 1988, few feared for American democracy. But in Russia, the very fact of Putin's KGB/FSB background has even Putin's allies thinking that democracy might be in a "deep freeze" for the next ten years while he cleans house. What is worse, they seem to accept this.

Conclusion

Russia has made a great deal of progress on the road to democracy. However, while the recent Duma, presidential, and regional elections merit an overall grade of "B," the

barriers to potential backsliding under President Putin are weak and uncertain. In fact, very real backsliding has already occurred in a number of regions (such as Tatarstan and Kalmykia), providing Putin a model to employ for the whole country.

To fortify the barriers to backsliding, the United States should encourage programs that do the following:

- Strengthen independent media in Russia. This includes providing vitally needed financing where necessary and appropriate. This need is particularly great at the regional level, where something as simple as supporting an independent commercial printing press could make a large difference. This is one area where the West (with a significant financial commitment) could make a large difference.
- Support the development of political parties in Russia. While the West can certainly help only at the margins here, it can share its experience with the aim of helping a new generation of leaders understand the value and methods of building and sustaining regional organizations.
- Call attention to violations of democratic norms. If Russian civil society is too weak or lacks the media access to do this, Western organizations can help fill in the gap and promote the awareness that will empower Russians to act to defend their own rights. Westerners need to be sensitive, however, and not communicate a "holier-than-thou" tone.
- Support the development of civil society in Russia. In doing this, Western organizations should be careful not to encourage these groups to be overly dependent on Western financing or to lose touch with Russian society. In fact, the best way to support Russian civil society would be for US organizations to promote the practice of charitable contributions from within Russia itself, perhaps by means of the tax code.
- Create multiple centers of economic power. Encouraging foreign investment, which will help produce new sources of wealth independent of the state, is probably the best way for the US to do this.
- Improve Russia's electoral laws. Here the greatest need is to make more clear when abuses take place and to take away discretion that can be manipulated by authorities for their own political purposes. While Russians must adopt laws that fit their own political culture, the shared experience of Western countries in struggling with similar problems will certainly be helpful.