

New Round of Elections in Russia New People, New Technologies...No Choice?

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It has been a busy season for elections in Russia, with gubernatorial contests in St. Petersburg and Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg), the presidential election in Chechnya, and mayoral elections in several large Russian cities. This round of elections was, across the board, a striking contrast to previous ones, yet all the 2003 elections looked surprisingly alike.

Key events such as the election of Valentina Matvienko as governor of Russia's "second capital" or Akhmad Kadyrov as Chechen president were clearly influenced by the Kremlin. The Volgograd mayoral campaign did not appear important enough to warrant federal interference. The flow of events in the months preceding the elections in Volgograd, however, proved that the Kremlin's "managed democracy" has a new approach and has spread to Russia's regions. The major feature of this new approach is the absence of a real choice for the electorate.

Four years ago, Russians witnessed heated campaigns not only for Duma seats but also for vigorous campaigns for various gubernatorial and municipal positions. Journalists and analysts stressed the dirty methods used by some participants, pointing at false newspapers and accusations as well as double candidates. The electorate was indignant but no one called those elections boring. Now the major battles are fought well before the election date. Sometimes (but amusingly rarely), the courts are used as a tool to stop a promising but undesirable candidate, at least from the perspective of the center, from running. More often, the public does not even see why and how there is only one recognizable (and, invariably, pro-federal) name on the ballot. There are no answers forthcoming from the authorities as to why there are no other merited candidates.

By summer 2003, the mayor of Volgograd, Yuri Chekhov, had the longest record in Volgograd politics, having started his political career some 10 years ago. He unsuccessfully ran for governor of the Volgograd region twice, in 1996 and 2000, but won mayoral elections in 1995 and 1999. He unexpectedly resigned without explanation in June 2003, more than a year before his term expired. Some journalists predicted that he would be appointed to the federal executive structures, but the former mayor has not moved to another position. Moreover, he chose to appoint as acting mayor his former deputy Alexander Tyurin, a less well-known and less popular member of his team. Tyurin, in turn, campaigned for mayor using the city's "administrative resource" until

two weeks before the election, when he announced that he would not run. The conclusion can be made that Tyurin never intended to run, but rather sought to drain administrative resources in the campaign. The administrative apparatus was working for his election when his refusal to run made all its work in vain. The Communist Party (KPRF), which controlled the Volgograd regional offices, experienced problems finding promising mayoral candidates for the city of Volgograd. The KPRF first supported regional trade-union boss Vyacheslav Kobozev, and then, realizing Kobozev's low electoral potential, shifted its support to the president of Volgograd's Rotor soccer team, Vladimir Goryunov, three days before the election. Rotor had seen better days, as had Goryunov's popularity.

The only candidate that had his resources and image intact was Evgenii Ischenko. Ischenko entered Volgograd politics four years ago. In the 1999 mayoral campaign he launched a massive public relations campaign with large sums of money, which is unusual for Volgograd. Many analysts, however, explained his mayoral attempt as, ultimately, part of his Duma campaign. By gaining name recognition in the mayoral election first, two months before the Duma elections, Ischenko was then better poised for his real goal, the Duma elections. As a result, the young businessman (28 years old at the time) finished second to incumbent Chekhov in October and easily won a State Duma seat in December, forcing Volgograd Communist leader Alevtina Aparina out of her district. During those elections, Ischenko's tactics included publishing a weekly newspaper *Den' za dnem*, which was freely distributed to tens of thousands of Volgograd citizens. The newspaper continues to be published today, four years since the election, raising still unanswered questions about the resources that were involved in Ischenko's election. Ischenko is now a recognizable "local" politician; his political program is delivered to every apartment, and his second place showing in the 1999 mayoral elections now speaks in his favor.

For Volgograd elites, however, Ischenko was (and still is) an outsider. He managed to establish some connections at the city and regional levels, but was very careful in establishing them. The local bureaucracy considers him an interloper who may destroy the city's balance of power. The city's elites, however, did not organize to fight Ischenko.

The result of the September 2003 election was very predictable. Ischenko won with 39 percent of the vote, Goryunov received 29 percent, and Kobozev and Tyurin both received five percent. As it turned out, Tyurin did not deliver his resignation from the campaign to the proper authorities so his name still appeared on the ballot. Voter turnout was 33 percent, and 8 percent of all votes were cast "against all candidates."

Speculating about the possible reasons for Volgograd politics giving rise to Ischenko is not an easy task. His victory may have been the Kremlin's will. Ischenko, who used to be a member of Vladimir Zhirinovskii's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and then an independent deputy, is now a member of United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*). Alternatively, Ischenko's meteoric rise could be connected to a financial scheme, as no one doubts that Ischenko was the most affluent participant in the election.

One of the obvious reasons that Volgograd Communists did not fight against Ischenko was the political interests of Alevtina Aparina, Volgograd KPRF leader. She obviously wants to return to the State Duma territorial district (Central district,

Volgograd region) that she lost to Ischenko in 1999. Aparina is now a Duma deputy from the Communist Party list, but feels uncomfortable without her own constituency. The election of her main foe and rival, Ischenko, as the mayor of Volgograd makes room for Aparina to win a State Duma seat from the Central district of Volgograd. Ischenko, in turn, announced early in the summer of 2003 that he would recommend his uncle, also named Evgenii Ischenko, to the list of candidates for the December elections from the same Volgograd Central district. Ischenko (the uncle) was an LDPR representative in the Central Elections Committee, and he played a key role in the 1999 elections by giving his nephew a smooth campaign when, for instance, no actions were taken by the CEC after it was alleged that Ischenko had forged his university degree. The CEC had been punishing other candidates for minor offenses.

In fact, these examples reveal the basic problem of Russian political life. The contemporary Russian electorate is apathetic. Fewer and fewer people see reasons to vote because they face elections without real choices. One explanation for the state of Russian elections lies in the political recruitment mechanism, or rather, its absence, in Russia.

In Soviet times, the Communist Party played the role of the recruitment machine, choosing the people fit for the *nomenklatura*. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, when political sentiment was high, some people went to Parliament or to governors' and mayors' offices directly from crowded squares. That is, they were inspired to political action. By the mid-1990s, however, those feelings were gone, the former activists had achieved political or business positions, and no new paths to start a political career emerged for the new generations.

The most recent political newcomers are either businessmen trying to convert their money into power or combine money and power, or members of the old *nomenklatura* trying to move from bureaucratic positions to more comfortable political ones. Such moves happen everywhere, but the problem lies in the absence of any normal way of building a political career. In other words, the major problem for Russian political system is the absence of a standard path to enter politics or the party system. There is no predictable route someone interested in politics can take to try to achieve this goal.

Russia's major political parties are currently the Communists, who inherited too much from the Soviet past, United Russia (the party of power), which recreated even more features of the former CPSU, and several small political groups that want to become parties but are still largely Moscow-based groups of intellectuals that may attract some electoral support but lack an internal structure and consistent presence. At each election, these parties raise funds for their candidates, and (according to some journalists) sell places in their elections lists, but there is no fundraising for a party platform, and no continuing presence between elections. Former prime minister Sergei Kirienko seemed to understand that problem, and was searching for younger members to join the Union of Right Forces but later switched to recruiting bureaucrats for his Povolzhkii Federal District instead.

Ischenko, Matvienko, and Kadyrov, became the preordained winners not only because of the Kremlin's will. They competed in a pretty empty political field, without any strong candidates competing against them. The opposition, for the most part, ignores politics and political contests at the regional and municipal levels. Such criticism cannot

be leveled against them at the federal level, but there is no structure or incentive to spend resources to contest elections and be competitive in the regions and cities.

In the coming years, Russia will face the unpleasant problem of trying to produce a new generation of politicians. Possible sources include the army and law enforcement agencies, business, and state structures (bureaucrats). Each of these sociopolitical groups has its own interests and way of thinking, and none of them are thinking politically. There is no institution that may constantly monitor and follow society's needs. And there is no surefire way to gain political experience.

This situation entails the prerequisites for the recreation of authoritarian rule. In March 2004, the Russian people will re-elect Putin. It was already clear in 2000 that there would be no alternative to him in 2004. People will be disillusioned with the idea of democracy when they see no real choice on the ballot, as a real choice is impossible without some mechanism of political recruitment. The only party that has a developed mechanism for political recruitment (at least in the so called Red Belt regions) is the KPRF. This is no surprise as it is the only party with a developed internal structure that holds offices at the different levels of the state apparatus. Even the Unity Party is different. Despite the existence of political groups directed at youths, such as Young Unity (*Molodezhnoe Edinstvo*) and Going Together (*Iduschie Vmeste*), participation in these groups seems less connected to career plans than to immediate results.

Another possible variant for starting a political career is through participation in the different structures of civil society, such as NGOs and local authorities. We currently see very contradictory signs from NGOs: some prosper, while others suffer as a result of state policy. In any case, party building and civil society construction are now major problems for Russian democracy. This must be recognized if there are to be free elections in Russia in 2008.

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