



The Duma Election

By Leon Aron

The December 7, 2003, election to the Russian parliament, the State Duma, has been portrayed in the U.S. media as mostly a product of the Kremlin's machinations. Its "administrative resources"—most importantly, its control of national television channels—are said to be almost entirely responsible for the winning performance of the "party of power," United Russia, which garnered 37 percent of the party-list vote among twenty-three parties and blocs on the ballot.

The reality is far more complicated. While what the Kremlin did or did not do in the run-up to the election was important, after over a decade of Russia's experiment with democracy, Kremlinology is hardly the source of most, much less all, the answers. Likely no less intelligent and no more malleable than voters in other democracies, Russian voters made what to them seemed like rational choices based on their immediate experiences and current political attitudes.

In addition to manipulation from above, any analysis of the elections must also take into consideration the factors that shape outcomes in national polls in every democracy, however young, poor, or flawed. In the Russian case, these factors include the state of the economy and the dynamic of relative well-being, the national consensus on economic and political systems, the life cycles of single-issue parties, and the political preferences and turnout in different demographic groups.

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Shaping the Results: Outside Influences and Their Limits

Allegations of Falsification. In the previous Duma election (1999), there were proven instances of ballot stuffing in the Caucasus and the Central Volga region: Dagestan, Bashkortostan, and Tatarstan. This time, international observers again charged Bashkortostan—an ethnic republic within the Russian Federation in which the Duma poll coincided with a sharply contested election of the republic's president—with "elements of blatant fraud."¹

For the party-list vote in the country as a whole, allegations of vote rigging thus far have been made by the Communist Party, based on the comparison of the official numbers with the party's own "alternative count" and the results of the exit poll of over forty-three thousand voters in forty of Russia's eighty-nine regions.² (In a monitoring alliance with the center-right Yabloko and the conservative Union of Rightist Forces (SPS), the Communists placed at least one observer at each of 94,115 polling stations³ stretched over eleven time zones—in addition to more than one thousand international observers from fifty countries and twelve national and international organizations.)⁴

Although the Communists did not allege falsification of their own party-list vote (the official results differ from the exit poll by .03 percent), they noted a discrepancy in the case of Yabloko and SPS. While Yabloko's official tally was 4.2 percent, the Communists' "alternative count" showed 6 percent, and an independent exit poll conducted by the *Moscow Times*, the Soros Foundation, and the ROMIR polling organization estimated 5.8

percent.⁵ For SPS, the corresponding numbers were 4 percent, 5.1 percent, and 6.1 percent.⁶

Hovering around the 5-percent barrier for entry into the Duma, the disparities make the difference for both Yabloko and SPS between having or not having party-list parliamentary representation. Yet, in the absence of other proofs, the falsification is impossible to prove since the deviations are well within the 3.5 percent margin of error of the MT-Soros-ROMIR poll. Both parties said that they would take their cases to court if “there were sufficient evidence covering several regions” and “if the difference between the official and unofficial counts proved considerable.”⁷

Media Manipulation and Harassment. A potentially more significant impact on the outcome may have come from what are known as “administrative resources,” or a set of assets available for abuse by officeholders. The most important of such levers is control of the three national television networks, which skewed the coverage of the parties to give the most favorable exposure to United Russia.

In addition, local authorities in the provinces were reported to have used all manner of pressure on the opposition parties and candidates. The shenanigans included sudden cancellations of previously approved campaign events, interruptions in electricity to campaign offices, and the theft of leaflets and posters. In the case of Yabloko, which was supported by the imprisoned billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the police searched the offices of the company that managed the campaign and carried away computers and papers. The presence of some thirty provincial governors on United Russia’s national or regional party lists has given further credence to allegations of “lies and intimidation”⁸ deployed in support of the pro-Kremlin party.

As a result, while international observers found the work of the Central Electoral Commission to be “highly professional,” the multiple disadvantages in which parties competing with United Russia found themselves prompted the head of the Council of Europe’s monitoring delegation, David Atkinson, to “regard these elections as free, but . . . certainly not fair.”⁹

Calling Yabloko’s and SPS’s failure to be elected to the Duma “one of the saddest things,” Atkinson’s counterpart among the observers sent by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Bruce George, cited the “failure [of the Russian media] to provide balanced and unbiased reporting” and concluded that the election had “failed in meeting many OSCE

and international standards.”¹⁰ (Together the Council of Europe and the OSCE fielded five hundred monitors on election day.)

Limits to the Effectiveness of Outside Pressure. Yet as over seven decades of media sociology and propaganda research have shown, it is enormously difficult to mold people’s attitudes on issues that are important to them. More difficult still is to force consumers to “switch” brands, be they of toothpaste, laundry detergent, or a political party. This simple truth—obvious to every starting advertising and marketing researcher after a month on the job—remains elusive to many intellectuals and journalists.

After over a decade of raucous democratic battles, uncensored print media, and ferocious political mudslinging, most Russians are no more gullible than any people exposed to print and broadcast political advertisements. Justice Antonin Scalia noted this innate resistance to media manipulation in his dissent from the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent decision that sought to “protect” the people from the “corrupting” influence of political advertising bought with “soft money” contributions to political campaigns. “The premise of the First Amendment,” Scalia wrote, “is that the American people are neither sheep nor fools, and hence fully capable of considering both the substance of the speech presented to them and its proximate and ultimate source.”¹¹

In fact, almost two-thirds, or thirty-eight million of sixty million Russians who came to vote¹² somehow withstood the wiles of the Kremlin’s technologists and television propaganda and voted for parties other than United Russia. As if to illustrate Scalia’s argument, a thirty-four-year-old Moscow printer who had just voted told a U.S. reporter waiting near the polling station: “They [United Russia] must have some kind of objectives. But in my view, it’s just marketing for the party of power. Their slogan, it’s not for thinking people.”¹³

Free Television and Radio Time. In the twenty working days before the election, each of the twenty-three parties on the national ballot was entitled to three hours of free airtime on the three state-owned television networks, plus two hours on the two state-owned national radio stations for political advertising and debates between its leaders and those of other parties. In addition, one half-hour of free time was given to the parties on regional state-owned channels.¹⁴ All of the parties could buy additional advertising or debating time, and many did.

Furthermore, there are over 150 local private television channels in seventy-seven out of eighty-nine Russian regions, and over one thousand private radio stations.¹⁵ Unlike their state-owned counterparts, they were far from uniform in their campaign coverage.

Newspapers and Magazines. The government's efforts at molding the electorate were further impeded by posters, leaflets, newspaper advertisements, door-to-door canvassing (especially liked by the Communists), meetings with candidates, and rallies.

Most importantly, unlike national television, print media of all political leanings are uncensored and were filled with all manner of pre-election materials reflecting the entire spectrum of ideological and party biases. There were forty thousand newspapers and magazines in Russia in 2002,¹⁶ and 7,477 new "mass media sources" were registered that year. With media-ownership laws more liberal in Russia than in the United States, many of these publications are foreign-owned.¹⁷ The total daily print run of newspapers and magazines is over one hundred million.¹⁸

Six weeks before the election, the vigor and candor of the nearly uniform negative reaction of the privately owned newspapers to Mikhail Khodorkovsky's arrest belied the clichés of the "death" of independent media in Russia. (For example, the black front page of *Novaya Gazeta* ran the white-lettered banner headline: "**A COUP HAS TAKEN PLACE IN RUSSIA.**") Freedom of the press in this election was greatly enhanced by the October 30, 2003, decision of the Constitutional Court to strike down a law that severely restricted press coverage of campaigns, candidates, and issues.

As anyone who can read Russian would testify, the criticism of the government, United Russia's nebulous platform, and especially its candidates was widespread and unchecked. The commentaries were especially harsh in liberal weeklies *Moskovskie Novosti* and *Novoe Vremya*, the left-leaning *Novaya Gazeta*, and leftist nationalist *Zavtra*, with the latter specializing in vicious Putin cartoons. Hundreds of pro-Communist national, regional, and district newspapers with an aggregate print run of millions were not too far behind.

The Internet. All the parties competing in the elections had their platforms, information about the candidates, and a plethora of campaign materials posted on websites where they could be easily accessed, copied, and distributed by anyone wishing to do so. In addition to dozens of uncensored Internet news and commentary websites, all the major newspapers and magazines have

their own sites as well. (According to surveys, between 9 percent and 11 percent of Russian adults—13–16 million people, or 12–15 percent of all eligible voters—have access to the Internet at home or work.)¹⁹

In the end, the manipulation may have moved a few percentage points here and toppled a candidate there. But with sixty million people turning out to vote, twenty-three parties on the party lists, and 1,985 candidates from single-mandate districts running for the other half of the 450 Duma seats (or almost nine contenders per seat), it is hard to imagine the outside factors fundamentally changing the final results.

"It's the Economy, Stupid!"

Virtually absent from the election commentary is the single largest explanatory variable: the economy. In what appears to be a new "iron law" of capitalist democracies, barring a major political scandal or a natural disaster, economic stability—better yet growth—makes the leader of the executive branch widely popular and almost invulnerable to challenges.

Russia is no different. There are many things people like about Putin—who is perceived by millions as trustworthy, caring, honest and, after thirty years of senescent and infirm leaders, youthful, energetic, and fit—but at the core of his 70- to 80-percent popularity, without a doubt, is the four years of economic growth unprecedented at least since the early 1980s.

Since Putin was elected president, the nominal GDP has grown \$260 billion in 2000²⁰ to the projected \$423 billion in 2003²¹—an almost two-thirds increase. (This year the economy is expected to expand between 6 percent and 7 percent.) Starting in 2000, investment grew by an average of 9 percent a year, construction by 9 percent, services by 5 percent, and retail trade by 19 percent.²² Since 1998, labor productivity has grown by 50 percent.²³ In 2003, until Khodorkovsky's arrest on October 25, the Russian stock market was the best performing in the world, with the RTS index reaching an all-time high on October 1.

Boosted by high oil prices, Russian private oil companies have invested over \$5 billion in exploration and equipment in the past five years. The resultant production and revenue growth among the top private oil corporations, especially YUKOS, TNK-BP, and Sibneft, amounted to 15 to 20 percent a year since 1999. Yet, although it still accounts for 40 percent of tax revenue because it is more transparent than other sectors of the economy and its profits are so high, the oil sector today

is responsible for no more than 20 percent of the Russian GDP.

Standard of Living and Tax Revenues

Economic expansion has lifted enough boats to secure election or reelection of any party or president associated with it. Needless to say, Russia is still poor and miles away from even moderate prosperity. Yet, as both incumbents and challengers know only too well, it is *relative* well-being—a change for better or worse compared to the recent past—that matters.

Between 2000 and 2002, real disposable income grew on average 9 percent a year.²⁴ It further has grown by 15 percent in the first half of 2003,²⁵ as compared with the same period the year before, and is projected to increase by at least 13 percent year-on-year.²⁶ Although still very low by Western standards, the average monthly salary has more than doubled from the equivalent of \$80 to \$179,²⁷ and the poverty rate has fallen by one-third, from 37 percent of the population in the first quarter of 2001 to 25 percent in the fourth quarter of 2002.²⁸ Between 2000 and the third quarter of 2003, the survey-based level of unemployment has decreased by 19 percent, from 7 million in 2000 to 5.7 million.²⁹

The widely popular tax overhaul has slashed marginal rates and established the 13-percent flat personal income and 24-percent corporate taxes, some of the lowest in the world. Tax revenues grew by 28 percent in 2001 and by 21 percent in 2002, with the personal income tax receipts almost doubling from \$6.2 billion to \$12 billion.³⁰

These sharply increased tax revenues have produced budget surpluses unprecedented in Russia's post-Soviet history. Compared to 1997, the state budget has gone from a deficit equivalent to nearly 8 percent of the GDP to a surplus of over 1 percent.³¹ Since 2000 the Central Bank reserves of hard currency and gold have doubled (from \$28 billion to a projected \$57 billion), while the state's foreign debt has been reduced by over one-fifth (from \$140 billion to \$110 billion or slightly over a quarter of the country's GDP) and domestic debt by half (from 62 percent of GDP to 30 percent).³² The state's full coffers have brought about salary raises for state employees, especially teachers and doctors, and the elimination of pension arrears for more than 38 million retirees.³³ Both measures have taken away one of the most effective Communist campaign issues and likely contributed to the shrinking of the Communist electorate.

Middle Class, Cellphones, and the Internet

Russian sociologists consider the middle class to be persons with monthly incomes of between \$230 and \$1,000 per family member.³⁴ Since 1999, the number of people in this category has grown one-and-a-half times: from 12 million to 30 million people, or 21 percent of the population.³⁵

Yet as in every young post-authoritarian nation, the rampant mistrust of the state makes "official" salary parameters notoriously unreliable. Even after the introduction of a low flat income tax, millions of Russians underreport or do not report second or third jobs for cash. In such societies, secondary indicators of economic change become important diagnostic tools.

Here too, the data strongly suggest impressive growth. One of the most reliable indicators of economic trends anywhere, advertising spending, is projected to grow 35–38 percent over the 2002 level to \$2.7 billion in 2003.³⁶ Between January and October of 2003, the number of cellphone subscribers in the country has increased by 50 percent, from twenty million to thirty-two million, or 22 percent of the population.³⁷ The subscription is higher in large cities—Moscow leads the way with 62 percent and St. Petersburg is second with 50 percent—but the growth is not limited to them. Excluding Moscow, in the same ten months of 2003, the Russian cellphone market as a whole expanded by 88 percent.³⁸ For instance, between January 2000 and August 2003, in the Samara region, 620 miles southeast of Moscow, the cellphone penetration rate grew four times, from 6 percent to 25 percent of the population.³⁹

Cars. Having increased between 1990 and the crisis year of 1998 from eighteen cars per one hundred households to thirty-one cars (an increase of 72 percent),⁴⁰ car ownership was up 30 percent in the next two years, reaching forty cars per one hundred households in 2000,⁴¹ and is likely approaching fifty cars today. According to Ford Motor Co., in August 2003 the demand in Russia for foreign-brand cars was up by 40 percent.⁴²

As Russia's leading political sociologist and student of political and economic elites, Ol'ga Kryshchanovskaya, wrote recently:

The rumors of the [Russian] people's penury are strongly exaggerated. The overwhelming majority of the Russians lives in large cities, not in the villages. We have already surpassed Europe in the rate

of consumption growth. When the cities register a colossal rise in personal savings in Sberbank [the largest state-owned bank]—who said that “we are all poor?” There has been a rather significant drop in sales of cars all over the world—but in Russia there is not just an increase [in the sales] but lines at the dealerships. According to Toyota, whereas before there was a waiting period to buy Corollas, now people are signing up for Land Cruisers four months in advance. Are these people all oligarchs? Please don’t consider us poverty-stricken cattle [bydlo].⁴³

The Party of the “More Satisfied” and Its Rivals

A choice stemming not from ideological allegiance but rather from the support for the economic status quo helps explain the remarkable consistency of United Russia’s performance across the political spectrum and the key demographic segments of the Russian electorate.

As exit polls have shown, UR handily beat both the Left and the Right in what used to be the core constituencies of the Communists (KPRF), Yabloko, and SPS. Thus it was far ahead of the KPRF in smaller cities, the countryside, among older and less educated voters, and even among the pensioners.⁴⁴ By similarly huge margins, UR surpassed the two liberal parties in their traditional strongholds in large metropolises, among the younger voters, voters with higher education, and even entrepreneurs and professionals.⁴⁵

United Russia might best be defined as the party of the “more satisfied.” Shortly before the election, a poll asked respondents if they or their families had “adjusted” to the changes of the past decade. On average, 57 percent answered affirmatively (in itself a remarkably high figure), but among those intending to vote for UR the number rose to 67 percent.⁴⁶ (By contrast, the corresponding number among the pro-Communist voters was 48 percent.) In the “adjustment” to—meaning well-being in—a post-Communist Russia of private property and free enterprise, UR’s electorate was ahead even of SPS, traditionally considered the party of prosperous “bourgeoisie”: among that party’s prospective voters the “adjusted” constituted only 61 percent.⁴⁷

Back to Brezhnev—or to Giscard? After its bravura performance in this election, United Russia has been likened to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). In its open association with the government

and identification with the president, its readiness to do the Kremlin’s bidding, and in its “nomenclature”-like national list teeming with governors and ministers, UR is indeed reminiscent of the CPSU.

Yet the CPSU-UR parallel is clearly an instance of history’s repeating itself by making into farce that which first appeared as tragedy. With its full ownership of the country’s repressive and economic resources, the CPSU held Russia firmly in its murderous grip for over seven decades. It was omnipresent and omniscient from the smallest decaying villages to the Kremlin. By contrast, the so-obviously “virtual” character of Russia’s first “presidential party” inspires in its opponents neither fear nor hatred but rather contempt.

A more fitting comparison is to the French “presidential parties.” Since the establishment in the early 1960s of the “presidential republic” (labeled an “elective monarchy”⁴⁸ and “authoritarian republic”⁴⁹ by Raymond Aron), these “parties”—with the exception of François Mitterrand’s Socialists—were largely vehicles for the advancement of presidential ambition. They mostly were discarded, or fell into disuse, after an election or, at best, the end of the presidential term. Even by the evanescent criteria of such parties, UR must be among the most heterogeneous and least stable. It spans almost the entire ideological spectrum, and its Duma faction runs from true blue Hyakian free-market liberals and “westernizers” to dyed-in-the-wool socialists and seekers after the “Russian way” to prosperity.

It seems a safe bet that, should Putin follow the letter of the constitution and retire in 2008 after a second term, UR’s showing in the 2007 parliamentary election will be far less impressive—if the party lasts that long.

SPS and Yabloko: Defeat by Success and Apathy

In addition to obvious tactical errors, some of which will be discussed shortly, two factors explain a great deal about the defeat of SPS and Yabloko. First, there is the well-known phenomenon of the erosion of support for single-issue parties and movements once their ideas become part of a national consensus. Second, both parties have suffered from apathy among their core constituents.

Since they were first elected to the Duma in 1993, the electoral support for both parties stemmed from their affirmative stance on two sets of issues: private property, the market economy, and liberal reforms, on the one hand, and democracy and civil liberties on the other. The economic half of this agenda has been co-opted,

and steadily and successfully implemented by the Putin administration between 2000 and 2003 (at least until the YUKOS-Khodorkovsky affair).

The most pro-reform Russian parliament since the first semi-democratic election in 1990, the 1999-2003 Duma passed Kremlin-drafted laws privatizing agricultural land and urban real estate; drastically reducing personal and corporate income taxes; privatizing the state electric monopoly; introducing a progressive labor code; and beginning partial privatization of pensions and utilities.

Consensus '99. Indeed, support for private property and a market-based economy became part of a national consensus. This sea change was signaled, in part, by the unprecedented success of Yabloko (6 percent of the party-list vote) and SPS (9 percent) in the crucial the 1999 election. The new consensus included tight budgets and low inflation; tax cuts and the shift of the tax burden from the producer and employer to the employee and consumer; the abandonment of extreme protectionism; and an aversion to the re-nationalization of small and medium-sized private enterprises.

In the next four years, some of the most politically explosive, hotly contested, and energizing issues advocated by the two parties suddenly became more or less commonplace (and, soon, government policies). By this year's election, even the Communists, their populist rhetoric notwithstanding, grudgingly accepted most of these policies. Thus, speaking to a Russian reporter three weeks before December 7, the KPRF's chairman, Gennady Zyuganov, stated that, in the end, privatization or nationalization must be judged solely by economic effectiveness.⁵⁰

Voting for private property and capitalism no longer meant voting for SPS and Yabloko or waiting for a presidential election. Nothing more than the president's parliamentary incarnation, UR, apparently did just fine in the estimation of millions of Russians.

Liberties and YUKOS: No Electoral "Bounce." As regards the political half of SPS's and Yabloko's platforms, the government's encroachments on civil liberties, including the re-establishment of control over the national television networks, proved unimportant to most voters and failed to produce the hoped-for electoral "bounce" for the two parties. Unlike Russian and Western elite media and political classes, slightly over half of the respondents saw no threat on the part of the authorities to freedom of speech and of mass media in a national poll a month before the election.⁵¹ And while

28 percent of those surveyed agreed that there was such a threat, apparently they did not see the issue as urgent enough to turn to Yabloko or SPS, or to vote at all.

Their lack of outrage (and the equanimity of the majority) may stem from the disgust at the recollection of the shamelessness with which between 1996 and 2000 the oligarchs Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky deployed the key assets of their media empires (among them the most-watched television network NTV, the daily *Segodnya*, and the tabloid *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* for Gusinsky, and the ORT television network for Berezovsky) to destroy the reputations of their business rivals or opponents of "their" parties or presidential candidates by spewing doctored news or outright lies under the guise of information.

Similarly, the reaction of ordinary voters to the Kremlin's blatant judicial assault on YUKOS and its former CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky turned out to be far less strong than that of the media and the intelligentsia. While Russians continue to be ambivalent about the private ownership of large industrial enterprises, strong majorities dislike oligarchs, whose wealth they believe to be illegitimately acquired.⁵² (It is not quite clear how much Khodorkovsky's arrest helped United Russia as opposed to the electorates of the left-nationalist Rodina (Motherland) and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's populist-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), for whom hatred of the oligarchs and re-nationalization are cardinal issues.)

Turnout and Tactics. The apparent absence of energizing issues further exacerbated the perennial vulnerability of SPS and Yabloko: voter turnout. In keeping with the tradition that has been broken only once (in the Yeltsin-Zyuganov presidential contest in 1996, which was the most important of all post-Soviet elections), the two parties' core electorates have always been the least likely to come to the polls. According to a national survey conducted two weeks before the election, among those "most certain" not to vote were entrepreneurs, men and women between the ages of twenty-five and forty, and people with higher education.⁵³ (By contrast, those "most certain" to vote were the traditional Communist or "national-socialist" constituencies: those over fifty-five years old, those living in small towns and in the countryside, and the poor with incomes less than four thousand rubles—or \$133—per family member a month.)⁵⁴

Still, with over 8 percent of the vote between them, SPS and Yabloko could have won Duma representation had it not been for the obstructionism of Yabloko's

leader Grigoriy Yavlinsky, his rejection of innumerable attempts by SPS to unite or field single-bloc candidates, and his Lenin-like obsession with being in total command of an increasingly isolated and small sect rather than gain electoral victory at the cost of surrendering a measure of control.

Increasingly, Yabloko sought to attract voters not by presenting a positive agenda but by whipping up hatred of Anatoly Chubais, one of SPS's leaders and Russia's former "chief privatizer." The run-against-Chubais strategy backfired: while weakening the support for SPS, the tactics have also failed to mobilize Yabloko's party base among the currently dispossessed and impoverished but formerly state-employed and privileged intelligentsia.

Blaming Themselves. To its credit—and contrary to the Russian intelligentsia's age-old tradition of blaming everyone (especially the government) for whatever setbacks it encountered in personal, professional, or political life—SPS was mature enough to see the main causes of the defeat in its own strategy and tactics. As Chubais stated on election night, both parties must "search for the reasons in themselves."⁵⁵ Later, in his diagnosis, the party's chairman, Boris Nemtsov, pointed to the "pendulum" of society's political preferences swinging from right to left, as "in all post-Soviet nations," and to the "fragmentation" of the democrats.⁵⁶

Similarly, the Yabloko leaders, although not Yavlinsky, pointed to their party's refraining from criticism of the government even after the Kremlin's attack on YUKOS and Khodorkovsky as a possible reason for the electoral failure. "We should have been either an openly pro-president party or clearly an oppositional one," Mikhail Zadornov said after the election.⁵⁷ Blaming the low voter turnout on the spats between Yabloko and SPS, one of Yabloko's founders, Vladimir Lukin, called upon both parties to abandon old agendas, forge "new democratic forces of the twenty-first century"—and do so without delay before the next presidential and regional elections.⁵⁸

The Leftists and the Nationalists

Helped by the fear generated by the December 5 suicide bombing in southern Russia in which forty-two people were killed (most likely by Chechen separatists), the success of Rodina (9 percent of the party-list vote) and LDPR (12 percent) have prompted two broad concerns. First, the election results were interpreted by many as a resurgence of the nationalist left. Second, it was assumed that the two parties would act, in effect, as United Russia's

wholly owned subsidiaries, thus forging a stable two-thirds constitutional majority in the Duma. The latter, in turn, would ensure the Kremlin's total control of the legislature, particularly in amending the constitution.

Yet in this election the leftists and the nationalists have done no better than to hold on to their traditional one-third of the electorate. In 1999 the Communists and LDPR together garnered 31 percent of the vote. This time, with Rodina, they received 34 percent. With the Communists down by almost half (from 25 percent to 12 percent of the party-list vote), LDPR up from 6 percent to 12 percent, and Rodina at 9 percent, the configuration looks far more like a redistribution within the anti-liberal bloc, rather than an expansion due to a "national-socialist" insurgency.

Although Rodina has succeeded in getting into the Duma, Russian voters have soundly rejected the other seven nationalist and leftist parties on the ballot with names like "For Holy Russia," "The True Patriots of Russia," or "The Party of Russian Revival—Russian Party of Life." Only two of these groups received over 1 percent of the party-list vote; the rest not did rise above 0.5 percent.

LDPR, which was labeled "national-capitalist" by the more perceptive Russian analysts shortly after its 1993 party-list triumph, did side with the Kremlin against the leftist plurality in the 1995–1999 Duma and supported the pro-reform/pro-government plurality in the 1999–2003 legislature. Yet Rodina's allegiance to Putin, much less to UR, is far from certain. Reportedly created by the Kremlin political technologists to split the Communist electorate, Rodina nevertheless is hardly the government's puppet. Both in its economic and foreign policy agendas, it is more nationalist than and very much to the left of United Russia. Indeed, already three days before the election of the party's two leaders, the economist Sergei Glaziev promised that, if it got into the Duma, Rodina would form an "anti-Kremlin patriotic alliance" with the Communists.⁵⁹

Yet if history is a guide, neither the Communists nor LDPR is likely to be a consistent ally of Rodina. In politics in general and Russian politics in particular, basic doctrinal similarities are not only a shaky foundation for cooperation but, on the contrary, usually cause bitter internecine conflict. One party seeks to distinguish itself from the other in obeisance to doctrinal purity and devotion to their common electorate.

The fierce rivalry between and merciless rhetorical attacks on one another by Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries in the early 1900s, has been replayed by Yabloko and SPS a century later. Largely for

the same reason, the much-feared bloc between the Communists and LDPR in the 1993 Duma never materialized. Instead, to highlight its own brand of populism and nationalism, LDPR became known for Zhirinovsky's fiery anti-Communist rhetoric and for a voting record that was far more frequently at odds with the Communists than was Yabloko's.

The Communists. Regardless of the final form and substance of the left-nationalist presence in the Fourth Duma, the halving of the Communist vote from 25 percent of the party-list vote in 1999 to 13 percent is a milestone in post-Soviet politics. Unlike the ex-Communists who were elected to power in Lithuania or Poland, the KPRF has not been "socially-democratized": it is unapologetic about its Soviet past and still marches with Stalin's portraits.

Undoubtedly, the KPRF's vote has been diminished by Rodina's challenge, with its skillful campaigning and its leaders younger and far more attractive than the bulbous-nosed Zyuganov. The Communists also were let down by the natural attrition in their actuarially challenged electorate, intra-party squabbles, and the money it reportedly took from Mikhail Khodorkovsky in exchange for several YUKOS-affiliated candidates on the party's national list.

Yet tactical issues aside, there is no denying that after fourteen years of free political debate and ten years of free voting, the Russian people are abandoning hard-line communism. Moreover, the more polished, less dogmatic version exemplified by Rodina can hardly be said to bolster support for Russian "national socialism"—together, KPRF and Rodina received 3 percentage points less than the Communists garnered alone in 1999.

Democratic Volatility

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Russian voters have been consistent in two regards: until this election they kept the executive branch in the hands of the reformers and away from the Communists, and they prevented any party from gaining a majority in the Duma. So long as these two conditions have been met, the Russian electorate has thrashed about with abandon. They gave 23 percent of the party-list vote to Zhirinovsky's LDPR in 1993; cut their support by half two years later; and by another half in 1999, reducing it to 6 percent. Now LDPR is back to 12 percent of the party vote.

Overlooked in the panic caused by LDPR's success was the fact that in the same 1993 election, Yegor Gaidar's Russia's Democratic Choice ended up with the largest

faction in the Duma. Two years later, the party failed to overcome the 5-percent barrier to qualify for the party-list representation. In 1999, as SPS, the party won 9 percent—and 4 percent on December 7, 2003.

Of course, this is not just Russia's story. Within basic parameters, mood swings are part and parcel of every democratic system. In one of the starkest recent examples, a few months after they reelected Gerhard Schroeder to the chancellorship, a majority of Germans told pollsters that they would not vote for him if the elections were held on the day of the survey. Apart from truly fateful choices between sharply competing ideologies and policies, one must be careful in reading too much into the results of the parliamentary elections, especially in young and poor democracies.

Fitting the Pattern and Correcting Errors. By running as the party of an extremely popular president who successfully implemented the key planks of the economic program of the Right, and, at the same time, by adopting some of the populist rhetoric of the Left, United Russia has come to dominate the center, the center-left, and the center-right. With a combined total of 246 seats from the party-list vote and single-mandate districts, it also became the first party ever to garner a majority (of eleven seats) in the Duma. The leftists and the nationalists have remained within what is by now a traditional range of one-third of the vote.

The vote was neither an endorsement of President Putin's disturbing turn toward greater state control over politics and economy nor a testimony to the effectiveness of such control. Rather, the result reflected broad support for the status quo as manifested in four years of economic growth and a palpable improvement in the living standards for millions of Russians. It also indicated voter indifference toward the slogans and agendas of the main opposition parties on the right and left alike.

Although the 55-percent turnout was lower than in the previous parliamentary election when 62 percent of the eligible voters went to the polls, it is well within the Central-Eastern European norm. (In the most recent legislative elections in countries considered leaders of post-Communist transition, the turnout was 46 percent in Poland and 58 percent in the Czech Republic.)

For as long as they can freely choose a party to vote for in their quadrennial trip to the polls, tens of millions of Russians will produce what Russian intellectuals and U.S. editorialists will condemn as mistakes or, worse yet, near-fatal blows to democracy. If they see them as errors, the voters will attempt to correct them four years later.

Will the Russian voters in time consider mistaken their empowering of Vladimir Putin's party and nodding to the new "national-socialists"? And, more important still, given the government's violations of the spirit, if not the letter, of the democratic political competition, will they be able to vote freely four years from now for the parties of their choice? Only time will tell.

Notes

1. Alex Fak, "OSCE: Vote Fundamentally Distorted," *Moscow Times*, December 9, 2003, p. 1.

2. Sponsored by the *Moscow Times*, the Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation, and Renaissance Capital investment bank, the survey was conducted by the ROMIR-Monitoring Holding polling agency.

3. Anatoly Medetsky and Francesca Mereu, "Zyuganov Sticks for SPS, Yabloko," *Moscow Times*, December 11, 2003, p. 1; and Vitaly Ivanov and Anfisa Voronina, "U kommunistov ne skhoditsya" (The Communists Cannot Tally Up). Accessed at <http://www.vedomosti.ru> on December 18, 2003.

4. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty *Newsline*, December 3, 2003, p. 1.

5. Anatoly Medetsky and Francesca Mereu, "Zyuganov Sticks for SPS, Yabloko," *Moscow Times*, December 11, 2003, p. 1.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. See, for example, "And Communists Protest Kremlin Campaign of Lies and Intimidation," and "SPS Alleges Official Harassment in Tyumen" RFE/RL *Newsline*, December 3, 2003, p. 2.

9. Alex Fak, "OSCE: Vote Fundamentally Distorted," *Moscow Times*, December 9, 2003, p. 1.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Quoted in, "Majority: 'Evidence Connects Soft Money to Manipulations,'" *Washington Post*, December 11, 2003, p. A30.

12. As of this writing, the turnout is estimated at 55.75 percent of the total eligible electorate of 109 million. Accessed at <http://www.rferl.org/specials/russianelection/archives/07122003.asp> on January 7, 2004.

13. Susan B. Glasser and Peter Baker, "Early Results Show Putin Strengthening Control," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2003, p. A10.

14. As stipulated in Articles 58 and 60 of the Federal Law No. 175-FZ of December 20, 2002, "O vyborakh Deputatov Gosudarstvennoy Dumy Federal'nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy

Federatsii" (On the Election of Deputies of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation), the national state-owned television networks and state-owned national radio stations must devote no less than one hour of free air time on working days to "election campaigning." The television networks are ORT, or "Channel One," RTR, or "Rossiya," and TV-Tsentr. The state-owned radio networks are "Mayak" and "Radio Rossii." Half of that time is to be "provided to registered candidates, regional groups of candidates, political parties and electoral blocs for joint debates, 'roundtables' and other joint campaigning events. . . ." In addition, state-owned regional television channels must provide at least one half-hour of free air-time for the same purpose. The time slots are determined by drawing lots. With twenty-one parties availing themselves of the free time, an hour of free time during the twenty working days on each of the three national television networks amounts to over three hours per party. Accessed at <http://democracy.ru/english/library/laws/duma175FZeng/page8.html#P712> on December 22, 2003.

15. "Gosudarstvennyi i chastnye SMI" (State-Owned and Private Mass Media), *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, No. 4, 2003, pp. 133-134.

16. "Rossiyskie SMI: kolichestvennaya spravka" (Russian Mass Media: A Note on the Numbers), *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, No. 4, 2003, p. 103; and "Business Diary," *Russia Journal*, May 2003, p. 47.

17. Nicolai Petro, "Russia Is Doing Just Fine," *The Providence Journal*, October 30, 2003. Accessed at: <http://www.projo.com/opinion/contributors/content/projo> on November 2, 2003.

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21. Keith Bush, CSIS *Russian Economic Survey* (Washington DC: CSIS), September 2003.

22. Al Breach, *Rasshiryaya gorizonty* (Moscow: Brunswick UBS Warburg, 31 January 2003), p. 38.

23. Alex Fak, "RTS Hits All-Time High of 573.85," *Moscow Times*, October 2, 2003, p. 1.

24. Keith Bush, CSIS *Russian Economic Survey* (Washington DC: CSIS), September 2003; and Jason Bush, "Sizzling Growth Could Singe Russia's Economy," *Business Week*, July 28, 2003, p. 52.

25. Alex Nicholson, "From Honduras to France, Russians Charge On," *Moscow Times*, October 16, 2003, p. 5.
26. Valeria Korzhagina, "Incomes Are Rising Faster Than Wages," *Moscow Times*, October 22, 2003. Accessed at <http://www.rusnet.nl/news/2003/10/22/print/businesseconomics03.shtml> on December 22, 2003.
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