

Pro-government forces make gains in elections to Russian Duma

Peter Schwarz
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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin—i.e., President Boris Yeltsin and his entourage—are the main winners of the Russian parliamentary (Duma) elections held last Sunday.

Following the counting of more than 80 percent of the votes, the election alliance “Unity”—first called into life by the Kremlin just two months ago—was running neck and neck with the Communist Party, which has dominated the Duma up until now. The new formation won almost 24 percent of the vote.

In the course of the election, Premier Putin supported “Unity”, although he is not officially allied with any party and did not run as a candidate. A further 9 percent of the votes went to the “Union of Right-Wing Forces”, which also supported Putin in the election.

In comparison with the election of two years ago, the Communist Party was able to increase its vote by 2 percent. Under circumstances, however, where its former political allies failed to reach the 5 percent threshold necessary to enter parliament, the party's influence has declined considerably.

The orientation of the pro-government forces, which will have the greatest weight in the new Duma, can best be described as a mixture of law-and-order and capitalist free market economic policies.

“Unity” has no recognisable programme. Leading the alliance are three popular but politically unknown figures: Sergei Shoigu, the Minister for Emergency Situations; the Olympic wrestler Alexander Karelin; and a police general, Alexander Gurov, who has made a name for himself in the hunt for Mafia criminals. The alliance has attained its popularity entirely as a result of the relentless manner in which Premier Putin has waged war against Chechnya.

The “Union of Right-Wing Forces” is supported by a group of so-called “young reformers”, who support an

accelerated introduction of the market economy and who were forced to resign following the financial crash of August 1998: ex-Premier Sergei Kiryenko, his former vice-premier, Boris Nemzov, and long-time exponents of a free market economic course, Yedor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais.

What unites both groups is the protection of the Kremlin, which has waged a no-holds-barred campaign to secure the power and privilege of the Yeltsin clan and its financial backers beyond the presidential elections in June 2000.

Putin's most important rivals in the struggle for the presidency, the mayor of Moscow Yuri Lushkov and ex-premier Yevgeni Primakov, have been the victims of an unprecedented slander campaign, which has been spread to the furthest corner of the country by the state-run television company, ORT. The grouping of Lushkov and Primakov, called “Fatherland-All Russia”, regarded as a clear electoral favourite last summer, was only able to win 12 percent of the vote.

Lushkov could only maintain his position in Moscow, where he has control over his own media sources. In the election for mayor, which ran parallel to the parliamentary elections, he won more than 70 percent of the vote. His nearest rival, Sergei Kiryenko trailed far behind, with 11 percent.

Following the results in the parliamentary elections, Putin is regarded as the most likely candidate for the office of president. However, in Sergei Shoigu the Kremlin has also found a potential rival to Putin, should the latter stray too far from the Yeltsin fold.

Many commentaries in the Western press and from political circles welcome the result of the Duma election as a “strengthening of the political centre”. According to such commentaries, it will now be possible for the first time to establish collaboration

between the Duma majority and the government, thus ensuring stable political relations. However, on the basis of the election results, such a conclusion is unsustainable.

On the one hand, the influence of the Kremlin bloc is much more limited than it first appears. Only half of the Duma seats are allocated on the basis of the percentages won by the parties in the election. The other half are allocated to individual candidates, for whom citizens vote in the electoral regions. Amongst the latter group are many “independents” who cannot be assigned to any particular political camp. Moreover, it is not unusual for Duma deputies to change political camps or sell their votes to the highest bidder.

According to the first count carried out by the election commission, “Unity” and the “Union of Right-Wing Forces” will together comprise just 105 of the total of 450 deputies. The Communist Party will be allocated 111 seats, 62 will go to “Fatherland-All Russia”, 22 to the pro-Western Yabloko party, and 17 to the bloc led by the ultra-rightist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Independent candidates and individuals from parties that failed to attain the 5 percent minimum will account for 133 seats.

The election result can be almost exclusively attributed to the Chechnya factor. The war unleashed a wave of nationalism, temporarily forcing into the background the social problems that plague the everyday life of the Russian population. Under conditions where all parties supported the war, the result was bound to favour the most prominent of the war hawks—Vladimir Putin.

In such circumstances it was possible for the Kremlin and its retinue of media moguls and finance sharks to pull out all the stops with respect to intrigue and manipulation. For its part, the general population showed subdued interest, with just 60 percent of the electorate actually voting, a decline from the turnout four years ago.

The Chechnya factor will not last long. Should the Russian army be successful in its war, the “iron hand” of Putin will be directed with increasing frequency against the Russian population itself, leading to rapid political disenchantment. Should the war end in a debacle, a political crisis is inevitable.

Behind the fragile democratic facade of the Duma election one can discern the thoroughly rotten and

unstable political relations which have developed in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union eight years ago.



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