

Russia on the eve of the Duma elections

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On December 19 elections to the Duma will be held, the third parliamentary elections in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Previous Duma elections occurred in 1993 and 1995. The present poll takes place under the shadow of the Chechnya war, which the Russian government has been conducting for weeks with great brutality.

The war has brought the political parties closer together and stoked up a wave of nationalism, pushing the social problems that plague Russian society into the background. Among the 28 parties, election slates and blocs, as well as some 3,000 individual candidates contesting the 450 seats, there is hardly a serious voice criticising the war.

The previous distinction between a pro-Western "democratic" camp and a "nationalist" (Russians speak of a "patriotic") camp, according to which the Russian parties were generally grouped in the post-Soviet era, has largely lost any meaning. Since the financial crash in August 1998, which seriously impacted the small but politically influential layer of nouveau riche social climbers, enthusiasm for the West, and in particular for America, has clearly diminished.

The Kosovo war last spring and America's aggressive push into the Caucasus and the oil-rich Caspian region were generally regarded as an attempt to encircle, weaken and destabilise Russia. If the first Chechen war of 1994-96 was met by widespread opposition inside Russia, mainly for domestic reasons, all major political camps support the current war because they see it as defending the unity of the Russian state and its place in Central Asia.

Present economic developments also encourage the mood that Russia would do better if it trusted in its own strength. The fall of the rouble led to a drop in foreign imports and a short-term growth in domestic production. Economic growth of 2 percent is expected for the current year. Rising oil prices on the world market have also increased Russian export income, making it possible for the government to pay outstanding wages and pensions and, at the same time, supplement the defence budget.

In foreign policy terms, the increasing dissociation from the US is expressed in a search for other allies, such as the European Union and China. The German Koerber Foundation, which closely follows developments in Russia, wrote in a recent issue of its *CIS Barometer*: "Moscow regards the past fixation on the USA as a strategic error, since the USA is not interested in strengthening their former rivals on the world's political stage. Russia regards America's substantial economic and political penetration into the Caspian region as its greatest challenge for the future. Moscow sees a way out through improving its strategic partnership with the EU."

In social policy terms, influential circles are adapting more and more to the rhetoric prevailing in Europe. "Russia is finally promising", writes *CIS Barometer*, to align "its economic reforms more strongly along the lines of the social market policies of the leading European Union states, which should be understood as a disassociation from the liberal free market model of the USA."

In view of the general agreement of all parties on these questions, political programs hardly play a role in the election campaign. Instead what predominates is an embittered mud-fight for power and influence between two powerful financial clans—the incumbent Kremlin family, with

the oligarch Boris Berezovsky in the background, and the alliance "Fatherland-All Russia", which is supported by the somewhat less opulent oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky.

The battle is being predominantly carried out over the country's two main television channels—the state-owned ORT (controlled by Berezovsky) and the private station NTV (owned by Gusinsky). For 90 percent of the population, television is the only source of information. In the struggle between the two camps, all means are permissible. No below-the-belt blow is too low, no accusation too dirty. Corruption, coercion, extortion and contract killing are among the accusations routinely raised against the leading candidates on both sides.

Fuelling the bitterness of the struggle is the fact that the Duma elections are considered a dress rehearsal for the politically more important presidential election set for June 2000. Two of the leading candidates of "Fatherland -All Russia", Moscow Mayor Yuri Lushkov and ex-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, are considered the most promising challengers to the Yeltsin camp, which is relying on the current prime minister, Vladimir Putin.

The "Fatherland" grouping was originally created in autumn of 1998 by Yuri Lushkov, who ranks among the most influential figures in the country. As head of the Moscow city administration, he presides over his own business and media empire. In 1999 "Fatherland" was joined by former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov (recently dismissed by President Yeltsin) and "All Russia", which had been brought into being by 16 influential provincial governors. These regional rulers, who to some extent act like medieval Boyars, are gaining ever greater importance in the political life of Russia, since they command their own budgets and autonomous economic structures.

Numerous large companies support "Fatherland-All Russia", including those operating in the oil and gas sectors. Among the sponsors are oil giant Lukoil, the airline Transaero and the Sistema corporation, which owns many telecommunications, microelectronics, oil, building, tourism, food and commercial firms, as well as banks and media companies. Also the gas giant Gazprom, which previously supported the party "Our Home is Russia" of its former boss Viktor Chernomyrdin, is seen as a possible sponsor of the Lushkov-Primakov camp.

In November, "Fatherland-All Russia" was considered the party with the best election prospects. Opinion polls forecast it receiving 30 percent of the vote. But since then the increasing popularity of the new prime minister, Vladimir Putin, and the mud-slinging campaign of the Yeltsin camp have relegated "Fatherland-All Russia" to third place.

In September, shortly before the expiration date for party registration, President Yeltsin's apparatus established its own electoral alliance under the name "Unity". Like "Fatherland-All Russia", it relies on a series of 39 provincial governors. It is led by Minister for Emergency Affairs Sergej Shoigu, who has sat in Yeltsin's cabinet since 1994 and originally belonged to the party of ex-Premier Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Prime Minister Putin is not officially a member of "Unity". But the party is generally considered a vehicle that can smooth his way into the office of president, and thereby protect the wealth of the Yeltsin family and their financier Boris Berezovsky.

The fact that the election campaign predominantly revolves around influence, power and privileges, and not political questions, is shown by the regularity with which various prominent politicians switch camps, new parties develop and old ones go under. In the Duma, 200 of the 450 delegates have changed their parliamentary allegiance since the last election, and it can be foreseen that the purchase of deputies and votes will continue after this election.

Of the last five prime ministers appointed by Yeltsin—Victor Chernomyrdin, Yevgeny Primakov, Sergei Kiryenko, Sergei Stepachin and Vladimir Putin—each now represents a different party.

Chernomyrdin leads the group "Our Home is Russia", once supported by Yeltsin but now hardly likely to reach the 5 percent hurdle required to enter the Duma. Kiryenko ranks among the leaders of the "Union of Right-Wing Forces", formed in August 1999 by various exponents of liberal market economics—among them Boris Nemzov, Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais. It likewise has only a small chance in the elections. Stepachin joined the Yabloko party of Grigori Yavlinski, which also calls for liberal market policies, albeit somewhat more moderate ones. Since they have so far rejected any collaboration with the government, they are forecast to receive about 10 percent of the vote.

Other parties and personalities that played a role in previous elections have lost influence or are biding their time. The ultra-nationalist movement of the extreme right-winger Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, which, with 12 percent, gained the second highest vote in the last elections, has badly discredited itself by virtue of its connections to organised crime and its proximity to the Kremlin family. In crucial votes in the Duma, Zhirinovskiy's parliamentary group usually voted for the president, on occasions reportedly receiving payment in return.

Alexander Lebed is not taking part in the election. This former general was regarded as a promising presidential candidate after his successful negotiating role in the first Chechen war, and subsequently became governor of Krasnoyarsk. Lebed is cultivating his image as a "strong man" and hopes to act as the popular saviour in any new political crisis. There are also rumours that he has agreed with the Yeltsin family to step in to replace Putin in the event of a new debacle in Chechnya.

The only apparent exception to this constant to-and-froing of the parties is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). With approximately 540,000 (mainly very old) members in 27,000 local organisations and 40 percent of the seats in the present Duma, the former state party has a certain stability. Alongside "Unity" and "Fatherland-All Russia", it is regarded as the most promising candidate for an election victory. It is even thought that the general population's annoyance at the continuous mudslinging on television could benefit the CPRF, which receives far less media coverage.

Programmatically, however, the CPRF hardly differs from the other parties. Because of its roots in the Soviet Union, it finds support among those social layers that were particularly hard hit by the changes of the last 10 years: pensioners, large families, workers in unprofitable factories and those in the agrarian sector, state employees, the military and war veterans. But it directs the social opposition of these layers into nationalist channels.

The CPRF's election platform carries the title "Arise, you great country". It upholds the role of Russia as a great power and specific type of civilisation against the "corrosive influence of the West". Alongside "justice" and "rule by the people", it declares its fundamental values to be "imperial power" (the call for a strong state), "spirituality" (the striving for "the highest, traditional Russian ideals of truth, goodness and a beautiful life") and "patriotism" (the love of the fatherland and a readiness to subordinate one's own interests to it). References to socialist or Marxist ideas have almost completely disappeared from the programme.

In the Chechen war, the CPRF argues for the unrestricted authority of the generals to act, and warns them that the government could stab them

in the back at the last moment and prevent a complete victory. With regard to foreign policy, it stresses the significance of close relations with Germany and with the European Union. CPRF boss Gennady Zyuganov has repeatedly visited Germany in order to stress this point.

Regarding domestic affairs, it has proved to be a reliable support for the regime, which it helps to gain a parliamentary majority again and again in critical situations. Almost all of the heads of government appointed by Yeltsin were elected with the support of the CPRF, and it has also regularly voted for his budget. Occasionally, members or representatives of the CPRF appear as ministers in the government.

The CPRF forms, therefore, "an altogether predictable opposition within the system today". This was the conclusion to an analysis by the Federal Institute for Eastern Scientific and International Studies (BIOst) in Cologne. The study concludes: "In certain respects, one could even talk of the existence of a grand coalition in Russia with the Zyuganov party as its informal constituent.... Thus the CP contributes to the stabilisation of the total system, by channelling political and social protest and steering it along constitutional lines."

It is conspicuous that in the Russian elections not a single party is taking up the country's tremendous social problems and the social concerns of the population, let alone advancing a solution. The wave of nationalism whipped up by the Chechnya war means that these questions can be temporarily pushed into the background. In particular the Yeltsin camp and Prime Minister Putin know how to use this factor skilfully. It may not be a coincidence that the offensive against the Chechen capital of Grozny is occurring at the same time as the election.

In the long run, however, the social questions cannot be suppressed. This concern engages the authors of the Koerber Foundation study quoted above. "Without a long-term improvement in the standard of living, the Russian population will not support Putin for ever," they write. "Experts warn that the economic recovery will only be short-lived in Russia and the Chechnya problem cannot be solved by war."



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