

The parliamentary elections and the crisis of the authoritarian regime in Russia

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The campaign for Sunday's elections to the Russian parliament (Duma) has proceeded against the background of a growing crisis of the entire political superstructure that emerged following the liquidation of the Soviet Union and the launching of capitalist "reforms" at the beginning of the 1990s.

The parties and socio-political forces participating in the elections are deeply discredited in the eyes of the electorate. They all defend the interests of the new layer of property owners and the upper layers of the state bureaucracy, whose interests are diametrically opposed to the needs and aspirations of the working population, the vast majority of the country.

At the same time, the election campaign has revealed growing contradictions within the ruling elite itself: the inability to strike a compromise over a successor to President Vladimir Putin; disagreements over what the priorities should be for further social and economic development (a greater role for the market or the state in the economy, an intensification or easing of the assault on social welfare structures); differences over questions of international policy in the context of a growing struggle between the world powers for control of markets and resources.

Until now, these contradictions have been held in check by the personal authority of the Putin, who has served as a stabilizing factor in his role as "supreme arbiter of the nation." However, from the moment he was forced to openly take the side of the party of power, in order to guarantee its parliamentary majority, he directly identified himself with the predatory oligarchy and bureaucracy, and his authority began to decline.

This threatens to undermine the last relatively stable political institution in post-Soviet Russia—the post of the president—which has played a critical role in recent years in maintaining the entire structure of the new Russian capitalism.

Of the eleven parties officially allowed to participate in the elections, no more than four have a real chance of getting into parliament, according to data gathered by sociologists. These are the pro-Kremlin United Russia, headed on the ballot by Putin, Gennady Ziuganov's Communist Party (CPRF), the descendant of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the ultra-nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party (LDRP) of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and A Just Russia, the "second party of power," headed by the speaker of the Federation Council (the upper house of parliament), Sergei Mironov.

Far from reflecting the genuine spectrum of political opinion in Russian society, all of these parties express the basic political tendencies which have developed within the ruling elite.

The party favored to win the election, United Russia, was created in the summer and fall of 1999, when the oligarchs of the Yeltsin period, led by the now disgraced and exiled Boris Berezovsky, were preparing the conditions to transfer power to Yeltsin's successor. This party was meant to become an obedient instrument in the hands of the dominant Kremlin clique for control over the legislative process, so as to guarantee the

transformation of the supposedly "democratic" Russia of Yeltsin's time into a centralized sovereign power capable of continuing the course of capitalist restoration and speaking on more equal terms with the leading governments of world imperialism.

In recent years, United Russia has obediently churned out measures benefiting the Kremlin and deservedly become a symbol of political spinelessness and corruption. Putin himself was forced to acknowledge this fact. In mid-October, when he was speaking in Krasnoyarsk, he said that United Russia had no consistent ideology or firm principles, and that it contained many "camp-followers" who were discrediting not only the party, but the regime as a whole. In his speech, Putin added that "nevertheless, we don't have anything" better.

The self-revelatory character of this admission was immediately noted by many commentators.

From the moment it was founded at the beginning of 1993, Ziuganov's CPRF has served as the most important political prop of the Kremlin. Forming a living bridge between the old Soviet nomenclature and the new bourgeoisie and bureaucracy, it plays the role of funneling mass protest into the relatively safe channels of Great-Russian nationalism and great power aspirations.

After Yeltsin used tanks to shell the parliament in the fall of 1993, the CPRF supported new elections to the Duma and the referendum on the authoritarian constitution which remains in effect to this day, legitimizing both through its participation. In the summer of 1996, Ziuganov accepted the official announcement that Yeltsin had won the presidential election, although rumors have continually circulated among experts that Yeltsin lost the first round.

The CPRF played a no less shameful and treacherous role in the beginning of 2005, when the country was gripped by a wave of spontaneous protests against the monetization of social benefits, at a time when this policy began to affect other layers of the population beyond old age pensioners. The CPRF "headed" these protests in order to snuff them out.

Despite its occasional sharp criticism of the authorities, Ziuganov's CPRF always obediently votes for laws promoted by the Kremlin. This party has never placed the social interests of its voters above its positions in the power structure. On the contrary, this decaying remnant of Stalinism has suited well the new regime and its defense of private profit.

Zhirinovskiy's LDRP, which is the oldest of all the official parties of "new Russia" (it was created with the blessing of the Gorbachev leadership), plays the role of systematically inciting and fanning prejudices and backward instincts. The LDRP looks upon the voters exclusively as objects to be manipulated, saying one thing one day and something else the next, without ever trying to justify the contradictions in its positions, or explaining its groveling before the Kremlin.

Zhirinovskiy's party also serves as one of the main channels for allowing criminal elements and people with dubious reputations into the parliament. In the current election campaign, the number two candidate on

the LDRP's election list is Andrei Lugovoi—the former KGB member and businessman accused by British authorities of using radioactive Polonium to murder Alexander Litvinenko, another former officer of the KGB, in the fall of last year in London.

A Just Russia is a structure of the state apparatus, created last year with the support of the Kremlin by combining the Party of Life (the initial instrument of Mironov, the speaker of the Federation Council), the Party of Pensioners, and the ultra-nationalist party Motherland. The latter was originally headed by Dmitrii Rogozin, recently appointed by the Kremlin to the post of permanent Russian representative to NATO.

A Just Russia engages in criticism of the authorities and proposes the enactment of social measures.

However, all this remains exclusively in the realm of rhetorical exercises. Mironov, the leader of the party, is one of the most active defenders of the idea of a third term for Putin. As the third person in the state, Mironov displays an outstanding talent for thinking up new legal pretexts for such an anti-constitutional step.

According to the assessment of sociologists, the two leading “free market” liberal parties stand no chance of getting elected to the Duma: the Union of Right-Wing Forces, politically tied to the architects of “shock therapy” and privatization of the 1990s, Yegor Gaidar and Anatolii Chubais; and Yabloko, headed by Grigory Yavlinsky. Both parties, notwithstanding their tactical disagreements and different shades of orientation, have lost the trust of the mass of voters as a result of their reliance on the oligarchs and their continuous appeals to Western imperialism as the supposed guarantor of Russia's “democratization.”

Against the background of the American occupation of Iraq and other manifestations of the inter-imperialist struggle for a new division of the world, their condemnations of the authoritarian measures of Putin's government, justified in their own right, look thoroughly hypocritical. This makes it easier for the Kremlin to carry out repressive measures against them. Such steps are justified in official propaganda by references to these organizations as instruments of foreign intervention in Russian affairs.

The situation is similar with regard to Another Russia, the bourgeois opposition movement headed by the former chess champion, Garry Kasparov. Another Russia has remained outside the parliamentary elections, but is holding protest marches against Putin's authoritarianism. At the most recent of these marches held last weekend, Kasparov and several dozen supporters were arrested in Moscow.

Not long before this, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared that it would not send observers to Russia's parliamentary elections, referring to the many obstacles which the Russian authorities had placed in its way.

Feeling compelled to react to these events, Putin declared on November 26 that the ODIHR's decision was made at the behest of the US State Department, and that Russia would keep this in mind when considering its relations with America. The decision not to send observers, according to the Russian president, is aimed at delegitimizing the Duma elections.

At the same time, Putin advised foreign powers not to poke their “snotty noses” into events taking place in Russia.

In response to this, US President George Bush called the next day for the release of the arrested participants in the “dissident marches” in Russia. He declared: “I am deeply concerned about the detention of numerous human rights activists and political leaders who participated in peaceful rallies in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, and Nazran this weekend.”

“I am particularly troubled,” Bush continued, “by the use of force by law enforcement authorities to stop these peaceful activities and to prevent some journalists and human rights activists from covering them.”

Putin, in turn, spoke on November 28 in the Kremlin before foreign

diplomats and leaders of international organizations. He once again insisted that it was inadmissible for events in Russia to be “corrected from without.”

This exchange of harsh statements underscores the sharpness of the conflict which is deepening between Russia and Western countries, first and foremost, the United States. Beginning with Putin's speech in Munich in February of this year, when he accused the NATO countries of “ever greater disdain for the basic principles of international law,” the Kremlin has been charging the West with ignoring Russia's interests.

The theme of resisting Western meddling has occupied a central place in Putin's pre-election speeches this fall. The culmination was his speech on November 21 before 5,000 supporters at Luzhniki. In it he attacked those who “need a weak, debilitated state, a disoriented and divided society, in order to make deals behind its back and receive rewards at our expense.” Putin was alluding to banished Russian oligarchs, opposition liberals and their Western sponsors.

The growing conflict with the West and the threat of a Western-backed “Orange Revolution” within Russia are utilized to create a personality cult around Putin. Kremlin propaganda all but declares that the entire edifice of the Russian state rests exclusively on one man. If he leaves, the country can expect chaos, discord and decline.

United Russia even announced that the parliamentary elections are “a referendum on confidence in Putin.”

The contradictory nature of such declarations is obvious to even relatively loyal commentators. The newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* noted on November 19: “The representatives of official ideology, in their attempts to justify the need to retain Putin in power, have agreed that a shift of even a ‘micron’ will cause the entire structure to immediately come crashing down and lead to a return of the chaos of the 1990s. They fail to note that this denies all the achievements of the eight years of Putin's rule. What kind of stability is it if it will disappear in an instant, given a shift in power by one micron?”

Underlying the promotion of a Putin personality cult is the deepening antagonism between the new ruling elite in Russia and the working class. The enormous levels of social inequality that have developed in Russia over the last twenty years leave no possibility of running society with the aid of even token democratic procedures.

The parliamentary elections serve as an example of this situation. According to laws adopted recently, in order to participate in the elections a party must have 50,000 members and gather no less than 200,000 signatures across all regions of Russia. In order to enter the Duma, a party must receive no less than 7 percent of the votes of those participating in the election. In addition, one-mandate regions have been rescinded (in which voters could select independent candidates, separate from party lists), and the ballot no longer offers the choice “against all.”

As was noted by the *Financial Times'* Moscow correspondent, Neal Buckley, a party can receive 3.5 million votes and nevertheless fail to gain entrance to the Duma.

As a result, the level of trust in the elections is very low. According to leading sociological organizations, from 39 percent (VTsIOM) to 16 percent (Levada Center) believe in the honesty of the elections.

In addition, few voters understand what is meant by the so-called “Putin plan,” which is trumpeted day and night by the Kremlin-controlled mass media. According to data from the above-mentioned Levada Center, 65 percent of those polled express certainty that “Putin has a plan,” however only 6 percent feel they know what the plan is.

In these conditions, there are ceaseless calls for Putin to remain for a third term, or to create some mechanism to allow him to remain the supreme ruler without occupying any official post.

One of these plans was advanced by the ideologues of United Russia. It proposes the establishment of a new institution—“national leader.” This new, unconstitutional center of personal power would be created by an all-

Russian conference of business and state representatives in the interval between the election of a new president and his inauguration in the spring of next year. This plan, published on the web site of United Russia in the middle of November, was subsequently removed. However, it is clear that similar projects continue to be developed and secretly prepared.

Politically, this means that the ruling elite is preparing several variants of a state coup which would allow the dominant Kremlin groups to remain in power.

One might say of the historical impasse reached by the post-Soviet regime in Russia that the “film of historical development” (to use Trotsky’s expression) has been rewound to the period preceding the October Revolution of 1917.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism have produced once again a concentrated expression of the failure of all attempts to overcome the social and economic backwardness of the country by liberal-bourgeois means. Now, in the epoch of globalization, which has sharpened the crisis of the world capitalist system, Russian liberalism in all its incarnations is even less capable of moving the country forward than in 1917.

Whatever the outcome of the December 2 parliamentary elections, it is certain that they will herald a new stage in the decay of bourgeois “democracy” in Russia and intensify the crisis of the new ruling elite. Until the working class builds its own independent political movement, reviving the heritage and international perspective of the October 1917 Revolution, Russian “democratic” authoritarianism will be torn between threats of an “Orange Revolution” and nationalist coups of an extreme-right character.



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