Russian parliamentary elections: Putin's party retains control

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One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the election campaign for the Russian parliament was the massive propaganda effort of the leading and government-controlled media in favor of one single candidate—that of the pro-Kremlin party United Russia, headed on the election ballot after October 1 by President Vladimir Putin.

This informational "one-sided game," which continued for at least two months, as well as the widespread use of so-called "administrative resources"—that is, methods to intimidate voters and juggle election figures—guaranteed the impressive advantage enjoyed by United Russia in the elections to the Russian parliament held on 2 December.

According to figures released by the Central Election Commission on December 3, with 98 percent of the ballots counted, United Russia received 64.1 percent of the votes and, according to preliminary data, secured for itself more than 300 of the 450 seats in the parliament, or Duma.

Other parties gaining seats were the Communist Party of G. Zyuganov, which received 11.6 percent, the LDPR of V. Zhirinovsky, with 8.2 percent, and A Just Russia, headed by the speaker of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of parliament) S. Mironov, which received 7.8 percent.

A number of representatives of the political elite rushed to proclaim the success of the "vote of confidence" in Putin. In the opinion of Dmitrii Orlov, leader of the Agency of Political and Economic Communications, "The majority of citizens have, in fact, spoken in favor of the present course of Vladimir Putin." The leader of United Russia, Boris Gryzlov, announced the "victory of Putin in the first round," evidently alluding to the upcoming presidential elections.

In the words of the same Gryzlov, which contradict the evaluations of the majority of observers and experts, the elections were "absolutely transparent and democratic."

Another section of the political establishment is speaking with greater caution. In the opinion of Gleb Pavlovsky, one of the leading Kremlin political experts, it means little "to say that these elections were a referendum of confidence in Putin." This phrase, he opines, is nothing but a propaganda formulation. In Pavlovsky's opinion, the "task for Putin is to see to it that the confidence which the citizens feel personally toward him grows over into confidence in the state."

Behind this position stands a more sober assessment of the character of the elections, in which the result required by the authorities was achieved with the help of extremely dubious manipulations, as well as slogans which, to a certain degree, call into question the very basis of the social and economic order which exists in Russia.

United Russia conducted its campaign under conditions of a sharp decline in the authority of all structures of governmental power and of official policy. Putin's decision to head the election list of United Russia was dictated by the danger that the Kremlin might not be able to guarantee for itself majority control of the Duma, without which the entire mechanism of "vertical power" would begin to slip.

Those positive achievements referred to by government propaganda and by Putin himself—the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) by several times over the last few years, the high revenues of the state from the export of natural resources, improvements in the incomes of sections of the population—are overshadowed by tendencies obvious to all, such as the rapid rise in prices for basic consumer goods, reaching 25-30 percent this fall. Putin's "achievements" have little impact on the everyday needs of the majority of citizens.

The main thrust of Putin's election campaign was not certain positive goals (on this score he has nothing to offer the people), but two themes: condemnation of Yeltsin's policy of "shock therapy" and privatization of the 1990s, and a struggle against the threat of an "Orange Revolution" in Russia, inspired by liberal Western forces acting with the support and in the interests of world imperialism.

In actual fact, Putin's main theme during the campaign was the assertion that he and the regime he has created are the lesser evil, and that if "the others return," it will be much worse. This was all that the ideologues of today's Kremlin were able to propose as a means of consolidating their electorate.

The culmination of this line by the president was his speech before a crowd of 5,000 supporters at Luzhniki on November 21. Putin condemned "those who ten years ago controlled key positions both in the Federal Council and in the government." What was inadmissible, he declared, was a return to power of those "who in the 1990s, while occupying high posts, acted to the detriment of society and the state, serving the interests of the oligarchic structures and squandering the nation's property."

"It was they," continued Putin, "who made corruption the chief instrument of political and economic competition. It was they who year after year adopted unbalanced and absolutely irresponsible budgets, which ended in default, collapse, and a relentless fall in the living standards of our citizens."

At the same time, Putin condemned those who have "absolutely different aims and different views of Russia." He continued: "They need a weak, debilitated state. They need a disorganized and disoriented society, a divided society, in order to make their deals behind the public's back and to receive their spoils at our expense. Unfortunately, there still are those in our country who latch onto foreign embassies and foreign diplomatic representatives, counting on the support of foreign foundations and their governments, rather than the support of their own people."

This rhetoric, alluding to very real tendencies, played no small part in the decision of many Russian voters to make a personal compromise of sorts and agree, in the end, to reconcile themselves to the pressure of the authorities and vote for the party which, in actuality, embodies almost all the vices Putin was denouncing in words.

The hypocritical and demagogic character of Putin's tirades is clear to any politically informed person. Putin himself is of the same flesh and blood as the layers of the new ruling elite who in the 1990s laid the foundations for their present privileges and wealth.

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A few days before the above-mentioned speech, Dmitry Furman, a professor of history and senior researcher at the European Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, justly noted:

"...Putin is the 'legitimate' heir to 1991. He was given power by the main leader of the 'dissident revolution' [Yeltsin], and the second president was himself the assistant to one of its leaders, the father of Ksenia Sobchak. It was not Putin who created today's system, but those who successively were victorious in 1991, 1993 and 1996." (*Independent Gazette*, November 14)

It is in this extremely contradictory public pose by Putin that people like Pavlovsky see a serious danger. Demagogy works, but it has its limits. It can lead to unwanted and unpredictable consequences.

The main result of the election campaign was the formation in Russia of a public consensus based on an extremely negative attitude toward the 1990s.

Ruslan Grinberg, the head of the Economics Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, reflected on this theme in *Izvestia* on September 20. In reply to the question, "In the final analysis, have the recent reforms succeeded?", he wrote:

"It depends on how you evaluate them. Take a person back to Russia of 1990 and tell him that the gross domestic product today is the same as it was then. He would go nuts. You can't compare the availability of goods. However, given all that, only 20 percent of citizens have begun to live better, 30 percent are the same, and 50 percent are worse off. Thus, we have a mixture of objective data and subjective feelings."

"It would seem that there has been substantial growth," continued Grinberg, "the monetary reserves have increased, the people's income has increased and inflation has been decreasing... But all this is only 'on average.' There is much that is worrisome. I see four key problems. First of all, the 'primitivization' of the economy continues: we are ever more dependent on the sale of natural resources. Secondly, the completely outworn infrastructure is by no means being renovated—roads, pipelines, housing and so forth. Thirdly, the fruits of the insane flood of petrodollars are being distributed in the worst Latin American way. Finally, and worst of all, the general productivity of the economy is lower than it was in Soviet times.

"And now let us recall why we began perestroika and its reforms: we wanted to raise productivity and the economy, make commodities better in quality, less expensive and in greater variety, and in doing so raise the general living standard. And what has happened? Instead of mediocre manufactured goods, almost none; power-consumption is increasing, the yield of capital investments is falling, innovation is almost zero... Such things could not be imagined even in a nightmare."

The new prime minister, Victor Zubkov, was recently forced to acknowledge the extreme technological neglect of the manufacturing infrastructure. On November 20, the government newspaper Russian Gazette wrote that when Zubkov visited the Moscow machine-building facility Salute in mid-October and saw the worn out equipment, he "became so despondent that he was even ashamed to speak about it."

In remarks at the factory, Zubkov confessed: "In the factories of Roskosmos alone, more than 70 percent of the machines are outmoded and physically worn out, and 15 percent of the specialized technological equipment has been under use for more than twenty years. In the last five years, we have renovated, it is shameful to say, less than one percent of the machinery."

Meanwhile, the social conditions for tens of millions of Russian inhabitants are not improving. For the majority, they are getting worse.

It is this reality that the masses of common citizens perceive from their everyday living experience. This reality inspires among them an inevitable feeling of protest and a desire to find social alternatives.

However, to this point such feelings have found a contradictory and regressive expression in the form of a large vote for the present regime. People do not want a repeat of the catastrophic period of the 1990s, with its naked plundering of the national economy by a group of scoundrels, the domination of criminality and horrific social collapse. It is precisely to these social impulses that the authorities are seeking to adapt in hopes of once again deceiving the masses.

Sunday's election results are above all the consequence of the treacherous role of all the official opposition parties. These parties, and Zyuganov's Communist Party most of all, serve as instruments of the bureaucratic-oligarchic elite and are hostile to the basic interests of the workers, leaving them no choice within the framework of the existing political system.

Another important result of the elections is the further degeneration of Russian liberalism, and its loss of any significant support in society.

The immediate results of the voting could be more beneficial to the two main right-liberal parties—The Union of Right Forces (URF) and Yabloko. According to the preliminary data of the election commission, Yabloko received 1.6 percent of the vote, and the URF received 1 percent. The authorities led a focused campaign against them, viewing them as dangerous competitors in the field of capitalist politics, and also as forces supported by the West.

Even with a thoroughly honest count of the votes, they would have hardly received a more significant result. The influence of the URF and Yabloko has been steadily declining over the last decade.

The main reason for the decline of their popularity is their consistent defense of the rights of private property and policies that further destroy social structures. This fact could not be obscured either by the supposed concern for the poor and pensioners displayed by the URF during the election campaign, or the pose of being the "guardian angel" of democratic principles that Yabloko prefers to adopt.

The role of Boris Nemtsov, the main figure on the election list of the URF, nominated as the presidential candidate of the party, is too easily recalled in recent history. He was, and continues to be, one of the most dedicated defenders of the policy of capitalist restoration in the form in which it was carried out during the Yeltsin years, and his favorite authorities in politics are, according to his own repeated confessions, figures such as Margaret Thatcher.

As for Grigory Yavlinsky, the leader of Yabloko, during the course of the present campaign he demonstratively emphasized his adherence to principles of the market. In an interview with the weekly *Moscow News* (the edition of September 28-October 4), he insisted that one of the country's main problems is that "the inviolability of property rights is absent." In elaborating his thoughts, Yavlinsky said:

"We consider large-scale Russian business to be a national achievement and want to make sure that it feels confident in Russia, because without it the economy cannot exist."

Immediately after this statement, he called for the full legitimization of the results of the privatization of the 1990s, "proceeding from the real conditions which have developed in our country, and not from abstract schemes." In addition, Yavlinsky explained that "as long as business does not believe that all this truly belongs to itself, it cannot be confident of its future."

All this once again shows how far the concerns of the Russian "democratic" parties are from the interests of millions of workers. Today's Russian liberalism is even less capable of presenting proposals to the nation that can truly solve its problems than its predecessors at the beginning of the 20th century.

The political bankruptcy of Russian liberalism is one of the factors allowing the Kremlin to posture as "defender of the people." Meanwhile, the social base of support for Putin's Kremlin is steadily, albeit slowly, eroding. One of the expressions of this erosion is the relative decline of the personal authority of Putin and United Russia in the leading urban centers, which the last elections have shown.

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If United Russia received almost 65 percent of the votes nationwide, in Saint Petersburg this support reached only 51 percent, and in Moscow, 53 percent. Meanwhile, in such traditionally backward and politically conservative regions such as Tatarstan, the “party of power” gained 87 percent of the votes; in Mordovia, it obtained 97 percent. In Chechnya, the efforts of “Putin’s friend,” the authoritarian dictator Ramzan Kadyrov, resulted in an almost 100 percent turnout and vote for the “party of power.”

The growth of anti-governmental moods, however limited, in leading urban centers is the herald of the future growth of a new social and political movement that must arise in Russia as the expression of the genuine interests of the majority of the working population. In anticipation of this, the Kremlin is beginning, to an every greater degree, to resort not only to “administrative resources” and direct repression, but is seeking support among the least educated and most socially defenseless layers of the population, trying to use their confusion and difficulties to secure their support.

According to Dmitry Oreshkin, a political scientist at the Institute of Geography at the Russian Academy of Sciences, “under conditions of a split in the elite during the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin was the ‘president of the cities,’ at a time when the provinces adopted conservative-communist positions [that is, sympathized with the Communist Party of Zyuganov]. Today the situation is much like a mirror reflection. Vladimir Putin is more a ‘president of the provinces’ whereas the cities fundamentally ignore the elections or give 10-15 percent less support to United Russia.”

In these elections, the Kremlin was able to achieve the result it needed. But by itself, control over the Duma is insufficient to resolve the crisis in which Russian authoritarianism is mired due to its internal contradictions, its growing conflict with the West, and the growing alienation of the working class. The further development of events must inevitably push in the direction of increasing conflicts and struggle within the regime’s ruling groups, and contribute to the growth of social protest by the workers against all layers of the ruling elite.

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