

From Soviet to ‘Soviet’ Elections?

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Abstract

Soviet elections, up to the Gorbachev years, had lacked a choice of candidate, let alone of party. But from 1989 onwards, they were largely competitive, and from 1993 onwards under a postcommunist constitution they were multiparty as well. Under the Putin leadership, from 2000 onwards, there was a movement towards ‘authoritarian elections’ in which control of the media and of the state itself meant that candidates and parties favoured by the Kremlin could normally be assured of success. The unexpected outcome of the December 2011 election suggested that arrangements of this kind were no longer secure; and although the re-election of Vladimir Putin to the presidency was not seriously in doubt, it was clear that he would be under some pressure to govern in a different way.

Elections in the Russian Federation, 1991–2008

There had always been elections in the Soviet Union. But they were ‘elections without choice’: not just of party or candidate, but even, in practice, of whether to vote at all. At the last unreformed elections of this kind, in March 1984, 1499 candidates fought it out for the 1500 seats available, as one of them had died shortly before polling day and there had not been enough time to replace him. Turnout was a massive 99.99 per cent, and the vote in favour of the single list of candidates in the two chambers of the Supreme Soviet was 99.94 and 99.95 per cent respectively. This clearly left little room for improvement.

One of the successful candidates on that occasion was Mikhail Gorbachev, already seen as the most likely to succeed an ailing Konstantin Chernenko. His address to the party congress in March 1986, his first as General Secretary, made clear there would be changes in what had become an increasingly discredited system of representation, and at the 19th Party Conference in the summer of 1988 these reforms were the central element in a far-reaching package of ‘democratisation’. An entirely new election law was adopted in December 1988, which formed the basis on which a new parliament was elected in March 1989. A whole series of party leaders, including a candidate member of the Politburo itself, were rejected by a newly enfranchised electorate; in Moscow itself Boris Yeltsin returned to national politics with a margin of victory so large it entered the Guinness Book of Records.

A new constitution, adopted in December 1993, appeared to consolidate these changes in what was now a postcommunist country. There was a commitment to multiparty politics, a separation of powers and the supremacy of law, as well as the usual democratic freedoms. The new parliament, the State Duma, brought together equal numbers of deputies elected by constituencies across the whole country and deputies put forward in a national party-list contest. There were 13 of these

parties or associations in the December 1993 election, and 8 of them won representation. The first Duma was elected, exceptionally, for a two-year transitional period; later elections took place every four years, from 1995 up to 2011, with presidential elections following a few months later. Russia, it seemed, had finally embarked on its long-delayed ‘transition to democracy’.

And yet there were worrying signs. The most successful parties, in the first elections, were either right-wing nationalist (the Liberal Democrats) or post-Soviet (the Communist Party). The all-powerful presidency was in the hands of a rather different figure, but his unpredictability and occasional ill health made it difficult to maintain a stable government with a consistent set of policies. With a stalemate at the centre, the republics and regions began to assert their own authority—even ‘independence’. An attempt to impose central authority in Chechnya led to a costly and long-running conflict. And a lack of effective central authority undermined law enforcement. Meanwhile, social divisions widened, the economy contracted steadily, and in 1998 the currency itself collapsed when the government defaulted on its international obligations.

There was no suggestion, under the Putin leadership from 2000 onwards, that elections should lose their place as the central mechanism by which the Russian parliament was formed. But it became increasingly clear that they would be elections at which the Kremlin could expect to secure the kind of parliament it wanted, rather than leaving it to ordinary citizens. One of the most important ways in which it could achieve this objective was through its control over the broadcast media, particularly television. Another was what became known as ‘administrative resource’, by which the authorities could use their control over secretaries and meeting rooms, public buildings and transport to advantage the candidates and parties they favoured. As well as this, the law itself had changed in 2005, eliminating the single-member constituencies entirely and leaving all of the

450 seats in the hands of parties that had been able to satisfy the requirements of an increasingly demanding law on political parties.

2011 Duma Elections and its Impact on Russian Politics

There were few who thought the Duma election of 4 December would mark a significant departure from this well-established pattern. Leadership approval ratings were still high. The economy appeared to have survived the international financial crisis that reached Russia at the end of 2008, and government forecasts suggested a 3–4 per cent rate of economic growth over the immediate future (Putin, in his speech to the United Russia congress in September that agreed to nominate him to the presidency, promised to raise growth still further, to 5–6 per cent annually). The most basic indicator of all, size of population, was beginning to show an increase after many years of decline. Indeed the only question for pollsters, when I visited the Levada Centre in the summer of 2011, was whether the ruling party, United Russia, would win an overall majority of seats in the new Duma or simply the largest number.

And yet at the same time there were worrying signs from the leadership's perspective. There was little evidence that the economy was shifting away from its heavy dependence on the exploitation of the country's enormous mineral resources, which left the state budget heavily dependent on the world oil price. The size of the government bureaucracy had been increasing, not diminishing. Capital flight was continuing, or even accelerating. And increasing numbers of the younger and better educated were seeking their future in other countries. Perhaps most important of all, corruption had apparently been increasing, in spite of Medvedev's promise to reduce it; and this was the basis on which a campaigning lawyer, Alexei Navalny, came to public prominence in early 2011, particularly through his claim that United Russia was a 'party of crooks and thieves'.

Party officials had already accepted that United Russia's share of the vote in the 2011 Duma election would be lower than in 2007, when Putin had agreed to head its list of candidates. In the event, it took 49.3 per cent as compared with 64.3 per cent in 2007; but this was still sufficient to secure a majority of seats in the new Duma (238 of the total of 450). The other seats went to the Communist Party (92), A Just Russia (64) and the Liberal Democrats (56), at least some of whom could be expected to be supportive. But in much of the country United Russia's share of the vote was very much lower. Indeed, there was hardly a national result at all. In Chechnya, United Russia had 99.5 per cent of the vote; in Dagestan, 91.8 per cent; in Ingushetia, 91

per cent. In Yaroslavl, on the other hand, United Russia won just 29 per cent, in Karelia 32.3 per cent and in St Petersburg 32.5. The worst-performing regional heads were called to the Kremlin a few days later to account for their shortcomings; a few resigned immediately, the first of them was the Vologda governor, in whose region United Russia had won just 33.4 per cent.

All of this was a familiar pattern, not just in Russia, but in the other post-Soviet republics. What was unexpected was the public reaction that began to develop after the election had taken place, particularly, but not exclusively, in Moscow. Small numbers appeared on the streets on the evening of the polling day itself. The following day, Monday 5 December, about five thousand took part in protests, although little of this was reported by the mainstream television or newspaper outlets. The first wave of demonstrations peaked at the end of the week, Saturday 10 December, when as many as 50,000 assembled in central Moscow and similar numbers in other parts of the country. The Moscow demonstrators approved a five-point manifesto, at the top of which was a demand that the entire election be repeated, this time with genuine opposition parties; another was that the more than a thousand people arrested in earlier demonstrations should be released. At least superficially there were parallels with the 'Arab spring' that had overthrown the autocratic rulers of Egypt and Tunisia earlier in the year, after electoral outcomes that had also appeared to be fraudulent.

Were the elections 'free and fair'? And either way, what are their political implications? The OSCE's observing mission was certainly sceptical. The elections had been well administered, they reported, but United Russia and the state itself had been too closely associated, and there had been 'frequent procedural violations and instances of apparent manipulation' during the count. Some of the mission's individual members, however, offered a rather different opinion in the interviews they gave to the Russian media, and other observing missions, including the one that was sponsored by the Commonwealth of Independent States, were much more positive. There had certainly been some technical faults, their chairman told Russian television, but not of a kind that could have substantially affected the outcome. The head of the Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov, laid particular emphasis on the close accord between the results that were announced on 9 December and the predictions of the major survey agencies, which were indeed very similar.

What did ordinary Russians make of it? How 'honest' were the elections, for a start? According to a post-election survey, conducted for the author and associates by the Levada Centre immediately after voting had taken

place, about a third (34 per cent) thought the election had been 'largely' or 'entirely honest'; but nearly half (47 per cent) took a different view. Perhaps a better question was to ask if the results that had been announced on 9 December had at least 'corresponded to reality'. The proportions were approximately reversed: half (51 per cent) thought they had done so, but there was a substantial 30 per cent who took the opposite view. And there was substantial support for the aims of the demonstrators: 43 per cent supported them 'largely' or 'entirely'; and about the same proportion (42 per cent) took the opposite view.

The Kremlin seemed to be listening—at least to some of these concerns. There was no concession to the central demand of the protestors, that the elections should be cancelled and repeated. But they did concede that the electoral system itself should certainly be reconsidered, and by early 2012 the necessary legislation had already been introduced into the Duma. Single-member constituencies would be revived in some form, so that ordinary electors could believe they had a personal representative in the legislature. The right to vote 'against all' the candidates and parties might be restored. And governors should once again be directly elected, although perhaps in a way that will allow the Kremlin some ability to filter the candidates beforehand. Putin's own suggestion was to install web-cameras in all polling stations. This, at least, could be implemented before the March

presidential election; any changes to the Duma election law could only take effect when the next parliamentary elections take place, in 2016.

Would this be enough? It was certainly true that the protestors had a diverse range of objectives: some were concerned about the electoral system itself, others had more general complaints about corruption, others still were more worried about the environment. All the same, what the demonstrations made clear was that the central authorities had less control over this developing movement than ever before. And the main reason for this was the spread of forms of electronic communication that could largely bypass the state itself. About half of our respondents (51 per cent) used the internet to some degree, and a very substantial proportion (40 per cent) used the various new social media, particularly indigenous networks such as Odnoklassniki (Classmates) and V kontakte (In contact).

It was hardly a 'Twitter revolution'. But neither was it (as Putin tried to suggest) an attempt to overthrow the Russian government with foreign funding. Unless the Kremlin takes more account of the public concerns that has led to these unprecedented demonstrations, including the abuse of their position by a privileged and apparently unaccountable officialdom, it is likely that these new forms of communication will allow increasingly effective challenges to be mounted in the future.

About the Author

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