

Opinion

Sufficient Legitimation for a “Shadow President”?

By Hans-Henning Schröder, Bremen/Berlin

Abstract

The results of the Duma election came as no surprise. After a very one-sided campaign, the United Russia party supported by Putin won 64 percent of the vote. In the Fifth Duma, as before, it will command a two-thirds majority. This result has allowed the presidential administration to consolidate a party system that is dominated by “administrative parties.” However, since these parties are not viable in the long run without support “from above,” the outcome does not mean that the system has now been stabilized. Neither has the Duma election resolved the problem of succession. As the main candidate of “United Russia,” Putin had attempted to achieve long-term legitimacy as a political authority through a quasi-referendum. In a number of regions, however, the election results were unsatisfactory from Putin’s point of view. Even the nomination of Dmitry Medvedev as the Kremlin’s candidate in the presidential election does not make clear what role Putin will play in the new system.

No Surprise...

Nobody was particularly surprised by the results of the Duma elections on 2 December 2007. As expected, the United Russia party, with President Vladimir Putin as its front-runner and a massive media presence, won a two-thirds parliamentary majority. With 64 percent of votes cast, United Russia left its competitors far behind. The Communist Party (CPRF) received less than 12 percent, which was its worst result since the end of the Soviet Union, while Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) at 8 percent remained well below its result in the 2003 polls. Fair Russia, the left-of-center counterpart of United Russia, struggled to overcome the 7 percent barrier and just managed to do so.

These are the four parties that will enter the Duma, where the Communists, as the only real opposition to the regime, hold 57 seats, and will face the presidential party with 315 seats. Fair Russia, with 38, and the LDPR, with 40, will reinforce the phalanx of deputies who support the system – they are not expected to present a challenge to the president or the government.

Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces, the parties whose stance adhered most closely to the principles of a parliamentary democracy, did not manage to win parliamentary representation. At 0.96 per cent and 1.07 per cent respectively, their results this time were even worse than their performance in the disastrous 2003 Duma elections. Political liberalism in Russia has thus reached a historic nadir. Such an outcome is certainly also a result of the official propaganda during the election campaign – Putin’s xenophobic attacks on “jackals” scavenging for carrion outside foreign embassies was all too clearly directed against them. But the fail-

ure of Russian liberalism is also a result of the inability to join forces in the face of the dominance of the presidential administration and to offer an alternative for urban, educated voters by opposing the social-patriotic and xenophobic discourse with topics such as modernization and political self-determination.

A Little Bit of Vote-Rigging?

Russian election observer organizations, such as the Golos non-governmental organization, which receives US and European funding, as well as foreign monitors, such as the representatives of the European Council and the OSCE parliamentary assembly, criticized Russia’s conduct of the electoral process. Lilia Shibanova of Golos condemned the obstruction of election monitors, illegally displayed election advertising inside polling stations, and the violation of election secrecy. Luc van den Brande, the head of the European Council’s election monitoring group, called the vote a “managed election.”

Certainly, the outcome is due mainly to the extensive media campaign that created a clear advantage for United Russia. The regional election results also reflect the massive deployment of “administrative resources” aimed at persuading voters to cast their ballot for the president’s party. In the republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Mordovia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Dagestan, Bashkortostan, and Tatarstan, the local administrations were apparently happy to oblige: In these regions, not only was turnout 80–90 percent, far above the average of 64 percent, but support for United Russia also reached record levels of 81–99 percent. It is hard to believe that these results were achieved fairly. The only question is really

whether those responsible went to the trouble of physically stuffing the ballot boxes, or simply and ruthlessly forging the results.

On the other hand, the results in Moscow, St Petersburg, Volgograd, Nizhny Novgorod and many other Russian cities were so noticeably far below the national average that they can hardly have been in line with the expectations of the Putin administration. It is therefore probable that in these places, the election was conducted in a technically proper style. In fact, Luc van den Brande described the polls as “technically good.” This judgment would also be in line with the experience in earlier Duma and presidential elections, which were held properly in the majority of Russian regions. Nevertheless, the poll results in the approximately 20 territorial constituencies with turnouts of 80 percent or more cast a dubious light on the overall process – and on Russian election officials, who are making no attempts to follow up on such suspicions.

Trends in the Development of the Party System

Looking beyond the current events and taking into account the results of Duma elections since 1993, it becomes clear that the presidential administration has made progress in its control of elections. While Boris Yeltsin’s advisors were taken completely by surprise in the December 1993 elections by the poor performance of the much-touted liberal parties and the fact that Zhirinovskiy’s LDPR managed to become the strongest party, and while Viktor Chernomyrdin’s Our Home is Russia in 1995 was unable to win more than 10 percent, the situation in the December 1999 polls was already a very different one. This election, which anticipated the presidential polls and Yeltsin’s succession in 2000, was of crucial political importance. The groundwork was therefore prepared by the creation of the Unity party, which was close to Yeltsin and whose foundation was notably supported by the financial tycoon Boris Beresovsky. On the other hand, the “Fatherland-All Russia” party was formed as a political power base by two Yeltsin rivals, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov and then-prime minister Yevgeny Primakov. While the CPRF won 24 per cent in 1999, becoming the strongest party, the two newly founded “administrative parties” (or “parties of power”) managed to win a respectable 23 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively.

Following the handover from Yeltsin to Putin, the presidential administration – where Deputy Chief Vladislav Surkov has emerged since 1999 as a key figure in Russian domestic politics – managed to unite the two competing movements under the single heading of “United Russia.” In the subsequent 2003 elections, the new party won more than 37 percent of the vote and

achieved a two-thirds majority in the Duma due to the fragmented opposition and the integration of individual independent deputies. In 2007, it was able to consolidate this success through a party reform and changes to the electoral law. The “party of power” monopolized administrative and media resources and was able in this way to marginalize all other political forces.

However, the question remains whether United Russia will remain viable without administrative support or will fall apart as soon as the presidential administration and the regional governments withdraw their support. It is therefore questionable whether the party itself is a politically relevant factor or whether it is merely a puppet of the administration. Fears of a one-party system being reintroduced to Russia are so far unfounded. For the time being, Russia has no functioning parties apart from the CPRF.

Was the Real Purpose of the Duma Polls Missed?

The election of parliament was, however, only a secondary goal in the 2 December polls. Primarily, this election aimed at securing legitimacy for departing president Putin’s future career as a political leader. For Western observers, the process itself seems puzzling: Why would a president who has enjoyed two successful periods in office require further legitimation through an electoral process?

The reason is the unresolved issue of his succession. The Kremlin announced on December 10 that First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev would be its candidate for the presidency. The election of a new president is scheduled for March 2, 2008 and there is no doubt that Medvedev will win. Putin does, however, intend to continue to play a role beyond the end of his incumbency, but it remains unclear what this role will be.

A president accompanied and constrained by a political authority figure, such as a national leader, is not envisaged by the constitution of 1993, however. After the conflict between the president and the Supreme Soviet, which ended in October 1993 with the siege of the Russian parliament, the authors of the constitution had taken care to exclude any possibility of the emergence of a new power center in addition to the president. The president therefore has all instruments of power directly at his disposal. The minister of defense, the minister of the interior, and the heads of the intelligence services are directly subordinated to him. The government is responsible to him, not to the parliament; he appoints and dismisses ministers, and the consent of parliament is only required when it comes to the appointment of the prime minister. There is no institution that controls the president, and apart from the – extremely complex

– impeachment process, there is no instrument for limiting the power of the president.

It is puzzling where in this construct Putin thinks there is room for the role of a “national leader” or a strong former president. Nevertheless, that seems to be the role he is striving for, and his candidacy as the front-runner of United Russia has to be regarded as an attempt to reaffirm his political authority by way of referendum.

From this perspective, however, the Putin group cannot be too pleased with the outcome of the election. While voter turnout was fairly high for a Duma election (the only poll at which more voters cast their ballots was the 1995 election) and the result was only slightly lower than at the presidential election of 2004, the vote in favor of Putin himself at the latter election was almost 8 per cent higher than the number of votes cast for United Russia in 2007. If the “Soviet-style” results in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya, and other Northern Caucasus republics are left out of the equation, the result is certainly not encouraging across the board.

In Moscow and St Petersburg, only 50 percent of eligible voters participated, much less than in 2004. Votes for United Russia made up between 49 and 55 percent of ballots cast. In 2004, 68 percent of Muscovites and 75 percent of St Petersburg residents had voted for Putin. The situation was similar in Samara, Nizhniy Novgorod, and some other regions. Apparently, in these areas, the “party of power” did not manage to mobilize the population. Therefore, the results of the December 2 election, despite returning a clear victory for Putin, can at best be considered a limited success. The question remains whether the election outcome is good enough to impart political legitimacy to Putin beyond the end of his presidential career.

The Future of Putin and the Future of the Regime

Although Medvedev’s candidacy has the backing of four parties, United Russia, Fair Russia, the Agrarian Party and Civil Power, it leaves open the question of how power will be organized. The day after President Putin announced his support for Medvedev, Medvedev returned the favor and declared that he would make Putin prime minister, should the Russians elect him. De-

spite this move, however, one cannot exclude other possible scenarios. One of these would be for Putin to assume the rather vague role of a “national leader”. In any case, however, the assumption is that Putin will be able to retain his current authority beyond the end date of his tenure as president. His political clout is currently derived from three sources:

The office of the presidency, which endows him with near-unchecked authority over the armed forces, intelligence services, state apparatus, and state-controlled companies, as well as the media controlled by them. The constitution is the source of this power.

The broad support he enjoys among the population, which trusts only Putin, but not the other politicians and certainly not the institutions of the Russian state. This power is derived from the plebiscitary acclamation of the population.

His close link with elite groups that view the president as a guarantor of the status quo, and accept him as the arbitrator and holder of political power.

However, once Putin gives up the presidency, it is far from certain that he will be able to retain his popular support, or that the elite groups will continue to align themselves with him. The leeway that the former president will retain depends largely on his successor, who should in principle be interested in securing the above-mentioned power resources for himself and his entourage. In this respect, by not clearly stating what his role will be after the election of the next president, Putin is playing a dangerous game, and the observer may occasionally gain the impression that the incumbent president is already a lame duck. Conflicts between the domestic intelligence agency FSB and the counter-narcotics law enforcement agency, the arrest of Deputy Finance Minister Sergei Storchak despite the vocal protest of the latter’s superior, Aleksei Kudrin, and the intrigue of financial wheeler-dealer Oleg Shvartsman, who disclosed the financial and political plans of leading *silovik* and Putin-follower Igor Sechin in a newspaper interview indicate that the elite factions surrounding the president are no longer counting on Putin’s continued presence. It will be interesting to see in which way the candidacy of Medvedev and his proposal to make Putin prime minister will affect these conflicts

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

About the author:

Prof. Dr. Hans-Henning Schröder is a lecturer in Eastern European History at the University of Bremen.