



*Russian parties could merge or disappear*

# Shifting electoral laws benefit Putin

BY SVETLANA BABAYEVA

**The** October 2006 elections for regional parliaments in nine constituent units of the Russian Federation have launched a major election cycle in the country that will culminate in the spring 2008 presidential elections.

The voters gave a pro-Kremlin party, United Russia, a majority or a plurality of the vote in all nine regions. Each regional legislature now simply must approve or reject the Russian President's nominee for governor.

Presidential election legislation has not changed since 2004 when Vladimir Putin was re-elected for a second term. That is why there are only two intriguing issues regarding the future campaign. The first is who will become Putin's successor. At this point, Minister of Defence, Sergei Ivanov, and former Head of the President's Administration, Dmitry Medvedev, are mentioned as the most likely candidates. Both became vice prime ministers in November last year; both travel a lot across the country with thorough coverage by TV channels. However, President Putin loves unexpected actions, so do not rule out the emergence of a third figure.

## **A third term for Putin?**

Second, Putin himself reiterated that he would not run for a third term (under the Constitution, he cannot stay more than two consecutive terms as President). However, as elections draw near, Putin is experiencing more and more pressure to extend his presidency. The main argument of the advocates for a third term is that Putin has widespread support among the Russian people and that there is no worthy successor to him. Putin's approval rating is now more than 50 per cent according to recent polls.

In 2008 Putin will be 55 years old, not even retirement age, which is 60 for men in Russia. Presumably, Putin will want to be actively involved in some way. But in Russia, with its Byzantine traditions, it will be quite difficult because every new leader discards whatever the previous leader did, including their team.

Two possibilities have been raised that could allow Putin to hold on to power. The first one is the establishment of



— AP Photo: Michal Japoritzke

*Russian President Vladimir Putin with Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov seated behind.*

a "Union State" with neighbouring Belarus and the election of a President for this new confederation. But the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is not willing to share his power with anyone. Putin himself is also against such a mechanism because it would lead to Russia's international isolation and doom him to the role of a "second Lukashenko." For Putin it is crucial to maintain good relations with the West.

## **Theories, speculations and elections**

Another way for Putin to stay in power would be to declare a state of emergency over all of Russia or within some constituent units. According to the Constitution, in

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such a situation the President can temporarily introduce “partial limitations of rights and freedoms of citizens,” including the postponing of elections. This particular scenario is considered probable by some experts. In a TV phone-in in late October, Putin ruled out a third term but hinted at some form of political involvement.

What may be a lot more interesting is what will happen during the elections just four months prior to the presidential race. Elections for the State Duma — the lower chamber of the Russian Parliament — will take place in December 2007. For the last 15 years, Duma elections have been a reflection of the political palette of Russia.

The previous elections for the State Duma took place in December 2003, also less than four months prior to the presidential race. The main result was the victory of a pro-government party called United Russia, which received roughly 37 per cent of all votes, which, added to its wins in many single-member electoral districts, gave the party more than 220 seats out of 450.

In the years that followed, United Russia’s caucus in Parliament was replenished by new members, both independent deputies and members of other factions who crossed the floor. Eventually, a pro-government “Constitutional majority” of 300 votes was formed in Parliament.

It is this majority that has so significantly changed the legislation on elections that it would be fair to consider it a fundamentally different system of elections that will be tested in December 2007.

So, what are those changes?

- **Abolition of the so-called “proportional scheme.”** Under this scheme, 50 per cent of the seats in Parliament were ceded to candidates elected from party lists, while the other 50 per cent went to deputies competing for a single seat in their electoral districts, allowing representatives of opposition parties to win seats in the Duma. The two largest right-wing opposition parties, Yabloko and Soyuz Pravykh Sil or SPS (Union of Right Forces) — it just so happens in Russia that the right wing is represented by liberals — failed to win more than five per cent of the vote, the minimum threshold for representation in the current Duma. However, some of their members won seats in the Duma thanks to single-seat races in their constituencies. Afterwards, several of them joined the United Russia caucus while others remained independent.

The elections of 2007 will be based solely on party lists. All 450 seats of the Duma will go to candidates chosen by proportional representation from the lists

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provided by the parties on the ballot. This means that independent candidates will either have to join one of the parties on the ballot or look for a new job.

- **More stringent requirements for parties running for Parliament.** Specifically, any party must have been in existence for at least one year, must have at least 50,000 members and must have branches with 500 members across the country. When deputies were adopting these standards and voting for amendments to the Law on

Political Parties, their rationale was that traditionally in Russia “caliphs for an hour” would emerge right before elections, i.e. small formations with doubtful reputation and questionable financing. At this point, it is not known how many parties will take part in the elections. The Central Elections Commission of the Russian Federation (the body responsible for conduct of elections) assumes there will be between seven and ten parties.

The main parties are United Russia, which holds a centre-right position, the Communist Party, and the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), which occupies the niche of conservative and marginal electorates. A liberal coalition is also possible, as well as the participation of the recently formed second pro-government coalition on the left side of the political spectrum, made up of three parties: Motherland, the Party of Life, and the Party of Pensioners. One of the leaders of United Russia, Boris Gryzlov, is the Speaker of the lower chamber of Parliament while one of the new coalition leaders, Sergey Mironov, is the Speaker of the upper chamber of Parliament.

- **Raising the threshold for political party representation in Parliament from five per cent to seven per cent of the vote.** This move is perceived to significantly lower the chances of the liberals — SPS and Yabloko — to win seats in Parliament. The public associates the liberals with the painful reforms of the 1990s, which is why they do not have vast popular support; the Kremlin does not like the liberals much either, so they cannot count on its administrative resources, such as appearances of their leaders on TV or at meetings with the President.

After the last elections, the liberal parties’ share of the vote did not even meet the five per cent threshold for representation in Parliament. When representatives of pro-government parties voted in favour of raising the bar in upcoming elections, their reasoning was that the new barrier would encourage creation of several large parties instead of hundreds of small ones that voters do not recognize.

With the introduction of the new threshold for representation, officials are making projections about the representation of four, or at most five, parties in a new Parliament. The frontrunner is United Russia, followed by LDPR, the Communists, and members of the new coalition of Motherland and the Party of Life.

- **Deletion of the “none of the above” line on the ballot.** When deputies were passing this amendment they referred to European preference for avoiding such a line on the ballot. Their opponents argued that by checking a box in the “none of the above” line, voters were expressing their attitude towards elections and parties. It is true — Russians even coined a new phrase, “the elections were won by candidate ‘none of the above’”. In some regional and municipal elections, candidate “none of the above” has secured as much as 20 to 30 per cent of the vote, a lot more than any “living” candidate or party.

The trend of voting for “none of the above” has become common in the past five to six years. With Putin’s accession to power in 2000, both the weight and the influence of the state have increased in all aspects of Russian life, while, at the same time, government institutions have been steadily losing credibility. This trend is even more pronounced in the constituent units. In Russia, people traditionally like to believe in the possibility of finding a kind-hearted tsar. That is why voter turnouts during presidential elections are much higher than during municipal elections.

Yet according to recent surveys of the Levada Center, only one per cent of respondents think that they personally influence the life of their country, whereas 87 per cent are certain that they are excluded from the decision making. Moreover, when Parliament discussed deleting the “none of the above” line, some experts suggested that the members of parliament were eyeing future federal elections. What if people are disappointed with all the candidates and decide to express their opinion by voting for “none of the above”?

- **Observers at polling stations.** From now on voting and vote counts will be overseen exclusively by observers who represent registered candidates; i.e., in the context of parliamentary elections, observers will represent only the parties that are running. International observers can be invited by the President, the federal government, the Central Elections Commission or the Chambers of Parliament.

### **A law on “extremism”**

It is likely that deputies will decide to adopt more amendments to the election legislation. For instance, last summer new amendments to the law on extremism were actively discussed. The final definition of extremism was so blurry that it could imply virtually any pre-election activities. “Extremism” could be interpreted as calls for discord, obstructing the activities of government bodies, slander and so on. In practice this would mean that any party could be removed from the race and the administration could exert serious pressure on mass media and

even have them closed by interpreting any criticism as slander. The bill became the subject of animated discussions at large and in the media. As a result it was partially softened. However, even deputies and senators themselves admit that the term “extremism” requires further clarification.

This is all to say that future parliamentary elections in Russia will be radically different. Many experts, including staff of the Central Elections Commission, think that it is already possible to predict the composition of the new Parliament. According to these insiders, about 30 to 35 per cent of the vote will be won by United Russia; the Communists will win around 10 per cent; LDPR will get 10 to 12 per cent; the Motherland-Party of Life block will win 12 to 15 per cent; and the rest will be won by smaller blocs.

### **Mistrust of government**

Nevertheless, despite Russia’s political, economic, and social stability and the benefits of high oil prices, various strata of society are dissatisfied for several reasons. The first reason is the poor performance of institutions such as law enforcement bodies, courts and regional governments. Another reason is that the people of Russia still have a strong urge for social equality, which manifests itself in hatred towards the rich, for example. Lastly, xenophobia is also on the rise. In the summer of

## **Russia at a Glance**

Name:	Russian Federation
Capital:	Moscow
Constituent units:	89 regions (21 republics, 6 krais, 49 oblasts, 2 cities of federal significance, 1 autonomous oblast, 10 autonomous okrugs)
<b>Central Government:</b>	
Head of State:	President
Chosen by:	Universal suffrage
Government Leader:	Prime Minister
Chosen by:	Appointed by the President with consent of the State Duma
Lower house:	<i>State Duma</i> with 450 members
Chosen by:	Starting in 2007, general election with proportional representation for all seats
Upper house:	<i>Federation Council</i> with 178 members – two from each of 89 regions
Chosen by:	One appointed by the Governor or President of the region, one elected by the regional legislature

### ***Shifting electoral laws benefit Putin***

2006, fifty-three per cent of respondents to a survey by the Levada Centre said they were sure that the number of fascists in Russia had gone up (47 per cent shared this opinion in August 2004, and 37 per cent in October 2005). At the same time, 34 per cent agreed that “people of non-Russian nationalities are to blame for many misfortunes in Russia” (58 per cent disagreed with this statement).

It will not be surprising if these attitudes are reflected during the elections in the form of an unusually high percentage of votes in favour of certain parties, or large numbers of spoiled ballots or low voter turnouts.

This does not mean that such actions will ruin the elections. But parliamentary elections do “lay the groundwork” for the next political cycle and they do reveal social attitudes. If the attitudes of the public do not turn out as positively as many politicians or official spin doctors want them to, they will create a heavy burden for both the next Parliament and for the next President, whoever that will be. And if the October 8 elections are any indication, changes in the federal government — and changes made by it — will have significant effects on Russia’s 89 regions. (6)