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Multiparty Politics in Russia

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The standard view is that the first multiparty elections in Russia took place on December 12, 1993. This is not quite correct. In fact, the first USSR elections to the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989, the elections the following year for RSFSR deputies, as well as the 1991 RSFSR presidential elections, essentially were all multiparty elections—or, more precisely, two-party elections, in the sense that there were contests in electoral districts between communists and democrats. The communists were backed by the CPSU, whereas the democrats possessed no national political structure, although they did have a common program, i.e., the fight to ensure civil rights and to end the CPSU's monopoly on power. This was enough to give the democrats victory in the 1990 elections and subsequently to elect Boris Yel'tsin president the next year.

After the parliamentary elections, the groups that had formed to support individual democratic candidates, as well as democratic clubs and the regional popular fronts, united into a single organization that took the name of the Democratic Russia movement, or DemRossiya. The movement played an enormous role in safeguarding democratic achievements, in supporting the Yel'tsin-Gaidar government, and in ensuring the victory of democratic forces in the two coup attempts that took place—the first in August 1991 and the second in October 1993.

If DemRossiya had been able to preserve its unity, Russia would have had a real chance of developing a two- or three-party system. But history decided otherwise. DemRossiya began to give rise to separate parties, one after the other: the Democratic
Party of Russia (DPR), the Republican Party of the Russian Federation (RPRF), and the Social Democratic Party of Russia (SDPR). In addition, other democratic political parties were created which were unrelated to the Democratic Russia movement. Among these were the Peasant Party of Russia (KPR), the People's Party of the Russian Federation (NPRF;), three different Christian Democratic Parties, and the Russian Movement for Democratic Reforms (RDDR). Such was the lineup of democratic organizations in the summer of 1993, preceding Russia's parliamentary elections.

At the time, the democratic leaders were confronted with two problems. First, there were too many parties. Second, the democrats who held office as ministers in the government-- Yegor Gaidar, Anatoli Chubais, Mikhail Poltoranin, Andrei Kozyrev, Ella Pamfilova, Vladimir Shumeiko, Sergei Shakhrai, and Aleksandr Shokhin--were not members either of the DemRossiya movement or of any other party.

There were two possible solutions to this problem: either create a bloc of political organizations and "include" the ministers in the new bloc, or the ministers themselves could create new political structures on their own. Sergei Shakhrai and Aleksandr Shokhin took the second route and set up a "party of the regional elites," i.e., the Party of Russian Unity and Accord (PRES). The rest of the democratic ministers joined a single bloc composed of the DemRossiya movement,

the Peasant Party, the "Living Ring" (Zhivoe kol'tso) alliance, and a number of other organizations. This bloc gave itself the name of Russia's Choice, and Yegor Gaidar was elected its leader. A third democratic bloc was created by Grigori Yavlinsky.

As we are all aware, if the democrats did not lose the parliamentary elections on December 12, it is safe to say that they did not win. In any case, their performance in the elections was significantly worse than expected. What were the main causes of their failure?

First, there was too little time available to prepare for the elections.
The Supreme Soviet was dissolved by Yel'tsin on September 20, and the elections were scheduled for December 12. Consequently, within two months an electoral bloc had to be formed, and also--most importantly--an ideological platform for the campaign had to be developed. For a bloc whose leading members included government ministers--who were also responsible for implementing economic policy during a crisis period--this proved to be an insuperable problem. More time was needed. It was far simpler for the opposition, notably for Zhirinovsky, to operate--promises of cheap vodka and sausage won over a large portion of the voters, worn out as they were by economic difficulties. The improvised election campaign of Russia's Choice was a brilliant failure.

Consequently, the first mistake was to hold premature elections.

The parliamentary elections should have been held no earlier than one or two months after the constitutional referendum on December 12. The West bears some responsibility for the decision to hold elections in a hurry.

During the third week of September, immediately after the dissolution of the Russian Supreme Soviet, I was in Washington and participated in a number of meetings with prominent Congressional figures and US Administration officials. Were people concerned about the fate of reforms in Russia? No, they weren't greatly worried about the reforms--instead there was much talk about how Boris Yel'tsin might become a dictator. I was asked whether there was a possibility that Yel'tsin would decide not to hold elections. They were also concerned for the opposition--would it be allowed to take part in the elections? Would the opposition be given equal access to the media, particularly to television?

Put under such pressure by Western "defenders of democracy," Yel'tsin was in a hurry to hold the elections on December 12. However, this was clearly a bad decision, if only because a lapse of two months after the tragic October events was too brief a period for the Russian people to come to sober conclusions about what had occurred. Grief was too deep over the casualties at the Moscow White House, and disillusionment was too
great. Time was needed in order to prove that the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet had been necessary, and to demonstrate--with documentary evidence--the aggressive plans of Ruslan Khasbulatov and Aleksandr Rutskoi, so as to prove definitively that if the army had not been used to storm the White House on October 4, a major civil war would have broken out in Russia.

The second major mistake was the adoption of a mixed system for electing deputies. Under this system, one-half of the parliamentary seats were filled by proportional representation on the basis of country-wide bloc and party lists, and the other half by candidates who won a majority in individual single-member electoral districts. Given the unstructured nature of many of the parties, in practice party leaders singlehandedly named all the candidates on their respective party lists. Frequently persons appeared on party lists who were absolutely unprepared for participating in professional parliamentary activity, and who were totally indebted for their success to the party leader. This applies in particular to the party faction headed by Vladimir Zhirinovsky. If there had been no party list system, this party would have had only small group of deputies in parliament--not an entire faction that constantly destabilizes parliamentary activity. The elections should have been held exclusively on the basis of majority vote in single-member constituencies. It is not easy for me to say this now, since last fall I took a different view and supported, along with my colleagues, the mixed electoral system that was adopted, advancing trivial arguments such as "elections of this type will promote the development of a multiparty system," etc.

The third serious mistake made before the 12 December elections was the lack of a properly thought-out concept for using government television during the election campaign. Various political blocs should never have been permitted to purchase virtually unlimited amounts of advertising time, nor--most importantly--should the politically unsophisticated Russian voter ever have been left on his own in the face of such a populist demagogue as Zhirinovsky. It must be remembered that the Central Electoral Commission adopted a decision prohibiting political commentators from appearing on radio or TV when the leaders of political blocs were scheduled to give
electoral addresses. Let me illustrate the situation by drawing the following analogy: Suppose that in 1929 Adolf Hitler had been given the opportunity not merely to speak at public meetings before an audience of a few thousand, but to address millions of people directly... It should also be pointed out that before the elections Zhirinovsky published a book, _The Last Drive to the South_. In the opinion of legal experts, this book contains incitement to war. The well-known defender of human rights, Kronid Lyubarsky, referred the matter to the Procuracy, which initiated a criminal investigation against Zhirinovsky. However, several months have passed, and the case is still marking time.

History will sort out everything. However, I fear that ultimately historians will refer to the elections of December 12 for the sole reason that they first gave political legitimation to the dangerous populist demagogue Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

**Since the December Elections**

After the elections all three segments of the political spectrum, i.e., the national-communist opposition, the so called center, and the democrats, started to shift. Old structures have been disintegrating, while new parties, blocs, and coalitions are being formed. These developments are mainly due to the fact that campaigning began anew for the 1996 parliamentary and presidential elections immediately after the December vote.

Within the "national-communist" camp the following factors are of decisive importance:

1. There is a division between those who took part in the _armed defense of the White House_ and in other unlawful acts (e.g., Aleksandr Rutskoi, Il'ya Konstantinov, Aleksandr Barkashov, Viktor Ampilov, Stanislav Terekhov) and those who were not involved in these actions (e.g., Gennadi Zyuganov, Vladimir Zhirinovsky). This split widened further when the first group--as opposed to the others--was not permitted to participate in the parliamentary elections. Despite increasing differences in political views, nonetheless a process of consolidation of these groups is occurring--with the active assistance of such "peacemakers" as Valeri Zor'kin (former chairman of the Constitutional Court).
2. The "respectable" opposition hopes to come to power by legal methods in the next parliamentary and presidential elections by exploiting the dissatisfaction of the population over the difficult economic situation and by relying on a further deterioration in economic conditions.

3. The radical extremist opposition prefers plotting to use anticonstitutional measures, and consequently is in the process of creating and training paramilitary formations.

The political center finds itself in a paradoxical situation: On the one hand, following the departure of Yegor Gaidar, Boris Fedorov and Ella Pamfilova, one has every right to call the present government headed by Viktor Chernomyrdin "centrist." Moreover, this government is the first since 1992 to enjoy a degree of support from the parliament. On the other hand, the sole political structure on whose support the government can rely is the PRES party, headed by Sergei Shakhrai. While this party did succeed in surmounting the 5-percent hurdle required to win (party list) seats, it enjoyed scarcely any support with the electorate.

How then is one to explain the government's relative stability? The answer consists of the backing it receives from an unofficial, unorganized party--i.e., the bureaucracy. Today's Russian bureaucrat is an essentially conservative individual. As a rule, these officials are either former state industrial managers or former CPSU functionaries. In their political views, they are considerably closer to the communist leader Zyuganov than to Gaidar.

Given this situation and the absence of a structured political organization capable of assuming responsibility for the government's policies, the future of reforms is under permanent threat. New political initiatives appear to be needed to fill this gap in the political spectrum. However, the bureaucracy is also making an attempt to organize itself politically with the formation of the so-called Party of the Majority, chaired by a certain Mr. Grechnev. Among its leaders are many plant directors and representatives of the former Soviet nomenklatura, as well as government bureaucrats. The party has
substantial financial resources: Its "charitable" actions include the grant of 5 million rubles to every family which lost a relative in the October storming of the White House.

As always, the democratic camp is notable for its characteristic polyphony. The three alliances of Duma deputies, headed respectively by Yegor Gaidar, Grigori Yavlinsky and Boris Fedorov, still have not succeeded in creating a coordinating body. The Russia's Choice electoral bloc effectively has collapsed. Currently, Yegor Gaidar is making an attempt to create a new party based on the Russia's Choice faction (probably under the same name). This process is having a painful impact on the already existing democratic organizations, above all on DemRossiya, since it is from DemRossiya that the active membership of the new party is mainly being recruited.

Meanwhile, the DemRossiya movement is seeking to reorganize itself, and it is probable that it will formally become a political party. An important role will be played by the regional democratic blocs which were formed to fight recent local elections.

The performance of the democrats in the 1996 elections will depend on the following principal factors:

1. Will the democrats successfully take into account the changed mood of an electorate jaded by the reforms? The experience of the Eastern European and Baltic countries indicates that the majority of reform supporters are shifting from radical liberal views toward a social democratic orientation.

2. Will the democrats manage to find the new language and new organizational forms needed to win back the sympathies of their former supporters who have become disillusioned by the reforms, and who expressed their disappointment by staying away from the polls in the December elections?

3. Will the democrats be successful in creating a unified bloc to support a single candidate in each constituency in the next parliamentary and presidential elections?
With regard to the latter, opinion polls show that Boris Yeltsin once again would be a possible presidential candidate for the democratic forces.