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Russia's Post-Electoral Landscape

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The recent Federal Duma elections revealed an important trend taking place in today's Russian society: the coalescence of voters' political consciousness and their gravitation to the most influential parties. At the beginning of the campaign there was concern that the electorate would act impulsively and disperse its vote among the numerous political formations.⁽¹⁾ However, the people exercised their right to vote more responsibly than expected, demonstrating an ability to distinguish major political forces and to weigh their chances of winning. The voters managed to match their political inclinations with parties having lucid political agendas. The election results showed that one-half of all ballots were cast for blocs that passed the five-percent barrier; the parties that gathered slightly less than five percent of the votes are included, it is evident that three-quarters of the electorate voted for the most significant political groups.

The distribution of votes proved the so-called "quadripolar" model of the Russian political scene. According to the model, the political sphere could be characterized as an empty circle with four opposing poles on its surface. Attempts to "fill" the circle with a "centrist" party proved futile: although Viktor Chernomyrdin's "Our Home Russia" claimed to represent the center and posed as a pillar of "stability," it turned out to be an extremist formation whose leaders would use any means to remain in power.

Since the "party of power" was terrified by the prospect of any change in the governing elite, immediately after the elections its leaders stated that the results should not in any way affect the government. Those in power would prefer to maintain the *status quo* even at the expense of its supporters in the reformist camp.

Russia's political landscape suffers from the lack of democratic traditions, a viable legislative branch, and a moderating middle class. In addition, today's politicians are faced with a populace that is in large part politically infantile and greatly dissatisfied with the course of reforms. According to public opinion polls, the degree of discontent among the population is very high -- more than half of those interviewed support the idea of Boris Yel'tsin's resignation, and government institutions are distrusted.

Many Communist supporters are dissatisfied with their current lack of privileges, which they believe have been taken by the reformers. Most of the Communist electorate continues to live modestly, but under socialism it had grown accustomed to a guaranteed (if minimal and low quality) supply of food, housing, and entertainment. In its support of the Communist Party, the electorate has rejected the expensive free market in favor of a controlled system which could provide again rationed but cheap sausage.

Socialism was a system of privileges which, although granted to millions of people, made even rank-and-file party members feel special. For example, the colossal number of military-industrial complex workers were provided not only with additional financial incentives, but also with the prestige of being keepers of state secrets. Even those persons who have not suffered financially in the free market economy, but who lost their elite status, now tend to vote for the Communists. For instance, although the living standards of foreign trade officials' did not decline, the open society deprived them of the distinction of being the few allowed to travel abroad. Today, such officials unanimously despise Gorbachev, Yel'tsin, and Gaidar.

The third pole of the Russian political space is characterized by the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and the Congress of Russian Communities (CRC). Their supporters represent a more complex and heterogeneous sample of the electorate. Personal status and financial well-being are not these voters' main priorities. (2) Rather, they are most concerned with Russia's loss of its "Great Power" status and the breakup of the Soviet Union. These sentiments consist of strong nationalistic elements since the "internationalism" of the empire was based on its "Russianness," with the Russian

people being "first among equals." Another dominant sentiment in this group is nostalgia for Russia's former "international greatness." This explains why such voters bow willingly before a dictator who promises "to raise Russia from her knees."

Our polls show that 30 percent of the country's population would welcome a dictatorial regime and 22 percent would not object to it. These voters who are looking for an iron fist would not choose the Communist Party, which is perceived to be "the party of pensioners." The great majority of the LDPR and CRC electorate is composed of young persons who are not tormented by recollections of rationed food and loss of status. However, the visions of "the great past" are indelible. They trust neither the "party of power" nor the democrats who "have destroyed the great country," and would rather vote for strong figures like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and General Aleksandr Lebed' (CRC).

In the first stages of the electoral campaign, part of the Zhirinovskiy electorate started gravitating toward Lebed's camp. However, CRC's propaganda did not correspond entirely to their hopes for "a strong hand." On the other hand, Zhirinovskiy promised to reinstate order, conquer the criminal world, defend Russian-speaking minorities, and show the West 'what we [the Russians] are made of.'" By election day, many potential CRC voters had joined the hard-core Zhirinovskiy fans. The leader of LDPR also managed to attract another category of people with his unruly political behavior -- those with anarchistic sentiments. This category will never exchange Zhirinovskiy for the dignified and commonsensical Lebed'. Whether criminal anarchists or defendants of firm order, LDPR supporters represent two different sides of the same coin, i.e., of the same patriotic pole of the Russian political space, who insist on "order" for everybody and power for themselves.

The "alternative democrats" make up the final pole on the political scene. They enthusiastically supported the beginning of the reforms and even marched with the banner "Down with CPSU!" These persons became bitterly disappointed with the plundering "nomenklatura" nature of reforms. Being in varying degrees pro-Western,

they support "a different reform," most clearly personified by the Yabloko leader, Grigori Yavlinsky.

* * *

Many parties and their leaders have tried, unsuccessfully, to occupy the gaps between the mentioned political poles. (3) Boris Fedorov (Forward Russia!) attempted to fill the gap between Yavlinsky and Zhirinovskiy; Gaidar made an effort to interject Russia's Democratic Choice between Yavlinsky and Viktor Chernomyrdin; CRC (between Zhirinovskiy and the Communists); the Women of Russia (between Chernomyrdin and the Communists); the semi-socialist Svyatoslav Fedorov (the Party of Workers' Self-Management) tried to find a place between the Communists and Yavlinsky; and the Party of Beer Lovers -- between the "party of power" and Zhirinovskiy. Yet one-half of those who cast votes support the "polar parties."

Parties which failed to unite on basic platforms due to their leaders' personal ambitions, in the end ran with almost indistinguishable programs, competing for the same electorate. The liberal, pro-Western camp suffered the greatest losses. Yavlinsky, whose ratings had been growing steadily during the past two years, appeared to be the strongest political figure, able to unite the reformist forces. However, the democratic *beau monde* in Russia did not trust him enough. Tragic disagreements within the democrats' camp resulted in the waste of 12 percent of the vote cast for minor democratic parties, which could not overcome the 5-percent barrier. Such a split makes the chances for the democrats to secure the presidency for themselves very slim.

Notes:

1. Forty-three parties participated in the elections.
2. The last poll (December 20-26, 1995, of 1,599 persons) showed that in the LDPR electorate there are as many people who perceive their situation as satisfactory as there are in the rest of the country (13%), whereas among CPRF supporters only 4% share that perception.

3. Boris Fedorov's electorate is the only one (besides Zhirinovskiy's) which gives preference to the LDPR leader on the question "Who will you vote for, if you have to choose between the two of them in the presidential elections?" (VCIOM poll of January 27, 1996; 1,050 persons interviewed).

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