



The State Duma in December...2007

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21 Dec 2006

Overview

The next Duma election, now under a year away, will be all about political parties. The present holiday season seems a good time for a leisurely review of the runners and riders. Little is being left to chance by the Kremlin, and as he tucks into his *blini* and caviar on New Year's Eve, President Putin might allow himself a quiet smile over the state of the parties in the Russian political landscape.

Despite the natural focus on Putin's successor, the shape of the next Duma will be important for country risk in Russia. Our analysis of the Kremlin's strategy for the Duma election - which may be summarised as a paradox: better control through more pluralism - leads to a first forecast of the result.

Core Case

The Kremlin plan for the 2007 Duma election, weaknesses in that plan, survey of the parties

Assumptions and Evidence

2007 Duma election result forecast

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There is now under a year to go until the election of a new State Duma (lower house of the federal parliament). Set for 2 December 2007, this election marks the turning point in Russia's four-year political cycle.

Given the overwhelming importance of the presidency, in terms both of the powers it enjoys under Russia's post-Soviet constitution and of its unique legitimacy in Russia's political culture, the Duma election will command less attention than the presidential election due to follow close behind (on 2 March 2008). However, the shape of the new Duma will to a large extent determine the operating environment for the next administration, hence the prospects for the success or failure of President Putin's successor as president.

New rules and a new plan - for pro-Kremlin competitors

The December 2007 Duma election will be conducted under a new set of rules with two important changes. Until now, the chamber's 450 seats have been elected in two different ways, with half the seats allocated in line with percentage vote shares of political party lists, and the other half going to the winners of 'first-past-the-post' races in electoral districts. This time around, the whole Duma will be elected on a party list basis. The other key change concerns the minimum vote share threshold which parties must cross to be awarded their proportional allocation of seats. This threshold is raised from 5% to 7%. In other words, a party list winning less than 7% of the total vote gets no seats.

President Putin announced this change as part of a package of measures in response to the Beslan tragedy of September 2004. As many commentators were quick to point out, it is not clear how changing the Duma election rules will contribute to combating terrorism in the North Caucasus. Putin did also proclaim a more general goal of cementing national unity in the face of the threat which materialized so horrifically at Beslan. In this perspective, some sort of logic can be discerned. Votes for national party lists may help bind together a country which, historically an empire, is in its infancy as a nation state.

The privileged position now given to political parties may also be reckoned a democratic advance in two senses. First, well developed political parties representing natural interest groups in society are typical of mature and successful democracies. The higher 7% vote share threshold will encourage parties to consolidate and mature (and leave the less serious ones to wither away). Secondly, proportional representation based on party lists will be more representative than single-district elections. Even in the UK with its well entrenched party system, members of parliament (and hence whole governments) are rarely elected with an absolute majority of votes; and in Russia, some single districts have been won on less than 20% of all votes cast.

But as with almost everything Putin does, this change also enhances his control. Those single-member districts were prey to local bureaucratic and business interests. National parties can be more effectively controlled. For one thing, much stricter qualifying requirements have been introduced for political parties wishing to contest elections (including a minimum national membership of 50,000 with a wide regional spread). And the amendments to electoral law also include various measures which could be used to strike off the ballot altogether any parties which the Kremlin views as a serious threat.

One other result of the disappearance of single-member districts will be to weaken the position of United Russia (UR), the sole overtly pro-Kremlin party in the current Duma, in which it commands an overwhelming two-thirds majority. UR achieved that majority despite winning only 37% of the party list vote in the last (December 2003) Duma election thanks to the ability of the local establishment to machine their candidates to victory in single-member districts (often with vote shares well below that level). Paradoxically, this change will also strengthen Kremlin control. For

by denying UR an automatic majority in the new Duma, the new rules will reduce the threat of the Kremlin (now meaning, in practice, a relatively weak successor president) becoming too beholden to a single ruling party which has in many respects started to resemble the old monopoly 'Party-State' - the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) - see .

While trimming the ambitions of UR, the Kremlin has no intention of losing control of the Duma itself. As part of what already looks like a well-planned operation by the Kremlin's political managers, this circle has been squared by the emergence of an officially-approved competitor to UR. This new party is called the Justice Party (JP), formed by amalgamating the neutered Motherland Party (see below), the Pensioners' Party and the Party of Life.

With Sergei Mironov, the Speaker of the Federation Council (upper house of the federal parliament) as its leader, the JP neatly offsets UR led by the Speaker of the State Duma, Boris Gryzlov. The balance seems to have been well thought out in the Kremlin. Like UR, the JP declares itself to be a supporter of the President Putin and his policies - only the policies it likes are of the more collectivist and nationalist variety. Putin's own public remarks in December 2006 indicate UR's continuing role as the largest single party, but with the JP accorded equal respect and, thanks to television air time denied to outright opposition parties, a platform to compete with UR on equal terms.

As we have argued elsewhere (), this construction obviously designed for control purposes may have another longer-term consequence (intended or not) of deepening systemic stability by promoting political competition. However, we see two main problems with this construction achieving its immediate goals in the new Duma to be elected a year from now.

Liberal comeback prospects

The first problem is that the planned controlled and limited competition may quickly take on a life of its own. Already at its annual congress on 2 December, the UR leadership - sensing serious competition for the first time - made some sharp attacks on the JP. Although these two parties are already being ridiculed by opposition critics as 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee', the atmosphere between these officially approved competitors could sour further. A bitter residue left from the campaign could prevent the two 'pro-Putin' parties from cooperating in the new Duma to form the necessary absolute majority for key votes on the new Prime Minister and central business of the new government.

One way of addressing this problem - and there are signs of the Kremlin's political managers considering this - would be to ensure representation in the new Duma for the liberal wing of the political spectrum.

Both the leading liberal parties - Right Union (SPS) and Yabloko - won party list seats in the Duma elected in 1999, but failed to pass the vote share threshold in the 2003 Duma election. Back in that 1999 Duma election, SPS owed its position as the most successful liberal party (with nearly 9% of the vote) to discreet but effective Kremlin support. Something similar could happen this time round. Even if the Kremlin were so minded, a positive outcome could not be guaranteed, since it might also depend on SPS and Yabloko overcoming their rivalry to form an alliance. These two parties are at one and the same time both too un-Russian and too Russian for their own good: un-Russian in their attachment to individualism and the rule of law, making them unappealing to many voters; but too Russian in their inability to accept compromises required in any mature democracy. Still, it is possible that SPS - perhaps with some other repackaging - could be machined in to the new Duma anyway. That would allow the Kremlin to avoid having to depend all the time on cooperation between UR and the JP, and instead construct tactical majorities consisting either of UR and the JP, or of UR and the liberals - the choice being determined in each case by the nature of the business in hand.

Hardline nationalist threat

The other problem with the new construction of competition between UR and the JP, is that this competition never gets off the ground. For all the television airtime and other official backing provided to the JP, voters disinclined to support UR and keen instead to register some form of protest, might rumble the JP as falling well short of a proper alternative.

One outlet for that protest will be that part of the liberal camp, now informally led by world chess champion Gary Kasparov, which has remained in uncompromising opposition to the Putin administration. But this will be a minority interest, with no prospect of passing the 7% barrier even if they get themselves organised to contest the election in the first place.

A much more serious protest vote could be harvested by the hardline xenophobic ('Russia-for-the-[ethnic]-Russians') nationalism which has been a worrying element in post-Soviet politics. This mood set in immediately after the collapse of the USSR - for many, it was convenient to blame everyone but Russians for that - and in recent years has taken on an ever-uglier appearance. Attacks on foreigners have become frequent in society, and often go unpunished or offenders receive light sentences. (For further discussion of this, see .)

The recent re-formation of the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO) highlights the electoral attraction of a more radical and politicised nationalism. When this movement was originally established in 1995, it did not include openly radical elements. One of its leaders, Dmitry Rogozin, led the Motherland Party - a project of Kremlin political managers in the 2003 Duma election to erode the Communist vote. More recently, Rogozin's nationalism has become too virulent for the Kremlin's taste. After he supported openly racist propaganda ahead of local elections in 2005, he was removed from the leadership of the Motherland Party (now integrated into the new JP - see above). And when he unveiled the revived KRO in December 2006, Rogozin was joined on the platform by openly nationalist and racist figures. In late 2006, Putin has raised the issue of extremism (meaning racist and violent nationalism) on a number of occasions, indicating Kremlin concern that this tendency could yet spin out of control.

The opposition establishment: Communists and Zhirinovskiy

Against this background, the traditional opposition forces may seem less threatening from Putin's perspective.

This is especially true of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) - a name reminiscent of Monty Python's Flying Circus (so called because there was no-one called Monty Python, and nothing about flying or circuses). The LDPR was thus named on its formation in 1990, with the assistance of the KGB, in order to discredit the terms 'liberal' and 'democratic'. It is the oldest political party in Russia. When the Congress of People's Deputies changed the constitution in February 1990 to allow for the existence of parties other than the CPSU, the LDPR was the first to register (even before the CPSU). Zhirinovskiy has delighted in making outrageous comments and statements over the years, and here lies his appeal to a largely uneducated portion of the electorate. Zhirinovskiy is often written off by commentators, but his act still has a following. He has long been tolerated by the Kremlin as a harmless and even useful shock absorber of the protest vote. Zhirinovskiy's track record in successive parliaments has been to keep his blood-curdling rhetoric for public consumption only and support the government of the day. It will be in the Kremlin's interests to divert protest votes to Zhirinovskiy from hardline nationalists like KRO (see above), so Zhirinovskiy can be expected to get ample television airtime during the 2007 Duma election campaign and pass the 7% barrier.

The Communist Party fulfils the role of a classic parliamentary opposition - making it part of the establishment. This reality is at odds with the party's unreconstructed spirit (it would be more

accurately named the 'Party of Nostalgia for the Soviet Union'), which is the basis of its appeal to a dwindling older generation. The Party's high point came in the mid-1990s when disillusionment set in with Boris Yeltsin and his reformers after the collapse of the USSR. Nowadays, by contrast, the party must contend not only with the Kremlin's popularity due to recovering living standards, but also much more competition for the collectivist and nationalist vote. As a result, the Party under its veteran leader Gennady Zyuganov, looks set to position itself with a more radical opposition platform than in the last Duma election when it polled its 12%. But such shifts will probably have little impact on the Party's performance, based as it is on an historic brand and core electorate.

Assumptions and Evidence

2007 Duma election result forecast

Our analysis of the Putin administration's political planning combined with recent regional election results and opinion poll findings support the forecast for the 2007 Duma election result published in December 2006 by the Political Technologies Centre (a leading Moscow think tank).

2007 Duma election result forecast (excluding 'wasted' votes for minor parties)

Party	Vote share (%)	Comments
United Russia	40-50	Probably lower end of range
Justice Party	10-20	Probably higher end of range
Communist Party + Zhirinovsky's LDPR	up to 25	Both parties will pass the 7% barrier
Liberals (SPS, Yabloko)	5-10	Passing the 7% barrier will depend both on discreet Kremlin support (likely) and a united liberal front (less likely)

Source: Political Technologies Centre