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This is the first in a series of reports to be issued by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs on the upcoming parliamentary elections in Russia. The newsletter will serve to inform and update its readers on developments in Russia as it approaches the December polls. This issue addresses the basic contours of the political and electoral system in which balloting will take place.

OVERVIEW

In December, the Russian Federation will conduct its third set of parliamentary elections since the country's independence in 1991. These polls fall at an important moment in Russia's post-Soviet history. Following an economic crisis and a series of government shakeups, Russians have grown weary of instability and suspicious of policies that yield little improvement in daily life, but nonetheless have been often introduced under the mantle of economic or democratic reforms. Since much of the hard work of genuine reform lies ahead, Russia's democratic reformers face a daunting challenge: they must convince an increasingly skeptical public of the need for much deeper economic and political changes. This is the challenge of the 1999 elections, and the presidential contest that will follow next summer.

There are several new developments on the Russian political scene. More and more, Russia's regional leaders are seeking to influence national policy by forming their own regional parties. These and other groups are actively considering electoral coalitions that may help consolidate Russia's fragmented political landscape. Recent events in Kosovo have brought international factors to the surface in a country where, during the last decade, foreign policy issues have not appreciably influenced electoral outcomes.

In the four years since the last parliamentary polls, the Russian financial crisis, the president's declining health and the appointment of three prime ministers in 18 months have raised questions about where power really lies in Russia's political system. The Duma flexed some muscle in the fall, but the parliament's failure in May, after months of rhetoric, to vote to impeach President Boris Yeltsin, and its rapid acceptance of Sergei Stepashin, Yeltsin's newest prime minister, reinforces earlier views about the dominance of the Russian executive. Still, Russia's developing political parties can use these elections to assert their role in the country's evolving democratic system, especially since these polls will serve as a prelude to the much-anticipated presidential contest next year.

During the past eight years, Russia's nascent democracy has proven notably resilient. Despite economic crises and periodic power-shuffling within the cabinet, fledgling democratic institutions have endured. Russian leaders largely abide by the constitutional process, accepting the provisions set forth in the 1993 constitution as the rules of the game. Political leaders seem to recognize that elections are the only way to gain power. While elections are not, themselves, the sole yardstick of democracy, they play a critical role in the development of a democratic state, provided that they are themselves democratic.

ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK

The 1993 constitution and the Act on Elections to the State Duma form the legislative basis for Russia's election system. The constitution establishes a bicameral legislature, the Federal Assembly. The Assembly's upper house, the Federation Council, comprises the legislative and executive heads from Russia's 89 federal components. The State Duma, which seats 450 members for four-year terms, is the lower chamber of parliament, and the body that will be elected in December.

Both houses of the Federal Assembly recently approved amendments to the 1995 State Duma election act. The December elections will follow the basic outlines of the 1995 law, according to which half of the Duma's 450 seats are elected on a majoritarian basis from single-member constituencies. The rest are chosen on a proportional basis from party lists. To compete in elections, single-member district candidates must collect signatures from 1 percent of the voters, unless officially nominated by a party. To qualify for balloting, parties must collect a minimum of 200,000 signatures, or in accordance with the amended law, pay a deposit and register with the Central Electoral Commission. A party must garner at least 5 percent of the national vote to enter the parliament. This threshold is meant to provide incentive to small parties with limited support, especially regionally based groups, to form broad coalitions, mutually beneficial to the electoral prospects of all their members.

The recent amendments to the Election Act, among other changes, limit the number of absentee voters and bar elected officials from using public funds and property for campaigning. The law also requires candidates to the lower chamber to declare income, property and criminal convictions. These revisions are meant to curb fraud and other irregularities during the upcoming polls.

THE PARTY LANDSCAPE

The current Duma is composed of four major parties, the largest of which is the Communist Party with 157 seats. Led by 1996 presidential candidate Gennady Zyuganov, the CPRF enters the elections with a stable and sizeable popular following. Until now, the left's campaign has focused on the removal of President Yeltsin, which culminated in the failed impeachment vote in May. Yeltsin will remain a target in their campaign. In light of anti-NATO sentiment in Russia associated with the Kosovo crisis, the party will also seek a major electoral boost from its long-time opposition to the NATO alliance and its member states.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy retains a loyal nucleus of supporters and a large network of regional organizations, but confronts new competitors for the protest vote. The ultra-nationalist party has launched a pre-election media campaign with a series of television advertisements featuring Zhirinovskiy in a variety of settings. The purpose of this advertising campaign has been to reinvigorate the party's stagnating image, to broaden appeal among nationalists and ultimately to maintain the 51 seats it holds in the current Duma.

Grigory Yavlinsky's liberal Yabloko party seeks to improve on its 1995 performance in which it gained 6.89 percent of the party list vote and 45 seats in the Duma. Yabloko claims a consistent record of being the only democratic party in opposition to the Yeltsin government, and expects to make major gains by strengthening its regional chapters and winning more than 10 percent of the national vote. Polls have suggested that Yabloko has the potential to attract support beyond its own electoral base if economic reforms become a major campaign

issue in the parliamentary elections. At the same time, some observers believe that Yabloko's identity as a pro-Western organization could adversely affect the party's ability to expand its base.

Viktor Chernomyrdin's centrist Our Home is Russia (NDR) party earned 65 seats in the 1995 elections. This former 'party of power' has declined since Chernomyrdin's dismissal as prime minister in 1998. However, recent efforts suggest a new strategy to reinvigorate the party and revive electoral support. NDR is adopting a new party program based on support for market reform, and has expressed willingness to form a broad, coalition with like-minded groups. Chernomyrdin's efforts in mediating the Kosovo conflict may affect his party's electoral performance. If Russians perceive Chernomyrdin as successful in influencing the peace process in Kosovo, his party could benefit. Likewise, Our Home is Russia may lose support if Chernomyrdin is seen as having capitulated to NATO demands.

These seasoned parties in the current Duma face newer groups such as Just Cause, Fatherland, Voice of Russia and All Russia. The Just Cause coalition is composed of a former governing party, Democratic Choice of Russia, that failed to reach the threshold in 1995, and a number of other smaller parties. The coalition is spearheaded by Russia's young reformers -- Yegor Gaidar, Boris Nemstov, Anatoly Chubais and others. By uniting, these pro-reform parties and leaders are attempting to consolidate their forces and capitalize on their combined strengths. This coalition promotes market reform and civil liberties, however the public image and precise composition of the group is still evolving. Former Prime Minister Sergei Kiryenko's New Force party may also join. As with Yabloko, the identification among Russians of Just Cause's leadership with the West may affect the coalition's electoral prospects.

Leading the Fatherland party, Yuri Luzhkov seeks to build on his record as mayor of Moscow and to launch his presidential bid. Fatherland is comprised of a diverse mix of groups ranging from federal leaders, regional elite and business interests, to trade unionists. The party relies heavily on Luzhkov's charismatic leadership and the expectation that the party will become an influential, centrist political organization in Russia.

The formation of blocs such as Samara Governor Konstantin Titov's Voice of Russia and Tatarstan President Mintimer Shamiev's All Russia represents a significant departure from Moscow-dominated party politics. These initiatives reflect the desire of regional leaders to exert greater influence over national level politics. A strong presence in the State Duma will give regional leaders more leverage in pursuing their demands for greater regional autonomy.

Among these and even smaller groups, there is all manner of speculation about possible mergers or alliances. Several centrist configurations may evolve in the coming months, however at this early stage, commitments between groups are few, while professed allegiances are many. For example, Fatherland and All Russia have recently announced their intention to form a united bloc. Voice of Russia has also hinted at an alliance with Our Home Is Russia. These potential mergers imply that Russia's fragmented political landscape might gradually consolidate, as parties try to create blocs that could challenge the dominance of the communists. The post-election period will reveal whether these combinations are pre-electoral marriages of convenience, or the building blocs of a more consolidated party system.

Russia's new parliament will face formidable challenges. Those future challenges constitute the issues around which the parties will campaign today. Most notably, Russia continues to struggle with the profound social and economic disarray caused by last August's financial crisis. The Russian electorate, burdened by the welfare costs of economic collapse, will likely look to those parties that can convincingly present themselves as guarantors of recovery.

The campaign season has already begun in Russia, marked by a flurry of party congresses in the spring. NDR, Fatherland, Just Cause, the Agrarian Party, Voice of Russia and All Russia all presented their organization to one another and the electorate. As in 1995, the party conventions demonstrate that powerful personalities continue to play a significant role in Russian electoral politics. However, parties have also used these gatherings to discuss their platforms, convey their image and court potential partners. In the next six months, the success of these parties will depend on their capacity to build productive coalitions and effectively communicate their message to the electorate.

NDI's ACTIVITIES

In Russia, NDI's programs are designed to support the development of a multiparty, pluralistic political system. Through its political party development program, NDI works with those reform-oriented parties about which there is consensus concerning their commitment to democratic principles. Parties must also have significant public support with a potential for expansion, and an expressed interest in cooperating with NDI. NDI's efforts focus on helping these parties participate in the elections, with particular attention given to regional structures, and strengthen organizational structures that will advance their long-term development. The Institute will also provide training and advice to a national coalition of civic groups that will advocate for open and fair elections in December 1999.

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