

This is the third in a series of reports issued by the National Democratic Institute on the parliamentary elections in Russia scheduled for December 19, 1999. This report examines recent developments in the campaign, as well as the roles of the Central Election Commission, and of media and citizens' groups.

On December 19, the Russian Federation will conduct its third set of parliamentary elections since its independence in 1991. These elections will determine the members of the 450-seat State Duma, the lower chamber of Russia's bicameral legislature, the Federal Assembly. 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. A party must garner at least 5 percent of the national vote in order for its members to gain any of the 225 seats allocated by party lists.

The Central Election Commission's Role

The State Duma election campaign is in full swing now that the Central Election Commission (CEC) has registered all the parties and single mandate candidates who will appear on the December ballot. The process of registration continues to be a source of controversy. Some have accused the Central Election Commission and Russian courts of using technicalities to disqualify or limit the participation of parties in the election.

Twenty-eight parties were registered by the CEC, including the ultra-nationalist bloc, *Spas*.

However, a Moscow court has ruled that the CEC must remove the *Spas* bloc from the ballot. Although the court's move appeared to be an attempt to prevent an extremist nationalist organization from participating in the elections, the court based its ruling on an accusation that the bloc reported incorrect registration data.

The CEC itself refused to register another nationalist group, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's *Liberal Democratic Party* (LDPR), citing inaccurate disclosure of assets by candidates, though some suggest the real reason the LDPR was denied registration was that the top two candidates on the party list after Zhirinovskiy were notorious criminal figures. Zhirinovskiy reorganized his party list and managed to register under the new party name *Zhirinovskiy's Bloc*.

The CEC's role in interpreting the election law has led to accusations that the CEC is stifling debate during the active campaign period. Recently announced limits on media commentary are intended to protect candidates from negative attacks, but if successful, these restrictions may curtail the amount of debate that could be expected one month prior to a major election. In addition, some feel that in determining acceptable levels of campaign spending, the CEC assumes inordinate power.

The War in Chechnya

The war in Chechnya is another significant factor shaping the parliamentary election campaign. In contrast to their conduct during

the 1994-1996 Chechnya conflict, Russian authorities have been careful to justify the current military actions as a fight against terrorism. Despite reports of brutality and gross human rights violations, most Russians seem to support the current military operation. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, a former KGB employee and director of the Russian security service, has apparently benefitted from his leadership on this issue. Putin has positioned himself as a leader prepared to make difficult decisions, assume responsibility, and rule with a strong hand. This is evidently appealing to Russian citizens, as Putin's popularity rating in recent opinion polls has soared.

The War in the Media

A media war between the Kremlin and the *Fatherland-All Russia* bloc is another major factor in the campaign. Russian voters have been subjected to excessively negative media coverage of political leaders and parties participating in the elections. The quantity and negativity of these attacks are unprecedented in Russia's 10-year electoral history.

Kremlin advisors have spearheaded this new trend in campaigning, with their attack on *Fatherland-All Russia*, the political bloc associated with Moscow Mayor Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Primakov. News programs on Channel One, the national television network controlled by pro-Kremlin business tycoon Boris Berezovsky, and Channel Two, the state-owned television station, have sought to undermine the reputations of *Fatherland-All Russia* leaders. Newspapers and radio stations controlled by the Kremlin have also participated in this negative campaign, in which Mayor Luzhkov has been accused of everything from petty corruption to complicity in murder. The media outlets also accused Luzhkov's wife of illicit business practices, and asserted that former Prime Minister Primakov tacitly serves the interests of NATO and the West.

November national opinion polls indicate that the media campaign against *Fatherland-All Russia* has been effective. Analysts in Moscow believe that *Fatherland-All Russia's* response to these attacks has helped to further undermine its support. *Fatherland-All Russia* leaders have counterattacked with criticisms of the Kremlin through NTV, the private network owned by anti-Kremlin tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky, and the television channel owned by the Moscow city government.

Polls show shifts in approval ratings for different groups competing in the Duma elections. Below is an assessment of the current standings of the major political parties.

The Reformers

In the current campaign, the reformist segment of the political spectrum is comprised primarily of two separate organizations, *Yabloko* and the *Union of Right Forces*, each with its own well-defined and loyal electorate. In building their party organizations and developing electoral coalitions, both groups show that they have learned important lessons from the 1993 and 1995 elections. These developments, as well as the declining fortunes of *Fatherland-All Russia*, have led to increased ratings in opinion polls for both parties.

If in the past *Yabloko* was considered to be merely a projection of its leader, liberal economist Grigory Yavlinsky, the party can now campaign on the reputations and legislative experience of the members of its State Duma faction. The party can also rely on an effective regional network it has worked to develop since the last election. Finally, the inclusion of former Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin on the party list has also strengthened *Yabloko*, by broadening the party's appeal and adding an element of applied administrative experience.

The *Union of Right Forces* brings together *Democratic Choice of Russia*, the party

organization established by Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais, with the young and charismatic reformers Sergei Kirienko, Boris Nemtsov, and Irina Khakamada and their respective parties (*New Force*, *Forward Russia* and *Common Cause*). With Kirienko, Nemtsov and Khakamada at the top of the party list, the *Union of Right Forces* has slowly, but steadily, improved its rating in the opinion polls. The group now seems poised to clear the 5 percent threshold to enter the Duma.

Yabloko and the *Union of Right Forces* will be competitors, to some degree, in the proportional voting. However to avoid additional fragmentation, they have coordinated their single mandate campaigns in Moscow and St. Petersburg, their main strongholds, as well as in other provinces throughout the country. This cooperation should benefit both groups significantly in the single mandate balloting.

The Pro-Government Bloc

Unity-Medved, the pro-government bloc of governors backed by the Kremlin, was formed in September 1999 after previous attempts to organize a pro-government coalition failed. The group is often dismissed as an association of governors with frequently opposing views, whose only common feature is their regions' dependence on financial handouts from the national government. However, these governors bring to the bloc significant political assets in terms of their control over regional media and administrative organs. Unity's strength also lies in the popularity of its leader, Minister for Emergencies Sergei Shoigu, and its association with Prime Minister Putin. While Putin has so far avoided direct involvement in Unity's parliamentary campaign, association with the Prime Minister and his popular military campaign in Chechnya has improved the bloc's chances of surpassing the 5 percent threshold for representation in the Duma.

The Communists/Nationalists

Splintering among communist and nationalist

groups has resulted in a proliferation of parties on this end of the spectrum. The *Communist Party of the Russian Federation* (KPRF) remains the largest and most influential party in this category. KPRF has now embraced the nationalist conservative agenda alongside its traditional, Soviet rhetoric. Nevertheless, several more radical communist organizations, such as the *Stalinist Bloc for the USSR*, and communist groups with a stronger nationalist program, such as the *Movement in Support of the Army*, will run on separate tickets. A few other less radical leaders advancing a version of social democracy also have elected to run separately from the KPRF. Because of this splintering and because of the nationalist-populist appeal of more centrist groups such as *Fatherland-All Russia*, it is unlikely that these smaller parties will make it into the next Russian parliament. Even the notoriously ultranationalist *Zhirinovskiy's Bloc*, according to the polls, will have difficulty clearing the 5 percent threshold.

Civic Involvement

The parliamentary election campaign has spurred several civic groups to conduct nonpartisan voter education, election monitoring and voter turnout activities. They are promoting free and fair elections by monitoring and reporting on election campaigns, campaign finance and media coverage; educating voters about election regulations; and monitoring polling places on election day. Major civic groups with extended regional networks, such as Moscow Helsinki Group, Mothers of Soldiers, New Perspectives, etc., are coordinating their monitoring activities. Some of the activities of select groups are explored below.

The Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG) is one of Russia's most established human rights organizations. For the December elections, MHG will work through its regional affiliates in 70 of Russia's 89 regions to serve as a national coordinator and clearinghouse for reports on election law violations. The New Perspectives Foundation (NPF) – a non-governmental civic organization established in 1995 – strives to make electoral politics more accessible to

Russia's youth. With the goal of increasing youth participation in and awareness of the December elections, NPF has developed a regional network in 52 Russian provinces with membership reaching over 4,000.

Many civic organizations are conducting election activities in regions across Russia. For example, in mid-October the Council of the Chelyabinsk Regional Public Students' Organization and the information center Sodeistvie (Assistance) held a roundtable to discuss the role of civic organizations in the upcoming elections and to coordinate regional activities to promote civic involvement and voter turnout. Representatives from over 20 non-governmental organizations from the Ural Region attended the event. On the national level, the INDEM Foundation and the Russian Union of Journalists are carrying out a joint project to establish an electronic information and communication network to

make election-related information accessible to voters and to publicize election law violations.

NDI's Activities

NDI's programs in Russia are designed to support the development of a multiparty, pluralistic political system. Through its political party development program, NDI works to assist the organizational development of reform-oriented parties. As December 19th draws closer, NDI has been supporting the efforts of political parties and civic organizations to monitor the polls and protect the integrity of the electoral process.

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