

This is the fourth and final report issued by the National Democratic Institute on the Russian parliamentary elections scheduled for December 19, 1999. This report examines the last stage in the election campaign, the impact of the war in Chechnya, and the outlook for the key parties contesting the elections.

What's At Stake

The campaign for the lower house of the Russian legislature – the State Duma – is drawing to a close. Half the 450 seats in the State Duma will be filled through proportional representation by party lists. The other 225 seats will be filled through single mandate races in districts.

The votes cast on December 19 will determine the configuration of the next Russian parliament. There is a good chance that, unlike the current Duma, the next parliament will be more reformist in character. The State Duma, particularly in the first six months preceding next June's presidential elections, can influence the composition and activities of the government because, under Russian law, it cannot be dissolved during this period. If there is a sufficiently broad consensus in the State Duma, it may start the process of changing the constitution to limit the power of the President.

The stakes are high for all the parties contesting these elections. For most of them, survival depends on their clearing the 5 percent threshold for entry into the parliament.

The election campaign to date has been marred

by mud-slinging and media manipulation. The December polls could be more contentious than the last parliamentary election of 1995.

The Chechnya Crisis

The military campaign Russia is waging against its tiny breakaway republic of Chechnya continues to be a major backdrop to the election campaign. Despite loss of civilian life in Chechnya and growing Russian military casualties, the war remains highly popular inside Russia. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is viewed as the main architect of the war, has seen his popularity ratings soar as the conflict has escalated. In fact, Putin's critics allege that he is using the war for political purposes.

The Communists/Nationalists

The *Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF)* will likely become the largest faction in the next parliament. According to the polls, the *KPRF* may garner around 20 percent of the proportional vote. However, they will probably win fewer seats than in 1995, and will be surrounded by far fewer allies. Several leftist parties who have been affiliated with the Communists in the current Duma will fail to clear the 5 percent threshold. Moreover, the Communist party has attempted to adjust to current political and economic circumstances by embracing a Russian nationalist agenda and at the same time adopting a moderate social democratic economic platform. No one can be sure, however, that the Communists have really

changed their stripes.

The Russian nationalist party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, misnamed the *Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)*, may also do poorly at the polls. The *LDPR* list was not registered by the Central Elections Commission (CEC) because two people at its top failed to correctly report their assets. As a result, Zhirinovskiy had to register his party list as *Zhirinovskiy's Bloc*. The court then overruled the decision of the CEC and ordered registration of the *LDPR*, resulting in two blocs associated with Zhirinovskiy. In a final twist, the Supreme Court's presidium on December 8 overruled the lower court's ruling and affirmed the CEC's ruling denying the *LDPR's* registration. This confusion could even mean that Zhirinovskiy's Bloc will fall below 5 percent. On the other hand, the controversy has provided Zhirinovskiy with free publicity and may burnish his image as an oppositionist and an outsider.

The Kremlin's Party

The pro-government, pro-president association of governors called *Unity*, led by Minister of Emergency Situations Sergei Shoigu, was created in August 1999, and its popularity has risen steadily in the weeks preceding the elections. According to some polls, its support has reached 18 percent of the electorate. If these polls hold, *Unity* would form the second-largest faction in the State Duma after the Communists. *Unity's* rise in popularity can be attributed to the support it has received from Prime Minister Putin. At the end of November, Putin, who had hitherto avoided direct involvement in the parliamentary campaign, declared that he would be voting for *Unity*.

Unity does not have a program, apart from an intention to do away with party lists and proportional representation, evidently because parliamentarians selected from single mandate districts are more dependent on regional authorities. Many of the governors in *Unity*

hold opposing political views. A big *Unity* faction in the State Duma would support the government on national issues but would be divided on many regional questions.

The Kremlin's Foes

Until mid-November the *Fatherland-All Russia* bloc was the frontrunner in the polls. *Fatherland-All Russia* is an alliance of two organizations: *Fatherland*, led by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, and a bloc of regional governors, *All Russia*. After these organizations united in August 1999, former Prime Minister Evgeni Primakov, highly popular at that time, joined and now heads the *Fatherland-All Russia* list. Both Primakov and Luzhkov are considered viable presidential candidates.

The President and his associates reportedly fear being investigated on corruption charges if Primakov or Luzhkov is elected President in 2000. Corruption inquiries began while Primakov was Prime Minister and Yeltsin's proxies have used state owned media and law enforcement agencies in an effort to undermine Primakov and Luzhkov. Moscow Mayor Luhkov's wife has been accused of illicit business practices and the Mayor himself was said to have been implicated in the murder of an American businessman. These charges and the inept defense offered against them have led to a decline in *Fatherland-All Russia* in recent opinion polls. Some polls now show the party popularity at 10 percent. The increasingly acrimonious struggle between the state owned media and the *Fatherland-All Russia* bloc has become the centerpiece of the entire media campaign.

One of the attacks against *Fatherland-All Russia* has been its close association with the Communists. This attack is based on support that the Primakov government received from the Communist Party. Moreover, several Communists served as cabinet ministers while Primakov was Prime Minister.

The Reformers

The current campaign is also of crucial importance for the two reformist parties, *Yabloko* and the *Union of Right Forces*. According to most polls, *Yabloko*, under the leadership of Grigory Yavlinsky and former Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin, will obtain more than the 7 percent they received in the 1995 Duma election. However, the party itself will consider anything less than 10 percent a poor showing. *Yabloko*'s popularity may have been affected adversely by Yavlinsky's moderate stance on the war in Chechnya. He has called for a moratorium on fighting and negotiations with the Chechen elected government.

Yabloko is running an uphill campaign in St. Petersburg, its major base of support. Reportedly, under unprecedented pressure from the governor of St. Petersburg, who supports *Fatherland-All Russia*, *Yabloko*'s leaflets have been confiscated by law enforcement agents and its headquarters have been inspected for evidence of alleged illegal activities. A suspicious fire in the *Yabloko* campaign headquarters in St. Petersburg destroyed the party's campaign literature. In addition, municipal police dispersed and detained *Yabloko* activists who were handing out campaign leaflets; the St. Petersburg courts fined them for allegedly spreading "lies" about the governor.

The *Union of Right Forces* is another group of liberal reformers which includes former prime ministers Yegor Gaidar and Sergei Kirienko, and two prominent former vice prime ministers, Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov. The alliance has conducted a professional campaign but its success is impeded by the popular perception that these leaders, by enacting economic reform measures, were responsible for the decline in Russian living standards during the 1990s. The alliance is currently hovering in opinion polls

at around the precarious 5 percent threshold. If the *Union of Right Forces* succeeds in clearing the threshold, the State Duma will have a small but highly professional and visible faction that may join forces with *Yabloko* to push for further economic and political reforms.

The Constitutional Debate

At least two major parties, the *Communist Party* and *Fatherland-All Russia*, have spoken in favor of constitutional reforms to expand the prerogatives of the State Duma and limit the power of the President. According to the constitution currently in force, the President nominates and the Duma must confirm the Prime Minister. If the Duma refuses confirmation three times, the parliament is dissolved and new elections are scheduled. Many parties question this provision as giving the executive excessive authority over the legislature. In addition, the *Fatherland-All Russia* bloc calls for the restoration of the vice presidency, obviously to reconcile the two leaders and future presidential candidates of the bloc: Primakov and Luzhkov.

Conclusion

The Communists and their allies are unlikely to win a majority of seats in the next Duma, and may end up with fewer seats and less influence than they have had in the current legislature. Conversely, while reformist parties do not occupy the center stage of this campaign, they are likely to expand their influence and their representation in the next Russian legislature. The leader of the pro-government party *Unity* party, Sergei Shoigu, has recently declared that he considers the reformist parties *Yabloko* and the *Union of Right Forces* his future allies in the State Duma. The two major non-communist competing blocs, *Fatherland-All Russia* and the Kremlin-backed *Unity*, represent the political center. While neither bloc projects a vision of a liberal democratic system, both represent a marked departure from the Soviet

past and will likely leave enough political space for more reformist forces to develop.

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 the elections draw closer, NDI has been training political parties and civic groups that will deploy pollwatchers to protect the integrity of the voting. Training programs are being conducted in Saratov, Astrakhan, Yaroslavl, St. Petersburg, Vladimir, Nizhny Novgorod, Ekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk. NDI anticipates training more than 1000 party representatives by election day.

NDI has also been training national civic organizations, such as New Perspectives (NPF)

and Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG), to better organize their election monitoring and educational outreach efforts. NPF has led a voter-education march from Moscow to Novy Rossisk. 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. MHG has released one report on election law violations during the pre-campaign period. The organization will issue another report on the official campaign period.

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