

Post Election Crossroads

Questions of interior life

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...the regime created after the acceptance of the present Constitution is called "illusory constitutionalism". Now it is complemented by imitation democracy. Jobless democrats can now meet in the "civic forum" and other useful talking shops.

For the first time in recent history, neither of the democratic parties, the Union of Right Forces (SPS) or Yabloko, have been elected at the December 2003 elections for the fourth State Duma of the Russian Federation.

Furthermore, if we look at the early history of Russian parliaments and the make-up of the four pre-revolutionary Dumas, we can see that it is the first time in the hundred years from 1905 to 2004 that this situation has occurred.

This has led some commentators to talk about a crisis of democracy, the end of liberalism, the death of the "modernising European project" and even about a catastrophe for civilisation. Others have noted the beginning of a new regime, a new authoritarianism and even a new order.

How much truth is there in these assertions?

In the old (second) Vestnik Evropy, the section containing articles on the current political life of Russia was called "Questions of Interior Life". Originally it was called "Interior Affairs Review".

The final edition of the journal, which had been an annual publication before it was shut down, came out in April 1918. Production was difficult in those turbulent times but the editor did his best to ensure a dignified end for the publication. Delays meant that issues had to be combined and the final edition (numbered I-IV) covered the key events of autumn 1917, including the October coup, the spring of 1918, elections to the constituent Assembly, the formation and dissolution of the Assembly and even the Brest pact.

"...the greatest scepticism could not have foreseen that, summing up the first year since the Revolution, one would have to say that the curve we have been rushing along for twelve months was in fact a vicious circle. If we evaluate the Revolution's advances not from the point of future opportunities but on the basis of realistic fact, then it appears that these "advances" in the best case left us no better off, and in the worst case have moved us even further backwards into state destruction and anarchy".

Within the narrow frame of the journal's history we can only recall the most significant recent events and try to reveal their meaning and the links between them.

A well-known methodological difficulty arises from the lack of clear definition and even reversibility of the concepts of “left” and “right” in the last political century. In pre-revolutionary Russia the right included conservative, military, nationalist, and monarchist parties. Cadets were not considered to belong to the right, nor were the Progressists or Octobrists.

The right-wing majority regularly undermined government reforms, sometimes with the participation of the Prime Minister himself. (Observations by State Council members Nikolai Tagantsev and Mikhail Stakhovich)¹.

Deputies of the first Duma were initially represented by the following parties: Cadets – 182, members of nationalist parties – 60, the Left – 47, Progressists – 36, Octobrists – 26, the Right – 8, Democratic Reformers – 4, Trade and Industry Party – 2, independent – 83.

By 26 July 1906 the first Duma had 176 Cadets, 102 Labour (including 9 members of the All-Russian Peasant Union), 23 Socialist-Revolutionaries, 2 Freedom Thinkers, 1 radical; 33 members of the Polish Kolo, 26 World Renewal, 18 Social Democrats, 14 Independent Autonomists, 12 Progressists, 6 Democratic Reformists, 100 Independent, many of which were on the right².

According to Maklakov, in the first Duma “the majority were a grey mass, unprepared for legislation. But it had a brilliant minority...”

The Second Duma

By party faction members of the second Duma were as follows: Labour group and All-Russian Peasant Union faction – 104 deputies, Cadets – 65, Social-Democrats – 65, Independent – 50, Polish Kolo – 46, Union of 17 October and Moderates – 44, Socialist-Revolutionaries – 37, Muslim Faction – 30, Cossacks – 17, National-Socialist faction – 16, the Right and Monarchists – 10, including 2 members of the Union of Russian People and 1 member of the Party of Democratic reforms.

The second Duma was much greyer than the first because of administrative machinations and it included “all the great names of our society”. According to Maklakhov: “out of all the four Russian Dumas it beat the record”.

Sergei Bulgakov, a deputy of this Duma, wrote the following:

“Take random people from the street, add to them a handful of well intentioned but ineffectual people, convince them that they are the saviours of Russia ... and you'll have the second State Duma”³.

The Third Duma

In the third Duma, 487 deputies were elected. In the 1st session (1907-1908) the factions were constituted as follows:

The Union of October 17th – 154 deputies, Moderate-Right – 70, the Constitutional-Democratic faction – 54, the Right – 51, Progressists – 28, the National group – 26, Social-Democrats – 19, the Labour group – 14, the Polish Kolo – 11, the Muslim group – 8, Polish-Lithuanian-Belarus group – 7 deputies⁴.

The Fourth Duma

The fourth Duma (May 1914) was made up of the following factions: Russian Nationalists and Moderate Right – 86 members, Zemtsy-Octobrists – 66, the Right – 60, People's Freedom – 48 members and 7 associated members, Progressists – 33 members and 8 associated members, Centre Group – 36, Union of October 17th – 20, Independent group – 13, Labour group – 10, Polish Kolo – 9, Social Democrats – 7, Muslim group – 6, Polish-Lithuanian-Belarus group – 6, Russian Social Democratic Labour Faction – 5.

17 deputies did not belong to any faction.

In 1915 from the faction of Russian Nationalists and the Moderate Right there emerged a group of “Progressive Nationalists” (30 deputies). In 1916 a group of “Independent Right” emerged from the Right faction. There were no significant changes in the constitution of the other factions.

The fourth State Duma turned out to be weaker than the third, “because the percentage of people capable of serious work was lower”⁵.

The Duma in Modern Russia

Members of the first Duma of 1993 were of venerable age. Almost a third of its members were aged between 50 and 70 and under a third were born after 1953.

In 1995, 67 million people cast their votes in the elections to the second Duma of the Russian Federation. As a reminder, there were 42 competing factions plus the option of voting “against all”.

Communist Party of the Russian Federation	22%
Liberal Democratic Party	11%
Our Home is Russia	10%
Yabloko	7%

The Left acquired 60% of the seats in the Duma (together with constituency deputies) and fell just short of a constitutional majority by around thirty seats. It was this that created the instability of the later Yeltsin years.

At that time the party of Russia Democratic Choice did not reach the 5% barrier (the minimum required for representation) – an outcome that some commentators attributed to vote rigging.

One of the best political analysts, the late and irreplaceable Alexander Sobyenin, wrote at length on the subject of the possible falsification of election results and how such fraud might be uncovered.

In the 1990s Sobyenin was published regularly in the Open Politics magazine. He gave the following insight into the reasons for the liberals' failure in the 1995 elections:

“Of course, before all the results are available it would not be right to talk about the presence or absence of fraud, but some preliminary analysis is possible. One remarkable change in the pattern of voting is the reduction in the proportion of ballot papers declared invalid. Between 1993 and 1995 this registered a fourfold decrease to just 1.9% in 1995. This finding is highly revealing. Such a strange (and rapid!) increase in the electoral literacy and competence of the Russian population can be explained in one of two ways. Either the 1995 ballot paper, which had “only” 43 unions and factions (plus leaders of the regional party lists) was “easier” to fill in than the 1993 ballot paper which had 13 unions and factions. Or, it was the result of that well-known phenomenon whereby one party is ascribed extra votes. This leads initially to an increase in electoral turnout and, secondly, to a smaller proportion of invalid votes because spoiled or additional ballot papers are usually filled in error-free by an experienced member of the electoral committee”. Sobyenin invited the reader to make his own choice as to which was the more likely explanation. According to his estimates the scale of electoral fraud in 1995 was as high as 20%.

Alexander Sobyenin warns: “The Stalinist traditions of our electoral system are such that they can only accurately reflect the voters' will if control is exercised at all stages of the electoral process. Unfortunately, our democrats are too honest to have recognized this so far”⁶.

There is no point in analysing the results of all 43 electoral factions, as they can all be assigned to one of three major groupings – Right, Left and Centre.

Sobyenin's comparison of the political allegiance of Duma deputies by party lists in 1993 (fact) and 1995 (estimates) is as follows.

Year	number and % of seats		
	<i>“Left”</i>	<i>“Centre”</i>	<i>“Right”</i>
1993	112 (49.8%)	53 (23.6%)	60 (26.6%)
1995	150 (66.7%)	44 (19.6%)	31 (13.8%)
1995-1993	+38 (+16.9%)	-9 (-4.0%)	-29 (-12.9%)

Sobyanin was trying to prove that the political preferences of the Russians are on the whole somewhat inert. Voters are in fact conservative and their behaviour does not accord very closely with the theories of political commentators. They can be roughly divided into three categories: one for the market and democratic reforms (“right”), one for socialism (“left”), and the remainder more likely to vote for the party in power (“centre”).

Our present “right”, the Union of Right Forces (SPS), coming from the first democratic parties, principally the Democratic Choice of Russia, acquired its name during the electoral campaign for the third Duma in 1999. For some reason “Yabloko” was also referred to as the “right”, although it is in fact left-democratic in classic terms. This change of terminology was not accidental, but marked a revision of values and political guidelines, as the current elections have shown. The party positioned itself as right-liberal rather than democratic, defending market reforms and keeping the status quo in property division, as the core reforms carried out by the President and Government and central to government policy. This meant the loss of some of the traditional electorate but also the gain of new voters, such as those who have successfully adapted to change (the middle class), managers from big business, and the most senior public servants. In this distribution of power, the “New Right” had the opportunity to work with the President and their motives in giving him their support were not without self-interest.

The Third Duma of the Russian Federation

The third Duma of 1999 was different again, as can be seen both in its political composition and in the age of its deputies. As a result it was more inclined towards reform than the second Duma.

CPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation)	24.29%
Unity	23.32%
Fatherland—All Russia	13.33%
Union of the Right Forces (SPS)	8.52%
Zhirinovskiy's Block	5.98%
Yabloko	5.93%

This was the first Duma in the new Russia in which the Kremlin managed to form a pro-presidential majority. This allowed the government to carry out its most

important reforms, among them the Civil code, the Land code, the Tax code and the Law on land ownership.

However, in this Duma, the President and Government, not to mention the governors, did not need the support of the liberal reformers. Now that they had a majority, they themselves became the reformers. The former reformers, rapidly losing their political weight in constant compromises with the government, were now used for their contribution to economic strategy and their assistance in the formulation of legislation. It was the Presidential majority that decided whether or not their participation was required.

A Business Take-over

In this sense little will change in the new, fourth Duma despite the fact that 15% of the seats, previously taken by SPS and Yabloko, will go to the “winners”. However, the tenor of the Duma itself will change irreversibly, as well as its inner structure, the work of its committees and the drafting of legislation. On the day after the elections, the President himself chose to make a public statement reassuring the losing “contributors” that their ideas and experience would still be needed. Perhaps so initially, but they will no longer be participants in a joint venture between political partners. Moreover, the vocabulary, as well as in some cases the know-how of the liberal democrats, has been successfully mastered by a large part of the presidential majority. They now want to be supporters of the presidential reforms. They will also align themselves with liberalism and Europeanism.

In business terms it is called an aggressive business takeover, Abramovich style. The forces of the administration were utilised. It remains to be seen whether it can be proved that the votes needed for SPS and Yabloko to enter the Duma were once again stolen.

In a certain sense it is not important, because the SPS lost much more: their political niche, which is now rapidly being occupied by the “New Right”.

On top of this came the long-standing demand for a fresh look at the business elite and its huge financial resources. Only by doing this can the nation's long-term financial and political stability be guaranteed.

This is explained in philosophical terms as the need to “re-freeze Russia”, to give her “a chance to consolidate”.

Thus the investigation of YUKOS, and of Mikhail Khodorkovsky personally, changed everything in the business and political environment, and the democrats lost their way. They understood this and their self-criticism after the elections can be taken as sincere and not mere platitude.

The Fourth Duma of the Russian Federation

United Russia	37.9%
CPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation)	12.7%
LDPR (Liberal Democratic Party of Russia)	11%
Motherland (Rodina)	9.1%
Against all	4.7%
Voter turnout	52.6%

Source: Nezavisimaya Gazeta

Voter turnout is constantly corrected and is continually growing, although it was noted in the course of the elections that it was at an unprecedented low, about 4% below that of four years ago.

How did the Duma change from the point of view of its political make-up?

After the 1999 elections, when Fatherland-All Russia and Unity came into the Duma, one of the leaders announced: "We are neither Right nor Left, we are different!"

Opinion polls showed that "voters perceived Fatherland as a reforming and anti-Communist party, more on the Right than Centre Left". This probably applies even more to United Russia, which includes some competent and respected people, such as Alexander Zhukov. However there are others, the majority of whom are basically opportunists.

As for the company of new deputies, who were led into the Duma by Boris Gryzlov, they are positioned alongside the President. However it does not mean that they do not have their own natural ideology, which could come to light in stormier times. Among them could be people with a hidden outlook on society. Remember Shoigu's recklessly bold proposal that people who do not vote in elections should be deprived of their citizenship! This caused some people to ponder deeply and others to stay at home.

These are in fact a particular group, who could be described as the new Royalists. In the freethinking year of 1905, Nikolai II proposed calling the new institution "His Majesty's Duma" rather than the State Duma, but the idea found no support. History repeats itself. These are the President's men; they have come to carry out his will and his reforms. What are they going to be like? We shall simply have to wait and see.

As in 1917 this is a vicious circle. The unreliable public will be represented by the tried and tested bureaucrats. Bureaucratic reforms are complete. In his works, Andrei Nikolaievich Medushevski called the regime created after the acceptance of the present Constitution "illusory constitutionalism". Now it is complemented by imitation democracy. Jobless democrats can now meet in the "civic forum" and other useful talking shops.

All this is very sad.

However it does not mean that people are disillusioned with democracy, that liberalism has no roots in Russia, that we will never see freedom or that we have no desire for it. Such allegations are untrue and a slur on Russians. They also overlook the fact that rights and freedoms are enshrined in the federal state system. There is recourse under the law; but our law is applied selectively.

It is no coincidence that the administration official Vladislav Surkov stated publicly that the historical role of the defeated parties was at an end. Nor that Gleb Pavlovski has been urging them to leave the political scene. Administrative-technocrats, geniuses of the tactical game have no need for either democrats or liberals, for the new struggle to impose the law will involve the seizure of many businesses and the redistribution of money, power and property.

The liberals lost; meanwhile the economy has been steadily growing, and not only on the back of oil. Investment in industry is also increasing and currency reserves are at an all-time high. This is the legacy of the previous reformers and managers, who have been deprived of their role not because they failed but quite the opposite. Over the last ten years, liberal ideas have been dispersed into the ether and become the received wisdom. Almost half the country considers itself middle class, more foreign cars are sold on credit, mortgages are becoming available, and mobile phones penetrate even the remote industrial regions. However, those who have prospered and see a bright future for themselves, did not take part in the elections. Liberal politicians must take the blame for this – they did not utter their warnings loudly enough.

At the opposite pole, there is a very large section of society that continues to sink into permanent poverty and despair. This is reflected in the way they vote and is well understood by the Duma winners.

Whatever people may say, liberal ideas have taken root in Russia; but the parties are feeble, under-resourced and inward looking. They have neither the desire nor the ability to co-operate with society; they do not have their finger on its pulse.

The parties of the Left have been weakened and become harmless. They have started to talk quite sincerely about democracy. They can and should become part of civil society rather than remain in their Communist ghetto, as long as they honestly accept the inviolability of the main constitutional principles and civic freedoms.

To quote from Valentin Shelokhaev:

“The irony of history was that state reform in Russia was carried out not by those who were inspired by the process of modernisation and vitally interested in the establishment of a State based on the rule of law and civil society, but by those forces for whom the introduction of the Constitution and Parliament threatened

their unlimited political rule. Authoritarian power has “stitched” a “constitutional suit” by and for itself which will lead to a political dead end. In the course of Russia’s political transformations at the beginning of the 20th Century, two contrary systems clashed: the bureaucratic, embodying the autocratic regime, and the liberal-democratic, catalysed by the modernisation process. Having taken control of the development of Russian state reforms, bureaucrats were using every means to push aside the representatives of the liberal opposition, who had in their arsenal a range of models for the country’s political transformation”.⁷

I would like to finish with another quotation from the final Vestnik Evropy of 1866-1918.

The author of the review is writing about the outbreak of violence, that arbitrary dictatorship which destroys everything, including itself.

“The first servant of the old regime to be arrested and brought to the Tavrichesky Palace on 27 February was Scheglovitov. Two volunteers arrested him. Why? And on what grounds? It had been decided that he ought to be arrested so they came to his apartment and took him away. The executive committee of the State Duma was surprised to find out about Scheglovitov’s arrest and their initial reaction was to set him free immediately.

However the volunteers in civilian clothes would not let him be set free. That’s right – they would not allow it. And the committee gave in, or to be more accurate, it obeyed. Kerensky came, thanked the volunteers for making the arrest, said a few unnecessary, rough words to Scheglovitov and summoned military guards. Scheglovitov remained under arrest. With a sense of State duty done, the volunteers left – to seize... other former ministers.

Thus the new regime started its rule. Of course the committee and the temporary government could not fail to understand that leaving the servants of the “old regime” under arrest, even for an hour, was scandalously wrong. But they did not have the courage to admit it openly even to themselves. They created a theory of arresting people for their own safety. But if that was the case, why were those arrested subjected to a humiliating search, why were the soldiers allowed to keep them under constant surveillance, not letting them talk amongst themselves. Why were those arrested later taken to the Petropavlovsk Fortress and deprived of bedding and visits from relatives? From its very first days, the new regime was held to ransom by the mob. The mob was dealing with political enemies. The mob was taking revenge...”

In the so-called “debates” shown on Russian TV before and after the elections, heated exchanges were provoked and a torrent of hatred and aggression poured from the screen with impunity. This could yet be the spark that kindles into flames, like tinder in a forest fire.

The final “Interior Affairs Review” of the Vestnik Evropy, signed by Vladimir Kuzmin-Karavaev⁸, ended as follows:

“On that day [the anniversary of the February revolution] Petrograd learnt from the papers that America had declared it untimely to present Russia with a Statue of Liberty and that the New York committee, headed by former President Taft, had decided to return the funds to their donors”.

Editor's notes

¹ The first Duma of the Russian Empire.

² V.A.Demin (1996) State Duma of Russia (1906-1917 Functioning Mechanisms), Rosspen, Moscow, p. 38.

³ V.A.Demin (1996) State Duma of Russia (1906-1917 Functioning Mechanisms), Rosspen, Moscow, p. 39.

⁴ V.A.Demin (1996) State Duma of Russia (1906-1917 Functioning Mechanisms), Rosspen, Moscow, p. 40.

⁵ V.A.Demin (1996) State Duma of Russia (1906-1917 Functioning Mechanisms), Rosspen, Moscow, p. 53.

⁶ Open Politics, No. 1-2, 1996, p.6.

⁷ This is from Professor V.V.Shelokhaev's introduction to V.A.Demin (1996) State Duma of Russia (1906-1917 Functioning Mechanisms), Rosspen, Moscow.

⁸ The probable author was V.D. Kuzmin-Karavaev, Chairman of the Commission in the second Duma for legislation on the rights of the individual, housing and confidential correspondence.