

Russian elections: Putin consolidates regime of “managed democracy”

By Vladimir Volkov
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The December 7 elections to Russia’s State Duma gave a sharply distorted expression to the dissatisfaction felt by tens of millions of citizens with the conditions created by more than a decade of “market reforms.” The popular vote showed that the population is increasingly hostile to the ongoing destruction of social welfare, collapsing living standards and growing social inequality. At the same time, it is left without any real political alternative in a system that is crudely manipulated by ex-Stalinists and the rising class of criminal businessmen.

The main victor in the elections was the pro-Kremlin party “United Russia,” which united unprincipled government officials and representatives of big capitalists, who have staked their fortunes on Russian president Vladimir Putin.

The party won nearly 37 percent of the vote, guaranteeing it more than 200 deputies in the 450-member State Duma lower chamber. It will effectively dominate the parliament and have the power to legally change the Russian constitution if it sees fit.

The other striking result of the vote was the collapse of the two leading parties of the liberals, the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko. Having collected less than 5 percent of the vote each, they have been ejected from the Duma, despite the massive cash infusions by the various oligarchic clans and their active campaign in mass media. The crushing rejection of these parties at the polls can be explained primarily by their identification with the social catastrophe of Yegor Gaidar’s “shock therapy” and the predatory privatisation under Anatoly Chubais.

The success of the nationalists on December 7 was expressed first of all in the strengthening of the chauvinist Liberal Democratic Party under the ultra-right demagogue V. Zhirinovskiy. Liberal Democrats campaigned under the slogan “For Russians, for the poor” and gained about 12 percent of the vote. Zhirinovskiy’s increase in votes may be explained by the active support by the authorities and the major TV outlets, which featured his antics practically daily for the past few weeks.

The voting bloc “Motherland” also received a significant 9 percent of the vote. This bloc—led by the economist and former minister in the cabinet of Gaidar, S. Glaziev; and by the nationalist-populist and partner of General A. Lebed in the 1996 presidential elections, D. Rogozin—was formed only a few weeks before the election on a programme that included nationalising the natural wealth of the country.

The Kremlin lent support to the “Motherland” bloc, seeing it as a means to weaken the Communist party, as well as to give itself a political cover for the Putin administration’s attacks on some of the “oligarchs.”

Finally, the elections showed a significant fall in the influence of G. Zyuganov’s Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which collected fewer votes than ever (13 percent). Throughout the 1990s, the CPRF served as a political instrument for diverting social dissatisfaction into harmless channels.

This party had invariably sided with the government on all decisive political questions: the decision to dissolve the Soviet Union, the privatisation programme, the Chechen wars, Kremlin zigzags with respect

to US aggression in Iraq. It repeatedly demonstrated its “statesmanlike responsibility” and unbreakable ties to the new ruling elite. The true nature of CPRF’s politics has now been conclusively expressed in the form of direct alliances with some of the major oligarchic clans. In this latest election, it included a number of big business representatives on its federal delegates’ list.

The electoral campaign was notable for its exclusion of virtually any serious discussion. The victorious “United Russia” bloc even provocatively refused to participate in televised debates. One observer from the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* wrote on December 5: “The pre-election declarations this season represent a political consensus. This is the first time when the leading parties agree with one another on practically every topic, starting with their evaluation of the present situation and ending with their lists of urgent measures.”

The writer continued: “...Russian voters face a terribly difficult choice. Regrettably, it is not a choice among programmes, ideologies or political strategies, but a choice of whether to go and vote or to stay at home. Or, perhaps, to go and to vote ‘against everyone.’ This is because copying of programmes by the parties from one another is a sign of disrespect for the voters. They calculate that the voter will accept anything at all. After all, how can you understand that the various parties promise the same thing, but march separately, and still posture as irreconcilable enemies.”

As a result, the percentage of ballots cast was lower than in the elections in 1996 and 1999. It was only due to various accounting tricks that the Central Election Commission was able to report that 60 percent of the eligible voters had gone to the polls. Even if we accept this report, it means that the victorious pro-Putin party won just over 20 percent of the possible vote.

Absent from the elections was any expression of the interests of the broad masses of Russian working people. All the listed parties and organisations represent big business and the state bureaucracy. They are distinguished solely by the degree of their devotion to either the “market” or “state” values, as well as by the extent of their social demagoguery. Even those most loyal to the regime were forced to admit this: the former chief editor of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Vladimir Tretiakov, who is today a columnist for the pro-government *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, wrote on November 20, “There isn’t a single party that would in the very least respond to the interests or the moral and esthetic standards of a normal human being.”

These elections were conducted within the context of worsening relations with Washington over events in Georgia and Moldova, and also in an atmosphere of instability produced by the continuing war in Chechnya. On December 5, just before the vote, there was an explosion on a local train in Yessentuki in the south that killed 41 people and injured another 150. Two days after the December 9 vote, another explosion occurred, this time in the heart of Moscow near the Hotel National. Six people died and 14 were hurt.

Above all, what feeds Russia’s instability is the huge chasm of social

inequality separating the thin layer of “new Russian” entrepreneurs from the vast majority of society. The following figures illustrate this essential fact of social life:

* According to the results of the 2002 census, in Russia there are about 1 million employers, about 2 million entrepreneurs and another 600,000 landlords who live by renting out property or their apartments. Taken together, this amounts to 3.6 million people who “have something to lose.” At the other extreme, 140 million people exist on wages and pensions, which even the official statistics evaluate as averaging under \$150 per month.

* Government sources state that in 1991, within the Russian Federation, the income of the wealthiest 10 percent of the population was 4.5 times higher than the income of the poorest 10 percent. By the year 2000, this ratio grew to 14.3. According to some studies, the wealthiest 2 percent get 33.5 percent of the total national income; the poorest 10 percent only receive 2.4 percent of this income.

* At the end of 2001, the Russian Goskomstat (state statistical agency) estimated the subsistence minimum at 1,600 rubles (about \$55) per month. About one-third of the population, around 50 million people, lived below that minimum.

* Eighty-five percent of the capital of the largest Russian private firms is controlled by only eight groups of stockholders, according to a 2002 report prepared by analysts for the Moscow office of the investment bank UBS Brunswick Warburg.

* In February 2003, the American magazine *Forbes* published its latest list of the planet’s wealthiest, which included 17 Russian citizens, all of them with a net worth of more than \$1 billion.

This unprecedented social polarisation and the political consequences of this huge concentration of property in the hands of an insignificant minority make democratic rule in Russia unviable.

Even the mass media is forced to admit the acuteness of this problem. *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* on December 2 published a typical article entitled “Two Russias.” Its author, the political scientist Leonid Radzikhovskiy, wrote:

“Enormous numbers of impoverished voters, and millionaire candidates (over 50 percent of the candidates are dollar millionaires, even according to their well-tailored official declarations)... It is obvious that there cannot be any common interests; the candidates try to connect themselves to the voters with thin threads of demagogy, which break and tear on the day of the vote. These ‘antagonistic elections’ do not pose a threat of a social collapse or a revolution because of the absence of any naïve trust and hope, which are necessary for revolution. But such elections do threaten to alienate from politics the voting ‘lower depths’ and to imbue the elected ‘higher ups’ with extremes of political cynicism.”

The ruling elite reacts to the extreme alienation of the wide masses by executing ever-harsher antidemocratic measures. This tendency has under Putin exceeded the levels of the Yeltsin period, and has now received among the political experts and mass media the label “managed democracy.”

The meaning of this euphemism is clarified for us in an interview with one of the leading supporters of this course, S. Markov, which the German *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* published December 2. Here is the most colourful excerpt from this interview:

“Q. How does this ‘managed democracy’ function?”

“A. The idea is simple. ‘Managed democracy’ is a system, under which those problems that it is possible to solve democratically are solved by democratic means. And those problems, not susceptible to democratic solutions are solved by other means.

“Q. Which other means?”

“A. Authoritarian.

“Q. And who decides, when to apply democratic means, and when authoritarian?”

“A. The President and his administration decide that.”

The strengthening of authoritarian tendencies is accompanied by reinforcement of the apparatus of repression. This includes promoting the role of special services, a general attack on democratic and civil rights, and ever-more aggressive policy in favour of the wealthy. Three years of Putin’s rule have achieved much in this direction: the 13 percent income tax was introduced; the aggregate social benefits tax was reduced by 5 percent; the pension reform was started (this reform aims to turn all pensions over to privately held investment funds); the diminution of the already threadbare social programmes and benefits continues; the long-planned reform of energy systems and of the provision of communal services and utilities is beginning to be put into action.

Political decisions are made behind the scenes, while the role of the parliament is becoming purely decorative.

Liberal-bourgeois parliamentarianism in Russia has a notoriously unhappy record. In the early 20th century, the czar called the Duma together and dissolved it at will. When, for a short while, between February and October of 1917, the parliament did gain a measure of independence, it fell under the domination of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, and had an appearance of authority only due to the conciliatory policies of the SR and Menshevik leadership of the Soviets.

When the head of the provisional government, Alexander Kerensky, attempted to consolidate power, he could find no other base of support than the extreme right wing and the aspiring dictator General Kornilov. Kerensky totally discredited the very idea of a bourgeois parliament in the eyes of the worker and peasant masses.

In January 1918, basing themselves on the will of the people as shown by the conquest of power by the revolutionary party, and on a more advanced—compared to bourgeois parliamentarianism—form of democracy embodied in the Soviets, the Bolsheviks dissolved the Constituent Assembly, which found defenders only among a tiny group of people.

Seven decades later, when Stalinism collapsed, many people in Russia thought that parliamentarianism would finally seize the historical opportunity. These hopes proved fleeting. After Yeltsin’s tanks shot up the parliament in October 1993, the country was subjected to a constitution that accorded the Duma a role analogous to that granted by the last of the Romanovs. History made a full circle. Parliamentarianism ended up with the same results it had started with 100 years earlier.

The results of these latest elections only confirm the total collapse of parliamentarianism. Russia now has what is referred to as a “one-and-a-half-party” system (the “party of power,” plus other factions, which in aggregate amount to half of its power). The parliament has no authority among the people, and the chief executive (president) views it as a machine to rubber-stamp laws designed by his administration, so as to give them a democratic veneer.

The apparent omnipotence of the Putin regime has, however, quite definite limits. It can dispose of one particular oligarch or get a governor elected, but it cannot establish a reliable and working state apparatus, enforce the laws, fight corruption, regional separatism, etc.

In reality, the apparent might of the president is only the reverse side of the general impotence of the regime. The obedient parliament can in no way play the role of safeguarding stability and “democracy.” It only multiplies the general vulnerability of the authorities to any shock, foreign or domestic. This is the logic of a bonapartist regime: the more it attempts to dress up its standing “above classes,” the less able it is to react to socially produced impulses, the weaker it is vis-à-vis any real social problem.

Events since 1991 have amply demonstrated that bourgeois-liberal parliamentarianism cannot play any independent or progressive role in Russia. This fact is but one expression of the technical and economic backwardness of the country under a capitalist regime.

Since the authority of the parliament has been consistently diminished,

there are no grounds to expect a reversal of this trend. Yet, the authorities and their Western benefactors are interpreting the election results in this way. At the end of the voting, Putin proclaimed that the results signaled a “movement in the direction of democracy.” At the same time, he naturally reaffirmed the continuity of the “reforms” in favour of the new property holders and the transnational corporations.

In the West, the results of the elections were subjected to definite, although measured, criticism, yet their results were largely seconded. One typical response is seen in the headline of an editorial in the December 8 *New York Times*: “Russia moved a tiny bit closer to democracy.”

Despite the axioms of modern liberal mythology, the capitalist West is not at all a guarantor of democratic development in Russia. What transnational capital absolutely requires is the continuing prosecution of capitalist reforms. This goal “temporarily” overrides Western devotion to the “sacred foundations” of democracy. In the view of the European and American governments, Putin’s authoritarianism is a “lesser evil,” which must be accepted and even utilised.

These elections give nothing to the Russian working class. The policies aimed at destroying the social and economic heritage of the Soviet Union will be continued. Even if some measures nationalising natural resources are implemented, this will only be done in the interests of world capital, under the tight control of the bureaucracy, and with a goal to smother the growing social tensions.

Construction of the “pro-presidential majority” in the Duma will better define the limits of the new social division: the organised ruling elite stands opposite the greater mass of the people. It will likewise expose all the more clearly that the country’s problems have no solution on the basis of capitalist reforms. The way out of this social and political impasse lies with the creation of a new party of the working class, standing on the best socialist and internationalist traditions of Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution of October 1917.

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