



EDITORIAL
by *Lev Gudkov*

Russia will hold parliamentary elections on December 4. Assuming the trends detected by a number recent sociological surveys hold true, the new Russian Parliament (Duma) will number representatives from three parties, the ruling United Russia Party, headed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin; the Communist Party (KPRF); and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) headed by nationalist-populist Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

The studies suggest that United Russia has the support of 43 percent of eligible voters, which means the party can expect between 64 and 67 percent representation in parliament. The Communists, meanwhile, have a support base of between 16 and 18 percent, which would mean earning about a fifth of the seats, while Zhirinovsky's LDPR stands at 9 to 11 percent, which would give it about 10 percent representation. A fourth party, "Fair Russia," which currently has 38 seats in the 450-seat Duma and is headed by former speaker Russian Senate, for the moment is seen as falling short of reaching the seven percent mark necessary by law for parliamentary representation.

Other contending parties, including pro-Western democratic alliances (Russian United Democratic Party "Yabloko," led by Grigory Yavlinsky) and various patriotic and conservative parties, have the support of between 0.5 to two percent of the Russian electorate. These political parties have no chance to be represented on the Duma. Their constituents (as well as Fair Russia backers, if their party fails to make the seven percent cutoff) will in essence be endorsing United Russia.

So far, the campaign has characterized by a lack of notable political intrigue, as well as a decline in interest levels among voters. Throughout 2011, only 40 percent eligible voters have expressed interest in the Duma elections, while 54-to-56 percent said they were indifferent to similar political issues. Russians explain their lack of interest based on the predictability of the outcome (based on the handicap faced by all parties other than United Russia). Every day citizens are convinced that regardless of outcome of the elections, they can have little impact on those making important national policy decisions. As a result, the procedure represented by elections is discredited. In fact, the process has lost considerable legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, who consider voting little more than a formality, a social ritual intended to demonstrate loyalty to those who already enjoy the fruits of power.

Only one third of all potential voters believe that official election results correspond to actual moods and opinions held by the population at large. More than half (52 percent) are convinced that authorities manipulate the voting environment or actually rig the vote. Some say the rigging takes the form of restricting open competition among political parties. Once again, more than half of respondents to poll questions (53 percent) say without hesitation that United Russia enjoys greater privileges than other parties. As a result, most Russian say they have little interested in politics, are not inclined to participate in political activities, and don't follow the activities and choices of individual political parties.

But the current regime doesn't require the over support of the public, in terms of mass mobilization. Instead, it relies on the basic trappings of legitimacy, which means the absence of obvious signs of opposition or mass social discontent. The strategy is to neutralize opposition early in the campaign, after which the Kremlin administration regulates access to the various legislative assemblies at different levels, both regional and federal, ensuring only anointed candidates receive a majority, namely those who accommodate the lobbyists from large state and private companies. The justice ministry controls and manages this phase of the "competition" by deciding which parties and candidates are permitted to register for elections. Thanks to this wide-ranging prerogative, the executive branch, falling back on arbitrary motivations, can prevent an opposition party's representatives from taking part in any given election campaign. The candidate selection process in fact takes place well advance based on a vetting process within Putin administration. Technically, the courts then formalize those decisions.

The structure of the existing political system provides for an effective monopoly. United Russia party officials who pander to business interests control the representation of vested interests in authoritarian terms. The mother party is surrounded a few smaller ones that simulate an opposition or play the part of radical critics of the regime. These parties are intended

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev Meeting with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Sochi, site of the presidential residence of Bocharov Ruchei.



to absorb any potential for social unrest and mass protest, as well as any voters eager to oppose the Kremlin. In the end, however, once the vote is over, these parties and their officials are blindly loyal to Putin and United Russia. In parliament, they rarely object to bills and proposals submitted by Putin-Dmitri Medvedev tandem. The party has guaranteed control of the electorate while neutralizing any discontent. It sterilizes positions systematically critical of the regime.

Real political debate between parties disappears, and with it serious discussions of issues pertaining to social and economic affairs. This is replaced by an array of noisy television talk shows intended to help leading insiders promote themselves. The overall electoral consequence is apathy and general uncertainty. Most people have no idea in what direction the country is headed (the number is 70 percent) and the resulting indifferent attitude towards all politics.

Pre-eminent is the view that regardless of who wins these elections, the domestic situation won't change. Parliamentarians will continue to break their promises to the electorate with that same electorate helpless to make them accountable for their pledges. In August 2007, 70 percent of respondents said parliamentarians didn't keep their promises. Four years later the figure had risen to 75 percent. In 2007, 21 percent believed in statements made by Russian lawmakers. In September of this year the number stood at 16 percent.

In that sense, the December elections are important only as a prelude to the next "simulation," namely the March presidential vote that will almost certainly see Putin re-elected to the presidency (after a four-year break in which Medvedev occupied the top spot). The result will ensure the continued composition of the country's dominant political groups. This is "manageable democracy" as envisaged by Putin.

The situation is complicated only by a decline in popularity of government "tandem," namely the decade-old Putin-Medvedev axis. This doubt is accompanied by increasing uncertainty and anxiety regarding the decline in the country's economic growth and its standard of living.

The announced Putin-Medvedev role reversal has aroused no particular emotion aroused Russians, above all because Medvedev is not perceived an independent political figure. After his 2007 election to the presidency (replacing Putin, who not run for a third straight term), most Russians backed his positions, which included pressing for liberalization, insisting of the application of the rule of law, and national modernization, and hoped that Putin would in fact allow the younger Medvedev to operate freely. But Medvedev turned out to be a weak figure dependent entirely on Putin. He proved unable to build his own team, instead hewing meekly to the political line drawn by his mentor.

Worse, he was eventually seen as little more than decorative cover for an authoritarian ruler, Putin, with Medvedev's assigned task being that of embracing liberal democratic politics to play-act for Western audiences,

and pushing for domestic political reform to placate the Russian middle class.

As a result Putin's presidential candidacy and Medvedev's abdication aroused little surprise. In a survey, 41 percent of Russians said they had no feelings whatever about the issue. Another 37 percent approved the shift and greeted it with "a sense of relief," since it removed the uncertainty surrounding who would lead the country in the foreseeable future. Another 20 to 25 percent, however, reacted to Medvedev's stepping aside with spite, anger and anxiety. These respondents were injured by what they considered an ostentatious disregard of the role of voters. They perceive the implicit pact between Medvedev and Putin to be contrary to the rule of law and any concepts of democracy.

Evaluations regarding the general situation in Russia today are increasingly contradictory. Earlier optimism has disappeared. Hopeful expectations and positive comments regarding the state of affairs in the country are all but offset by negative feelings, though youth remains more optimistic than their elders, whose experience leads them to interpret the facts with a greater pessimism. Fifty-two percent of potential voters expect no real change for the better following the elections. Only a minority fears the situation will become worse, a concern based almost exclusively on reductions in income. Television censorship and the transformation of information into an adjunct of the Kremlin's propaganda machine has failed to convince the Russians public that a rosy future is imminent, as promised repeatedly by United Russia officials and leaders. But state propaganda has had the effect of crippling critical thinking in much of Russian society. In response to all of the questions submitted by the Levada Center in recent months, including short-term the hope for short-term improvements in material well-being and quality of life, Russia's position in the international arena, and a resolution to the violence in the North Caucasus, most respondents (54-to-69 percent consistently answered that they expected a static scenario with no change of any kind. Only 16-to-17 percent saw hope for improvement in terms of material well-being. That figure was offset by those who worried about a decline in that same well-being, from 22 percent.

But if we take into account a longer period of time, it becomes clear that the satisfaction of the population tends to tail off sharply as measured by the index that measures the difference between positive and negative assessment. Satisfaction and optimism peaked in the summer of 2008, mainly in August-September, when after the brief war between Russia and Georgia the country was galvanized by a wave of nationalistic enthusiasm and solidarity with the power structure. Soon thereafter, the economic crisis set in, casting a pall over autumn. Financial indicators dropped, generating a downward spiral in the social mood. The index then rose again, apparently based on hopes of quick end to the crisis. But it then began dipping again, driving down the popularity of both the president and the prime minister.