

# The Executive Memorandum

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## THE DUMA ELECTIONS: RUSSIAN REFORMERS BEWARE

The elections to the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, on December 17 demonstrated that democratic politics are beginning to take root in Russia. A healthy majority of eligible voters participated, and the political elites are learning that they must appeal to them. However, many voters clearly are frustrated with the hardships of economic transition, crime, and corruption. The impressive performance by Gennady Zyuganov's communists at the polls, and the high public opinion ratings of ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy as a presidential candidate, indicate that the pro-market forces may lose control of the executive branch in the June 1996 presidential elections. If this occurs, there is a danger that the 1995 elections will be the first and the last free and "clean" parliamentary elections in Russia for a long time.

**More Hardline Duma.** Half of the Duma (225 seats) is elected by party lists. To win seats in this half, parties had to gain more than five percent of the popular vote. Only four parties met this test. The Russian voters gave the communists 22 percent and Zhirinovskiy's "Liberal Democratic" Party of Russia (LDPR) 11 percent. The centrist Our Home is Russia, headed by Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, received 10 percent of the vote, and the reformist *Yabloko* Party led by economist Grigory Yavlinsky just over 7 percent. This means that the communists, together with their allies, now have about 30 percent of the votes, and the nationalists, over 17 percent.

The other half of the Duma is made up of single-seat constituencies, in which the candidate with the majority of votes in the district takes the parliamentary post. In these single-mandate districts, the voters elected 77 independent (unaffiliated) candidates, 58 communists, 20 deputies from the Agrarian Party (which is closely tied to the communists), 14 from *Yabloko*, and 10 from Our Home is Russia. Former Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar's reformist Democratic Choice of Russia and the communist-nationalist Power to the People party, led by former USSR Prime Minister Nikolay Ryzhkov, won 9 seats each. Zhirinovskiy's LDPR took only one seat. A few seats in the single-mandate districts were gained by members of smaller parties which did not clear the five percent barrier.

Out of the total of 450 Duma seats, the communists lead with 150 seats, while LDPR, Our Home is Russia, and *Yabloko* all have approximately 50 each. Given these figures, the communists most probably will manage to appoint a chairman and take control of several key committees. The leadership of the Duma will consist of the chairman and leaders of the factions which will be formed. Given its composition, the Duma is likely to prove confrontational toward the executive branch.

**Achievement for Russian Democracy.** The 1995 democratic process was more transparent and fair than in 1993: this Duma was elected for a full four-year term; no parties were banned from running, and a total of 42 parties and movements participated in the race. The 1993 Duma was elected for two years only, and several parties were banned from running after the Russian Supreme Soviet was disbanded by Boris Yeltsin.

The Russian public showed maturity by heeding the call to participate in the voting process. The voting rate was a respectable 65 percent, 15 percentage points higher than in 1993. The lowest voting rate was among the young, who tended to cast their ballots for democrats, Zhirinovskiy, or centrists, but not for the communists. Older voters leaned more heavily toward the communists.

The elections were "clean" by Russian standards. This is the assessment of foreign and Russian observers and of the generally free mass media. There were very few reports of minor tampering with the process; three candidates, however, were killed or died in suspicious traffic accidents.

There were quite a few surprises in the elections. A number of parties had been expected to do better. Among these were Gaidar's Democratic Choice of Russia (4.1 percent), Women of Russia (4.6 percent), and the Congress of Russian Communities led by the charismatic General Alexander Lebed (4.3 percent).

The poor performance of Prime Minister Chernomyrdin's Our Home is Russia suggests that the voters do not trust the government's execution of reforms, and they are tired of the ubiquitous crime and corruption. Our Home is Russia won the most votes in Moscow (20 percent), where the country's capital is most heavily concentrated, and where the reforms already have produced wealth and opportunity. (Almost all of Moscow's single-mandate districts returned democratic candidates.) Voters in the provinces, where the reforms have not yet generated jobs and have weakened the social safety net, gave the communists and nationalists their heaviest gains.

**The Presidency: Yeltsin Still in the Running.** Many Russians believe that the Duma elections were but a dress rehearsal for the real political fight that will take place in the presidential elections next summer. The Duma elections highlighted Communist Party chief Zyuganov and his ability to command the still-formidable Party machine. They also showcased Zhirinovskiy's shrewd political instincts, setting him up as the other presidential front-runner in June. On the other hand, Alexander Lebed, whose ads featured the General shooting an arsenal of infantry weapons, has shown that he is a better soldier than a politician.

According to public opinion polls, both Chernomyrdin and President Boris Yeltsin are not favored to do well if they run for president. Both men are in their sixties in a country where the average male life expectancy is only 57. Yeltsin's ill health remains a central theme in Russian politics. Nevertheless, well-informed sources in Moscow predict that he will still run in June, even though he trails Zyuganov, Zhirinovskiy, Lebed, and Yavlinsky in the presidential election ratings.

Yegor Gaidar's poor showing eliminated him as the presidential hopeful of the Russian center-right. Grigory Yavlinsky, who consistently has distanced himself from the Yeltsin administration and won high personal approval rating among the voters, remains the only democratic presidential hopeful. However, he will need to work hard to win the first round of presidential elections by becoming a consensus candidate of the reformers—not a very likely development.

**Conclusion.** The fight for Russia's democratic future is far from over. The democrats and reformers are split and hardly capable of resisting the dual nationalist and communist threat. While the elections showed that Russians can behave like good democrats, they showed also that voters do not necessarily elect good democrats. The reformers have to increase their popular appeal, and do it very fast. If these had been presidential elections, Gennady Zyuganov would now be the leader of Russia and working to turn back the clock, with disastrous consequences for his own country and her neighbors near and far. Come June, this may be a very real scenario if democrats do not unite.

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