

6/24/96

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THE RUSSIAN ELECTIONS: A GLIMMER OF HOPE FOR REFORM

The first round of the Russian presidential elections, held on Sunday June 16, 1996, confirms a trend that began with the parliamentary elections in December 1995: Russia is now holding regular national elections that are relatively free and fair. This is no small achievement for a country that has known such leaders as Ivan the Terrible and Josef Stalin. These elections strengthen Russian democracy, and credit should go to the Russian people. But credit should go also to Boris Yeltsin and even presidential candidate Mikhail Gorbachev, who received only 0.5 percent of the vote. They shepherded their country toward a participatory political system after decades of totalitarian communism.

Communist and nationalist messages rejected. Communist Gennady Zyuganov and ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy seem to be failing to obtain a democratic majority. Zyuganov received 31.96 percent of the vote, while Zhirinovskiy got only 5.78 percent, down from the 11 percent his party received in the last election. Most Russians are unhappy with the Yeltsin administration, but they prefer the continuation of market reforms and individual freedoms, even under Yeltsin's faltering leadership, to a return to the communist past.

Boris Yeltsin shrewdly turned the elections into a referendum on communism, polarizing the electorate and saturating the airwaves and print media with anti-communist messages. The Russian President masterfully played on the fear that a communist victory would lead to a new civil war. The communists played into his hands by refusing to adapt their ideology to the new times and new generation. Unlike their Central European colleagues, who by and large have transformed themselves into Western-style social democrats, Russian communists have preserved the spirit, the name, and the trappings of Lenin's party and teachings, adding to them a particularly virulent brand of Russian chauvinism. This not only makes Russian communists appear to be throwbacks to the past. It also limits their voter appeal, especially among the young and the business class.

The Messengers and the Messages. There was also a tremendous difference in style between Yeltsin and Zyuganov. Yeltsin ran a modern, Western-style campaign, complete with "Rock the Vote" concerts, "Choose or You Lose" slogans, widespread television advertising, and media advisers imported from the U.S. By contrast, the communists relied on door-to-door canvassing and tedious party meetings. Yeltsin's new style of campaigning paid off. His popularity surged from single digits in January to an impressive 35 percent, while the communists failed to expand their electoral base, which hovers around 30 percent. Yeltsin made great strides in spite of the dire economic crisis.

During his campaign, Yeltsin took advantage of his incumbency, promising everything from pension increases to wage and stipend hikes and even tax breaks for entire regions. He leaned on the media to ensure favorable coverage for himself. The liberal media were only too glad to deliver the anti-communist message. They did not want to see their freedoms dashed by a return to communist repression.

The impressive vote for retired Lieutenant General Alexander Lebed, who received 14.8 percent of the vote, demonstrated public nostalgia for great power prestige and a thirst for law and order. But the General Lebed of today is not the unabashed hard-liner he was two years ago. He is a professed convert to the gospel of the free market, small state, and democratic principles and procedures. He also seems to recognize the limits of Russian imperialism. The general knows that over 80 percent of the Russian public does not support using military

power in the New Independent States (NIS) of the former Soviet Union, not even to assist ethnic Russians residing there. The majority of Russians favor an immediate end to the war in Chechnya, and a plurality even favor Chechen independence as the price for bringing troops home. Lebed has been a bitter critic of Yeltsin's war in Chechnya.

Market economist Grigory Yavlinsky, a Western-style liberal who garnered only 7.42 percent of the vote, finished fourth. He failed to establish himself as the viable alternative to Boris Yeltsin and ran a mediocre campaign that was low on cash and weak on organization. Yavlinsky reportedly does not enjoy stump speeches and campaign travel—a handicap in a country of eleven time zones. He now has four years to build his Yabloko party into the sort of political machine he must have to win the presidency in the year 2000. He has a long road before him. His intellectual style and politics seem to be out of favor with many Russian voters.

The New Russian Electorate. The first round of the presidential elections demonstrated that the majority of the Russian people eschew the message of the cradle-to-grave welfare state, restoration of the Soviet Union, and militant Russian chauvinism. Moreover, the voters seem to be afraid that the communists would take away the freedoms they are learning to enjoy.

The electorate was divided in more ways than one. How these divisions develop in the future will have a huge impact on whether democracy takes root in Russia. The agricultural South and the economically depressed areas of European Russia went for Zyuganov, while most of the resource-rich Far East, Siberia and the North, and the relatively more prosperous large cities voted for Yeltsin and Yavlinsky. The electorate under 35 years of age, large city dwellers, and voters with higher education rejected the communist message. By contrast, rural dwellers, voters over 55 years old, and people with only a secondary education cast their votes for Zyuganov. As older voters pass away, the younger generation that tends to be more democratic will gain more influence in Russian politics. Pro-reform regions in the Far East and Siberia also may continue to grow in political influence, which is good news not only for reform, but for the national unity of Russia's far-flung regions.

Second Round Crucial. All of this is good news, but it should not be exaggerated. The degree of popular discontent in Russia should not be underestimated. A Yeltsin victory in the upcoming runoff elections, now scheduled for July 3, is not guaranteed. Zyuganov will do his best to play on voter frustrations to win. However, Boris Yeltsin is a master politician. The nomination of Alexander Lebed to serve as Russia's Head of the Security Council and Yeltsin's national security aide, and the firing of Lebed's unpopular rival, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, make the Yeltsin ticket particularly strong. An even greater boost to Yeltsin's popularity is his firing of the unpopular chief of the Kremlin Guards, General Alexander Korzhakov, as well as Internal Security chief Mikhail Barsukov and Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets. Moreover, if Yeltsin brings Grigory Yavlinsky into the government as the economic policy czar, or otherwise secures his endorsement, he will improve his chances for re-election significantly.

Voter turnout will be an extremely important factor in the runoff. The communist electorate is disciplined, and Yeltsin will need to pay close attention to getting out the vote in order to achieve victory. Otherwise, many voters may decide that Yeltsin's victory is a foregone conclusion and stay away from the voting booths, attending their garden plots and summer homes.

Conclusion. From under the rubble of the former communist economy, a new Russia is emerging, complete with a consumer society and concerns about businesses and jobs. This is a new Russia whose face is much more familiar to Westerners than its previous communist one. The many problems between Russia and the West will not disappear—problems such as differences over NATO expansion, supplying nuclear reactors to Iran, and Moscow's assertiveness outside its borders in the countries of the former Soviet Union. But at least there is hope that these problems can be worked out with Boris Yeltsin. The new Russia is making its choice for freedom, and it savors the occasion. While comprehensive economic and political reforms are painful and may take at least a generation, the current elections bring a glimmer of hope.

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.
Senior Policy Analyst