

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1706

November 20, 2007

## Who's Who in Russia's Parliamentary Elections

*Yevgeny Volk*

On December 2, an estimated 100 million Russian voters are expected to elect 450 deputies to the State Duma, the Russian Federal Assembly's lower house. Unlike every parliamentary election since 1993, all the deputies will be chosen from the party lists compiled by the leaders of 11 parties formally registered to run in the election. The 450 seats will be distributed on a proportional basis among parties that receive at least 7 percent of the vote.<sup>1</sup>

In Russia, parliament is seriously circumscribed by presidential rule. The Duma is almost completely subservient to the incumbent regime, rubber stamping laws initiated by the Kremlin. At the same time, parliamentary elections are important to the Kremlin, because they retain some semblance of an enduring democratic institution in Russia and indicate that the country belongs to a civilized democratic community. Yet, Russia's electoral process is entrenched in corruption, and the government has curtailed observation by international watchdogs.

Now that President Putin has agreed to lead the pro-government United Russia ticket, the upcoming elections look like a referendum on the credibility of the President and his Cabinet. Since victory is a forgone conclusion, the regime will undoubtedly use the election results as a justification to keep Putin in power. Although Putin is required by the Constitution to step down in early 2008, a resounding victory by United Russia will give him a mandate to promote his protégé to the presidency.

While it should avoid choosing sides in the election, the United States must send the Kremlin

a clear message that the integrity of Russia's democratic process will largely determine the direction of its development and the future U.S.–Russian relations.

**Peculiarities of Existing Electoral Law and Campaigning.** To Russians, parliamentary elections are not as critical as the presidential election. This is a result of many factors, including the Russian Constitution, a feeble civil society, a weak system of checks and balances, dramatic strengthening of the executive branch under President Vladimir Putin, and the Kremlin's control over large parties.

In contrast to the four preceding State Duma elections, the upcoming parliamentary vote will see the electorate's choices significantly restricted. Amendments to the election law have eliminated individual candidates for majority (single mandate) districts. The electoral threshold for political parties was increased from 5 percent to 7 percent, effectively denying representation to supporters of the center-right Union of Right Forces and liberal-left Yabloko. In addition, the mandated minimum voter turnout required for a valid election was abolished.<sup>2</sup> Political parties face tough registration requirements designed by the Justice Ministry and the Central

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm1706.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm1706.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Elections Commission. A Putin-approved law from July 2000 raised the minimum nationwide membership for registered political parties from 10,000 to 50,000; the threshold was just 100 in the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup> These regulations implicitly favor the parties that toe the Kremlin line, as the authorities tended to turn a blind eye to their manipulations by strong parties. At the same time, the parties critical of the regime, like the Republican Party, headed by independent State Duma deputies Vladimir Ryzhkov and Vladimir Lysenko, were denied registration and are now defending their rights in the European Court of Human Rights.

Still, 11 parties have been registered for the elections: the Agrarian Party of Russia, Civil Force, the Democratic Party of Russia, the Communist Party (KPRF), the Union of Right Forces (SPS), the Party of Social Justice, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), A Just Russia, Patriots of Russia, United Russia, and Yabloko. Only two to four of them are likely to win seats in the Duma: United Russia, the Communist Party, Just Russia, and LDPR.

Ultimately, the key campaign issues are popular support for Putin and the living standard of the population. Putin and his United Russia are parading the following achievements before the public: high economic growth rates (an average of 6.5 percent for 2000–2007, with 6.7 percent in 2006); a wage surge (13.4 percent in 2006); a pension hike (21 percent in 2007); a spike in appropriations for social services, primarily for education, healthcare, housing, and the depressive agricultural sector; and a rise in defense allocation.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the opposition—both on the right and the left flanks—is also in possession of

serious trump cards. Inflation has climbed 10 percent this year and eats up the better part of increased incomes. Reforms related to pensions, self-government, and municipal issues fell flat; privatization was aborted. Administrative reforms ended in failure.<sup>5</sup> The government has stepped up its crackdown on business.

The social apathy of the better part of Russia's voters is another peculiarity of the present campaign. Most voters do not believe the elections will affect their lives. Polls show that nearly half the population is sure that most Duma deputies discharge their duties poorly or very poorly.<sup>6</sup> The State Duma's approval rating is one of the lowest for Russian government and public policy institutions. Poor ratings for live election debates on government-run television channels further reveal the lack of public interest in the Duma and its deputies.<sup>7</sup>

**United Russia as Clear Frontrunner.** According to most forecasts, United Russia is likely to win a hands-down victory in the upcoming election. The fact that its federal ticket includes President Putin has dramatically boosted its ratings.

United Russia is a major league bureaucratic party that was designed for Russia's officialdom in the image and likeness of the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Membership in the party is mandatory for rising to key government positions. Significantly, "in 62 of the 83 regions, it named the governors to head its party lists."<sup>8</sup> It is common knowledge, though, that none of these governors has any intention of stepping down and working in the Duma. Upon getting elected, they will simply give up their Duma seats to candidates ranked next to them on the party lists. Their role is that of an engine to promote United Russia's candidates.

1. *Moscow Times*, "11 Parties Registered," October 29, 2007.
2. *Izvestia*, "Floating 7-Percent Threshold," September 5, 2007.
3. "On Political Parties," Federal Law of the Russian Federation No. 95-FZ (July 11, 2001), Art. 3, at [www.democracy.ru/english/library/laws/parties\\_fz95\\_eng/index.html](http://www.democracy.ru/english/library/laws/parties_fz95_eng/index.html), and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 1996-1997* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 1997), p. 423.
4. President Vladimir Putin. "Our Plans Are Not Just Big, They Are Grand," *Izvestia*, October 19, 2007.
5. Vladimir Milov, "Years of Reforms: Resume," *Vedomosti*, November 14, 2007.
6. Dmitri Kamyshev, Viktor Khamrayev, "Idlers, Idiots, Swindlers," *Kommersant*, July 7, 2007.
7. Arina Borodina, "Viewers Unconnected to Elections," *Kommersant*, November 13, 2007.
8. *Moscow Times*, "The Faces of United Russia," October 23, 2007.

**The Party of Millionaires.** Under the electoral code, every State Duma aspirant must declare his or her income and holdings. United Russia candidates' incomes, at least by Russian standards, are significantly higher than those of most other parties. President Putin's 2006 annual income of \$80,000 ranks among United Russia's lowest. Then again, Samara Provincial Governor Vladimir Artyakov earned \$57 million last year; Duma deputy Vladislav Reznik made \$47 million; another deputy, Vladimir Gruzdev, made \$38 million. Putin is presented as being much poorer than most provincial governors, whose annual incomes are significantly higher than \$1 million.<sup>9</sup> These incomes are substantial by Russian standards; Russia's average monthly salary of \$600 is comparable with the U.S. poverty line.

United Russia's structural and status criteria are not the only parameters likening it to the extinct Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Communist traditions are clearly visible in its campaign drive. United Russia's campaign platform, named "Putin Plan is the People's Plan," echoes Communist slogans that go back 30 to 40 years. At its party congress, United Russia nominated Putin—unopposed and accompanied by sycophancy and glorification—as the lone candidate to lead its federal ticket. The entire procedure was reminiscent of the Brezhnev era.

Why is United Russia enjoying such high approval ratings? Apart from Putin's personal popularity, the Russians tend to share a deep-seated belief that the powers that be are better geared for combating the nation's problems than those who wield no power. As with the previous elections, United Russia has access to "administrative resources," including government-controlled television and the willingness of provincial governors to boost the party's candidates.<sup>10</sup> Local control over campaigns is also crucial. As Joseph Stalin used to say, "It's not the people who vote that count. It's the people who count the votes."

In regions with largely non-Russian ethnic populations and strong clan traditions—such as the North Caucasus and Western Urals—the fact that local leaders run for parliament on United Russia's regional ticket serves as a voting model for the rest of the local populace. In such provinces, the number of votes cast for "the party of power" is normally significantly higher than the country's average.

United Russia's candidate list contains quite a few popular Russian personalities. Apart from Putin, it includes Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov; Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu; Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiyev; and prominent athletes, scholars, and entertainers. Loyalty to Putin is their common feature. The other trend is connection to business: "...an analysis of United Russia's party list shows that at least 72 of the 600 candidates, or 12 percent, have direct links to large or medium-size businesses. Many of the candidates occupy high posts on the lists, indicating that they have good chances to win Duma seats."<sup>11</sup>

United Russia is raising its election campaign to the level of the absurd. One poster at a university attributes the maxim "knowledge is power" to United Russia instead of English philosopher Francis Bacon.

As the party in power, United Russia is vulnerable to the opposition's stinging criticisms about the problems and difficulties facing Russia's populace, including low living standards and high inflation rates. United Russia's leadership renounced participation in the televised public debate with the other parties, invoking the law they had helped push through the Duma that allows them to do so. This development is seriously undermining the other parties' chances to build their campaign platform on polemicizing with United Russia.

The election campaign of State Duma deputies is picking up steam. Thus far, United Russia's leadership appears undisputed, but things within its ranks are not as smooth as its leaders claim. In early

9. "A Sacred Moment," *Kommersant*, October 27, 2007.

10. See Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., "Russian Duma Elections: How the U.S. Should Respond to 'Controlled Democracy,'" Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 908, December 12, 2003, at [www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/Russian-Duma-Elections.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/Russian-Duma-Elections.cfm).

11. Francesca Mereu, "Russia Hasn't Separated Business from Politics," *International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 2007.

November, debates took place among United Russia's three factions—"socially oriented," "liberal," and "conservative-patriotic"<sup>12</sup>—that exposed the party of power as an artificial conglomeration of politicians holding diverse stances. The one thing they have in common is a hankering after power at any cost.

Unlike the social faction that openly holds populist social-democratic views and the "conservative-patriotic" platform that is virtually ultra-nationalist, the liberal faction largely embraces the principles of a free-market economy. Admittedly, such showy pluralism can be viewed as yet another PR campaign to win over voters leaning toward other parties. But that political promiscuity could also hurt United Russia; the majority of United Russia voters with socialist leanings are hardly prepared to vote for its liberal faction.

There are other factors likely to complicate United Russia's march to power. With every poll showing United Russia as the unconditional frontrunner, a lot of voters could well fail to turn out for the elections out of complacency. This would raise the ante for other parties with a more disciplined electorate.

Another controversy emerged surrounding a suggestion by United Russia's ethnic policy coordinator, Abdul-Khakim Sultygov. He and another party leader proposed to introduce a "national leader" status for Vladimir Putin.<sup>13</sup> This initiative brings to mind 19th and 20th century analogies such as the Italian "Il Duce" Benito Mussolini, Spanish "Caudillo" Francisco Franco, let alone the German example of the "Fuehrer."

Tellingly, United Russia's leaders did not find Sultygov's idea entirely unacceptable. They wholeheartedly subscribe to its purpose—keeping Putin in power in some capacity in the aftermath of the parliamentary and presidential elections. It was the suggested method of ensuring Putin's ascendancy—through signing a national "civil pact" and a nation-

wide oath of allegiance to Putin—that came under fire from United Russia's leadership and was disavowed by a Putin spokesman.<sup>14</sup> However, the "national leader" proposal is far from discarded from the political playing field.

**Communists Always Second Best.** The Communist Party of the Russian Federation is the most belligerent opponent of the Putin regime. Its opposition, however, is mostly verbal. Longtime Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov had the following to say about the nation's present leadership:

"Today the country is ruled by bandits, oligarchs, and bureaucrats who—like a malignant tumor—are sucking our nation dry. We are facing up to the course pursued by Putin and his government. We deem this socio-economic policy totally ineffective."<sup>15</sup>

In reality, however, the Communist leaders are fully integrated into the regime. For the most part, they support government-initiated draft laws in the State Duma.

The Communist electorate is largely made up of senior citizens nostalgic for the Soviet era, who retain their loyalties to the Communist ideology. Unlike leftists in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia's Communist Party failed to develop social democratic leanings and retains its Leninist-Stalinist stance. It is banking on the support of portions of the populace who were impoverished in the course of the market reforms and could not adapt to a new economic situation. The number of such voters is steadily declining between elections due to both natural causes and a greater integration of the Russian population into the market economy. Hence, the Communist Party electorate is steadily falling.

Communist leaders criticize the Putin regime in bitter terms but are incapable of proposing anything positive or constructive. Most of their populist slogans that aim at improving the living standards of unprotected groups of the Russian population have found their way into the arsenal of other parties,

12. Suzanna Farisova, "All of You Are Right. I Support You and You," *Kommersant*, November 12, 2007.

13. Viktor Khamrayev, "United Russia Denied Obvious Pact," *Kommersant*, November 8, 2007.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Gennady Zyuganov, "We are the Only Opposition in the Country," *Izvestia*, October 19, 2007.

including United Russia and even the right-wingers. This is a hitch in the game the Communists are playing on the social protest field where they used to be strong.

The Communist Party has an edge over the other parties owing to the discipline and excellent organization of its electorate. Its elderly loyalists are used to mandatory voting since the Soviet era, and their turnout rates are traditionally higher than those of the other parties. Backed up by activists with more free time on their hands, the Communist Party can spend fewer campaign resources. By late October, its campaign fund had \$2 million altogether. In contrast, the campaign funds of the leading parties, including United Russia, the LDPR, and even the Union of Right Forces, were more than 10 times higher.<sup>16</sup>

**Liberal Democrats in the Running.** Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR has a better chance of making it into the Duma than any other party save United Russia, although it is not a foregone conclusion. This right-nationalist party is a kind of one-man band. Its popularity is hanging on the striking and contradictory personality of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, known for his nationalist and xenophobic pronouncements. It is no small wonder: His party's slogan is "good for (ethnic) Russians means good for everybody else."

Zhirinovskiy is no opposition politician, though. LDPR's faction in the State Duma tends to approve the government's draft laws on most issues. Zhirinovskiy often acts as the Kremlin's mouthpiece to float the ideas the Kremlin deems attractive but too outrageous for moderate voters and the outside world.

Given the current high rate of illegal and legal immigration into Russia from the former Soviet republics and the prevalence of immigrants in an array of key economic sectors (retail, produce markets, gambling), Zhirinovskiy's nationalist ideas are

getting a rousing response from a large number of ethnic Russians.

Zhirinovskiy's stance on international issues is clearly anti-Western. Addressing the LDPR Congress with a presentation titled "Global Civil War," Zhirinovskiy identified Great Britain as Russia's arch-enemy. Also quite telling is the choice of the person placed second on the party's federal ticket. It is Andrei Lugovoy, a former Federal Security Service officer-turned-businessman, who is charged in the United Kingdom with the murder of FSB defector Alexander Litvinenko. The U.K. is seeking his extradition in conjunction with the case.<sup>17</sup>

LDPR's loyalty to the Kremlin has been generously rewarded. Today it has the largest electoral fund, and the businessmen making up the majority of the ticket are the wealthiest.<sup>18</sup> Another advantage for LDPR is that the Kremlin does not view Zhirinovskiy and his party as United Russia's rival. LDPR's electorate is largely made up of marginal segments of the population unlikely to ever support the mainstream United Russia.

Zhirinovskiy has always taken advantage of extreme situations to boost his popularity, but with the current stability in Russia, his approval rates are sliding and many people are bored with his act. Thus, it is not a foregone conclusion that LDPR will overcome the 7 percent plank.

**Just Russia's Electoral Chances.** The Just Russia party, headed by Sergei Mironov, Speaker of the Federation Council (Parliament's upper house), is the creature of the Kremlin's "political technologists," who aimed to establish a two-party system where both parties—formally competitors—would be completely under the Kremlin's control. The Kremlin looked to have United Russia represent the right flank and Just Russia the left. The authorities also intended Just Russia to use its social-democratic slogans to take votes away from Communists and possibly come second in the race.

16. *Izvestia*, "United Russia and the President's Approval Rates on the Rise," October 17, 2007, and *Izvestia*, "Zhirinovskiy Squandered Away 170 Million," October 17, 2007.

17. "Figure-skaters/Footballers Making the Impression No Longer: Vladimir Zhirinovskiy presented Andrei Lugovoy," *Kommersant*, September 18, 2007.

18. *Izvestia*, "United Russia and the President's Approval Rates on the Rise," and *Izvestia*, "Zhirinovskiy Squandered Away 170 Million."

However, the Kremlin seems to have dropped this option. The odds might have favored Mironov if some other candidate had topped United Russia's federal ticket. But with Putin's nomination, Just Russia's plans to become "the second party of power" fell through. In contrast to three or four months ago, when many politicians and even some parties joined Just Russia, the reverse is true today. The party is torn apart by factional strife. Its members are concerned that whatever chances it had to make it to the Duma have been seriously jeopardized by Putin's candidacy.<sup>19</sup>

**Do Liberals Have a Chance?** The Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Yabloko are the only parties running for the Duma that represent opposition to the Kremlin. Neither party counts on the Kremlin's support, although some of their leaders are laboring under the delusion that assistance from on high will be forthcoming.

SPS is the most consistent force to defend the principles of economic freedom, the rule of law, and civil society in Russia. Its power base is largely represented by the fledgling middle class. However, it is facing grave internal and external problems. A split attitude toward the Putin regime has generated two schools of thought within the party. The first stands for backing Putin on key issues and offering only tempered criticism; the second favors bitter criticism of the Putin regime as the basis for drafting their own platform and electoral tactics.

The Kremlin and United Russia rightfully regard SPS as their real contender and seek to discredit it. The party's detractors are aggressively using the fact that Anatoly Chubais, who sides with SPS, is CEO of the government-controlled energy monopoly Unified Energy Systems (RAO UES). They charge that the energy monopoly's resources are being channeled to fund the party campaign. President Putin also commented on the matter:

It is common knowledge that Anatoly Chubais is one of SPS's formal and informal lead-

ers. He also heads one of our largest energy companies. It commands enormous resources, not only financial but quasi-administrative opportunities to influence people, because it is represented in every village, town, and community. It is capable of providing not only moral and administrative but also financial assistance. I am hopeful that what they are doing is within the law. I wish I could believe it. In fact, it is covert support of this "right force"—Union of Right Forces, as it is called—by the government.<sup>20</sup>

A great many SPS opponents blame spiraling inflation on United Energy Systems, claiming it is bankrolling the SPS campaign. SPS is also the target of a smear campaign. Leaflets published on behalf of SPS and disseminated in some provinces called on AIDS patients and the HIV-infected to enroll as campaign activists. According to one of the party's leaders, Leonid Gozman, "The scale and wastefulness of the implemented actions indicate that the entity calling the tune is a powerful federal agency rather than a specific provocateur."<sup>21</sup>

SPS has recently stepped up its criticism of Vladimir Putin and United Russia as its electoral campaign pivot. It plans to take part in the November 24–25 Dissident March organized by the radical anti-Putin coalition, The Other Russia. SPS Leader Nikita Belykh announced that SPS subscribes to the march's chief slogan, "For Russia—Against Putin!"<sup>22</sup>

Retaliation was swift. According to Nikita Belykh, the Putin-headed 'party of power' declared SPS its arch-enemy. The bureaucratic machinery fell on SPS with all its force with a barrage of lies and criticisms. Law enforcers are arresting print runs of its newspapers in millions of copies, and attacks on its headquarters are underway. The Interior Ministry has launched detentions and arrests of innocent people. SPS activists, operators and Duma candidates are constantly under pressure from every quarter.

19. Yuly Taratuta, "A Just Russia Got a D," *Kommersant*, October 10, 2007.

20. Vladimir Putin, in discussion with Valdai International Discussion Club, September 14, 2007.

21. Yulia Sukhonina and Marie-Louise Tirmaste, "Rightwingers Framed: SPS is a participant in the first smear campaign," *Kommersant*, October 8, 2007.

22. Marie-Louise Tirmaste, "Right-Wingers Forced into Dissident March Ranks," *Kommersant*, November 14, 2007.

The authorities are trying to bribe SPS members with money and lucrative positions, at the same time threatening to strip them clean and put in custody, and launching criminal probes. They are pressured through their friends and relatives. The Kremlin wants the SPS to abandon the struggle and quit the electoral campaign. It looks to crush and destroy the party as an independent political force because it is clearly running scared.<sup>23</sup>

However, SPS radicalization brought about the exodus of some regional leaders from the party ticket. Be that as it may, the odds for SPS winning Duma seats are slim.

The same could be said about Yabloko. The party largely unites an intelligentsia that failed to find its place in the socio-economic circumstances of post-Communist Russia. In addition, SPS and Yabloko face competition for liberal votes from the newly formed Civil Force party, led by well-known lawyer Mikhail Barshchevsky. Unlike the former two, Civil Force is in the Kremlin's good graces. Barshchevsky himself holds the prestigious position of the Russian government's representative at the Constitutional, Supreme, and Supreme Arbitration Courts.

**Political Dwarfs.** Some minor parties are also running for the Duma seats. For example, the Russian Democratic Party's objective is to get Russia into the European Union and NATO. The party will likely have difficulty garnering even 1 percent of the popular vote.

For other parties, the chances of winning Duma seats are close to nil. Nevertheless, the Kremlin—with specific political objectives in mind—has approved their running for parliament. First, it seeks to create the semblance of a multi-party system and political pluralism in order to refute the thesis of a guided democracy in Russia—a premise very much in evidence in the West. Second, allowing these parties to run will take away electoral votes from larger parties that the Kremlin deems

undesirable as Duma members. These are largely left-wing parties. Most of them—the Agrarian Party (its number two is notorious Communist maverick Vassily Shandybin), the Party of Social Justice (Alexei Podberyozkin), and Patriots of Russia (Genady Semigin)—are led by former Communist Party allies and contend for the leftist electorate's votes. Together, they could take away quite a few votes from the Communists.

**Elections Free and Fair?** Most independent Russian and foreign experts are of the opinion that the elections will be neither free nor fair. Unequal access by the contending parties to the news media and immoderate tapping into “administrative resources” will severely restrict the opportunities for free and fair voting. The pro-government United Russia and its chief candidate, Vladimir Putin, have an enormous campaign edge over the other parties.

According to Yelena Panfilova, who heads the Russian office of anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, “the scope of the use of the administrative resources this year is a lot larger than previously.”<sup>24</sup> Experts note that with the Duma elections looming large, preparations for rigging them are in full swing. This tendency is quite marked in the provinces where participation by independent observers is limited and the authorities' arbitrariness knows no bounds.

According to Boris Nemtsov, member of the SPS Political Council,

“The local election commissions are already notified how many votes United Russia is to receive in every voting precinct - 69 percent in some places, 100 percent in others. Governors are bending over backwards to ensure the required result because they are appointed by the President and are well aware of what is at stake and what to fight for.”<sup>25</sup>

The contending parties also have fundraising problems. The conditions in the country are such

23. 'SPS Leader Nikita Belykh Slams Kremlin for Pressuring Candidates Running on SPS Ticket; Appeal to State Duma Candidates, Activists and Operators of the Union of Right Forces,' (press release), Public Relations Service, Union of Right Forces, November 13, 2007.

24. Yulia Sukhonina and Marie-Louise Tirmaste, “Inviolable Violations,” *Kommersant*, November 1, 2007.

25. Boris Nemtsov, “The Cost of the Question,” *Kommersant*, November 1, 2007.

that bankrolling opposition parties is becoming quite dangerous. Businessmen appreciated the danger of doing so in full measure after former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky (who has bankrolled several opposition parties) was arrested (in 2003).<sup>26</sup> Khodorkovsky has received an eight-year sentence, and a new case against him has been opened.

The Russian authorities are not interested in having large numbers of independent election observers. The Russian daily *Kommersant* reports:

Some 330 to 350 international observers are expected to be in the country on election day, Central Elections Commission Chairman Vladimir Churov said. Of these, around 100 will represent the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE], he said.<sup>27</sup>

According to *The Moscow Times*, “Churov further said that excessive numbers of ‘so-called foreign observers’ during upcoming State Duma elections would interfere with Russia’s internal affairs.”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) was compelled to cancel its planned observer mission for the upcoming Duma vote and accused Moscow of stonewalling cooperation.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the Russian authorities did their best to show OSCE their negative attitude toward its monitoring activities. After several weeks of waiting for Moscow’s invitations, the OSCE was faced with unprecedented restrictions: Its mission was reduced nearly six-fold—from 450 at the 2003 elections to 70 for the December 2 elections. Russian entry visas were continuously delayed for ODIHR applicants. In fact, the Russian authorities pressured OSCE into canceling its mission by knowingly creating unacceptable conditions for its work.

Small wonder that the Kremlin slammed ODIHR for derailing election monitors, blaming confusion

at the ODIHR and its leadership’s “scornful mode of action.” Furthermore, the Russian Foreign Ministry underscored the timing of the OSCE’s decision to cancel its observer mission, which followed the Head of the ODIHR’s trip to Washington. It was a clear allusion to the U.S. having a hand in OSCE’s decision to suspend the monitor mission.<sup>30</sup>

Most observers are subscribing to the opinion that revoking the OSCE mission opens up broad opportunities for rigging the elections and for multiple violations and manipulations. There is no excluding a similar decision by observer missions of other international organizations, for example, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, although the Russian officials have promised to increase their numbers. Their non-attendance could seriously hurt the legitimacy and credibility of the Duma poll as free and fair.

Around 30 observers will represent the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These groups found no fault with dubious elections in other post-Soviet nations. Another 30 will represent the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Churov said.<sup>31</sup> The Kremlin sent out no invitations to any observers representing American NGOs, including the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute.

**Implications for the United States.** The upcoming State Duma elections are unlikely to significantly affect Russia’s domestic and foreign policy. Irrespective of the election outcome, the Duma will continue to work hand-in-glove with the Kremlin. Still, these elections are critical from the perspective of evaluating Russia’s standing as a democracy, the rule of law, and its civil society record. The U.S. government has leverage to demonstrate its attitudes toward political developments in Russia and to influence public opinion there.

---

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. “Churov Says Observers Get in Way,” *Moscow Times*, November 7, 2007.

29. Alexander Gabuyev, Vladimir Solovyov and Viktor Khamrayev, “Europe Turning Away From Russia” *Kommersant*, November 19, 2007

30. *Ibid.*

31. “Churov Says Observers Get in Way,” *Moscow Times*.



The U.S. government should do the following:

- Refrain from backing certain parties running for the State Duma or opposing others. An explicit expression of American preferences would be counterproductive and could adversely affect Russian public opinion.
- Carefully monitor the electoral campaign as to its freedom, fairness, and openness.
- Insist on providing adequate opportunities for international observers at the elections through bilateral channels and the OSCE network.
- Assess the fairness of voting and bring concerns to the Russian government's attention.
- Send Moscow a crystal clear message that free and fair elections are the cornerstone of any democratic system. The ways and means this is translated into Russian reality will inevitably influence the U.S.–Russia relationship.
- The U.S. Congress should actively develop ties with the new Duma and engage its members through multiple contacts and exchanges on political and work levels in order to relay the principles and content of U.S. policies, and hone new Duma deputies' parliamentary skills.

**Conclusion.** In most democracies, the electoral process is known but the results are typically unknown before election day. In Russia, however, the results are generally known well in advance; it is the electoral process that remains a mystery from year to year. The Kremlin's persistent manipulation of the electoral process—ranging from smear cam-

paigns and denying media access to the opposition, to United Russia's failure to participate in public debates with other parties—has demonstrated the increased degradation of democratic processes in Russia. The number of parties participating in the December parliamentary elections is not indicative of democratic growth, rather it is a mere show demonstrating a weak and divided opposition and the increasing popularity of radical, ultra-nationalist fringe groups. Russia's electoral system is entrenched in corruption—controlled and manipulated by government-friendly oligarchs, former Communist leaders, and Putin's loyal inner circle—all in the name of profit and power.

Of particular concern are the significant obstacles the Russian government has imposed on international election observers. With election-rigging anticipated as a near-certain aspect of the December elections, the Putin Administration has made every possible effort to prevent OSCE observers from attending. Nevertheless, the United States and other democracies countries must make every possible effort to assess the legitimacy and fairness of the elections while avoiding openly intervening or indicating their political preferences. It is the integrity of the democratic process that will largely determine the direction of Russia's development and future U.S.–Russian relations.

—Yevgeny Volk, Ph.D., is Coordinator of the Moscow Office in The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.