

After Duma elections, Russian power struggle continues

by Jonathan Tennenbaum

No one should jump to conclusions about the outcome of the elections to the Russian State Duma, on Dec. 19. Contrary to media proclamations of an “overwhelming victory” for the Kremlin and right-wing forces backing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and despite talk of a long-awaited “centrist coup” or epoch-making “peaceful revolution,” the political future of Russia is very much up in the air—including the future of the putative new strongman, Putin, himself. Far from having been resolved, the power struggle in Russia is set to escalate, with unexpected turns possible at any moment.

The most grotesque mischaracterization of the Russian elections was given by Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair, who declared them a “victory for democracy,” and reportedly spent 40 minutes on the phone congratulating the “victor,” Putin. The continental European press was far less enthusiastic, and even appalled at what commentators saw as clear signs of a dictatorship in the making. Widely reported are the massive manipulation of public opinion by the Russian oligarch and Kremlin-controlled media, and the cynical exploitation of widespread support for a “hard line” against terrorism, by Anatoli Chubais and other “pro-Western liberal reformers” who have overnight turned into “national patriots.”

The elections per se

The official tally released after the Dec. 19 election, gives the following totals for the national election blocs (not including direct mandate candidates and independents): the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), headed by Gennadi Zyuganov, led with 24.29% of the vote, followed by the newly-created “Unity” block of Emergencies Minister Sergei Shoigu, often referred to as “the Kremlin Party,” with 23.29%. In third place came the so-called center-left election bloc “Fatherland-All Russia” (OVR) of former Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, with 13.33%. The “Union of Right Forces” (SPS) of Chubais and Sergei Kiriyenko received 8.52%, followed by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s bloc with 5.98%, and last by Grigori Yavlinskii’s “Yabloko” with 5.93%.

These percentages, however, only pertain to the allocation of half of the Duma seats (225 seats), which are assigned directly to the election blocs. The remaining seats are composed of direct-mandate candidates, of whom about half are

attached to the election blocs, and half are “independents.” Although the full results for the direct mandates are not yet available, it is clear that they are much less favorable for the Kremlin and right-wing forces. According to reliable estimates, one can expect that the CPRF will get a total (party seats plus direct-mandate seats) of approximately 113 seats; “Unity,” 72; OVR, 66; SPS, 29; and Yabloko and Zhirinovskiy, 21 and 17 seats, respectively. The remaining approximately 129 seats go to “independents,” whose factional orientation cannot be predicted at this point.

“It could well turn out that the elections have produced a stalemate rather than an outright victory for the Kremlin alliance,” remarked Russian economist and political observer Stanislav Menshikov in an analysis in the Dec. 20 *Moscow Tribune*. “The big question is whether the right-wing bloc can muster a clear majority in the new Duma. Despite Mr. Kiriyenko’s optimism, this may not be the case. The results of the one-district contests paint a somewhat different picture. . . . The real test will come in January, after the new factions in the Duma work out their relations with each other. *It is only then that the exact correlation of forces will become evident.*”

“Despite the success of ‘Unity’ and SPS, Mr. Putin may still have a hard time being confirmed in his present post. . . . To maintain his popularity which puts him above the Kremlin and the Duma, Putin will have to bring the war in Chechnya to an early and victorious conclusion. If he succeeds, no Duma opposition will dare to fire him even if they think they have the votes to do so. If, however, the war drags on and casualties on the Russian side are high, his popularity may well disappear as quickly as it has accumulated.” Menshikov notes that political uncertainty will be aggravated by other problems, including above all the economic situation. In fact, a moderate tendency toward revival in some productive sectors, which had emerged during the Primakov government, is now running out, with a new wave of collapses and closures of privatized enterprises spreading in the country.

Much will depend on the future of the Primakov-Luzhkov OVR election alliance, Menshikov notes, particularly to what extent it will retain some cohesive strength in the face of massive pressures to split it up. Furthermore, “there will be strong pressure brought to bear on the OVR to prevent it from associating with the Communists. On the other hand, it is hard to see how the OVR can keep playing a significant role without siding with the Left. The outcome of these maneuvers will determine the kind of political ball game that is in store for Russia in the months ahead.”

Menshikov concludes, “It looks like all parties involved in this roulette are facing a Catch-22 problem. Which means that prospects for political and economic stability in Russia, at least in the near term, are dim.”

The process of splitting and regrouping among the factions has already started, but is by no means limited to the OVR. Indeed, even the “Unity” bloc itself, whose sudden rise has supposedly laid the foundation for Putin’s Presidential

hopes, appears anything but solid. Reporting on an unceremonious 40-minute meeting in Moscow on Dec. 28, at which "Unity" turned itself into a party and elected Putin its Presidential candidate, the Russia correspondent of the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* observed: "The new [party] etiquette changes nothing of the fact, that the 'Unity Party' is an extremely nebulous entity. It has neither a program nor a charismatic figure. Most of its representatives were completely unknown persons until now, not only in Moscow but also in the regions. The Russian press has therefore already called 'Unity' a 'virtual party.' Its existence . . . would probably have gone unnoticed, if it were not for the heavy-handed methods of the state-controlled media, which, for two months continuously, told the population that the survival of the country depended on the success of this new creation."

"Unity" leader Shoigu hinted in an interview with the *Washington Post* that Putin can not count on the support of "Unity." According to Shoigu, it is President Boris Yeltsin, not Putin, to whom "Unity" owes allegiance! Indeed, as long as Yeltsin is on the scene, Putin cannot be sure of his future.

Putin: the new strongman?

These and other circumstances should put a big question-mark on the line now circulating in some Western establishment circles, that Putin is now "certain" to become the successor to Yeltsin as next President of Russia. Western commentators tend to give one-sided, superficial attention to the play of personalities, who very often have no substantive personal power, and can be removed again as suddenly as they were thrust onto the stage. Thus, even a preliminary assessment of Putin's role must take account of two aspects:

First, Putin's (possibly temporary) usefulness to the various forces grouped around the Yeltsin "Family," the Kremlin apparatus, and the so-called Russian oligarchs, who are desperately trying to hold onto power at all costs. These forces—whose perceived interests may not always coincide in other respects—had long identified Primakov as the most dangerous internal threat to be neutralized. They banked on the overwhelming popular support for Putin's "hard-line" stand on "Chechen terrorism" on the one hand, and the effect of a massively orchestrated progaganda and "dirty tricks" campaign, on the other, in the attempt to crush the Primakov-Luzhkov-OVR combination.

Second, the extent to which Putin's present activity might reflect the influence of more traditional institutional forces in Russia, including within the foreign policy apparatus, sections of the military, intelligence services, etc., which are reacting to the perceived threat to Russia's very existence. As we emphasized in "Russia Draws the Line Against Strategic Insanity" (*EIR*, Dec. 10, 1999), a marked "closing of the ranks" has occurred inside Russia, in the face of the strategic threat posed by the combination of Russian's economic collapse, the NATO eastward push, and more broadly, the ongoing Anglo-American policy to break up and destroy Russia.

This institutional response overlays the Byzantine political struggles which are going on, in part, inside the institutions themselves, and codetermines the conditions under which those fights are taking place.

Recent articles published in Putin's name, including a major policy statement "Russia on the Eve of the Millennium," leave a remarkably big margin of ambiguity concerning which of the above two factors—or both!—is exerting a dominant influence. Doubtless, Putin's recent statements reflect strategic and economic realities facing Russia, realities which have dictated a continuation of policies, pursued under Primakov, such as growing strategic cooperation with China and India. Particularly interesting is Putin's emphasis on the fact that Russia's survival requires a strengthening of central state power, and dirigistic policies which de facto run against the whole trend of "liberal reform" up to now.

The unpleasant ambiguity, however, lies in the circumstance, that a new dirigism could develop either as a necessary instrument for saving Russia and rebuilding its economy, or as the means for imposing a monstrous and unpredictable "Bonapartist" dictatorship in the interest of the most corrupt and dangerous British-linked forces inside Russia and internationally. In any case, the outcome will be determined, not simply in Russia alone, but by the course of events globally, and especially the policy struggle centered on Lyndon LaRouche's campaign in the United States.

Putin writes: "One cannot overlook the fact, that any changes, which would lead to a further reduction of the living standards of the Russian population, are excluded for Russia. We have reached the utmost limits. . . . Society is simply collapsing—economically, politically, psychologically, and morally. . . . Russia will not soon become a second edition of the U.S.A. or England, where liberal values have a deep historical basis. A strong state is no anomaly for Russians, not something that must be opposed, but on the contrary a source and guarantee of order, the initiator and main locomotive of any changes. . . . *The key to a rebirth and recovery of Russia lies today in the governmental-political sphere. Russia needs strong state power and must have it.* . . . The situation requires a larger degree of state intervention in the economic and social processes. . . . Above all [we need to] increase investment. During the 1990s, investment into the real sector decreased by a factor of five. . . . We are for an investment policy, which includes both market mechanisms and measures of state intervention. . . . The government is ready to carry out an industrial policy, which is oriented to prioritizing the development of leading branches of scientific-technological progress. . . . In order to mobilize the financial resources, which are necessary for this policy, we must use mechanisms which have long been known in world practice. Their foundation is directed credit and tax instruments, providing various kinds of state-guaranteed support."

This all sounds remarkably similar to the policies advocated by Primakov, as well as by economist Sergei Glazyev,

who is now an adviser to the CPRF. Why, then, the vicious campaign against Primakov in particular? In reality, nothing Putin has said or done so far, threatens in the least the interests of the Kremlin/oligarch groupings. Not mentioning with a single word the massive looting of Russia's economy, organized by Chubais et al. on behalf of the London-centered financial oligarchy and its Russian partners in crime, Putin blames the 1990s collapse of the Russian economy entirely on the "errors of the Soviet system." In another revealing position, he rejects out of hand the idea of a change in the Constitution, as has been called for by Primakov and others with the aim of establishing a true division of executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government and limiting the (at present virtually dictatorial) powers of the Presidency, which have allowed the continuing, disastrous usurpation of state power by the "Family" and allied Russian oligarchs.

The Chechnya military campaign itself expresses the irony of the Putin government's "nationalistic turn." Does the offensive against Grozny make military sense, as an anti-terrorist measure, or is it a gruesome vehicle of Presidential ambitions? Is this really an effective way to counteract NATO's eastward expansion, or might it not have the opposite effect—namely, to push Georgia and other nations of the region into the arms of NATO? Is this campaign really in the national interest, or is Russia instead playing its assigned, profiled role in a typical British-authored geopolitical game?

Ominous tones

Signs of a dictatorial turn in Russia are becoming more evident by the day. Quite revealing is a Dec. 22 article by Vitali Tretyakov, founding editor of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, which is now owned by the oligarch Boris Berezovsky. The article, entitled "Russian Reform as Dictatorship," begins: "Yesterday, Dec. 21, was an important day . . . for the country, the whole world, the 20th century and perhaps the whole second millennium—that day was the 120th anniversary of the day when, according to official historiography . . . the man named Stalin was born." Tretyakov claims that practically everything in Russia, even today, from the architecture of Moscow to the mentality of politicians, embodies the personal influence of Josef Stalin, whom he describes as a great "reformer" in the tradition of Peter the Great. "The enlightened Chekist [secret police operative] Putin, the enlightened hard-line reformer Chubais, the enlightened oligarch Boris Berezovsky—these are the three faces of Stalin today—Stalin as the quintessence of Russian pragmatism and the quintessence of Russian reformism: *cruel, inhuman, violent.*"

Tretyakov's words exude pessimism, born of the brutalization of Russia under the banner of "liberal reforms" during the past decade. Isn't it time for the West finally to face the dangerous consequences of the looting and political chaos, fostered in Russia by policies promoted so insistently from the West as the road to "free trade and democracy"?

German corruption Put the whole truth

by Rainer Apel

Germany's political life is heading for a process of decomposition, which resembles the beginning phase of the scandals that destroyed the entire postwar political system of Italy, during the early and mid-1990s. As in the case of Italy, the stream of new scandals that make news headlines daily, has taken the direction of predominantly hitting the Christian Democracy (CDU). Longtime party chairman and former Chancellor Helmut Kohl has been made the focus of the scandal campaign, which is also increasing the pressure on the party to rid itself of the "Kohl System" and of a good part of the party's political program.

The scandals launched against Kohl have been proceeding along three main routes: 1) suspected irregularities in the sale of light tanks to Saudi Arabia in 1991; 2) suspected irregularities and fraud in the 1992 takeover of the eastern German petrochemical complex of Leuna by the French oil giant ELF-Aquitaine; and 3) suspected violation of party funding laws, in which "gray zone" funds were allegedly used to channel anonymous donations into the CDU party organization, during the early and mid-1990s.

An important aspect of the media campaign to portray Kohl as a corrupt politician, is aimed at undermining his reputation as the leader who unified the two separated German states after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. Because there was a lot of resistance to the October 1990 reunification, both inside and outside of Germany, Kohl's name and political career is identified with the fact that he managed to achieve German unity in spite of that. The "Kohl era," which spanned his 25 years as chairman of the CDU party (1973-98) and 16 years as Chancellor (1982-98), and which some people want to bring to an abrupt end now, certainly has not been an uncontested success story. The failure to get the German economy out of the depression and to contribute to a policy alternative to the International Monetary Fund on a global scale, worsened the economic and social situation in Germany to such an extent that Kohl lost the confidence of the electorate and was voted out of office in September 1998. But even most of those who can claim good and justified reasons for voting him out on