

Russia's Elections and "Managed Democracy"

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From Communism to Democracy

When Russia emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union in 1991, many observers in both Russia and the United States hailed the victory of democracy and the end of authoritarian rule. Now that 13 years have passed, however, optimism is low. With the incumbent president, Vladimir Putin, crushing opponents in the December 2003 parliamentary elections and the March 2004 presidential vote, analysts talk not of actual democracy but of, at best, "managed democracy." These Russian elections thus provide AP teachers and students with an interesting opportunity to explore many of the difficulties involved in establishing democratic institutions in countries emerging from decades of Communist dictatorship.

The most recent Russian election cycle began with the playing field tilted heavily in favor of President Putin and the United Russia Party that he had endorsed. Very importantly, the Russian state owned or indirectly controlled all three major television networks in the country: the First Channel, RTR, and NTV. Taking their cues from the Kremlin, the nightly news programs on each network besieged viewers with stories on how Putin and his United Russia Party allies were improving the economy, ending social injustice, fighting crime, battling terrorism, and making Russia great again on the international stage. TV editors gave very different treatment, however, to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), which was the chief rival to the United Russia Party and which had been running neck-and-neck with it in the polls ever since the 1999 election. Almost every evening, news anchors read stories reporting failures in the regions that still had Communist Party governors and, most devastatingly, implied that the Party had abandoned its principles and become corrupt by inviting "millionaire" businessmen to join the ticket of the "workers' party." Communist leaders were rarely given an opportunity to respond.

The Kremlin also devised a number of more creative ways to reinforce its advantage. For example, under Putin's watch Russia had adopted a series of highly restrictive campaign laws that effectively prevented opposition parties from countering the slanted coverage on the nightly news. Not only were spending limits set at extremely low levels, but parties were actually forbidden to explicitly campaign for office until just one month before election day. Even more creatively, Putin's allies poured money into a series of "decoy" parties and candidates in order to split the Communist vote. These decoys were usually other leftists, many of whom had previously lost power struggles within the Communist Party and were now ready to work with the Kremlin in order to receive money, exact revenge, and perhaps regain some power.

In one of the most extreme episodes, two candidates in districts where the KPRF was strong, both in the region of Riazan, actually changed their legal names so that they would appear on the ballot as "Sergei KPRF" and "Svetlana KPRF" in the hopes of confusing some older Communist voters. Eliminating any room for doubt, Putin's forces also made good use of the power of Russia's regional strongmen, "governors" who typically wield vast power over their local economies but who are also highly dependent on resources controlled by the federal government and who are thus manipulable.

Parliamentary Results

The result, not surprisingly, was a landslide for the United Russia Party, which in one way or another won 306 of the 450 seats in the Russian parliament, enough to unilaterally approve constitutional amendments. The Communist Party, on the other hand, saw its standing in the polls plummet during the final weeks of the campaign, and was reduced to an essentially powerless 52 seats. No other party netted even as many as 40 seats. Strategists have long considered parliamentary elections in Russia as a kind of "primary" for the presidential race, which now regularly takes place just three months afterward. The leaders of parties that do badly in the parliamentary voting tend to drop out of the presidential race. The United Russia Party's victory was so stunning that in 2004 nearly all of the big-time politicians other than Putin pulled out of the presidential contest. As a result, Russia's biggest parties either sat the election out or nominated token candidates; the misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, actually a radical nationalist party, nominated its leader's bodyguard. The only serious candidate who dared to run, the leftist economist Sergei Glaziev, was pilloried in the state-controlled media and came in third place with just 4 percent of the vote. Putin waltzed to victory with 71 percent; the second-place candidate, the little-known Nikolai Kharitonov of the KPRF, garnered 14 percent.

The sum of these methods of manipulating the election process is what analysts frequently call "managed democracy": the manipulation of state-controlled media, vast resources, and the law in order to produce electoral outcomes favorable to incumbent authorities. After the 2004 presidential election, an increasing number of observers are insisting that Russia's system not be called any kind of "democracy" at all.

The Roots of Russia's Democratic Deficit

Some have explained the advent of managed democracy by arguing that Russian culture is inimical to democracy or that Russia has no democratic history and is thus doomed to remain autocratic. Such arguments, however, are ultimately unconvincing. Survey research has shown that while Russian citizens do tend to favor strong leaders and the restoration of political order, a clear majority nevertheless think that democracy is compatible with these things and support it. One study found, for example, that a whopping 87 percent of Russians consider it important that their leaders (however much power they may have) be popularly elected and that over 85 percent support important freedoms of expression and conscience (Colton and McFaul 2003). It would also seem overly pessimistic to assume that a lack of experience with democracy dooms it never to occur; plenty of nations have learned democracy after extreme authoritarian pasts, with Germany being one of the most striking examples.

Instead, we can find the roots of Russia's problems in some of the contingent decisions that were made by individual leaders during Russia's transition from communist rule. Anxious to impose market reform on a society that was feared not to be ready for it, President Boris Yeltsin and his allies adopted a constitution in 1993 that invested immense powers in the presidency, including the power to issue decrees with the force of law and, effectively, to dissolve or subdue parliament. The president's informal powers are even greater than his formal ones, since the government owns or controls all three major television networks and reaps enormous revenue from Russia's highly lucrative oil and gas industry. In fact, despite great progress in privatization, the state still owns much of the oil and gas industry and controls other parts of the economy through levers such as taxation, licensing, and law enforcement. Indeed, Russia's leadership dealt opposition parties one of their most severe blows less than two months before the 2003 parliamentary election by suddenly arresting Russia's richest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was known as a major financier of such parties. Finally, Russia's regional governments depend heavily on transfers from the central budget, rendering them highly susceptible to Kremlin influence.

It must also be noted, however, that managed democracy has been effective in Russia partly because Putin himself is genuinely popular. Since his election as president in March 2000, his approval ratings have ranged from 60 and 80 percent. While Putin's public standing is certainly bolstered by fawning media coverage, the same media failed to produce such a positive image of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who at times did enjoy similarly universal positive coverage but whose popularity remained quite low for most of the 1990s. While support can be found for many of Putin's policies, it is clear that Russians primarily see him as an effective leader whom they can trust to act decisively to restore order and prosperity in long-suffering Russia. Even when his policies go bad and people know it, as has happened with the war he launched in Chechnya, they continue to support him.

From Managed to Real Democracy?

Russia helps illustrate the painful point that the demise of an autocratic or communist regime does not always lead to democracy. Some postcommunist countries, such as the Czech Republic and Estonia, have successfully made the transition. Russia is one case in which the way political and economic reforms were conducted gave rise to big trouble for democratic institutions.

But the fact that the roots of Russia's political troubles are contingent and institutional gives rise to some hope. Although Russia's economic and regional elites now support a popular Putin to the extent that there is no meaningful opposition to him, one can expect divisions within these elites to emerge should his popularity falter. Such splits in the leadership are even more likely should Putin decide to step down, as he has promised to do after he finishes his second term (which Russia's constitution says must be his last) in 2008. In struggling for power at the top, these elites are likely to look to support anywhere they can find it, including the electorate. Democracy, therefore, may return to Russia from the top down once Putin's dominance begins to fade.