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The Transfer of Power in Russia 1999-2000

The Duma elections of December 1999 are significant not so much in themselves but in the political context in which they take place, namely the presidential elections that will mark the transition from Russia's first post-communist leader to its second. These Duma elections have served the role of being a type of primary election in relation to the presidential elections.^{1[1]}

The Duma election has been, and the presidential election will be a "khaki election." The Chechen war is effectively the main issue, and nationalist sentiment generated by that war resulted in major support for the pro-Kremlin Unity movement, and put the then prime minister (and now acting president) Vladimir Putin in a strong position to win the presidential elections. There is however a sharp contrast to the khaki election that took place in Britain in 1900. The Conservative government of the day decided to capitalise on the upsurge of patriotic sentiment caused by the Boer war to call a general election. In Russia in 1999, Duma elections were already scheduled for December, and the Kremlin therefore decided to start a war in order to create an upsurge in patriotic sentiment that it hoped would be to its advantage. It is a gamble that has worked in the case of the Duma elections, and will probably work for Putin in the presidential elections. Putin has been able to use the war to portray himself as a decisive man of action, and the Unity movement backed by him, which was created in late September, enjoyed a meteoric rise in support. Prior to the military intervention in Chechnya which began in October 1999, the opposition Fatherland-All Russia (FAR) movement had been in a strong position in the polls, and one of its leaders, former prime minister Yevgenny Primakov looked as though he would be a strong contender in the presidential elections scheduled for 2000.

The Chechen war changed the situation entirely. The main pretext for the intervention in Chechnya was the terrorist bombings that took place in Moscow and Volgograd in September 1999. As no Chechen or Islamic force has claimed responsibility for these bombings, it seems increasingly plausible that these bombings were organised by the Federal Security Service (FSS) (or elements connected with it) in order to create the conditions for a military intervention and the subsequent khaki election. If this speculation is correct, then Putin will directly owe his presidency to the premeditated murder of several hundred Russian citizens by Russian security organs. It is of interest to note that last

summer FSS personnel in Ryazan were caught placing explosives in an apartment bloc. When challenged, they stated they were carrying out an exercise.

In the election campaign, FAR was targeted by the Kremlin, as it was the most serious challenger. The electronic media was used viciously by the Kremlin to attack FAR. The two state TV channels, ORT and RTR, were heavily biased towards Unity and heavily biased against FAR. ORT and one of its presenters, Sergey Dorenko, venomously attacked Yury Luzhkov; computer generated graphics were used to transform him into both Mussolini and Monica Lewinsky. It was also claimed that Luzhkov planned to settle thousands of Chechen refugees in Moscow. This propaganda appeared to be highly effective. One opinion poll showed that 62% of respondents believed that the information on ORT was fairly presented, and only 24% saw it as unfair. ORT devoted 28% of its news coverage to Unity, and only 14% to FAR, which was 1% less than the pro-Kremlin Zhirinovskiy bloc.^{1[2]}

The Union of Rightist Forces (URF) was used to take votes away from Yabloko, and received the backing of the Kremlin following polls which showed that 41% of URF voters would vote for Putin as president.^{1[3]} Anatoly Chubais was the most pro-Kremlin of the URF leadership, and he received generous media coverage. Chubais came out strongly in favour of both the Chechen war and Putin. Yabloko suffered because of its opposition to the Chechen war.

The CPRF was left alone by the Kremlin in the Duma campaign, as the Kremlin desires to have a CPRF candidate as its main opponent in the presidential elections: a communist presidential candidate (who will be Gennady Zyuganov) will be an easy opponent for Vladimir Putin.

Although the Chechen war was the main reason for the success of Unity, other factors also helped. The economic situation improved slightly, as pensions and wage arrears were reduced and tax collection improved. More significantly, this election and Unity's success in it reflect generational changes within both Russian elites and society as a whole. A large portion of voters desire stability and order, and saw Unity as the best provider of it. FAR was perceived as more likely to confront the regime and undermine stability. Unity and to a lesser extent the URF represent a younger generation of leaders, less tainted with the corruption and failures of the past decade. Both the FAR and the CPRF with their aging leaderships represented the past.^{1[4]}

^{1[3]} See Dunlop, *ibid*.

^{2[4]} See Vladimir Boxer, 'Putin is riding on more than war,' in Russian Election Watch, No 6, 8 January 2000, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. This report is available on: <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/bcsia/russianelectionwatch>

The Duma will now be largely pro-Kremlin in its orientation, with Unity, URF and the Zhirinovskiy bloc being the most important pro-Kremlin blocs. This means that executive-legislative relations are likely to be smooth in the run up to the presidential election. It is highly unlikely that any faction in the Duma will call for a no-confidence vote in the government.

As noted above, Putin's active prosecution of the Chechen war is the main reason for Unity's electoral success and his standing in the polls. Putin's success with the Duma elections puts him in a strong position to win the presidential elections, and it is for this reason that Yel'tsin felt able to resign from the presidency on 31 December. If the president resigns, then the constitution requires that the prime minister take over as acting president, and that presidential elections be held within 3 months. Presidential elections will now take place on 26 March 2000, instead of in June as originally intended. This increases Putin's chances of victory, as popular support for the Chechen war is unlikely to dissipate significantly before March, whereas it could have done so by June. Furthermore, the decisions of Yevgenny Primakov, Yury Luzhkov and Aleksandr Lebed not to contend the presidential elections mean that Putin will face no serious rival. Yel'tsin's resignation statement that "Russia must enter the new millennium with new politicians, new faces, new intelligent strong energetic people" boosted Putin's image as a new face, and subsequently undermined the images of Primakov, Luzhkov, Zyuganov, etc as representatives of a discredited past.

It has often been argued that one factor that may have made Yel'tsin reluctant to surrender power when his term expired next summer, was the fear that he and his family might face prosecution for financial corruption, and that he himself could be indicted for treason. Putin's obvious willingness to grant him immunity, along with the acting president's extremely good chances of winning the next election made it possible for Yel'tsin to step down and for a smooth transition of power to be effected. It has been speculated that Yel'tsin decided upon Putin as his desired successor back in April 1999, and this was why Primakov was dismissed from the presidency in May 1999. Sergey Stepashin was appointed prime minister from May until August to allow a decent interval to pass before appointing Putin. By appointing Putin four months before the Duma elections, Yel'tsin allowed Putin enough time to use the Chechen crisis to portray himself to the electorate as a decisive man of action. Had Putin been appointed back in May, he would have had to wait seven months to the elections, and his image might have lost some of its dynamism over this time. The creation of Unity and Putin's endorsement of it appears to have been part of this strategy of promoting Putin as the successor and manipulating the elections to the Kremlin's advantage. If this assumption is correct, then the dismissals by Yel'tsin of Primakov and Stepashin were not the actions of an ailing president running out of ideas, but of an extremely cunning political operator, cleverly utilising his powers to ensure his own secure future and the continued domination of the presidency by the post-1991 political establishment.

Yel'tsin has been able to use the Chechen war to ensure victory for the Kremlin establishment in the Duma elections, and effect a smooth and legal transition of power from one leader to another in post-communist Russia. It has been a high-risk gamble that has been typical of his political career since he entered the national political scene in December 1985. Like most of his other gambles, it

appears to have paid off (assuming Putin wins the presidential election in March), and Yel'tsin has created a precedent by being the first and only Russian leader in the 20th century to have willingly relinquished power. The irony of course is that this comes from a leader who has been very much motivated by power for its own sake, and only relinquished power when he saw it as being to his advantage to do so. Furthermore, this has only been made possible by the war in Chechnya. It says little for Russian democracy and the rule of law that the smoothness and legality of the power transition has been largely dependent on what has become an extremely brutal use of force by the Russian military in Chechnya.

If Putin does emerge victorious in the presidential elections in March (which seems highly likely), he will therefore owe his victory to the military suppression of Chechen separatism; again, hardly an encouraging portent for the development of a non-authoritarian Russia. Furthermore, if the FSS was responsible for the Moscow and Volgodonsk bombings in September 1999, then Putin will also owe an enormous debt to the FSS, which it will expect to be repaid. This is hardly likely to augur well for the development of Russian democracy. In June 1999, Putin placed flowers at the grave of Yury Andropov in Red Square, and at his monument at the Lubyanka.^{1[5]} His obvious respect for Andropov may well give some indication of the sort of regime Putin would like to establish in Russia.

How Chechnya Might Affect The Character Of The Putin Leadership

A Russian military victory in Chechnya (the Kremlin propaganda machine could declare a victory, even if no actual victory is forthcoming), and its contribution to Putin's electoral victory means that he will owe an enormous political debt to the Russian armed forces. Had there been no military victory in Chechnya, the likelihood of a Putin presidency would have been significantly smaller (possibly negligible), and we would probably still have seen Yel'tsin in power, anxiously considering his options before June 4th, the day Russia would have held its presidential election.

Putin is well aware of the importance of the Chechen campaign. On his very first day as acting president he flew to Chechnya to award decorations and present gifts to Russian military personnel serving there. It is therefore likely that Putin will move much more energetically than Yel'tsin in seeking to rebuild Russian military power. An on-going need to maintain a military policing operation in Chechnya will require a sustained military involvement, and this will increase the need for a viable military machine.

Although one can correctly argue that Chechnya represents relatively modest opposition, it also represents the first opportunity for the Russian armed forces to claim some glory after a decade of decline and humiliation. If a victory is gained in Chechnya, Putin could face a more confident and assertive military leadership, and it will probably be harder for him to ignore the military's voice on areas of policy (eg military reform, and defence and security policy) where it has direct interests. However, if the conflict drags on inconclusively, Putin will be in a stronger position to impose his will on the armed forces. Intensification of military action is likely to result in a more intolerant and repressive regime in Moscow.

Any victory in Chechnya is likely to boost Russian national pride and self-confidence, and Putin may well preside over a rise in this sentiment. In December 1999, Yel'tsin's former human rights commissioner, Sergey Kovalev, expressed concern that Russian society was being consolidated on the basis of chauvinism.^{1[6]} Andrey Grachev voiced similar sentiments and considered this represented a frightening evolution in Russian politics.^{1[7]} Anti-western sentiment was boosted significantly in Russia by the NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999, and this sentiment could fuse with the assertion of national pride caused by a successful Second Chechen War to produce a more self-confident, anti-western and dirigiste Russia in the opening decade of the 21st century.

APPENDIX 1

Russian Superpresidentialism

If elected President, Vladimir Putin inherits what has been termed a superpresidential political system. This superpresidency reflects Russia's autocratic tradition, where enormous power is concentrated in one person. Paradoxically, this system owes its legitimacy to democratic elections, so the contradictory principles of autocracy and democracy coexist uneasily within the framework of the Russian political system. In the book *This Omnipotent and Impotent Government*, the Russian political scientists Igor Klyamkin and Liliya Shevtsova offer a brilliant analysis of Russia's superpresidential system and the dilemmas that it faces as a result of the tensions between the principles of democracy and autocracy. Below are reproduced several paragraphs from their book.^{1[8]}

In the range of his powers and in his staunchly defended extra-party status - ie, his independence of any political forces - the head of the Russian state does in fact resemble a monarch. But this power is formed through elections. An "elected monarchy," which actually exists in Russia, is a political nonsense. It is testimony to the fact that an irreconcilable conflict has arisen in Russia between the still undefeated tradition of autocracy and the necessity of using democratic procedures for the legitimization of this autocracy, since all other methods of legitimization have already been exhausted. But democracy and autocracy, much less a guaranteed lifetime right to the presidency, are by definition incompatible. This incompatibility is turning into the major reason for the inability of the system itself to survive. A political system built in the image of one man elected by the people is in no position to provide either for a reliable transfer of power or for the effective and stable functioning of the system. Strictly speaking, this is no system at all, if by system we mean the totality of institutions, mechanisms and procedures, which automatically perpetuate themselves and dictate firm and generally acknowledged rules of the game to any state official. Russia now has a surrogate system, which has no institutional guarantees and which, if the president becomes unable to govern, immediately begins to degenerate, turning into a source of conflict. Such a system can only be maintained by force, but the Russian federal government does not have (at least not yet) the necessary resources for this...

^{3[7]} Andrey Grachev, 'The military-electoral campaign', *Moskovskiye Novosti*, No 45, p2.

^{4[8]} The text of this book can be found at <http://www.carnegie.ru>

...It would be naive to think that Russia's political system will survive for an indefinite time in its current form...sooner or later Russia will have to make a choice between authoritarianism and democracy and the longer they defer this decision the greater becomes the danger of the first option. The hope that "stagnating stability" can be preserved indefinitely is illusory...

...Indeed, Russia's immediate political future depends on the state of its economy - there is no room for doubt here. But the completion of economic reform and its regulation under new principles will have to be carried out in Russia under extremely unfavorable conditions, unlike the same process in the post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe. There the economic transformations began and the first stages were completed during the first wave of democratic enthusiasm. The painful consequences of the transformation were compensated psychologically by a mass desire to say goodbye to Communism. In Russia the economic transformation is a long way from completion and it cannot be completed while the population is massively dissatisfied with the government.

The inevitable mass discontent may give the new government new energy and push it toward decisive action to restore order and to decrease that discontent. But it is impossible to find a quick fix for Russia today, and Yel'tsin's regime does not have the time that would be needed, since its political resources were exhausted by its leader long before it was even formed.

Under these conditions young, unsettled democracies usually fall, giving way to authoritarian regimes. This is what happened in pre-war Germany, Spain, and Italy, and in several countries of Latin America in the post-war period. Russia today is rushing headlong toward this point. If it gets there, the new Russian authoritarianism is unlikely to resemble the present Belarussian or Central Asian variants: in a huge country where so many people have tasted freedom, in a country with elected regional governments and a multitude of national formations with the status of semi-states, an authoritarian regime will simply be unable to establish itself without massive bloodshed and a gulag full of political prisoners. And if even these methods are not enough, Russia will continue to degenerate, slowly and painfully, until it falls apart completely.

Since 1993, violence has been used on a major scale on three occasions for political purposes: October 1993, when Yel'tsin forcibly disbanded the old Supreme Soviet, December 1994 and October 1999, when Russian forces invaded Chechnya. As Putin has come to power on the back of the Russian military's involvement in Chechnya, and perhaps also of the possible FSS bombing of apartment blocks in Moscow and Volgodonsk, it is likely that he will seek to develop Russian politics in a more authoritarian direction.

APPENDIX 2

The 1999 Duma Election Results

The Central Electoral Commission announced the final results of the elections to the new State Duma. The following blocs received more than 5% of the vote.

CPRF	24.29%
Yedinstvo	23.32%
OVR	13.33%
URF	8.52%
Zhirinovskiy's Bloc	5.98%

Yabloko

5.93%

The likely distribution of seats in the Duma elected on 19 December 1999 was as follows:

Party/Bloc	Party List	Single-Member Constituencies	Total
CPRF	67	46	113
Unity	64	8	72
FAR	37	30	67
URF	24	5	29
Yabloko	16	4	20
Zhirinovskiy Bloc	17	-	17
NDR	-	7	7
Russian All Peoples' Union	-	2	2
Dukhovnoye Naslediye	-	1	1
Bloc Nikolayev-Fedorov		1	1
KRO + Boldyrev movement	-	1	1
Russian SP	-	1	1
Independents		106	106

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