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Duma Elections Preview

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DUMA ELECTIONS PREVIEW

Kremlin Strategy: "Just Good Enough" Elections While Maintaining Control

By Darrell Slider and Nikolai Petrov, Moscow

Abstract:
Despite problems facing the regime, the Kremlin expects to enhance its majority in the Duma in the September elections. The return of single-member districts is a critical element in Kremlin strategy as is redistricting to minimize representation of city voters. The Central Election Commission will try to stop blatant violations, but it can do little to stop the traditional use of "administrative resources."

Cause for Concern

The last State Duma elections, in December 2011, sparked a series of large protests in Moscow that still evoke a sense of trepidation among the Russian leadership. Elections represent the potentially most vulnerable period of any authoritarian regime. The initial reaction to the 2011 protests was to expand the public dialog to include many of the protest leaders (though never Alexei Navalny) and to make concessions on democratization—returning gubernatorial elections, for example.

Events since 2014 have led the Kremlin to view the problem of legitimacy in a new light. The legitimacy achieved by winning free and fair elections is viewed as too risky, a process which can easily spin out of control and lead to some form of regime change. Instead, the source of legitimacy has become the personal popularity of President Vladimir Putin. The president's ratings can be maintained through adroit policy moves (including foreign policy initiatives) and the effective use of state media. Threats to legitimacy—opposition movements and their ability to appeal to the broader population through protests and media—can be minimalized through repression and marginalization. The "angry citizens" who engage in protests are now depicted as enemies of the majority Russian people, a "fifth column" in the service of Western interests. Putin, on the other hand, represents the majority and no longer claims to represent the entire population.

In this context, the 2016 Duma elections to be held on 18 September present the Kremlin with a new set of problems to manage. One early decision was that the 2016 Duma will be chosen using a different election system from that used to elect the 2011 Duma. In the aftermath of the Beslan hostage crisis in 2004, the role of governors in the political system was drastically reduced. Not only were popular elections of governors ended (they resumed, in a highly restricted form in 2013) but single-member district (SMD) elections to the Duma, which gave governors a significant role in the composition of the Duma, were eliminated in favor of party lists. As a concession to regional interests, the party lists were subdivided into regional lists and deputies to the Duma were chosen from these lists based on the regional vote.

On 18 September 2016, for the first time since the 2003 Duma elections, a mixed system will be employed once again: half of the 450 seats will be chosen from party lists (again broken up into territorial districts) and half will come from elections in 225 single-member districts. This decision was prompted by the relative decline in the ratings of United Russia, and the experience in recent years of mixed elections in choosing regional legislatures. United Russia has a deep bench of potential SMD candidates who can be drawn from local officials, factory managers, prominent hospital administrators, and other prominent public leaders. Potentially strong opposition candidates are routinely blocked from registering, and no other party has competed successfully with UR at the SMD level. United Russia continues to have a majority of deputies in every one of the 85 regional legislative assemblies (including Sevastopol and Crimea—Russia formally annexed Crimea in 2014, but most countries continue to recognize this land as Ukrainian territory).

Redistricting and the Coming United Russia Majority

Rather than use the previous division of larger regions into SMDs, the Kremlin decided to begin anew. Its effort was quite obviously inspired by one of the most undemocratic elements of the American political system, gerrymandering by the party in power in order to undermine the electoral prospects for the opposing party. In 2014 Putin's presidential administration commissioned a study of American election techniques, given the return to SMDs.[1] But he implemented a system that includes several differences from the American

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1   "Administratsiia prezidenta zaprosila pomoshchi uchenykh," *Vedomosti* 15 July 2014; "V Kremle izuchaiut amerikanskie tekhnologii v kontekste vyborov v Dumu v 2016 godu," *Vedomosti* 11 March 2015.

model. In the U.S., the redistricting takes place in each state legislature rather than by some national authority, and controversial districting plans can be challenged through the court system. In Russia, the process was conceived and adopted within the presidential administration, approved by the Duma, with no effective right of appeal. Second, in the U.S. both of the two major parties have supporters broadly distributed across the country; this means that a shift among independents in a given election toward one party can at times overwhelm the impact of the redistricting, producing a defeat for the party that designed a "safe" district for itself. In Russia, there are second, third, and fourth parties, but in most cases there is a substantial gap between UR candidates and any particular opponent that makes victory by the latter unlikely. The Kremlin's rejection of runoff elections in favor of the "first-past-the-post" system (whoever wins the most votes in the first round wins, even if this is far less than 50%) will tend to benefit United Russia. With no limit on the number of candidates, the winner will often have received the votes of a very small percentage of the electorate.

The transparent intention of the redistricting was to dilute the urban vote, which is more inclined to vote for opposition parties or to use the voting process to express dissatisfaction. In recent years, cities such as Sverdlovsk, Novosibirsk, and Petrozavodsk (capital of Karelia) have rejected United Russia's choice and elected opposition candidates as mayors. Of particular concern was the experience of the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, in which the opposition leader Alexei Navalny unexpectedly won close to 30 percent of the vote and nearly forced Sergei Sobianin into a run-off election. Not only are rural voters more compliant and loyal to the ruling party, but rural polling places are more difficult to monitor for vote fraud. The new districts divide cities into several parts and then combine these urban areas with rural districts. For example, the city of Yekaterinburg, where the independent candidate Yevgenii Roizman defeated United Russia's choice for mayor in 2013, is divided among four of Sverdlovsk oblast's SMDs[2]. The resulting map looks very similar to the Texas legislature's scheme dividing the mostly liberal capital city of Austin into congressional districts that extend far beyond the Austin city limits. In the Russian context, de-urbanization of electoral districts removes influence from mayors

and their local political machines and places the outcome more completely in the hands of governors.

The redistricting and de-urbanization of Russian politics is not total. The three federal cities—Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Sevastopol'—can be subdivided into new SMDs, but remain overwhelmingly urban.[3] In Moscow and St. Petersburg, however, areas that had traditionally voted for the opposition (areas with a high concentration of the intelligentsia) were split among districts with a higher percentage of *biudzhetniki*. Also, 32 of the remaining 82 regions are too small to create SMDs, and so the election district remains the same and corresponds to the regions' borders.

The shift to the new districting and electoral system has several implications. The 2016 Duma will likely include many more deputies who identify primarily with their home regions rather than the party. Also, the representation of urban political and economic interests will be drastically reduced by the redistricting. (Holding the elections in September instead of the usual December is also likely to reduce urban turnout, since many Russians in September are still spending Sundays at their dachas outside of the city.) The result is that the most politically volatile part of the population will be even less represented than they have been in the 2011 Duma. This could raise the risk of mass street protests in the coming years, as alternative mechanisms for expressing the demands of the urban population have disappeared.

Election Administration and Uncovering Fraud

The Kremlin changed the composition of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and placed the respected human rights advocate Ella Pamfilova in charge. The CEC has already demonstrated that it will act aggressively to prevent abuses of election procedures. However, the legal foundations under which the CEC must operate are by their nature often undemocratic and give substantial advantages to candidates enjoying the support of the Kremlin. The CEC does not have time before the Duma elections to make more than token changes in the composition of regional and local elections commissions. These are bodies made up of officials and staff (most often teachers) with a history of subservience to the slightest administrative pressure.

Election observers who witnessed fraud were a major component of the activists who turned out to protest at Bolotnaia and Sakharov Squares in December 2011.

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2   See the map of Sverdlovsk oblast' electoral districts on p. 69 in the MS Word file at <http://www.cikrf.ru/law/decree_of_cec/2015/09/02/1740-pril2.doc>, on the web page of the Russian Central Election Commission with the decree of 2 September 2015 detailing the boundaries of the single-member electoral districts <http://www.cikrf.ru/law/decree_of_cec/2015/09/02/304-1740-6.html>.

3   The expansion of the boundaries of Moscow to include "new Moscow" brings some additional opportunities for diluting a few districts with rural residents, but that population is not large enough to have much impact.

Domestic observers will be significantly curtailed by new laws and regulations in 2016. Penalties for "interfering" in the work of elections commissions have increased. The monitoring group Golos, which played a major role in training observers and consolidating reports of violations, was the very first target of the Russian law on "foreign agent" NGOs, and it has suffered a major drop in its funding. New laws also hinder the work of journalists who seek to expose election fraud, including those operating in this capacity under the auspices of Golos. For the 2016 elections, journalists must choose which polling station they will monitor and file paper work far in advance. The consequence of the restrictions is exactly what the Kremlin intended: systematic observation of the election with well-prepared observers at a significant number of polling places is now practically impossible. Further, any negative reports on the widespread use of administrative resources and manipulation will be countered by loyal "observers" and government-organized NGOs (so-called GONGOs).[4] A key element of the Kremlin's strategy is to reduce the "noise" surrounding elections, and this can be done by making some concessions on election administration without threatening the larger mechanism that ensures Kremlin domination of the political process.

Representation of Other Political Parties

One danger to popular acceptance of the outcome would be the near total eclipse of even the tame, within-system opposition represented by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and A Just Russia. The Kremlin wants to maintain the façade of a multiparty democracy, but an overwhelming victory by United Russia in the SMDs and by party list would illustrate the actual balance of political power perhaps too starkly. There has been talk about a deal under which United Russia will cede in advance certain SMDs to the "systemic" opposition parties and possibly Yabloko. UR would agree not to field candidates in certain districts or would simply instruct local administrations to guarantee a victory by candidates for the systemic opposition. It is also quite possible that other loyal non-parliamentary parties, such as Rodina and Patriots of Russia, will be allowed to win in one or two districts, thus increasing the nominal number of parties in the Duma.

The non-systemic opposition has been hamstrung by a combination of media aggression, administrative barriers, and assorted "dirty tricks" orchestrated by the FSB and groups loyal to the Kremlin. Navalny's Progress Party was deprived of its legal status by the Ministry of Justice.[5] PARNAS, the party once co-led by Boris Nemtsov, Mikhail Kasyanov, and Ilya Yashin, was crippled by Nemtsov's assassination in February 2015. In 2016 efforts by Kasyanov, Yashin, and Navalny to revive the party—which can put forward candidates without gathering signatures—were sunk by intraparty disputes that were triggered by an NTV "expose" in April. The program drew on surreptitiously recorded video and audio apparently supplied by the FSB. Yabloko, the liberal party which has not been in the Duma since 2007 and which has lost much of its previous electorate, is registered and allowed to nominate candidates, and it planned to campaign actively for places in the Duma. Talks were held with Navalny to permit several of its candidates to run under the Yabloko label.

The Kremlin will not do anything to change what has become a constant element of Russian elections: the widespread use of "administrative resources" by regional governments. Officials' control over the media, ability to apply pressure on "*biudzhetniki*" (anyone dependent on state resources such as teachers, doctors, workers at state-financed enterprises and institutions, pensioners), and their influence over election commissions virtually ensures that the results will reflect their interests as they perceive them. Regional leaders have become adept at hiding the application of these levers. As a result, the process outwardly appears to be honest and open. The vote and its official tabulation could very well give United Russia a two-thirds, constitutional majority in the Duma, much larger than the slim majority it currently holds. The party is expected to do better than any other party in the list vote—and votes cast for parties that do not reach the 7 percent threshold are redistributed in favor of those that do. And, as indicated above, the party should perform extremely well in SMD races in light of redistricting and through administrative leverage.

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4   For an overview of several pro-Kremlin groups that will monitor the election process, see Yekaterina Vinokurova, "Kreml' b'et v GONGO," The New Times 23 May 2016, pp. 10–13.

5   Navalny appealed in June 2016 to have this decision reversed, which would allow the Progress Party to participate in the election under its own banner.

United Russia's "Primaries": A Preview of the Duma Elections?

By Darrell Slider and Nikolai Petrov, Moscow

Abstract:

Primary elections held in May provided a significant opportunity for United Russia to test its preparations for the Duma election in September. But the primaries also exposed intraparty conflicts and showed the increasing ability of governors and other regional elites to prevail in determining who will represent them in the center.

Establishing Primaries

On May 22, the ruling party United Russia held its first ever national "preliminary elections" or "primaries" to choose candidates for the September Duma election. Previously the party used other procedures to select candidates; starting in 2006 the process was designated "primaries." In 2011, four models for conducting this selection of candidates were proposed, and each region could choose from among these options. Participants in these earlier efforts were mostly limited to party insiders, and regional governors were themselves often candidates. In the 2016 primaries, participation was expanded to include all eligible voters. Governors were excluded from running, though many are expected to appear once again as "locomotives" heading territorial party lists and then relinquish their Duma seats to candidates lower on the list.

The 2016 primaries accomplished what they set out to do: they provided a ranking that the party could use in determining candidates for both single member districts (SMDs) and party lists.[1] The primaries also increased media exposure of United Russia and many of its most prominent candidates which will help in the general election. What was unexpected was the degree of controversy and intraparty squabbling exposed by the primaries. Attempts by the national party organization to place sitting Duma deputies to regions in which they had no previous ties were sometimes opposed by the governor, who typically has a major role in running the regional UR party organization and overseeing election administration. Even before the poll was held, sev-

eral candidates withdrew or were forced out because of conflicts with regional elites. For example, Aleksandr Khinshtein, a sitting Duma deputy and a controversial muck-raking journalist, removed himself under pressure from the race in Nizhnii Novgorod where he has had a series of running conflicts with the governor. In some cases, defeated and offended candidates are expected to turn to another party and run against the UR candidate.

Turnout

Turnout figures for the primaries (which in the Russian context should be interpreted not as actual turnout, but "reported turnout") show a pattern similar to that in recent elections. Most typical was modest turnout, an average of 9.6 percent (10.5 million voters) was reported nationally. In many regions the turnout appeared to have been coerced: voters who worked at state institutions, pensioners, and others susceptible to pressure from local administrators made up the core electorate for the primaries. Party officials capped the turnout in advance at 15% of eligible voters by only providing that number of ballots to election commissions. The number of polling stations was also limited, to about 20 percent of those normally functioning during an actual election. The party employed local election commission staff and equipment, and were able to use polling places (including security) at highly subsidized rates.

Turnout data showed what charitably might be called anomalies. In previous elections regions such as Chuvashia, Tatarstan, and Chechnya have run up the numbers to show massive voter turnout. In the primaries they simply reported turnout at the maximum allowed by United Russia. In Tatarstan, each of six SMDs came within .05 of the 15% limit, and two districts hit the target exactly. There were no apparent complaints from regions that the number of ballots was insufficient; election commissions in regions reporting high turnout simply made sure that virtually every ballot given to each polling place was marked by counting time.
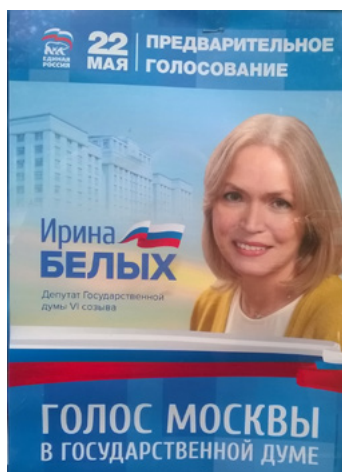
Competition

The illusion of competition was created by the generally high number of candidates running. In SMD prima-

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1　The rules adopted for the primaries allowed the party leadership to replace candidates who won primaries if they believed it was expedient. Also, winners had the right to refuse to run in the Duma election. Speakers and deputy speakers of regional parliaments, for example, who won in many regions, are likely to remain in their posts. For them, the primaries were a means of self-promotion in advance of regional elections. In smaller regions that have only one SMD, primary voters received a single ballot. The top vote-getter would be the presumptive candidate for the SMD, and the remaining ranking would be used in creating the territorial party lists. It was not clear how list rankings would be used to create territorial lists—there will be 35—that combine multiple regions.

ries, the range was between two (a SMD in Tatarstan) and 30 (a SMD in Moscow and one in Bashkortostan) candidates for each nomination; the median number of candidates was nine. In most primary races, however, there was no real contest. The mismatch between one of the candidates and the rest of the field was so great that the outcome was predetermined. To take one extreme example: in Sverdlovsk SMD no. 173, a Duma member who is a billionaire with strong ties to the region won 70 percent of the vote. Second place (11 percent) went to a cashier at a local grocery store. In Crimea, in all three SMD districts winners reportedly received 95% of the votes. On average, winners of SMD races received 67 percent, while the second place candidate received 25 percent. Most prominent UR party leaders and nationally known celebrities won under similarly favorable conditions [see appendix on pp. 8/9]. Of the 225 races that determined SMD candidates, only 19 were won by a margin of less than 10%.

Local administrations often expended considerable energy to promote one candidate, tilting the playing field to the detriment of all other candidates. In the northern district of Moscow, for example, the official district newspaper that is distributed free to each resident featured articles in the weeks prior to the primary on how Irina Belykh, a little-known member of the Duma and leader of the Moscow UR party organization, was improving the lives of local citizens.[2] The other seventeen candidates in her race were hardly mentioned. Prior to the primary, the announcement board next to each apartment entrance (access to these is controlled by district government) prominently displayed her campaign poster. (see the accompanying photographs.) If that was not enough to get the desired result, it is apparent that elec-

Election poster for Irina Belykh, advertised as "the Voice of Moscow in the State Duma." (photograph by Darrell Slider)

tion officials were able to add to her vote total using other means. Alexei Navalny posted to social media a video of someone, presumably an election commission official in a north Moscow polling station, going through a stack of ballots and marking each for Belykh.[3] When the votes were counted, she received 49 percent, while her nearest competitor received only 12 percent. The candidate did not appear to expend much effort on the campaign. Irina Belykh participated in the required minimum of two "debates", both held the same day in a *Moskva24* television studio, though the debates were not televised. Four other candidates appeared with her on the rostrum, but only two were running in her district. The audience consisted, not of members of the public, but of between 20–30 United Russia workers. Anyone who wanted to see her debate had to access the United Russia site and the page created for each primary candidate. Debate rules prohibited criticism of other candidates and did not allow direct questions by the candidates to each other; questions from the audience came from designated supporters of each candidate.

Surprising Results

The Moscow party list voting results were a surprise. Moscow will likely have the largest number of seats to fill by regional party list, and it has the most SMDs. The Moscow list ballot was almost a meter long, containing the names of 128 candidates. With the number of candidates on offer, one would expect a wide dispersion of votes; voters could choose more than one candidate, or even vote for everyone on the list, if they wished to mark every box. Liubov' Dukhanina, a member of the Popular Front and school administrator with a very low public profile, was reported to have received 77 percent in her SMD race and emerged as the top candidate in all of Moscow on the party list voting with 33 percent. How a little-known candidate could win such a dominant victory out of this field of candidates raises strong suspicions of fraud. Another SMD winner in Moscow with ties to the Popular Front, Duma deputy Vyacheslav Lysakov, also ran on the party list. Yet he received ten times fewer votes than Dukhanina in the party list vote.

The result of the primaries, whether intended or not, is that many current UR Duma members will not appear on the September ballot. Initially 189 of 238 UR Duma deputies announced they would compete. A large number did not fulfill the formal requirements. Of sitting Duma members who officially participated in the primaries, 49 either lost their SMD race or placed too low in the regional list to be re-elected. Aleksei Pushkov, the chairman of the Duma foreign affairs committee

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2   <http://severstolici.ru/arkhiv-izdaniy.php> Belykh took over the post heading UR's Moscow party organization after it was relinquished by Mayor Sergei Sobianin in December 2012. In October 2013 she entered the Duma when the party named her to replace a deputy who had been appointed a senator. She is considered a Sobianin ally.

3   <navalny.com/p/4876/>

and a prominent voice in justifying Putin's foreign policy, ran in Perm' and managed to receive only 14 percent of the vote, seventh place on the party list. Robert Shlegel, once consider a rising star among young members of United Russia, finished tenth on the list in Astrakhan with only four percent. Party leaders justified the rejection of sitting members by accusing them of not taking the campaign seriously. The primaries were presented as a "renewal" of UR, bringing in new blood, fresh ideas, and greater legitimacy for both the party and the Duma. The actual reason for defeat seems to have been a lack of support from either the national party organization, or regional officials, or both.

Maria Maksakova, currently a Duma deputy from St. Petersburg and an internationally known opera star, was one of those defeated, and she emerged as one of the sharpest critics of the primaries. Early during the voting she reported through social media that in one precinct in her district only one voter had cast a ballot between 8 and 9:00 am, yet there were already "around 500" completed ballots in the urn. Several of her observers were forcibly removed from polling stations and beaten. In recent years, Maksakova had developed a reputation as one willing to speak her mind and go against the party's decisions. In an interview on *Dozhd'*, Maksakova complained that Sergei Vostretsov, a Duma member who entered the race after she did, hardly campaigned in the district and was not known there; yet the results showed him winning with 81 percent of the vote. Maksakova came in fourth, in a district where reported turnout was around three percent.

Since the primaries were not official elections, the normal legal framework governing elections in Russia did not apply. Thus, there are no legal sanctions for those who engaged in vote fraud or violated UR's self-declared procedures; it was left to United Russia to decide who had violated the rules and what the penalty should be. Of course, this approach made it convenient for the party to apply justice flexibly, to the party's advantage. Three candidates were disqualified by UR after the elections, though only one of these cases was in response to procedural violations.[4] The winning candidate from Nizhnii Tagil, local police chief Ibrahim Abdulkadyrov, was accused of bribing voters, busing supporters to polling stations, and using administrative resources. Abdulkadyrov claimed victory was stolen from him and announced that he would still run for the seat.[5]

Enhanced Power for Regional Elites

Perhaps the most striking impact of the primaries on the future Duma lies in the Kremlin's apparent decision to defer to regional elites and above all to governors. Of the candidates who won the 225 races for SMDs, only 18 were sitting Duma deputies with few or no ties to the region. (Several of these, by the way, emphasized in their biographical sketches their success in previous lobbying for the region.) The vast majority of winners consisted of current Duma members with strong connections to the region (64), deputies from regional legislatures (53), regional government officials (24), and prominent local personalities from business, education or medicine (22). The goal of regional leaders seems clear—to pack the Duma with potential lobbyists for their region. For United Russia it was important to change the party's image, which tends to be associated with colorless bureaucrats. Thus, there were a large number of winning candidates who are teachers, doctors, athletes, and cultural figures. Most of these, if allowed to vote their opinions in the Duma, would side with paternalistic-oriented *biudzhetniki*.

The primaries served additional functions. They allowed United Russia to begin its party election campaign far in advance of the official campaign period, and a significant amount of time was devoted to United Russia and its candidates on state media at the federal and regional level. As shown above, the primaries helped in advancing a new set of potential Duma rank-and-file members. (The final choice of candidates takes place at a party congress at the end of June.) To a lesser extent, it gave candidates some campaigning practice and helped the party sharpen its message for the September election. Finally, the primaries served as a dry run for mobilizing administrative resources that will be applied during the election in the service of United Russia.

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4   Two candidates were disqualified, in Kaliningrad and Ul'yanovsk, on the grounds that they were recently charged with criminal activity unrelated to the primaries. Yevgenii Morozov, a former deputy governor in Kaliningrad, had won his SMD race with over half the votes cast.
5   "Ya uveren, chto poluchennyi mnoi resul'tat byl chestnym," <www.v-tagile.ru>, 8 June 2016.

Appendix: High-Profile Primary Winners for United Russia

Candidate	Background	Region	Result
Party leaders			
Isaev, Andrei	Deputy Speaker Duma	Udmurtia	61% first on list
Makarov, Andrei	Budget comm. Chair	Riazan'	69% first on list
Naryshkin, Sergei	Speaker Duma	Leningrad Oblast	86% SMD
Neverov, Sergei	Deputy Speaker, UR Sec. General Council	Smolensk	73% SMD 69% first on list
Nikonov, Viacheslav	Education comm. Chair, Molotov grandson	Nizhnii Novgorod	66% first on list
Vasil'ev, Vladimir	Deputy Speaker, Head of UR fraction	Tver'	67% SMD 44% first on list
Yarovaia, Irina	Security Comm. Chair	Kamchatka	68% SMD/list
Zhelezniak, Sergei	Deputy Speaker	Moscow	74% SMD
Zhukov, Aleksandr	1st Deputy Speaker	Novosibirsk	65% first on list
Media			
Boyarskii, Sergei	St. Petersburg TV Channel Director, son of actor Mikhail Boyarskii	St. Petersburg	63% first on list
Tolstoi, Peter	State TV news host (Channel One), Grandson of Lev Tolstoi	Moscow	76% SMD
Revenko, Yevgenii	State TV news host (Rossiya1)	Voronezh	70% first on list
Pushkina, Oksana	TV show host	Moscow oblast	71% SMD
Yampol'skaya, Yekaterina	Kultura newspaper editor; outspoken social conservative	Cheliabinsk	30% first on list
Culture			
Kobzon, Iosip	Popular singer; in Duma since 1995	Zabaikal krai	68%, first on list
Kozhevnikova, Maria	Gymnast and actress, in Duma since 2011	Vologda	76% first on list
Sholokhov, Aleksandr	Director of Sholokhov Estate-museum; grandson of author Mikhail Sholokhov	Rostov	84% SMD 68% first on list
Tolstaya, Yekaterina	Director of Tolstoi Estate-museum; wife of grandson of Lev Tolstoi	Tula	59% second list
Sports			
Chepikov, Sergei	Biathlon	Sverdlovsk	58% first on list
Emirgamzaev, Abdulgamid	Judo and Sambo Master	Dagestan	74% SMD
Fetisov, Vladislav	Hockey, currently senator	Moscow oblast	92% SMD
Karelin, Aleksandr	Wrestler, in Duma since 1999	Novosibirsk	84% SMD
Karpov, Anatolii	Chess, in Duma since 2011	Tiumen'	50% first on list
Rodnina, Irina	Figure skater, in Duma since 2007	Moscow oblast	81% SMD 29% first on list

Appendix: High-Profile Primary Winners for United Russia (continued)

Candidate	Background	Region	Result
Romanova, Yana	Biathlon	Omsk	18% second list
Tretyak, Vladislav	Hockey, in Duma since 2003	Ulyanovsk	68% first on list
Valuev, Nikolai	Boxer, in Duma since 2011	Briansk	70% SMD 6 5% first on list
Zhurova, Svetlana	Speed skater, in Duma since 2013, previously senator	Leningrad oblast	34% second list
Cosmonauts			
Romanenko, Roman	International Space Station	Orenburg	58% first on list
Serova, Yelena	first female cosmonaut on International Space Station	Moscow oblast	82% SMD
Suraev, Maksim	International Space Station	Moscow oblast	78% SMD 26% second list
Tereshkova, Valentina	first woman in space	Yaroslavl'	65% first on list
Other			
Milonov, Vitali	St. Petersburg city council; leading anti-gay activist	St. Petersburg	63% SMD
Fedorov, Yevgenii	Senator, founder of NOD "National Liberation Movement" Radical "patriotic" organization	Kaliningrad	50% first on list
Sablin, Dmitry	Current senator; organizer of "anti-Maidan" movement	Moscow	67% SMD
Onishchenko, Gennadi	Former chief sanitary inspector	Moscow	67% SMD

Note: The term "second list" means that a candidate came in second on the party list.

Source: United Russia website <www.er.ru>

Primaries in Saratov: How it Happened

By Alexander Sazhnov and Andrei Shenin, Washington and Moscow

Abstract:
This article provides an inside view of the United Russia primary process in Saratov Oblast. Overall, the primaries had little impact because they did not bring new people into the political process and did little to convince ordinary citizens that the elections would be fair.

No New Faces

This year, Russia is experimenting with "primaries." This idea, developed by political consultants associated with Russia's largest political party, the pro-Kremlin United Russia, is supposed to provide the most legitimate and transparent mechanism to improve the party's credibility before the September elections to the State Duma, the lower house of Russia's parliament. Almost every Russian citizen older than 21 and without a criminal record had an opportunity to take part in this political rally.

During the primaries, United Russia formed a list of candidates in each region that consisted of two groups. The first group were members of the party; the second group consisted of anyone who had passed the registration procedure and was planning to stand for election in the single-member districts.

In fact, the primaries were nothing new in Russian political life because the party controlled every step of its candidates' actions, especially those who wished to be elected in the single-seat electoral districts. Point 2.22 of "The Primaries Rules" declared that United Russia set up all the debates and events, including meetings with the electorate. The party's experts also approved or rejected all the propaganda material of the candidates in advance. The Russian media reported that the primaries cost about 500 million rubles (8 million USD) to run.

As a journalist, I [Andrei Shenin] worked in Saratov (population of about 1 million) as an assistant to a local businessman, whom I consider to be a smart and distinguished person, Andrei Malyshev. Andrei had no desire to be elected, but he wanted to see how political life functioned from the inside. In retrospect, I have to say that these primaries did not bring any new faces to the regional political community. The party put forward mostly current members of the Duma. Nevertheless, this process brought home to people what elections in Russia really are and why there will be no serious political changes in the country in the near future.

Malyshev meeting local people. (photograph by Andrei Shenin)

Country and Province: The Highest and the Lowest Levels of Political Context

The institutional design of the Russian electoral system has been in a period of flux since the primaries were introduced in 2009. In fact, the new institution of the primary system, formalized by United Russia's internal statutory documents, is still under construction. The ruling party intends to propose amendments to current Russian legislation related to procedures for

Malyshev meeting local people. (photograph by Andrei Shenin)

primary elections in order to improve the pool of qualified candidates.

According to neo-institutional theory, the transplantation of institutions involves various actors initializing changes that they believe would be desirable. In other words, the question is as follows: Who is interested in these transformations, and what goals do they pursue? As the representatives of United Russia claim, the idea was to improve the quality of the candidate pool and also expand it with popular non-party single-seat nominees.

However, particular attention should be paid to the Russian political context, especially to the relationship between the state and the third sector in the last decade. As a matter of fact, during the period from 2006 to 2014, the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation has been partially formed from those politicians and activists (including those of the opposition) who did not manage to obtain a seat in the Duma of the fourth and fifth convocations. Most of these individuals, such as Alla Pugacheva, Gleb Samoilov, Henry Reznik, were appointed by President Vladimir Putin. Despite having only advisory functions in the Public Chamber, the political ambitions of its several members were partially satisfied because they still could participate in public affairs.

However, after the online voting in 2014 (which determined one-quarter of the Public Chamber members), some of oppositionists lost their seats. This circumstance led to a weakening of the institutional capacities of human rights groups and opposition parties in the Russian political process. At this point, primaries offered a chance for these oppositionists to return to politics.

Following this line, the foreign agent law passed by the Duma in 2012 (in addition to reducing the foreign funding of Russian NGOs) was intended to depoliticize civil society organizations. Yet, in the same year, the Duma approved a bill which simplified the registration of political parties and lowered the minimum threshold

of their membership to 500 people. Thus, the authorities sought to shift the political activities of the NGOs into more familiar and traditional institution like parties. In accordance with the ideological part of the election program of United Russia, the party intends to play the role of mediator between state officials and society. In this sense, the primaries seem to be a part of a bigger game.

Nevertheless, these processes are working better in Moscow than in areas with a far less energetic political life, like Saratov or other provincial cities, where the primaries are hardly able to bring "new blood" or resurrect people's faith in political parties. In regions where political elites know each other well, the biggest political parties – United Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) – have already occupied a certain place in people's minds and usually only play an active role before elections.

United Russia, as a ruling party, has almost all the key officials in regional governments among its supporters. For example, in Saratov region, the governor Valeriy Radaev is a member and devout supporter of the party, the regional parliament speaker, Vladimir Kapkaev, was the secretary of the party's regional committee at the same time, and now this position is held by Saratov mayor Oleg Grischenko. In addition, United Russia has several youth organizations and several supporters among state employees who joined the party as an obligation to get a job.

The two other parties do not have such effective administrative resources. Therefore, their political campaigns are usually based on criticism of both the ruling party and the Russian government as a whole. Key voters for the KPRF are mostly retired people who dream about the return of the USSR, despite the fact that KPRF-leaders do not use the words "communism" and "socialism" in their statements any more. LDPR, in contrast to its name, desperately tries to use nationalistic rhetoric and poses as a "party of young people", but most supporters vote for the LDPR charismatic leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, rather than for the party's political program.

Mechanism of Primaries: View from Inside

I met my future candidate, Andrei Malyshev when he hired my boss, Nikolay who tasked me with interviewing and writing Andrei's biography for the primaries' web-site: <http://pg.er.ru/>. On this resource, every candidate was able to publish information about himself, his political program, and reports about meetings with the electorate. It is fair to say that this aspect of the campaign was transparent and was always available for everyone and I cannot remember any glitches or system errors in its work.

The elections-for-everyone approach brought out candidates from all kinds of social layers. Among electoral competitors in single-seat electoral districts were doctors, teachers, a retired police officer, a children's rights deputy ombudsmen, emergency response workers, journalists, and even the mayor of Saratov. After analyzing this list, few experts doubted that the mayor would win; after all there were already rumors and information leaked that he would be elected to the Russian parliament. Nevertheless, the candidates were more interested in seeing how the primary process worked, than they were to score a victory.

The schedules of debates were divided by cities and topics (medicine, agriculture, employment, housing and municipal services, and so forth) and set up for every candidate by the Organizing Committee of United Russia. Participants also had to be ready for a specific debate and bring their own support team of 3–5 people who would pose one question for every other candidate. I visited two debates in small regional cities, Bazarniy Karabulak and Tatischevo, where I noticed that no one was able to resist the doctor's experience (who is also an honorary member of United Russia) on medical debates, or the mayor on a debate devoted to housing and municipal services. Nevertheless, these were open debates with previously announced topics, so candidates all had the opportunity to prepare for answering questions from local constituents.

A few sample questions were:
- Could you help to provide an Internet connection to our village?
- How can revenue be redistributed to benefit the cities and regions instead of going to the federal budget (Saratov, for example, usually sends $1.3 billion out of its $1.4 billion budget to Moscow. The remaining $100 million is for the city with a population of about 1 million people for the whole year.)
- What are your plans for developing our region?

Debate in Tatischevo. (photograph by Andrei Shenin)

Debate in Tatischevo. (photograph by Andrei Shenin)

Analyzing these debates, it is hard to imagine that in small cities people believe politicians more than in big cities and that the politicians are going to take active part in Russia's political life. My boss once said, "If you put these events into perspective, it turns out that in a small city there were candidates, who have never been there before, know nothing about local problems, and are being seen for the first time, but United Russia tries to convince the people to vote for one of them." It became apparent that some candidates browsed materials about such cities during their trip there: "Well, where are we going… and what does Wikipedia say about this place?"

So, what are the primaries – just a show or do the organizers really believe in "love at first sight?" Even my candidate, whose speech extoled patriotic education, concerns about future generations, and improving the situation in the village (a huge problem in Russia nowadays) did not touch anyone's heart. (You can see one of the many debates here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LxB-cyydJg>)

The same things happened during meetings with the electorate. First, such meetings were not essential, and if the candidate desired to speak with the people, he would pay for the organization himself. As practice showed, in order to gather even 10–15 people from a 200-unit apartment building (about 500–600 residents), there is a large amount of preparation required. Young boys and girls must be hired to place posters in the yard, talk with their neighbors, and invite them the week before, then a couple of days before, and then right before the meeting. Some candidates tried to get support from volunteers among their neighbors (especially, active retired people, who consider such meetings entertainment) or use children which is illegal. One political party, for example, had to find a dwarf to persuade prosecutors that he was the one portrayed on propaganda materials.

The pictures demonstrate a usual meeting between people and a candidate, when they meet for the first time. As a result, conversation typically turns not to Q&A, but to complaints about politicians and promises by the candidate to fix everything in the event of victory. According to my experience, all the complaints can easily be divided into three groups: municipal service problems, small pensions, and "today there are thieves everywhere; in the USSR we lived better." Candidates today have no legitimate power to fix anything, so all they are able to do is to woo people to self-organize in order to make life better and work with authorities through official channels. As a whole, these sessions more resemble a chat on Reddit than meetings with voters.

Conclusion

In the end, the primaries in Saratov had no impact on the upcoming elections, because they could not bring "new blood" into the political system, nor convince people of the transparency of the elections. The winners of the primaries were almost all the same people who are sitting representatives (Olga Batalina, Nikolai Pankov, Vasiliy Maksimov) and senators (Mikhail Isaev) plus Saratov's mayor (Oleg Grischenko). Andrei Malyshev took about 8.5 percent of the vote in his single-seat district.

The only additional thing worth mentioning is that, through the primary process, United Russia, in fact, started its election campaign long before the official campaign period begins. And everything turned out very well for it, given the fact that the primaries were organized by the same people and party that the people mostly do not trust and are tired of.

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (<www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de>), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University, and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen (<www.laender-analysen.de/russland>), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (<www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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