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What the Elections Tell Us

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Abstract

The December 2003 parliamentary and the March 2004 presidential elections witnessed worryingly lopsided victories for incumbent president Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin-backed United Russia party. These victories were assisted by an unlevel electoral playing field. Russia's political system has become less pluralistic on Putin's watch. During his first term, Putin did little to strengthen democratic institutions and much to weaken them. These antidemocratic political "reforms" made it more difficult for opponents of the regime to compete effectively in the 2003-2004 electoral cycle. Nevertheless, these ballots also demonstrated the extent to which elections in Russia have become thoroughly institutionalized, and that they make more difficult the consolidation of authoritarianism.

Russian Democracy in Eclipse

WHAT THE ELECTIONS TELL US

Michael McFaul and Nikolai Petrov

Michael McFaul is the Peter and Helen Bing Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and associate professor of political science at Stanford University. His latest books include, with James Goldgeier, Power and Purpose: American Policy Towards Russia after the Cold War (2003); and with Timothy Colton, Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000 (2003). Nikolai Petrov is a scholar-in-residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center. His latest book, with Michael McFaul and Andrei Ryabov, is Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform (2004).

Although Russia's most recent presidential and parliamentary ballots witnessed worryingly lopsided victories for incumbent president Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin-backed United Russia party, they also demonstrated the extent to which elections in Russia have become thoroughly institutionalized. In December 2003, Russians went to the polls for the fourth time in a decade to select representatives to the lower house of the parliament, the State Duma. Three months later, Russian voters turned up again to select a president for the fourth time in thirteen years. Both of these national elections took place as scheduled and guided by laws approved through a legislative process well before the vote.

In fact, the basic electoral laws governing these two votes had not changed appreciably since 1993. In the fall of that year, Russian president Boris Yeltsin issued a decree, stating that the new lower house of parliament, the State Duma, would be elected according to a mixed system: Half the 450 seats were to be determined by a majoritarian system in newly drawn electoral districts, while the other half were to be allocated according to a system of party-list proportional representation (PR). Parties had to win at least 5 percent of the total nationwide vote to win any seats on the PR ballot. This electoral system, later codified into law, remained unchanged until last year, when the Duma approved a new threshold of 7 percent for the 2007 PR ballot. The rules

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