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THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: PROGNOSES AND PERSPECTIVES

ANATOLY M. KHAZANOV

Abstract

The Russian presidential election will almost certainly be won either by Yeltsin or by Zyuganov. In either case, its outcome does not seem favorable for the country's transition to a liberal democratic order. Zyuganov's victory will lead to re-nationalization of commercial banks and big enterprises, populist measures that will speed up inflation, a neo-imperialist policy toward the former Soviet republics, and a much more confrontational policy toward the West. Yeltsin's victory will result in Russia's further move toward semi-authoritarian rule. It seems that the period of internal instability will continue for the near future. Inasmuch as the undemocratic and antiliberal trend in Russia's development is mainly connected with the internal situation, there is very little that the West can do to prevent it, except to watch events closely without excessive optimism so as to draw conclusions and make necessary adjustments in its policy toward Russia.

During my visit to Moscow in February 1996, I discussed the current situation in Russia with leading figures in the parties of democratic orientation, with liberal members of the Russian parliament, editors and columnists of several newspapers and magazines, political scientists, analysts, and opinion poll experts, as well as with members of Yeltsin's administration. These discussions are reflected in the following comments on the ongoing political process in the country, especially with regard to the forthcoming presidential elections.

Contrary to many rumors and much speculation, the presidential elections in Russia will almost certainly take place on time, in June 1996. Their results, however, may be very dangerous to the country's transition to a liberal democratic order. At present, public sentiment in Russia is certainly moving toward the communists and nationalists. This is due to several factors, including economic difficulties, dissatisfaction with the results of economic reforms, disappointment with the political elite which is considered incompetent and corrupt, and a sense of national humiliation which is accompanied by growing anti-Western and xenophobic feelings skillfully fuelled by ultra-nationalist and communist forces. This change in attitudes is connected not only with economic but also with social and psychological factors. The problem is not so much that reforms have inflicted too much pain, but that this pain was distributed inequitably, and that many people no longer believe that their life will become better in the near future.
Still, the democratic parties enjoy the support of at least 25 percent of the electorate, while about 40, or even 50 percent of the electorate do not have firm political preferences, except a deep dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. However, at the moment the democratic forces in Russia are in disarray and are unable to unite. The prevailing mood both among the leaders and among their followers is that of impotence and defeatism.

The Russia’s Democratic Choice Party and its leader Yegor Gaidar, despite their failure in the parliamentary elections, still enjoy significant support amongst the intelligentsia, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. However, thus far the desperate political manoeuvering of its leaders have proven to be unsuccessful. The party has made two attempts to find candidates for the presidential election who might be acceptable to both democratic and centrist electorates, and thus could have a chance to defeat Yeltsin and Zyuganov.

Its first choice was Prime Minister Chernomyrdin. It is not a secret in Moscow that personal relations between Yeltsin and Chernomyrdin are strained and that the latter will hardly be able to retain his position in case of Yeltsin’s re-election. Politicians in Moscow are speculating only about the timing of Chernomyrdin’s dismissal, whether it takes place on the eve of the presidential elections or afterwards. (His successor most likely will be Oleg Soskovets who enjoys the support of Yeltsin’s "inner circle"). However, after some hesitation Chernomyrdin refused to compete with the President in the June 1996 election. The reasons for this are unclear, but the two prevailing explanations circulating in Moscow’s political circles are as follows: (1) Yeltsin has at his disposal some materials that can easily compromise the Prime Minister, and thus keeps him under control. (According to rumors circulating in Moscow, Chernomyrdin is one of the richest men in the country. It is hard to tell whether they are justified or not. However, their spread is significant in itself); (2) Because of his personal characteristics Chernomyrdin is unable to withstand Yeltsin’s strong personality in a harsh political competition.

The second attempt made by Gaidar was to persuade the fairly popular liberal governor of Nizhny-Novgorod province, Nemtsov, to run for the presidency. This attempt also failed. Nemtsov is certainly an ambitious politician, but he thinks that he still lacks sufficient nationwide visibility and prefers to wait for the next presidential election. Besides, he is semi-Jewish which is a liability in the prevailing political climate in the country. Thus, Gaidar’s party has failed to nominate a candidate who might have a chance to win the election.

The Yabloko Party has already nominated its leader Grigory Yavlinsky as its candidate. Although his popularity among democrats has somewhat diminished (Yavlinsky is considered as the main contributor to their failure to create a united front for the December 1995 parliamentary election), the leaders of Yabloko hope that all the democrats in Russia will vote
for Yavlinsky, if not in the first round of the presidential election, then in the second one, simply because they will not have any other choice. For this reason, and because of the well-known personal animosity between Yavlinsky and Gaidar, the former avoids, and in practical terms simply sabotages all attempts to create a united democratic front in the presidential elections, except on his own terms.

However, Yavlinsky's calculations may well turn out to be wrong. Firstly, it is far from certain that all people of democratic persuasion will vote for Yavlinsky, especially in the first round of the elections. Thus there is no guarantee at all that Yavlinsky will get enough votes to run in the second round. In the second round some of them for various reasons may prefer to vote for Yeltsin. Secondly, and most importantly, at this moment his meager following make his chances to win the elections very small.

In an attempt to increase his popularity, Yavlinsky resorts to some populist statements. However, in this respect he cannot compete with the Communists; on the contrary, these tactics only confirm an existing suspicion that Yavlinsky is an opportunistic politician who cannot be trusted.

The Communists. At the moment about 30 percent of the Russian electorate claim that they are going to vote for the Communist leader, Zyuganov. If by June 1996 the tendency remains the same, Zyuganov will apparently win the first round of the elections. But this does not guarantee him a victory in the second round. Since about 25 percent of the Russian electorate will not vote for the Communists under any conditions, Zyuganov has to appeal to those 40-50 percent of the electorate whose political sympathies are fluctuating.

Zyuganov understands that in the December 1995 parliamentary elections many people voted not so much for the Communists but against the government. Thus, he also faces the problem of increasing his support base and has to appeal to different social strata with contradictory demands and interests. Hence, his different statements made to different audiences. Sometimes Zyuganov sounds almost like a social democrat, sometimes like a die-hard Stalinist. Still, his opportunities for manoeuvering are fairly limited, because the major faction in the Russian Communist party resists its transformation into a social democratic one. Besides, Zyuganov almost managed to secure the support of the splinter ultra-left Communist parties and groups (the most influential is that of Vladimir Anpilov). However, the price of this support would likely be Zyuganov's refusal to follow a "revisionist course".

The suspicion that exists among some of Gaidar's supporters about a possible alliance between Zyuganov and Yavlinsky does not have serious grounds. On the other hand, part of the ultra-nationalists will apparently vote for Zyuganov, But it is doubtful that the major nationalistic party, that of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, will support Zyuganov in the elections.
The Russian Liberal-Democratic Party of Mr. Zhirinovsky. Zhirinovsky is a smart politician, and he knows that he cannot win the presidential elections. It is even dubious that he will be able to enter the second round of the race. Apparently, at the crucial moment, he will trade his support to one of the two remaining candidates. In all probability, Zhirinovsky will support Yeltsin against Zyuganov, since to some extent he competes with the latter for the same groups of the electorate. Zhirinovsky will certainly demand a price for his support of Yeltsin. Actually, unofficial cooperation between Zhirinovsky's faction in the parliament and the government already exists. If it continues in the future, it will push Yeltsin further toward nationalistic internal and foreign policy. However, the problem is whether those who voted for Zhirinovsky in the last parliamentary elections would follow his call to vote for Yeltsin in the second round.

The "party of power" of President Yeltsin. Although the popularity of the Russian President is at present very low, and his health and mental abilities raise many doubts, he remains a formidable candidate in the forthcoming elections. Gaidar certainly exaggerates when he claims that if Yeltsin runs for the presidency, the election of Zyuganov is inevitable. Yeltsin's advisors count on several factors that, in their opinion, should help him to win the elections.

Firstly, Yeltsin should secure the support of the regional administrations that have a certain degree of control over the electorate, especially in the provinces, and which to some extent can even resort to fraud. (Incidentally, according to recent opinion polls, 68 percent of Russians think that the results of the elections will be somewhat falsified.) Apparently, most of these administrations will support Yeltsin, who has already made many concessions to them increasing their power. Despite the communist background of most of the regional leaders, they are afraid that, if Zyuganov is elected, it will lead to a new redistribution of power and property. Secondly, Yeltsin can also count on the important support of the so-called "force ministers", i.e. the ministers of Defence and Interior and the heads of the intelligence services and the secret police. Thirdly, it is hoped that the democrats, facing a choice between Yeltsin and Zyuganov in the second round, will vote for the former as the lesser of two evils.

Still, in order to win in a more or less fair election Yeltsin would have to attract a part of those voters who in the last parliamentary elections voted either for the Communists, or for the nationalists. His policy during the years 1995-1996, and especially after December 1995, clearly demonstrates that he is actively pursuing this goal. Thus, he has sacked the last liberals in the government and in his administration, is about to embark on a populist spending spree, and is hardening his attitude toward the West. There is no guarantee, however, that Yeltsin will be re-elected, and a smooth transition of power also remains a problem. While the
presidential elections will almost certainly take place, it cannot be excluded completely that in case of unfavorable results for the Russian President, they may be canceled after the first or the second round, under one pretext or another.

In this analysis I do not mention the Chechen conflict as a factor in the forthcoming presidential elections. Despite its importance for the Russian political development, this conflict will hardly become a decisive factor in this election. I will soon submit a special report on the current situation in Chechnia.

Conclusions
At present, Russia's immediate political future looks rather grim. Both of the most probable winners in the presidential election leave little room for any hope that the country will proceed further on a path of political and economic liberalization. The Russian Communists are far from having been transformed into social democrats, and Zyuganov's victory will almost certainly mean re-nationalization of commercial banks and big enterprises, other populist economic measures that will speed up inflation, a neo-imperialist policy toward the former Soviet republics, and a much more confrontational policy toward the West. If Yeltsin retains power, his policy line does not promise to be very different from that of Zyuganov. His regime may acquire additional semi-authoritarian characteristics.

An additional problem is the extent to which Yeltsin, if re-elected, will be able to lead the country. Some people who until recently worked in his administration, and even one member of the Presidential Council (all of them have an intimate knowledge of the state of affairs in the Russian ruling elite), complained to me that Yeltsin has become intolerant of any criticism and disagreement, and that he simply does not adequately comprehend the situation in Russia. He has ceased to read newspapers, listens only to his supporters and cronies, and is under the growing influence of his "inner circle" which consists of such notorious figures in the eyes of the Russian people as Korzhakov, Barsukov, Iliushin, and a few others.

After the presidential election a new cold war will hardly take place - Russia is too weak for it. But the possibility of cold peace cannot be excluded. Inasmuch as the undemocratic and antiliberal trend in Russia's development is mainly connected with the internal situation in the country, there is very little, if anything, that the West can do to prevent this unfavorable course, except to watch events closely, without excessive optimism, so as to then draw necessary conclusions and make necessary adjustments in its policy toward Russia.