

# Analysing the effects of russian electoral reforms politics essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

From 2001-2008 Vladimir Putin, then President of the Russian Federation, passed a number of electoral system reforms which have had major impacts on political parties, then and now. Putin's electoral and party reforms have, as demonstrated below, made it much more difficult for small parties to win seats in the federal, regional, and local branches. These reforms have also made impossible for independent candidates to contest elections; and regional parties are prohibited from competing completely. These new reforms will only increase United Russia's (Putin's 'party of power') domination of all national, regional and local elections. Supporters of United Russia now dominate the electoral commissions at all levels. No longer will citizens have the opportunity to show their disapproval of the electoral system by voting 'against all' candidates. The weakness of political parties in Russian local councils has allowed local executives to rule their local communities with little or no legislative check on their activities.

In June of 2001, a new 'Law on Political Parties' was ratified by the State Duma of the Russian Federation (Federal Law 95, 2001). According to the law, before a party can be officially registered it is required to have a minimum of 10,000 members, with branches in over half of the 89 subjects of the Russian Federation. In addition, it is required to have a minimum of 100 members in each of the regional branches. The 2001 'Law on Political Parties' also included provisions and stipulations for the state funding of parties. State parties that received more than three percent of the total party list vote in elections to the State Duma were to receive 0.2 rubles for each vote they received (Bacon, 2004, 43). Gennadiy Zyuganov, the leader

of the Communist Party (KPRF), condemned the law as “ a strait jacket” that would prevent parties from “ normal and democratic development.”

“ Parties,” he maintained, “ would be suffocated by the tight control that the law establishes over party activities (Zyuganov, 2002).”

Immediately after the Beslan hostage crisis of September 2004, President Vladimir Putin forced many key amendments through the legislature concerning election and party legislation, which has extremely damaged the development of grass-roots democracy in Russia. (Ross, 2009, 165-168) (Sakwa, 2008, 109-111). A new version of the 2001 ‘ Law on Political Parties’ was ratified in December 2004, (Federal Law 168, 2004) with further amendments in December 2005, (Federal Law 202, 2005) and a new version of the 2002 Federal Law, ‘ On Basic Guarantees of Electoral Rights and Rights of Citizens of the Russian Federation to Participate in a Referendum’, was ratified on 21 July 2005 (Federal Law 93, 2005). Significant amendments on election and party laws were also ratified in 2006. In addition, Putin adopted an extremely restrictive law on non-governmental organizations in December 2004.

According to the late chair of the Central Electoral Commission, Alexander Veshnyakov, the main aim of the amendments was to,

“ stimulate the development of political parties, strengthen their role, and raise their responsibility in the electoral process (Address, 2005, 1).”

However, while PR (majoritarian electoral) system will certainly provide new prospects for national parties to gain seats at the regional level, Putin’s

electoral and party reforms have made it much more difficult for small parties and independent candidates to contest elections; and regional parties are barred from participating .

Putin's second set of reforms were requested in Sept 2004 and signed into law May 2005. The reforms were clearly intended to increase the control of the central party leadership over its own Duma members, none of whom will now have a district base of support to rely on in breaking with the party line. Party substitutes will consequently not be allowed ballot access directly and will have to support individual candidates in more understated and less dependable ways, such as lobbying party leaders to include candidates on a party list or withholding support from a party in order to affect electoral outcomes (Hale, 2006, 232-233).

In November 2006, the minimum election turnout thresholds, which had been 50 percent in national elections, 25 percent in regional elections, and 20 percent in municipal elections, were abolished. This further undermined the legitimacy of the electoral process (Sakwa, 2008, 122). Veshnyakov argued that the move was ' premature', noting that there had been no problem with voter turnout in national elections, and that the step lacked popular legitimacy and was perceived to benefit only the authorities (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 2006).

According to the newer and latest version of the Law ' On Political Parties', from January 1, 2006, political parties must not have fewer than 50, 000 members in order to register for elections. Political parties are also required to have regional branches, each with a minimum of 500 members in over

fifty percent of the federal subjects. In addition, the number of members of other regional branches must have at least 250 members. These new requirements are a five-fold increase over the 2001 law. Finally, only political parties that have been registered for an election at least one year in advance are allowed to register for that election (Federal Law 168, 2004).

The new law also explicitly excludes certain types of parties. Article 9, for example, prohibits the creation of political parties on a “ professional, racial, national, or religious basis.” These constraints, whatever the motivation, are plainly undemocratic and intolerant. As the 2002 Unity party deputy Aleksandr Chuyev pointed out, political parties

“ exist to represent interests, and national, racial, and religious interests should not be excluded. It is, in fact, precisely because Russia is a multinational state with different religions that it should be possible to form parties on national and religious bases (Wilson, 2006, 318-319).”

There is now a total ban on the formation of electoral blocs. On June 4, 2003, election blocs were restricted to a maximum of two or three political parties. However, in further amendments it was declared that after the December 2003 Duma elections, they were to be banned altogether. United Russia had previously had the advantage to form an electoral alliance, and has now denied the same benefits to other parties.

Regional councils have been compelled since July 2003 to elect at least half of their members by PR in a party list electoral system. While this could be seen as a positive move that will encourage the development of parties at the regional and local levels, it is more likely to simply increase United  
<https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-effects-of-russian-electoral-reforms-politics-essay/>

Russia's domination of regional legislatures. In 2005, the electoral minimum to be met was raised from 5 to 7 percent, another factor that will make it more difficult for small parties to win seats.

Furthermore, Kynev notes,

“ If the new mixed electoral system for municipal elections is adopted nationwide, with only three to five mandates reserved for independents, it will deprive the majority of citizens of the right to be elected as they can no longer be self-nominated (Kynev, 1).”

From December 2003 to March 2006, elections took place in Russia for seats in the 52 regional assemblies. United Russia, not surprisingly, gained the largest number of seats in 47 regional assemblies, with the absolute majority in 12. They also gained second place in five regions (Ivanchenko and Lyubarev, 1). In December 2006, a total of 1, 960 deputies of regional assemblies were members of United Russia (Zakatnova, 2006, 1-2).

The weakness of Russian federalism is exemplified by the fact that the ' Law on Parties' also prohibits regional parties from competing in elections. Such a ban is clearly designed to prevent regional governors and presidents from building local political machines that could eventually be powerful enough to challenge to United Russia. This is especially important now that since January 2005, regional legislatures have been now responsible for approving the president's nominees for regional and chief executives.

In July 2005, another amendment was adopted that allows the party that wins the most party list seats in a regional legislature to nominate the

candidate for regional governor. It is probably no coincidence that this new ruling coincides with United Russia's newly acquired electoral success in the regions.

The percentage of signatures that an individual or party needs to gather in order to contest an election has been set by federal legislation as “ no greater than 2 percent” of the number of electors, up from one percent in previous legislation. The number of invalid signatures permitted was also lowered. Up until 2005, registration for elections could be refused if 25 percent of a candidate's signatures were declared invalid. This has now been reduced to 10 percent for regional and local elections and five percent for federal elections.

The verification of nomination signatures has been subject to widespread abuse by regional and local administrations, with numerous opposition candidates being expelled from election campaigns. The monetary deposit required for candidates and parties to register for elections has also been significantly increased. Moreover, parties that have party list seats in the Duma (currently CPRF, LDPR, Motherland, United Russia) do not need to gather signatures or pay a deposit in order to register for elections, unlike the other smaller parties, and the amount of state funding to these major parties has also been substantially increased.

In July of 2005, the maximum share of state officials and members of political parties that were permitted to serve in electoral commissions was increased from one-third to one-half (Federal Law 93, 2005). Parties with party list seats in the State Duma also have a privileged position with

reference to their nomination of members of electoral commissions. This has led to a situation whereby supporters of United Russia now dominate the electoral commissions at all levels.

In July 2006, the Duma adopted legislation removing the vote ' against all' category from ballots. No longer will citizens have the opportunity to show their disapproval of the electoral system by voting against all candidates. Similarly, in January 2007, minimum voter turnout requirements were abolished.

Stykov concludes that,

"[Putin's] goal is to create a coherent and controllable intermediary space between the state and its citizens. This strategy which is best documented in the civil society arena, but also extends to interest groups in the broadest sense, now is being extended to the party system, where only a limited diversity is becoming institutionalized (Stykov, 2007, 3) (Ross, 2009, 165-168)."

The weakness of political parties in Russian local councils has allowed local executives to rule their local communities with little or no legislative check on their activities. A key feature of Russia's transition has been the weakness of political parties, particularly at the regional and local levels. Cameron Ross notes that,

" the absence of strong nationwide institutionalized parties has intensified the ' clientalistic and corporatist nature' of politics in Russia, and thwarted the development of local democracy. Russia's small, part-time, weak and



politically fragmented local councils have been unable to provide an effective opposition to executive power (Ross, 2009, 201-203)."

Sisk adds to this saying,

" Voters must be able to trust local officials to carry out their campaign promises and believe that they will engage in open, corruption-free governance. Candidates must trust that if they lose an election, they will have a fair opportunity to win the next one.... Minority communities must trust that even if they do not win a majority of seats in the city council, for example, their interests will not be neglected and they will not be subjected to systematic disadvantage, given their minority group status. All actors in local elections must trust that the administration of the poll is free and fair and that the will of the voters will prevail (Sisk, 2001, 115-116)."

However, elections in Russia are far from free and fair, and the manipulation and falsification of local elections is not out of the ordinary. What may be termed an ' electoral vertical' has been created to ensure that Putin's ' party of power,' i. e. United Russia, reins supreme over all other parties. Putin's regime limits opportunities for political challengers, while at the same time has provided Putin and his supporters seemingly unlimited ' administrative resources' during the campaigns in December 2003 and March 2004 (White, 2005, 75). Cameron Ross adds that,

" Enhancing democracy through the creation of free and fair elections is still very low down the president's list of priorities (Ross, 2004)."

On July 27, 2006, the Duma adopted a new ' Law on Combating Extremist Activity,' which gives the government new powers to ban parties from elections if any of their members are charged with extremist activities. Even Alexander Veshnyakov, who at the time was the chair of the Central Electoral Commission, has spoken out against this Law. In an interview in summer 2006, he warned:

“ I will mention that attempts are now being made to modify legislation in order to get more ways to cut out disliked candidates using administrative resources.... What frightens me is that if these amendments are adopted, we will have elections without choice, as it was in fact in Soviet times..... It is simply a different ideology of elections where everything must be regulated and in that way no candidate the government does not like will be permitted to participate in an election. It resembles Soviet times.... Inappropriate light punishments discredit the authorities and give the opposition serious arguments for discrediting elections in Russia (Ross, 2009, 196-197).”

Veshnyakov later called on prosecutors and courts to toughen the criminal and administrative penalties for violating election laws (Lankina, 2005, 4) (Ross, 2009, 196-197).” In 2007, Veshnyakov was fired from his post as head of the Central Electoral Commission and replaced by one of Putin’s right hand men, Vladimir Churov.

Regional and local elections in Russia are rapidly turning into ‘ elections without choice,’ predominantly in those regions where the chief executives have been appointed by Putin and are members of United Russia (Ross, 2009, 165-168). There is no real, meaningful separation of legislative,

executive, and judicial power, in Russia and the distinction between the United Russia party and the regional administration is blurred. What may be termed Putin's 'electoral vertical' has now been extended from the regional to local level, and Schedler's model of 'electoral authoritarianism' has firmly taken root in Russian localities. The current system of local politics in Russia mirrors the dominant power politics model put forth by Thomas Carothers. Carothers says,

"...countries with this syndrome have limited but still real political space, some political contestation by opposition groups, and at least most of the basic institutional forms of democracy. Yet one political grouping-whether it is a movement, party, an extended family, or a single leader-dominates the system in such a way that there appears to be little prospect for alternation of power in the foreseeable future..... The state's assets-that is to say, the state as a source of money, jobs, public information (via state media), and police power-are gradually put in the direct service of the ruling party (Makarkin, 2007, 28)."

In conclusion, the forecast for development of grass-roots democracy in Russia now looks extremely gloomy because of Putin's centralizing agenda. Vladimir Lysenko, head of Republican Party, argues that the new legislation will disproportionately benefit the two largest parties, "transforming the multi-party system into a system of only a few parties (Lysenko, 2001, 2)." According to Lysenko, the new law will make it "impossible for any other parties to recruit the necessary number of new members in the time permitted (Ross, 2002, 111-114)." Furthermore, he says the law "strikes a blow against local democracy in the regions as it <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-effects-of-russian-electoral-reforms-politics-essay/>

bans regional parties from forming and competing in elections.” As a consequence, Lysenko argues:

“ The provinces will inevitably be removed from politics on all levels, and all levels, and all decisions will be made in and by the centre alone. It means reverting to a unitary state, a loss of one of the major achievements of the past decade-the federal structure of the state (Lysenko, 2001, 2).”

Financial and other bureaucratic controls over the parties will also prohibit the development of a “ strong and constructive opposition,” without which, as Lysenko argues, a state would be doomed to stagnation and authoritarianism. Furthermore, the law makes it relatively easy for the government to suspend the activity of a party or to shut it down for good. Finally, the law does not allow the party system to evolve naturally. Instead, it is the state decides what kinds of parties Russia requires and which ones it can do without, and what kind of party system Russia needs state (Lysenko, 2001, 2).

Since the provincial legislatures are to be significantly infiltrated by national parties according to the amended ‘ Law on Voter Rights,’ the post-Beslan reforms are likely to give these parties a more significant role in choosing governors than they had enjoyed in the past. This reform would also have the obvious effect of giving the president greater influence over governors, thereby making it less likely that a governor would operate independently of any future parties of power (Hale, 2006, 232-233).

In “ Putin’s ‘ Party of Power’ and the Declining Power of Parties in Russia,”

Kunov, Myagkov, Sitnikov and Shakin analyze the dynamics of political  
<https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-effects-of-russian-electoral-reforms-politics-essay/>

preference within the Russian electorate by comparing electoral support for major political parties in legislative and presidential elections from 1995 to 2004. They conclude that the shift in preference towards Putin's United Russia party, the 'party of power', has had a devastating effect on the multiparty system in Russia (Kunov, Myagkov, Sitnikov, & Shakin, 2005). They also note that the opposition parties have continued to lose support in the last legislative elections. They claim, "it was Putin's own perestroika – or 'vertical of power' – that changed not only the rules of the game, but players' incentives that had been forming throughout the 1990s. Under such conditions, the prospects for the formation and development of an effective multi-party system appear quite bleak (Kunov, Myagkov, Sitnikov, & Shakin, 2005)."

In conclusion, Vladimir Putin's electoral reforms have had a stifling and extremely negative impact on political parties as a whole, with the exception of the United Russia party, and their development. As stated before Putin's reforms have made it nearly impossible for small parties to win seats in the government. These reforms have also made it a hopeless endeavour for independent candidates to contest elections; and regional parties are squeezed out completely. These new reforms will only increase United Russia's domination of all of Russia's elections, as supporters of United Russia already control the electoral commissions at all levels. The dominance of the United Russia party, the 'party of power', has had a devastating effect on not only the multiparty system in Russia, but also Russia's democracy.