

Inflatable Pluralism-95 (Let all the bubbles bloom)

A report from St. Petersburg

Forty-two political blocs are registered by Russia's Central Election Committee (CEC) and, consequently, will join the struggle for 125 places in the State Duma. Some of their names are longer than two lines, even typed in the finest letters. Every voter is doomed to get a headache before he finds his preference on this list, even if he has chosen it long beforehand.

According to the election law adopted by the Russian State Duma in August of this year, only those blocs will be able to promote their representatives to the new Parliament, which gain over 5% of the total vote in the election.

Now let us count. If we imagine an "ideal" situation in which all the blocs gain an equal number of votes, the largest number of registered blocs represented in the Parliament will be 20 ($5 \times 20 = 100\%$). This means that every second bloc will be represented.

In order to be registered, each election bloc had to collect 200,000 signatures. So, in the "ideal" case, 50% of the population will be actually "dropped out." Their sympathies will be not reflected in the result of the elections.

Apparently, the result of the vote will be very far from this ideal variant. I suggest at least 25% of the votes will be received by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation; at least 12% of the voters will support Skokov-Lebed-Glazhev's Congress of Russian Communities [lead candidates: Gen. Aleksandr Lebed, industrial leader Yuri Skokov, parliamentary economics commission head Sergei Glazhev—ed.]; Women of Russia will probably be no more popular than that (though they could be, if anything besides the gender were written on their banners). The next place, with about 10%, is expected to be taken by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's Nash Dom/Gazprom ["Nash Dom—Rossiya," or "Our Home Is Russia," is commonly known as "Nash Dom/Gazprom" because of Chernomyrdin's money links with the giant natural gas firm—ed.], followed by the Agrarians and maybe reform economist Grigori Yavlinsky's Yabloko (5-7% each). The seventh bloc theoretically able to jump over the 5% barrier, is the Industrialists/Trade Unionists. But their success is very questionable, for a lot of trade union activists disapproved the alliance of their leadership with former Communist Party Central Committee official Arkadi Volsky's "privatizing bourgeoisie" and are likely to support the Communist Party.

So, the actual number of winners in the vote will be no more than 7, not 20. From a superficial point of view, this means that not one-half, but only approximately one-sixth of the collected signatures, reflecting the citizens' sympathies, will define the result of the elections.

This arithmetically correct option has become a subject of discussion which started in the mass media, especially on the TV, even before the last bloc was certified by Nikolai Ryabov's CEC. The argument was started by Irina Hakamada, leader of the liberal Common Cause bloc, which obviously has no chance to collect 5% (even having 10 rivals, rather than 40). She was clearly expressing the anxiety of the probable losers. But when the same objections were put forward by Vladimir Tumanov, chairman of the Constitutional Court, the situation appeared to be much more serious.

The honorable judge pretends to be unaware of the real mechanism of bloc-cooking and especially signature-collecting—the procedure which was to limit the access of blocs and candidates to the election.

Try and find 70 liberals in a town of 5 million

In a rural district center in central European Russia where my mother-in-law lives, no party petitions have been seen except those circulated by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Ironically, even the Agrarian Party is not known here. People vaguely recollect the name of its candidate, Vasili Starodubtsev, only because he was a member of the Communist coup plot known as the GKChP [State Committee for the Emergency—ed.] in August 1991.

As for the other parties, to find out something about them, you have to go to the regional center, about 100 kilometers away. The only means of transportation is a bus that goes five times a day, is overcrowded and rather expensive (12,000 rubles) for a rural worker who earns usually not more than 200,000 per month. But in this particular regional center, you cannot find representatives of all the 42 parties and unions that submitted their petitions with signatures to the CEC. You'll certainly find groups of Skokov's people at a ruined military plant, rows of Trade Unionists in the conference hall of a frozen-out hospital, a gang of Zhirinovskites [supporters of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, of radical nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovksy—ed.] in a pub, a

squad of left radicals from the Communist Workers' Party at the Lenin monument, and after a double search, if you are lucky, you may stumble upon a few angry supporters of ousted Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy or scare away a flock of feeble Yavlinskyites, with one or two odd-looking partisans of former prime minister and radical market reformer Yegor Gaidar.

Even in St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city, at least half (!) of the registered blocs have no offices, and their local activists are known only to a very narrow circle of political journalists. I'll bet if you ask 50,000 people on the Nevsky Prospect to show you the place where Boris Fyodorov's "Go Russia!" party office is located, maybe one person will answer, and this will be either a party activist (Go's branch was established several months ago), or most certainly a newsmaker.

It is even more difficult to discern a Gaidar supporter in St. Petersburg. Actually, last summer a friend of mine met an unhappy-looking activist of Gaidar's "Democratic Choice"; the guy went to pieces trying to invite 70 radical liberals to a seminar organized by the British Tories. He could not collect such a number of shock therapy enthusiasts in St. Petersburg (not in Irkutsk out in Siberia, not in Ivanovo, but in St. Petersburg, the most pro-Western town in the country!). A year later, I was told that the number of Gaidar party members did not exceed 300 in our town, despite all the organizing efforts.

I meet a lot of people from different professions and different layers of society, including businessmen, scientists, teachers, workers, physicians, etc. More and more often I meet new supporters of the CPRF or of the Congress of Russian Communities, and not only among unemployed or military men, but more often, among the intelligentsia. Very often, I remember these Communist or nationalist "neophytes" as former members of the 1989-91 liberal democratic movement. No wonder they've changed their views. The Sachs-Gaidar reforms [Gaidar was advised by Prof. Jeffrey Sachs of Harvard Business School—ed.] deprived most of them of their work in science and culture, pauperized their parents, made them fear for their families, and deeply hurt their dignity. It is also remarkable that none of my old friends who made a business career is going to vote for Gaidar. Mostly these guys are not going to vote at all, and one of them will support the Communists, sincerely believing that they will affect his business (sale of used computers) less than Gaidar. He says that the taxes introduced by Gaidar made all businessmen into criminals, otherwise they would not survive.

Since the Brezhnev era, Russians know and practically use what we call *pripiska*, originally meaning falsification of the real amount of production, especially crops. This practice was widely reproduced after the 1992 tax reform, when industrial managers and directors did everything possible to conceal a part of their income from state officials, more often not in order to increase their personal interests, but to save the industry, for this was impossible under the murderous tax policy

imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Of course, the same was done by lots of new private companies.

Actually, violation of laws has become as ordinary in everyday life as a toothbrush. Old women violate newly imposed legal restrictions, selling things in places where it is not allowed. Schoolchildren sell newspapers without paying for a license. Actually, the citizens are responding to the incredible economic policy in an adequate way: They fool the state, which fools them all the time, and develop great skill inventing new ways of survival.

No wonder that the 1995 parliamentary elections offered a significant part of the urban population a new way of illegally earning quick money.

Infant socialists and dead environmentalists

Vladimir Shumeiko, head of the Federation Council [upper house of parliament—ed.], also insists on making some changes in the federal election law, and postponing the elections for one or two months. At the same time, he rejects proposals to lower the barrier for ballot access. If we do this, he says, the parliament will consist one-half of Muscovites, for all the "outsider" blocs are actually located only in Moscow. This is not true in all cases, but probably in the majority of them. Most of the newly cooked up election alliances have been formed by Moscow elite groups of various origins, actually having no time to gain popularity even in several other regional centers, but using the same technique of collecting the required 200,000 signatures for their support.

Almost all the election blocs made their "investments" into a lot of small private companies, consisting mostly of psychologists, sociologists, and university students, which used their legal and illegal techniques of "gathering" signatures. Officially, all of them collected this material by visiting apartment buildings and asking people if they agreed to support this or that bloc. Many of them really did this legwork. But, of course, a month was not enough for most of them to complete it and to earn the sum fixed in their contract with the bloc, some of which offered from 500 to 3,000 rubles for a signature. So, in order to fulfill their task and to get the money (so necessary for a psychologist, whose salary is usually very small), they used every other possibility to get more signatures, or at least more names of citizens, for a signature can be easily falsified.

At a subway station, I recently saw two young guys sitting on a bench, writing or drawing something on election petitions. One of them opened a bag with 30 or more petitions, already containing a lot of names. Very often these names comprised whole families, and the addresses were sequential: street N, house 1, apartments 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. It was clear that the signature-collecting company which hired my friends got these names from a local police station. The young women who work there in the so-called pass service, also do not earn very much.

One of the guys was getting a petition from his bag, and the other guy, with tremendous speed, wrote an alleged

signature beside each of the names. Of course, all of them were different, and derived from a real surname, consisting usually of one or two of its initial letters. He used four pens, first using one, and leaving gaps in the list, then filling the gaps with other pens and other "handwriting." Sometimes he worked a little bit slower, featuring a "trembling hand," when the marked age of the signature's alleged owner was over 75 years. In 20 minutes, about 300 persons "gave their sympathies" to some bloc with a long and clumsy name including the words "social" and "ecology" (I never saw its precise name before, but I'm sure it is included among the lucky 42).

The guy who brought in the signature lists was to earn 300 rubles for each signature, and their real author worked free of charge, just for the sake of "art." He told me he had already helped a lot of his friends in such a way, and did not even remember the number of blocs he made happy. He also said, grinning, that he signed for one particular house at least thrice, on different party petitions, and in each case he invented a new signature.

Several months ago, the mass media published a lot of thrilling reports about the "fascist" Aleksei Vedenkin, who mastered and sold dozens of counterfeit documents, including even certificates of the Federal Counterintelligence Service. Obviously, Vedenkin's example has inspired a lot of followers. I can't calculate their number, but only this one example with the guy in the subway doing his work as deliberately as if he were killing mosquitoes, suggests that the real number of people who signed for these long-named bubble coalitions is dozens of times smaller than the allegedly fairly collected amount.

Two days before the Central Election Commission finished accepting bags and suitcases filled with thousands of spidery-looking signatures, *Izvestia* reported about gross falsifications committed by the political bloc Christian Democratic Union-Christians of Russia, or, more precisely, by the "sociological" company it hired. The name of the company was, for some reason, not published. The amount of money it earned for its "services," for this bloc alone, was also left unknown. In several days, I found the Christian Democrats (two years ago their leader, Vitali Savitsky, was elected as a representative of Gaidar's Russia's Choice) on the list of already registered blocs.

My friends told me about only one case of falsification which was exposed and led to a candidate's withdrawal. In St. Petersburg, one independent candidate managed to fill his election petition with names of . . . newborn infants, evidently acquired in an obstetrics clinic. Some of his supporters also appeared to be dead long before he allegedly visited them with a petition.

So, some of the would-be parliamentarians have directly followed the example not of Vedenkin, but of the famous character from Russian literature, Chichikov in Nikolai Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*, who collected the names of dead serfs to make himself famous as a landowner (the number of serfs possessed, at that time, reflected a person's wealth).

Magicians are helpless

Certainly, the authorities of the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, and the CEC know how the alchemy of the election campaign actually works. If they do not live in an ivory tower, and sometimes read the papers.

If these officials were really anxious for a valid result of the elections, they should introduce several simple measures which could make the risk of "Chichikovization" minimal. For example, a bloc could be deprived of the right to participate in the elections, if 1% (or 5%) of its signatures were found invalid, regardless of the total number of valid signatures.

Secondly, those companies that buy living or dead "souls" at police stations, obstetric wards, or cemeteries could be subject to criminal investigation. One such precedent could suffice, to make this practice much less popular.

Thirdly, the names of candidates and companies using forged signatures could be published, in capital letters, in the government's *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* or elsewhere, creating a negative image that would very hard to repair before the next election campaign.

There are a lot of other ways to make the results of the elections more reliable. The officials did not use them. Why?

Since the beginning of its work, the CEC has calculated and reported the percentage of invalid signatures collected by this or that bloc. When they found 5% of the Communist Party's petitions invalid, the figure seemed big, and it was commented upon in the mass media.

But the Zhirinovskiyites produced already 7% invalid signatures. And Democratic Russia's signatures were found invalid in one out of five cases. Nothing was reported about Gaidar's or Boris Fyodorov's parties.

Actually, the Communists or Agrarians don't need to falsify their signatures, or to pay citizens for getting them, for as a result of the disastrous IMF policies, they have a great lot of volunteer supporters who agree to work for them day and night. With the liberal parties, speaking frankly, it is different.

The depleted electorate of the liberal politicians is being torn into pieces, like a piece of meat in the cage with tigers, by at least eight blocs, each leader hating his rival and unable to unite with him: Gaidar, Yavlinsky, Fyodorov, Borovoy, Hakamada, et al. Evidently, all these "companies limited" are unable to collect 200,000 signatures each without forgery. Only if they teamed up with witches and sorcerers like the famous Dzhuna Davitashvili could they avoid this. But Dzhuna has probably got infected with Communism from her own former patients in the former Politburo, and recently expressed her nostalgia for the Soviet era on a popular TV program. She used her parapsychological talents, constituting (and registering!) a political bloc headed by herself, and did not risk inviting Gaidar into it. Probably the rejected shock therapist is believed to bring misfortune even to sorcerers, and no "white magician" is able to take out the black blot of his bioenergetic field.

A rifle in the cupboard

According to the *Kommersant Daily*, the only Russian popular paper that is really economically independent, the scandalous election story of Yavlinsky's petitions being rejected, then reinstated, by the CEC, was due to Yavlinsky's own "organizing impotence." *Kommersant's* correspondent Natalya Arkhangel'skaya witnessed the efforts of the CEC to help Yavlinsky put his electoral petitions in order—and the total neglect of this by Yavlinsky's team, being very busy . . . celebrating their manager's birthday right on the day when they were supposed to make the necessary corrections. As far as I know, the manager, Vyacheslav Igrunov, is really well known as a very bad organizer; for this reason, it is said, he was fired three years ago from the Soros Foundation, where he was responsible only for distributing grants.

Despite being a paper never suspected of sympathy to the Communists, *Kommersant Daily* features Yavlinsky as a "provincial hysteric enthusiastically making a god of himself." Moreover, *Kommersant's* observer Maksim Sokolov, known as a liberal author, also regards U.S. White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry's "anxiety" for Yavlinsky as an example of a "double standard." For McCurry suspected that the original negative reaction of the CEC was based upon "procedural details," though "the Americans used to tell the Russians that democracy is a procedure."

The concern which the West demonstrated in Yavlinsky's case has irritated even definitely liberal politicians and journalists. As in the case of October 1993, when President Yeltsin's armed attack on the parliament was approved by the most influential Western leaders, this concern does little to bolster the authority of either Yavlinsky himself or the Western politicians. As a result, many of my fellow citizens, not only those who belong to the opposition, suspect that in case the results of the election are retroactively judged invalid, and the new Duma dissolved, such actions by the Russian leadership will again be approved by the Western authorities, as in October 1993.

In the very beginning of the "signature industry" boom, CEC chief Ryabov warned that the election ballot delivered to each voter would probably look like a book, or at least a brochure, for the whole list of registered parties may be too big for one or two sheets of paper. Immediately, Ryabov was criticized by liberal mass media, which suspected him of making a farce of the future elections. The same mass media were quite indifferent, when Ryabov's commission rejected the petitions of Ruskoy's "Derzhava" bloc. But when Yavlinsky faced the same misfortune, the liberal scribblers got extremely annoyed. The most poisonous of them, Most Bank's mouthpiece Alexandr Minkin, exposed Ryabov of 1) being former Parliamentary Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov's friend (though actually Ryabov betrayed Khasbulatov), 2) supporting the soldiers of Dniestr [region in Moldova where Russia has forces, formerly commanded by Lebed—ed.] (though support for the Dniestr Republic was Russia's policy

at a state level), and 3) keeping a rifle brought from the Dniestr without registering it (!).

Labeled a "Soviet" oppositionist, a chauvinist, and a gangster, Ryabov did not dare to oppose the Supreme Court, which eagerly judged all the questionable petitions valid, and registered not only Yavlinsky's and Ruskoy's parties but also the Union of Lawyers and the Party of Beer-Lovers. I suppose that, in his place, I would also register the Beet-lovers, and the Beef-lovers, to make sure of my personal security.

On the other hand, opposition sources claim that the tendency of the CEC to register as many political blocs as possible is based on some unofficial order from Sergei Filatov, head of the Presidential Administration. According to this version, Filatov is trying to improve his political position, which has become much weaker during the second half of the year. In case the results of the elections were in favor of the opposition, Filatov, as well as Yeltsin's assistant Georgi Satarov, were supposed to be removed as scapegoats. Therefore, they are believed to be elaborating a scenario for creation of a pretext either to consider the election results invalid, or to dissolve the new Duma in case it starts to adopt laws which seriously affect the property of the elite.

Vladimir Shumeiko recently expressed a belief that after the elections are over, the number of those who consider their results invalid will certainly multiply. Irina Hakamada may be joined by Gaidar, Starovoitova, Fyodorov, Yavlinsky, and even the radical fringe Communist Anpilov, if all of them fail.

In case the same argument about the "incomplete representation of the citizens' sympathies" is used after the elections, I'll have to make a public confession that I am *not* one citizen, but four. Actually, I signed *four* party petitions when I was visited by the representatives of different blocs. First, because I wanted to get rid of these guys as soon as possible. Second, because they looked so frozen and unhappy that I wanted to please them. Certainly, I could not expect that my Christian feelings would be used for considering the elections invalid.

So, if the Constitutional Court should decide that the "ousted" blocs really reflect the sympathies of $200,000 \times (42 - 7) = 7,000,000$ people, I'll declare, officially, that I am four persons, and I know at least one citizen who is really at least 1,000 citizens all by himself. Maybe my confession will be followed by many other similar claims. Then Mr. Tumanov (who also not quite legally replaced the fairly elected chairman of the Constitutional Court, Valentin Zorkin) will have to make his calculations once again. I suppose he'll have a nice occupation till the end of his life, sorting out single and real persons from double, triple, quadruple, newborn, deceased, emigrated, never existed, and inflatable personalities.

—Roman A. Bessonov, Roman Bessonov, R.A. Bessonov, R. Bessonov