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Elections to the State *Duma* in the Russian Federation 1993-2011

Abstract: Subsequent to December 1993, when the first elections were held for the newly formed Russian parliament, five further parliamentary election processes have been conducted. These occurred in the years 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011. With the exception of the 1995 and 1999 elections, all were far from being of free and democratic character. In particular the 2007 election constituted a political farce with its outcome predetermined. Among others, the weaknesses of the system relate to a lack of parliamentary tradition in Russia, constitutional and legal solutions that favour the president, and the absence of developed and stable party structures.
Keywords: Duma, elections, Russia, Yeltsin, Putin
Słowa kluczowe: Duma, wybory, Rosja, Jelcyn, Putin

1. Introduction

Modern Russia's political practice demonstrates constant although, as a rule, unsuccessful, attempts to build opposition groups and alliances able become the alternative to the dominant political regime. One of the causes of this state of affairs was the polarisation of political movements in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s, not conducive to creating further alternatives and reducing political choices to the dichotomy of 'democratic' or 'antidemocratic'[1]. This was linked to disorientation of a large part of the elite, which often found itself in random situations – this made it difficult to construct its own political identity. This problem was exacerbated through the opportunism of individual politicians as well as parties

1 В. Гельман, Правящий режим и проблема демократической оппозиции в постсоветском обществе, p. 3 printout from http://www.igpi.ru/monitoring/1047645476/jan1994/Analiz.htm (accessed on 03.02.2004).

and social groups. The factor which significantly weakened the political role of the Parliament was the conviction that it was the Kremlin[2], not the Parliament who held real power. This was, to a degree, the result of the provisions of the Constitution, but if truth be told, the Parliament did very little to change this. In these circumstances the political aim of the majority of political party leaders was the fight for the presidency, not the reform of the political system and changing the Constitution. The authority of the President could be advantageous for the opposition, assuming it won the office. The concentration of the efforts by parliamentary blocs on presidential elections meant that any alliances were fleeting. There were too many personal ambitions and objectives. This situation was masterly exploited by Boris Yeltsin who, for a long time and mostly successfully controlled the opposition through the application of the 'divide and rule' principle. The very political aim of the Russian opposition cast a shadow over it – the objective was not to create an alternative for the programme pursued by the Kremlin, but an alternative to the authority itself.

This analysis aims to showcase the running of the elections to the *Duma* in 1993-2011 and their results, as well as some changes to the electoral law and the political circumstances which contributed to the opposition being marginalised by the Kremlin. In the years 1990-2011 the opposition managed three times to create a fairly unified front to challenge the regime. This occurred for the first time in 1990-1991, when liberal and nationalist forces, aiming to overthrow communism, were truly unified under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin; for the second time in 1992-1993, that is during the constitutional crisis, when recent allies faced each other in the fight over free Russia, and for the third time in 1998-1999 during the impeachment procedure of the president. Post 2000 a 'rationed opposition' phenomenon may be observed in Russia, where the Kremlin decides on the character, the strength, the quality and the potential of the 'opposition'. After the 2007 elections parliamentary opposition was practically eliminated in Russia through changes to selection procedures and expansive propaganda directed at Russians through mass media under the ruling elite's control.

2. Elections to the *Duma* – 12 December 1993

On the 21st September 1993 President Boris Yeltsin issued a decree dissolving the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet. At the same time he ordered general elections to the parliament and a constitution referendum to be held on 12th December 1993. The new constitution proposal envisaged a two chamber parliament in Russia – the Federal Assembly – consisting of the state *Duma* (the lower chamber) and the Federation Council (the upper chamber).

2 The Kremlin as a political camp centred on the president.

The work on the new constitution ran concurrent to a short and not entirely honest election campaign. The campaign ran according to new regulations. The elections to the 178 seat upper chamber – the Federation Council – were to follow majority rule. Candidates were elected in 89 two seat constituencies with boundaries corresponding to those of the members of the Russian Federation. In the elections to the 450-seat lower chamber – the state *Duma,* the proportional majority rule applied. Half the seats in the lower chamber (225) were filled with candidates from federal lists submitted by political parties and blocks which passed the threshold of the 5% of the vote (proportionally to the number of votes gained). The fight over the second half of the seats in the *Duma* was in first past the post constituencies where – according to the majority rule – the candidate with the largest number of votes won (the turnout could not be less than 25% of those eligible to vote).

Of the 21 parties and groups which managed to assemble the required 100,000 signatures under the lists of candidates before the deadline, eight were refused to have their lists registered, which equated to being excluded from the elections.

There were various reasons for the refusal. Some groups submitted lists with fewer signatures than the number required by the regulations. Two parties have withdrawn their lists, calling their supporters to vote for democrats. The Russian All People's Union of Siergei Baburin met all the conditions but breached the rule that the 100,000 signatures had to be collected in at least seven constituencies, with no more than 15% of signatures from each constituency. Among the eight parties that had to withdraw from elections campaign, the majority were organisations that were more or less opposed to the current President. Of the parties and blocs standing, only eight passed the election threshold [3]. The turnout was relatively low– 54.8% – noticeably lower than in the elections to the Congress of People's Deputies in 1990 (77%)[4].

Elections to the 5th *Duma* (the first since the February Revolution) were an acute surprise to the Kremlin. The political scene was unexpectedly entered by a new and victorious political force – the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR – 22.9%) and its leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky. The pro-presidential Choice of Russia came second (15.5%) but could practically feel the growing strength of Giennadi Ziuganov's communists panting down its back (12.4%). The poor result for the Choice of Russia's liberals, which was hotly tipped as a decisive winner by political commentators, was a huge surprise. It transpired that political reforms fronted by Yegor Gaidar, which brought a dramatic drop of the standard of living, affected the ratings of the whole wide reform bloc. Democratic parties were incapable of uniting and unable to prepare

3 Some parties and coalitions which did not get their lists registered entered their candidates into the Duma in the first past the post constituencies. They either joined existing parliamentary factions or formed their own groups.

4 I. Mikhailovska, Russian voting behavior as a mirror of social-political change, "East European Constitutional Review" 1996, vol. 5, No. 2-3, p. 57.

a unified and convincing manifesto as an alternative to populist promises made by Zhirinovsky.

The real winner of the 1993 elections were the LDPR, but also the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). The first one not only confirmed, but consolidated its position on the political scene[5]. In turn, the communists not only became a force in the Parliament but managed to unify a large proportion of nostalgic (for the Soviet Union) electorate, which was going to prove a stable foundation for the future development of the party. One of the major reasons for the success of the communists and nationalists in December 1993 was an active campaign through the mass media [6]. Until then, the Kremlin was not able to exploit its control over state television. In the next elections the circles close to Yeltsin tried not to make this mistake again.

A material, and the most important, outcome of the elections was the defeat of Yeltsin. Despite pacifying the Parliament and restricting the opposition activities, electoral manipulation and creating a broad pro-Kremlin electoral bloc, the President did not succeed – not only did he not fully meet expectations, but not even to a degree which would have permitted the government of Victor Chernomyrdin to function without disruption. The situation could have been even more difficult. The anarchic opposition[7], fragmented by personal ambitions and devoid of moral legitimacy, was replaced by new, vigorous, united political blocs enjoying full democratic legitimacy, whose leaders – Zhirinovsky and Ziuganov – became significant figures in the fight over political leadership. It turned out that Yeltsin's power did not have to be as absolute as it could have been expected even at the end of 1993.

Despite the obvious fact that the term 'democratic', when applied to the 5th *Duma*, is somewhat stretched, it needs to be acknowledged that it did have an undisputed imput into building Russian parliamentarism. It is impossible to overlook the huge legislative accomplishment of this body which, during its short two year term, passed 328 acts The December 1993 parliamentary elections were a vital step in setting and ordering[8], the Russian political scene. They were also the decisive factor for the emergence of a party political system. Those groupings that entered the Parliament had a real social mandate, a formal permission from voters to act. They also acquired a relatively large dose of independence. However, it needs to be remembered that in their elections' decisions, Russians were guided more by favouring certain politicians

5 In the 1991 presidential elections Zhirinovsky won 7.8% of votes.
6 D. Yergin, T. Gustafson, Russia 2010. And What it Means for the World, New York 1994, p. 55.
7 As a Soviet provenance legislative body.
8 Российская газета" 22.11.1995.

and ideologies they represented rather than analysis of political manifestos[9]. Accordingly, it was difficult for parties to maintain a strong position in Parliament.

The term of the 5th *Duma* was determined as two years. This was due to extraordinary state of affairs in the country in the autumn of 1993 and the not entirely free nature of the elections[10]. Those two years were a transition period for Russian democracy and for political parties. It is received knowledge that only the 6th State *Duma* was to be formed through the first fully democratic elections.

3. The *Duma* elections – 17 December 1995

The decisive test of the Russians' electoral preferences as well as the power of the political and financial resources of the candidates before the 1996 presidential elections, were the parliamentary elections of the 17th December 1995. These were different to the elections from two years before. The political climate was different: the Kremlin wasn't able to interfere so much in the elections process. Political life flourished as never before.

Where in 1993 there were around 150 organisations with the legal means to take part in elections, in 1995 there were already 259[11]. The level of readiness of various political parties to participate in elections was also much better than in 1993.

The dominant position of the Kremlin enabled it, however, to deploy a range of legal and informal means in order to achieve its tactical aims. With the use of complex pressures, the presidential centre tried to unite factions which declared loyalty whilst at the same time weakening the opposition. In order to split the opposition the Kremlin mainly exploited internal conflicts within parties. Another element of the political fight was to make it more difficult for the opposition to access popular public media dependent on the authorities. The Kremlin also applied specific pressures which were, in reality, a veiled form of corrupting the opposition's politicians. The prize, in this instance, were profitable posts in state and private owned business.

Electoral legislation was conducive to getting rid of political competition. The need for the parties to collect the sufficient number of signatures (200,000) required in order to be registered in the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), resulted in opportunities for significant manipulation. Questions over 3-5% of the lists with signatures could result in the entire list [of nominees] being withdrawn and consequently result in the exclusion of the party or parties from the electoral contest. Due to procedural failings, the CEC had struck off the lists submitted by *Yabloko*

9 О.Т. Вите, Центризм в российской политике (Расстановка сил в Государственной думе и вне ее), "Polis" 1994, No. 4, p. 49.

10 A. Czajowski, Demokratyzacja Rosji w latach 1987-1999, Wrocław 2001, p. 90.

11 Е.В. Березовский, Политическая елита российского обшества на рубежие эпох, Москва 1999, p. 148.

and the nationalist *Derzhava* movement of the former vice president Alexander Rutskoy. *Yabloko* and *Derzhava* appealed to the Supreme Court. Similar appeals were lodged by several other political parties and groupings whose applications were not accepted in the first place by the electoral commission. The Supreme Court ordered the commission to accept the applications of *Yabloko* and *Derzhava*, the Democratic Party, the Marxist *Our Future* and of the nationalist bloc the *Land Assembly*.

In the end 69 political parties and blocs took part in the elections, although 43 groupings passed the registration threshold[12] (including 17 electoral blocs); only four of these passed the 5% elections threshold[13]. The 1995 elections turnout was high at 64.4%.

CPRF's victory (22.3%) was not a surprise for politicians' and public opinion alike. What was surprising was the scale of their success in the first past the post constituencies[14]. There, the communists gained the upper hand as a result of fragmentation of the democratic parties, whose candidates jointly won (in Percentage terms) greater support than the communists. A huge sensation was the poor outcome for the pro-Kremlin group Our Home-Russia of the Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin (10.13%). The result for the LDPR (11.18%) was also worse than expected – their 1993 voters switched their support to CPRF[15]. The democratic *Yabloko* group got 6.89% of support.

Evgeni Bieriezovski, searching for the basis of the almost universal defeat of political parties and election blocs in the 17th December 1995 elections, pointed out the exaggeration in political parties' own ratings, and their leaders who hugely overestimated their social popularity. This resulted in a poor election strategy and consequently a defeat. Another reason was the 'lack of perspective' for *stricte* elections alliances and blocs, whose existence was the result of weakness of political parties[16]. The reasons for the democrats' defeat could be found in the society becoming disillusioned with politicians and groups accused of causing an economic and political crisis in Russia, as well as lack of ability to form one coherent bloc able to oppose the communists.

The elections campaign for the 6th *Duma* was a brilliant lesson in political marketing, a study in the deterioration of societal support and the motives for political choices in society. The 1995 elections did significantly raise the role of parties in political life. This period can even be regarded as an apogee of the Russian

12 *Ibidem*, p. 148

13 Apart from the fraction of the four main groups, the following groups of MPs were also registered in the Duma: "Agricultural Deputies Group", "Power to the Nation" and "Russian Regions".

14 *Ibidem*, p. 157.

15 В. Шейнис, Пройден ли исторический рубеж?, "Polis" 1997, No. 1, p. 85.

16 Е.В. Березовский, Политическая елита…, *op. cit*., p. 158.

multi-party system. It turned out that (like in Poland) the centre of gravity in the body politic started to migrate from single parties to electoral blocs.

The 1995 parliamentary elections were transparent in showing the balance of power before presidential elections. It became clear that the communist leader Ziuganov would stand in the second round. This mobilised all the forces afraid of the return of the old nomenclature. It became equally clear that Ziuganov in the second round would not be defeated by Yavlinski nor Chernomyrdin. Therefore the single candidate for the anti-communist forces for the office of the President could only be Yeltsin[17].

4. The *Duma* elections – 19 December 1999

The December 1999 elections were very different from previous elections. For the first time the election campaign was fought through television on a massive scale – the only source of information reaching almost all potential voters. An interesting element of the election was the fact that media sympathies were divided between two new blocs: "Fatherland – All Russia" (OVR) – supported by the former Prime Minister Evgeni Primakov and the Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov, and the pro-Kremlin bloc "Unity" under the leadership of Siergei Shoygu.

The prize in this contest was not so much winning the elections to the Duma as a fight over Yeltsin's political legacy. The real aim of the electoral overtures became clear during the campaign, which concentrated on promoting individual leaders rather than political parties themselves. Both blocs were so absorbed by the fight, that deliberately and of their own free will, they gave the communists free rein; these had accepted their role as the opposition and had rescinded the last vestiges of power. The campaign was joined, however, by the Central Electoral Committee, which issued a string of incomprehesible decisions, e.g. refusing to register Zhirinovski's LDPR[18].

26 political parties and electoral blocs stood in the December elections, of which only six managed to get their deputies into the *Duma*. The communists won the elections decisively (24.29%); however, the strongest group in the *Duma* were independent MPs. One of the suprises of the elections was the success of the Union of Right Forces bloc of the former Prime Minister Siergei Kiriyenko (8.5%) and a total annihilation of a once powerful grouping Our Home-Russia of Victor Chernomyrdin (1.2%). The defeat of the 'Zhirinovski bloc' (6.0%) was hardly a surprise. Such a result was engendered by the moral degeneration of the party regarded by society as the most corrupt grouping in the 6th Duma. It turned out that in the long term it was

17 Е. Охотский, Л. Шмарковский, Выборы-95: три дня и после, "Власть" 1996, No. 2, p. 59.

18 On the 13th of December 1999 the Commission declared that the party could stand in elections but that Zhirinovski himself was barred. A. Łabuszewska, Spiskowa teoria imitowania demokracji, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 1999, No. 51-52.

impossible to reconcile subserviance and feigned opposition to the authorities. Another grouping whose elections result was widely off the mark of the party leadership expectations was Yabloko. Yavlinsky's party maintained its (almost unchangd from the last elections) level of support (5.93% in 1999 and 6.89% in 1995), but the results in the first past the post constituencies and the loss of majority on Yabloko's home turf in St Petersburg were indications of the waning support for this grouping.

The most sensational result of the December elections was the relatively weak result for the Fatherland – All Russia bloc (13.3%) – tipped to be an almost certain eletions winner as late as autumn 1999. It transpired that a manifesto constructed almost exclusively around Anti-Yeltsinism was too weak a foundation to guarantee success. F – AR pursued power without any coherent programe or alternative to the Kremlin ideology. Potential voters may also have been put off by militaristic rhetoric of the group's leaders who were setting out to 'make war with Yeltsin'[19].

The real winner of the parliamentary elections was the pro-Kremlin bloc Unity (23.3%). The grouping's success foreshadowed Vladimir Putin's future victory in the 2000 presidential elections. The election manifesto for this grouping was replaced by an election strategy based on some fundamental assumptions. Firstly, the campaign was based around the ever growing popularity of Prime Minister Putin, who received a blank confidence cheque from Russians. Secondly, the staff of Unity carried out a character assassination on the leaders of the main competition in the power struggle F – AR. Thirdly, Unity leaders managed to play up the voters' nostalgia for a strong state (both domestically and on the international stage). And fourthly, in its elections campaign, Unity liberally used state resources and means[20].

5. The *Duma* elections – 7th December 2003

Elections to the Duma in December 2003 were the first elections where the winner– the pro Kremlin "United Russia" – was known even before the voting started. The only unknown was how big a majority will this grouping achieve over the other stakeholders. The Kremlin very carefully prepared for the encounter. Special emphasis was put on defining the institutional roles of various elements of the political system. Firstly, an attempt was made to define anew the role of political groupings in the system. The new Political Parties Act, adopted on 11th July 2001, clearly favoured large and strong political parties. Therefore the potential for new

19 A phrase used by the F-AR chief of electoral staff Gieorgiy Boos in an interview for "Niezawisimoja gazieta" of 21.08.1999.

20 That all state forces were thrown in aid of the virtual bloc Unity was noted by M. Deliagin, Czy nowy autorytaryzm rosyjski może okazać się skuteczny, (in:) A. Madziak-Miszewska (ed.), Rosja 2000. Koniec i początek epoki?, Warszawa 2000, p. 58.

political groupings critical of the President was marginalised. Under the new act it became very difficult to form a party. The Act stipulates that periodically checks will be carried out on already registered organisations with the possible loss of the political party status if these cease to meet certain legally defined conditions. According to Ministry of Justice data, on 15th February 2002 there were only seven political legally active parties in Russia[21]. Another element of the reform aiming to eliminate small groupings from political existence was raising the electoral threshold to 7% (the provision applied since the 2007 elections), and broadening the remit of the Central Electoral Commission which acquired the right to annul the results declared by regional commissions.

In the 2003 parliamentary elections the pro-presidential United Russia and *Rodina*, linked to the current administration, won a decisive victory (37.57% and 9.02%). This was hardly a surprise, given the massive campaign and the Kremlin's (or the oligarchs' links to the current administration) almost full control over the media. The most prominent opposition groupings, that is, Yabloko and SPS, had not reached the electoral threshold – their support was around 4% each – and were therefore eliminated from the contest. How much of the democrats' defeat was down to their fragmentation and mistakes in the manifesto, and how much to the actions by the Kremlin is difficult to judge; the fact is that the force of the opposition, small to start with, was weakened beyond limit. The remaining quasi opposition parties, that is CPRF and LDPR, secured the support proportionate to their capabilities (12.61% and 11.45%). This guaranteed them a presence in the Parliament but without any influence over the shape of legislation. The communists and LDPR were much weakened by a clever manoeuvre by the Kremlin, who in 2003, therefore before the elections, instigated, a new national – patriotic grouping *Rodina* (founded by D. Rogozin), which attracted the CPRF and LDPR voters.

The 2003 elections were monitored by around 1200 foreign observers. They were declared as "free but unfair". The OSCE Representative George Bruce stated that a number of OSCE and European Council obligations had not been met, as well as many benchmarks of free and democratic elections[22]. The most frequently voiced concerns were over the secret nature of the ballot and the public television bias towards United Russia.

6. The *Duma* elections – 2nd December 2007

Elections in December 2007 were the first elections under the provisions of the new electoral legislation passed in April 2005, which raised the elections threshold

21 С. Заславский, Закон о политических партиях принят. Что дальше?, "Конституционное право: восточноевропейское обозрение" 2002, No. 1 (38), 2002, p 17.

22 "Коммерсантъ-Власть" on 23.10.2007

from 5% to 7%. This, together with the prohibition for parties to form electoral blocs struck a blow at smaller opposition parties which had practically no chance to secure the level of support required. An even greater weapon against the opposition was abolishing the first-past-the-post constituencies, where democratic parties won at least a few seats. This eliminated any possibility of politicians independent of the regime, representing the regions, business and democratic circles, ever being elected[23]. The minimal turnout threshold to declare elections valid was abolished, as was the possibility of voting 'against all'. In order to be registered in the CEC the parties were obliged to collect at least 200 000 voters' signatures under the list of candidates, or to pay a deposit of 60 million rubels ($2.35 million). The deposit was to be returnable after the elections but only for those parties which secured at least 4% of the votes. The parties represented in the *Duma* – "United Russia", "Just Russia", the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and Liberal Democratic Party of Russia were exempt from the obligation to collect signatures or pay a deposit. A symptomatic gesture by the Kremlin which showed that political outcomes were determined before the elections and were independent of the electorate's votes was limiting drastically the number of OSCE observers from 400 (in 2003) to only 70 in 2007.

The strongest party on the Russian political scene before the 2007 elections was the pro-Kremlin party of power – United Russia. The CPRF and the LDRP continued to play a role, but these two groupings became reconciled to the limited role of opposition and were not an alternative to the Kremlin establishment. Other notable political groupings include the other party of power – Just Russia. Opposition parties including: the Russian People's Democratic Union of the fomer prime minister M. Kasyanov, the Republican Party of Russia of V. Ryzhkov, the United Citizen Front of G. Kasparov, the National Bolshevik Party of Limonov – all united in Other Russia and Yabloko groupings of G. Yavlinsky, were considered from the outset to be the victims of the 7% electoral threshold. In the case of some parties the CEC denied them a chance to even stand in elections by querying their support letters. Among those excluded were the People's Democratic Union, the United Citizen Front, the Republican Party of Russia, the Great Russia of D Rogozin and the National Bolshevik Party. 11 parties were finally permitted to stand in the elections.

The parliamentary elections campaign was a farce. Russian state television excluded opposition representatives from participating in debates. The average Russian was bombarded with the Kremlin propaganda and the pro-Kremlin United Russia. In the end, United Russia received 64.3% of votes, CPRF – 11.57%, LDPR – 8.14% and Just Russia– 7.74%. The remaining groupings did not pass the elections threshold[24].

23 M. Wojciechowski, Prezydent Rosji wzmacnia ustrój autorytarny, "Gazeta Wyborcza" on 13.09.2004.

24 http://kprf.ru/vibory2007/chronicle/53685.html (accessed on: 11.12.2014).

Of those parties that entered the parliament the communists were the most disappointed with the result; they even challenged the outcome of the elections. The opposition outside the Parliament declared loudly but futilely that these were the least fair elections in the history of Russia. This was confirmed by the observers from the OSCE parliamentary assembly and the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council.

In the 2007 elections it is worth noting the 10% increase in the turnout in comparison to the 2003 elections– up to 63.72%. This could have been, to a degree, the result of the mass mobilisation of society by the Kremlin but it could have been, as speculated, the result of electoral fraud.

7. The *Duma* elections – 4th December 2011

The elections that took place in 2011/2012 unexpectedly demonstrated that Russian quasi-authoritarianism fell in a trap of democracy. It turned out that the propaganda, social engineering and manipulation cannot wholly replace policies and Russian's growing aspirations. The relative economic stability afforded by the Putin administration quite naturally led to a boom in political expectations expressed mainly by the Russian youth (which often does not remember the chaotic times of Yeltsin) and the middle class. The slogans of modernising democracy formulated by the "temporary president" Dmitry Medvedev turned out to be empty, especially when contrasted with reality. The December parliamentary elections were won by United Russia with 49.5% of the votes, followed by CPRF – 19.2%, "Just Russia" – 13.2% and LDPR – 11.7%. Yabloko, with 3.3%, did not pass the election threshold. A grouping of anti-government opposition – "Parnas" (National Freedom Party) – was not allowed to stand[25]. The Russian Ministry of Justice in September 2011 already had refused to enter this grouping into the register of political parties. As an explanation, the Department stated that the statute of the grouping contains entries contrary to the Political Parties Act and other federal acts[26].

The result of the parliamentary elections was quite surprising and not quite clear cut. United Russia won decisively, but its result was much worse than in the 2007 elections. The inconsistency of this result was undoubtedly due to electoral fraud in favour of United Russia but also to the fact that in a non-democratic regime the ruling party gets results that are, from the point of view of those in government, far from satisfactory. The fraud uncovered was often so brazen that one could

25 J. Rogoża, Wybory parlamentarne w Rosji: powrót polityki, OSW 07.12.2011. http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publika- cje/analizy/2011-12-07/wybory-parlamentarne-w-rosji-powrot-polityki (accessed on: 21.12.2014).

26 The party was formed in 2010 by four leaders of democratic opposition: Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Milov, Boris Niemcov and Vladimir Ryzhkov.

suspect these were not the result of any orders from the Kremlin but rather a 'grass roots initiative' of the local activists keen to demonstrate the success of their political fieldwork. Perhaps the Russian elections were a plebiscite of political preferences before the presidential elections, a way of probing the real level of support for the administration before the key outcome? If this was the case, then the ruling oligarchy failed. It wasn't the outcome of the vote that was deemed a failure, but rather the prevalent view among the Russians that the elections were fraudulent. This had finally stripped any vestiges of democratic legitimacy that the administration might have had.

The 2011 parliamentary elections brought the opposition back onto the electoral scene; which, as it turned out, had a considerable esteem in the society despite information blockade in the pro-government media. The following personages got actively involved: Gary Kasparov, who encouraged boycotting the elections, Boris Niemcov – who called for the whole ballot papers to be crossed out, or the famous blogger Alexei Navalny – called for voting for every party other than United Russia. Their voices were heard mainly by residents of big cities, often via the Internet, which the administration failed to control successfully. The role of the internet, including the social media, turned out to be key. First of all, this was the means for organising protests efficiently (through Facebook, Twitter and VK), as well as for estimating the level of support. Frequent negative comments concerning the Prime Minister (Putin) were also significant. The main advantage of the internet was, however, that it allowed electoral fraud to be uncovered quickly. Russians filmed and photographed the process of voting and then posted these on the internet.

Activating the opposition was a function of a great social unease, the like of which had not been seen for years. On the 5th and 6th of December protests against fraudulent elections took place in many Russian cities. The greatest protest, on the 5th of December in Moscow, assembled between five and eight thousand people [27]. For several weeks it would seem that a wave of the "colourful revolution" would sweep the regime in Moscow, especially as the protests were joined by activists from the parliamentary opposition attempting, with the help of society, to improve their position in relations with the Kremlin. The scale of the social protests forced the authorities to make certain concessions to the protesters. Liberalisation of electoral law was announced. President Medvedev issued generalised statements on bringing back direct elections of governors and increasing the pluralism in the media. But no real dialogue was entered into with the protesters. Instead, the authorities made concerted efforts to discredit the opposition and cause a breakup in its ranks.

27 J. Rogoża, Wybory parlamentarne…, *op. cit*., http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2011-12-07/wybory--parlamentarne-w-rosji-powrot-polityki (accessed on: 21.12.2014).

8. Conclusions

The procedural side of democracy in its liberal variant treats elections as a valid delegation of authority, which is at odds with the traditional understanding of authority in Russia – both by the political regime and society[28]. Moreover, the very institution of elections has not engendered the difference between the sovereign and authority in Russia. Such view on the issue has been (and remains so) convenient for the group remaining in power, which could use it to explain its non-democratic actions.

The disastrous constitutional crisis in 1992-1993, and the procedure of the impeachment of Yeltsin in 1998 relegated the legislative authority to be more and more of a facade – a fig leaf to presidential authoritarianism. The presidential regime deprived the parliament of autonomy, allowing it to act but restricting those actions to the areas non-confrontational to the administration. Parliament's functions became drastically restricted as the result of adopting the Constitution of 1993. The most important one – legislative – was left to the Duma, but the shift of legislative initiative to the President and the government caused the parliament's autonomy in this area to be doubtful.

To an even greater degree this was the case with any amendments to the political system, which the parliament lost to the President in 1993. It would also seem that the Russian Parliament did not integrate and socialise the political community due to insufficient means and authority. The element that did galvanize the system and socialised the political community was without the doubt the President and associated elements of the power set-up. It was similar with the Parliament's participation in forming the government. A major impediment for any anti-presidential action by the *Duma* was the attitude of the Federation Council which tended to lend its support to the president (it was a rather staunch ally of the Kremlin) and therefore limited the actions of the lower chamber even further.

After 1999, parliamentary elections clearly indicated that the political role of parliamentary opposition is nearing its end. The regime did not, however, decide to take direct, undemocratic action against rebel MPs. Gradual limiting of the opposition through depriving it of political ('taking over' of various opposition leaders) and economic resources has been more than evident. Repercussions did not touch directly politicians and their parties but were aimed at people assisting them or financing them. Cutting the opposition off from the majority of mass media meant that the regime could manipulate the elections, and the political scene, at will, relegating from political existence those grouping whose opposition was particularly troublesome for the Kremlin. The 2003 parliamentary elections, where the anti-

28 Por.: Л. Бляхер, «Презумпция виновности». Метаморфозы политических институтов в России, "Pro et Contra" 2002, No. 3, vol. 7, pp. 82-83.

Kremlin opposition was practically eliminated, only confirmed the trends that were evident before. Parties remaining on the political scene were forced to accept that their opposition would be controlled. The elections in 2007 and 2011 were a poor imitation of democracy by the Kremlin. The final elimination of the parliamentary opposition did, however, return the political system to a functional balance, based on real inequality of its various elements, that is the absolute dominance of the Kremlin or the 'political corporation' running Russia.

The general level of liberty in the Putin era went down significantly in comparison to the Yeltsin period. The first Putin presidency (2000-2008) prepared the ground for greater authoritarianism. Its proliferation undoubtedly stimulated the political regime, which liberally applied the resources of authority in this area. The Russian political system still contains, however, elements of a competing oligarchy, has preserved elements of democratic legitimisation in the formal sense (elections), as well as elements of economic liberalism. Moreover, the middle class play a role in Russia; despite still being linked to the state it is more independent and numerous than, say, in Belarus. The political role of 'the marginals' as the political basis for authoritarianism seems to be lesser.

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