



COMMENTARY

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The Russian Parliamentary Elections Do Matter

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How much do the results of the Russian parliamentary elections this Sunday matter for the United States? From today's vantage point in Washington, given the urgent problems in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and I could probably name a few other places, I guess not all that much. But since I am in the Russia "expert" business, it is in my interest to make the counterargument, so let me give it a go.

Russia, of course, matters for a number of reasons we do not have to belabor here. What Putin decides to do about his future matters a great deal for Russia's future as well as the U.S.-Russian relationship, and he has made these Duma elections a referendum on his leadership. With him leading the United Russia party list, it is important that the party come out with at least a two-thirds representation in the Duma. Anything less will be regarded almost as a defeat and this result would also make changing the Russian Constitution, if that is desired, a little more difficult.

The results of the parliamentary elections will also likely influence the decision Putin makes about his future, if he has not yet made it. First, let me elaborate why that decision is of considerable consequence. If Putin were to push for constitutional change to allow for him to run for a third term in March or if he were to step down in favor of a "caretaker" or "placeholder" until his imminent return to the presidency, it would have quite negative implications for the potential of the Russian political system to evolve in a more pluralistic and ultimately democratic direction. These scenarios are likely to increase the likelihood that the current system further stagnates, becomes even more corrupt, and ultimately less stable.

If Putin decides, however, to step away from the presidency with no intention to return to the Kremlin, he would make his own significant and unique mark in the 1000-year history of Russia. Whether he remained influential in a combination of party and corporate positions or took the position of prime minister, this would immediately signify change in the Russian political system in a more pluralistic direction and enhance the chances for further democratic change. This move, literally giving up his Kremlin office, would reverse the antidemocratic trend of his entire leadership. I think the ramifications of the decision he will make are that stark and of tremendous magnitude.

From the standpoint of the United States, and I suspect our European and Asian democratic allies around the world, if Putin decides to stay on as Russian leader operating from inside the Kremlin (this local geography is actually quite important), suddenly he and Russia will be relegated to the dreaded "club of dictators," and whatever credibility Putin had for honesty would be completely shot. He has looked too many important people in the eye and said too many times in public that he will step down and will not change the Russian Constitution but rather will follow it in "letter and spirit." That does not mean that the United States and Russia cannot cooperate on a variety of security and economic issues we view in our joint interest, as even we did with the Soviet Union at times. But whatever pretensions Putin and his colleagues may have had about Russia being part of European political culture would be dramatically and conclusively revealed as false. Maybe it is my naiveté, but something tells me that is not the category the Russian people want to be in.

The parliamentary elections are not the definitive data point that will eliminate all doubt about Russia's domestic political course. Putin's decision will clarify that. But these elections will both be an indicator of and a factor in that decision. Although this is unlikely, a massive electoral triumph for United Russia in the neighborhood of 80 percent or more will frankly make Russia look all the less democratic, and more like a one-party autocracy. Anything less than 60 percent will look like defeat, and perhaps lead Putin to conclude that he is not all that indispensable after all. Maybe how the Russian people vote on December 2 actually does really matter. Putin has certainly been campaigning for the last two months as if it does.

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