

Monday, 11 October 2004

# Analysis: Will The Next Duma Have A Bigger Pro-Kremlin Proportion?

By Robert Coalson

In the wake of the Beslan school hostage taking, President Vladimir Putin proposed a number of measures intended to combat terrorism by strengthening the unity and integrity of the country. The main goals of Putin's proposals, according to the 13 September speech in which he presented them, are "to ensure the unity of the country, the strengthening of state structures and confidence in the authorities, and the creation of an effective system of internal security."

One of the most important changes that Putin proposed -- and one whose relationship to combating terrorism has been most called into question -- is the elimination of single-mandate-district representation in the State Duma and its replacement with a system of proportional representation based on party-list voting. "Today we are obligated through our practical actions to support the initiatives of citizens in their efforts to combat terrorism, and we must together find mechanisms to strengthen the state," Putin said. "One of these mechanisms, ensuring a real dialogue and interaction between society and the authorities in the struggle against terrorism, must be national political parties. And in the interests of strengthening the political system of the country I believe it is necessary to introduce the proportional-representation system for elections to the State Duma."

Currently, one-half of the Duma's 450 deputies are elected by proportional representation from party lists and one-half are elected from single-mandate districts.

**"Many people still have not realized that the switch to a proportional system completely opens up a regime of the appointment of convenient candidates. Practically nothing depends on the voter."**

The Central Election Commission (TsIK), however, has been advocating this change at least since May, and many observers criticized the proposal before Beslan as antidemocratic and intended to strengthen the Kremlin's grip over the legislative branch. Free Russia party leader Irina Khakamada said on 20 May that the proposal indicates "that the Kremlin has to have an even more monolithic parliament and the entire political field to itself." Duma Deputy Speaker Sergei Baburin (Motherland) told Ekho Moskvyy on 6 May that he opposed the proposal because lawmakers from single-mandate districts have close ties to particular regions and their residents. Ironically, in an interview with "Itogi" in June, TsIK Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov floated the idea of electing members of the Federation Council from the same single-mandate districts now used in Duma

elections, ostensibly as a way of increasing democracy through direct representation.

The history of single-mandate districts in Russia is indeed connected with the fate of its political parties. They were created by the 1993 constitution as a way of breaking the Communist Party's firm grip on the legislature. The Kremlin knew that only the Communists had the kind of strong party apparatus and broad popular support necessary to win a solid bloc in a purely proportional system. It also felt that with the support of most of the regional administrations, pro-Kremlin -- or at least anti-Communist -- figures could do well in single-mandate districts. Unlike Baburin, many observers have criticized single-mandate-district deputies for being more closely tied to local administrations than to their electorates. For this reason, for example, the liberal Yabloko party endorsed the TsIK's proposal in May.

In the 1990s, the country had a large number of small political parties serving as vanity platforms for national political figures, and the Kremlin was actively working to prevent such figures from gaining any solid backing among the public. Moreover, the numerous Kremlin-backed "parties of power" fared poorly in various national elections. At that time, "Kommersant-Daily" wrote on 7 May, the Kremlin made efforts to elect the entire Duma from single-mandate districts, in an attempt to secure its power in the Duma on the basis of its control of local administrations.

Now, the pro-Kremlin Unified Russia party has a well-developed party apparatus and has gained a solid majority in the Duma, controlling all of its senior posts. Moreover, as the December 2003 elections showed, the Kremlin has finally been able to convert its domination of regional administrations into support for the party of power, as governors fell all over themselves in their efforts to ensure that Unified Russia polled exactly what the presidential administration wanted it to poll. At the same time, parties such as Yabloko and the Union of Rightist Forces were unable to muster much party-list support and were only able to get deputies in the Duma through the single-mandate system. Although most single-mandate deputies joined one of the main Duma factions, some obstreperous independent voices continue to be heard in the chamber's back rows.

The history of Russia's post-Soviet Duma elections, then, shows that the proportional-representation system does strengthen political parties, but it strengthens those with the strongest national apparatuses and the greatest access to the resources of the Kremlin. The administration's bid to eliminate the single-mandate districts would, for example, make no sense if the Kremlin had not already established firm control over national television and the TsIK. The system does little, however, to bolster "real dialogue and interaction between society and the authorities," as Putin said in his 13 September speech.

In fact, since parties have developed the notorious practice of presenting party lists dominated by high-profile figures who have no intention of actually taking up seats in the Duma, voters don't even know for whom they are actually voting when they give their support to a particular party. And in the Duma that is formed from party-list voting, citizens will have no particular representative with whom to hold a dialogue.

What the reform will not do is to help political parties develop grassroots support, the kind that could theoretically challenge the legitimacy of the party of power's position. As Institute of Elections Director Aleksandr Ivanchenko told "Izvestiya" on 7 October: "What does the switch to a proportional system mean? The party lists are appointed. All that is needed is for these lists to be coordinated in the Kremlin, and the voters will be left with nothing else but to vote for it. Many people still have not realized that the switch to a proportional system completely opens up a regime of the appointment of convenient candidates. Practically nothing depends on the voter."