



The 2005 Moscow Election and the Future of Russian Politics

By Leon Aron

Like most elections to city councils around the world, the Moscow City Duma election on December 4, 2005, was marked by apathy and low turnout. Occasionally, however, such elections yield clues to national trends in voter attitudes and allow the parties to test tactics and strategy in advance of national contests.

This is certainly how the Moscow ballot was viewed by the Kremlin, on guard against a Russian reprise of the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Kirghiz “color revolutions”; by resurgent left nationalists; and by the democratic opposition, eager to reclaim its place in Russian politics after the disastrous showing in the 2003 parliamentary election. Moscow’s centrality in Russian politics greatly heightened the election’s importance.

In a rehearsal for the crucial 2007 national Duma poll, the Moscow campaign tested the strength of the “official” party, United Russia, as well as the Kremlin’s ability to manipulate and divide the left populists; the viability of the democrats’ unity after a decade of bitter internecine conflict; and the effectiveness of all manner of legal and illegal “technologies” used by the authorities to prevent the democratic opposition from “getting out” its message.

In the end, the election did not entirely live up to the expectations either of the Kremlin—

which was unable to secure a majority for United Russia or to marginalize the democratic opposition—or of the democrats, whose results hardly amounted to a triumph. At the same time, the event revealed or confirmed several aspects of the Russian political scene that are likely to be pertinent to the 2007 election.

The Parties

Ten parties vied for thirty-five seats in the Moscow City Duma. Fifteen mandates were to be decided by direct vote in each of the city’s fifteen electoral districts and twenty seats allocated according to the percentage of the party-list vote. The larger parties on the list were United Russia, the Communists, and the right nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). (The left nationalist Motherland, or Rodina, had been barred from the ballot a week before the election for running a racist campaign advertisement on television.)

The liberal democratic opposition was represented by Yabloko-United Democrats (Y-UD), in which Grigory Yavlinsky’s Yabloko joined forces with its former arch-rival, the Union of Rightist Forces (SPS in the Russian acronym); the smaller Green Russia environmental party; and the United People’s Party of Soldiers’ Mothers, which decries the abuse of conscripts in the Russian armed forces and campaigns for the abolition of the compulsory military service.

Leon Aron (laron@aei.org) is a resident scholar and the director of Russian Studies at AEI. The author is grateful to Center for Eastern Studies (Warsaw) researcher Jadwiga Rogoza and AEI research assistant Igor Khrestin for their help in researching this essay.

A Referendum on Democracy

Yabloko (which is supported largely by the older intelligentsia, many of whom experienced a sharp diminution of status in post-Communist Russia) and SPS (whose constituency tends to be younger and more affluent, urban, college-educated entrepreneurs and professionals) aimed at turning the municipal election into a “referendum on democracy.”¹

The Yabloko-United Democrats’ electoral platform opened with an indictment of the present regime for attempting “a wholesale destruction of the main democratic institutions”: a sovereign parliament, media free from political censorship, an independent judiciary, honest elections, and an autonomous private economy.² In the twenty-first century, the platform continues, “the authoritarian model of governance” is doomed: it will result in Russia’s falling behind its international competition and may even lead to the country’s disintegration.³ The Moscow election would help “determine if the society had a chance to oppose the restoration of the *nomenklatura*-bureaucratic state, defend freedom and justice,” and “protect the citizens against authoritarianism, arbitrariness, favoritism, and corruption.”⁴

On the democrats’ agenda were the return to the direct election of the regional governors; firm guarantees of freedom of speech, dissemination of information and of meetings and demonstrations; military reform and the elimination of the draft; the independence of the courts; an end to the manipulation of election results; and the inviolability of private property and freedom of entrepreneurship.⁵

The Campaign

The election was marred by instances of blatant unfairness. Helped by the power of bureaucracy (what the Russians call “administrative resources”), United Russia—backed by the Kremlin and the mayor’s office—seemed to have at its disposal campaign funding that the opposition alleged was far in excess of the official limits on spending. Meanwhile, private businesses that used to be the main source of the support for both left and right opposition had been scared off by the trial and harsh sentence meted out to the former billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whose fate is widely believed to have been sealed by his generous assistance to the opposition.

With the city owning thousands of buildings and employing hundreds of thousands of workers, and with a myriad of enterprises and firms dependent on it for contracts or the ability to do business, the “administrative resources” allowed United Russia to dominate the campaign. The party’s posters hung on virtually every street corner. The entire façade of the Rossiya Hotel was covered by an enormous placard, while the passenger straps on trolleys were festooned with the smiling faces of the United Russia candidates.

The democrats, on the other hand, were routinely refused space by advertisers reluctant to run afoul of the authorities.⁶ The Y-UD posters that did find space were systematically removed by the teams of suddenly zealous “cleaners” employed by the city, usually within three hours after the campaign materials were put on display.⁷

At Moscow schools, parents of students were pressured to vote for United Russia.⁸ Apparently taking a page from the campaign of the pro-government candidate Viktor Yanukovich in the 2004 rigged presidential election in Ukraine, United Russia bused the same people with absentee ballots to different polling stations for multiple voting.⁹

On election day, several Y-UD observers were forced out of polling stations, and at least two were briefly detained by police after noting and protesting violations by election officials. There were no exit polls, except for the one paid for by United Russia and the Kremlin-organized youth group “Nashi” (Ours).

In the end, only three out of nine parties on the final ballot overcame the 10 percent threshold required to seat their representatives in the city duma: United Russia, with 47 percent of the party-list vote (thirteen seats in the duma), the Communists, 17 percent (four seats), and Yabloko-United Democrats, 11 percent (three seats). In addition, United Russia swept up all the fifteen seats decided by the direct vote. The turnout was 35 percent.

United Russia and the Communists

Although falling short of a majority (and thus disappointing its Kremlin engineers and financiers), United Russia has confirmed the solidity of its pre-eminence in Russian politics today. Just as its winning performance in the 2003 national election was due largely to the identification with the then immensely popular president (whose term in office coincided with the strongest economic growth in at least thirty years), so United

Russia's dwarfing of all other parties in Moscow was due in large measure to its list being headed by Mayor Yuri Luzhkov,¹⁰ during whose thirteen-year tenure Moscow has been transformed from a gray, dirty, hungry, and crumbling metropolis into a bright and vibrant European capital. If the real incomes in the country as a whole have grown 6 to 7 percent a year on average since 2000, the prosperity of the Muscovites is likely to have increased at twice this rate.

On the left, the Communists almost certainly profited from the disqualification of Rodina, which advocated a quasi-socialist economic policy and called for restrictions on immigration, capitalizing on Muscovites' concern about the migrant workers from the former Soviet republics (particularly the Caucasus and Central Asia) who now fill most of Moscow's construction, transportation, and sanitation jobs.

With significant overlaps in their constituencies, Rodina was the choice of 14 percent of Muscovites, and the Communists received 10 percent in pre-election polls.¹¹ The alacrity with which the electoral commission, the Moscow City Court, and the Supreme Court barred Rodina from the final ballot lends credibility to the theory, widely circulated in Moscow, that the party's ejection had very little to do with the fight against racism,¹² but instead had been engineered by the Kremlin in order to prevent Y-UD from taking the symbolically important second place were the Communists and Rodina to split the left-nationalist vote.

Yabloko-United Democrats: Tactics and Strategy

The democrats are right to blame the unfairness of the competition for hampering their campaign. Convinced, in addition, that at least 3 to 4 percentage points had been stolen from them by the Electoral Commission,¹³ the coalition filed a suit on December 5 alleging that its observers had been denied access to the voting records after the closing of the polling stations.¹⁴

Yet no matter how manifest or distasteful, the electoral shenanigans of the authorities are far from sufficient to account for the coalition's weak showing. Having been at the center of Moscow politics for over a decade, both Yabloko and SPS are well-known to most Muscovites. Like other parties, the democratic coalition was entitled by law to over two hours of free advertising on Moscow television and took full advantage of it.

Furthermore, the democrats' highest level of support in pre-election surveys stood at 14 percent, and it is very unlikely that they would have "surpassed" United Russia given "equal opportunity" as Grigory Yavlinsky claimed.¹⁵ Instead, the outcome reflects the coalition's tactical and strategic choices, and, of course, the electorate's mood.

To begin, Y-UD refused to follow the example of United Russia and the Communists, who liberally studded their party list with the names of nationally known figures (including Luzhkov and the Communist Party's perennial chairman Gennady Zyuganov)—none of whom, of course, had the slightest intention of serving in the city duma. Loudly criticizing this practice as cynical manipulation of voters, Y-UD filled its list with politicians unknown to most Muscovites and left out such vote-getting names as Grigory Yavlinsky and former first deputy prime minister and former co-chairman of SPS Boris Nemtsov.

The Turnout

An even larger loss of votes very likely resulted from the low turnout. With United Russia mobilizing "administrative resources" to bolster the vote by city and federal employees with all kinds of positive and negative incentives and with the aging communist electorate disciplined by decades of Soviet "elections," it was the democrats' potential voters—younger, better-educated, professional, and entrepreneurial—who likely abstained in disproportionately greater numbers.

Although there were no reliable exit polls, a comparison with the national Duma election two years before tells much of the story. At the time, voter turnout in Moscow was 1.7 times higher (58 percent). Similarly, the combined support for the two parties was 18 percent (10 percent for Yabloko and 8 percent for SPS), or 1.6 times their December 4 showing.

The Failure of the Referendum on Democracy

The low turnout signaled the fundamental problem the democrats faced: in times of relative prosperity and stability, a municipal election—even one in the country's most liberal region*—is not the most fitting occasion for a "referendum on democracy."

* Because of its size, Moscow is accorded the status of a federal region.

Like voters everywhere, Muscovites were apparently reluctant to mix national and local issues. Whereas Y-UD leaflets began with demands for “freedom and justice” and “direct elections of the mayor,” and decried “authoritarianism and corruption” and the “arbitrariness of the government officials,”¹⁶ the polls showed that Muscovites were most concerned about the numbers of out-of-town “visitors,” street crime, the increase in rents and utilities, and the skyrocketing prices for housing.¹⁷

The democrats failed to give the election the meaning and urgency necessary to overcome voter apathy. Almost every fifth Muscovite who told the pollsters that he was not going to vote explained the decision by stating that “their vote decides nothing.”¹⁸

The Complacent and Contradictory Electorate

The key lesson of the Moscow election for 2007 is that, barring extraordinary events, Russians, much like people elsewhere, tend to be complacent and uninterested in politics in times of a steadily expanding economy. In these circumstances, it is hardly a winning strategy for a highly ideological opposition to make criticism of the current regime’s policies the centerpiece of their electoral program. (Within two weeks of the Moscow poll, Y-UD received 3 percent of the vote in the regional elections in Tver and Novosibirsk, failing to qualify for the seats in the regional dumas.)

The democrats’ cause was not helped by the contradictory opinions many Russians held (again, not unlike most other large electorates). Almost two-thirds of the people believe that the country needs opposition parties or movements,¹⁹ and solid majorities (or pluralities) support the independence of courts, freedom of speech and travel, and the direct election of the political leadership, while they oppose a third term even for so popular a president as Vladimir Putin.²⁰ Yet when asked how successful President Putin is in “defending democracy and political liberties of the citizens,” almost half (46 percent) think that he is either “very successful” (4 percent) or “rather successful” (42 percent),²¹ despite the consistent tightening of the executive grip over the Russian

parliament, courts, media, and the abolition of the election of regional governors. (Almost as many, 43 percent, consider Putin to be “without much success” or “absolutely unsuccessful” in defending democracy).²²

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A Significant Achievement

Still, the Moscow election has proven that the two main democratic parties could join forces after a decade of rancor and animosity and retain their core constituencies. Contrary to most forecasts, the coalition proved viable. After the election, the partners began talks about developing a joint national program and strengthening a regional electoral alliance that had sprung up in the provinces long before the leaders hammered out the final details of a joint list in several all-night negotiating sessions in late November.²³

In the words of a Y-UD activist, “A united democratic opposition now officially exists!”²⁴

The opposition’s existence is a blow to the government’s domestic and foreign propaganda campaign that denies the presence of a viable “liberal alternative” to the current regime and portrays Putin (or his successor in 2008 and, by extension, United Russia) as the only real “liberals” in the country, the sole bulwarks against the anti-Western leftist and nationalists, and, as such, deserving of wholehearted allegiance from all progressive Russians and indulgence—if not indeed active assistance—from the West. Proving the Kremlin wrong was among the key reasons some democrats viewed the results of the Moscow election as the “first good news [in Russian politics] in five years.”²⁵

Provided the alliance holds, there is a good chance now that it might become the nucleus of the national democratic opposition by including the parties and the constituencies of such nationally known democratic leaders as Vladimir Ryzhkov, Irina Khakamada, and the world chess champion Garry Kasparov.

What Is to Be Done?

The Moscow election has confirmed that the key to the democrats’ success in 2007, realistically defined as capturing around 20 percent of the national vote, is no different from the recipe for opposition everywhere.

It must develop constructive, realistic alternatives to the policies of the current officeholders; widen and strengthen regional networks; and relentlessly communicate its message to a seemingly uninterested electorate in comprehensible language. If and when the voters are jolted out of apathy, the opposition may then be perceived as a reliable instrument of peaceful regime change.

As the former acting prime minister and co-founder of SPS, Yegor Gaidar, told an interviewer after the Moscow election, the most important thing in the future would be to “ensure that those [Russians] who think that Russia can and must be a free country with a functioning democracy have a political movement which they could support.”²⁶ In the Russian case, the jolt may come from lower oil prices, which would restrict the government’s ability to pacify key constituencies by throwing money at problems that require structural changes; from the national protest that is likely to follow next year’s withdrawal of rent subsidies without adequate preparation and protection for pensioners and other categories of the poor; from growing inflation; or from the inability to stop terrorism and a worsening of the situation in the Northern Caucasus.

The electorate may also be gradually energized by the accretion of understanding that would link the neo-authoritarian drift to the growing unresponsiveness of the authorities; the stifling of public criticism and protest; the almost daily and demeaning encounters with corruption, incompetence, and bureaucratic extortion from traffic police to tax authorities; and the botched or frozen reforms of such vital but crumbling sectors of economy and society as health care, education, housing and utilities, electricity, transportation, and armed forces. Already, a 44-percent plurality of Russians feel that the country is on the wrong track,²⁷ and as we have seen, four in ten Russians think that Putin is not up to the task of protecting democracy.

In the 2003 parliamentary election, an estimated 9 million pro-democracy voters, who had supported the liberal parties in the 1990s, stayed home. These voters comprised 9 percent of the total electorate

and at least 18 percent of the turnout.²⁸ Bringing back just these people may be sufficient to make United Democrats the second largest party in the country.

Not Fatalism, Just Policy and Work

To win in 2006, the democrats must develop constructive, realistic alternatives to the policies of the current officeholders; widen and strengthen regional networks; and relentlessly communicate its message to a seemingly uninterested electorate in comprehensible language. If the electorate can be jolted out of apathy, the opposition may then be perceived as a reliable instrument of peaceful regime change.

Despite the trends pointing to increased dissatisfaction and restiveness of the Russian public, the results of the elections to the Moscow City Duma confirmed the lack of the Russian electorate’s enthusiasm for regime change at a time of relative prosperity. At the same time, the event proved the viability of united democratic opposition and its ability, under the right political circumstances, to become the country’s third or even second largest party. Such a result would be vitally important in 2007, when the Russians will decide whether the previous eight years of Putin’s regime were a short-lived neo-authoritarian restoration or a long-term tendency of political and economic re-centralization, encroachment of state on the civil society, bureaucratic dominance, and increasingly brazen corruption.

Interviewed shortly after the Moscow poll, Yegor Gaidar pointed to the success of the right-of-center parties in the 2005 Polish election after they had been routed in 2001. “There is no fatalism here; this is a question of policy and work. Everything else is a technical matter.”²⁹ If the Russian 2007 electoral campaign is allowed to be

even half as free and fair as the Polish one this year (an admittedly large “if”), this is good advice from one of the architects of the Russian market economy and democracy.

Notes

1. Vladimir Kara-Murza, “The Moscow Election: Report from the Trenches” (presentation at the U.S.-Russia Working Group luncheon, December 7, 2005).

2. Yabloko-United Democrats, “Predvybornaya programma partii Yabloko na vyborah v Moskovskuyu gorodskuyu dumu” [The electoral platform of the Yabloko Party for the election to the Moscow City Duma] (Moscow, Russia: Yabloko-United Democrats, 2005).

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Oksana Yablokova, "Campaign Ads Conquer City," *Moscow Times*, November 29, 2005; and Vladimir Kara-Murza, "The Moscow Election."
7. Vladimir Kara-Murza, "The Moscow Election."
8. Ibid.
9. Anastasiya Kornya, Elana Rudneva, and Nadezhda Invanitskaya, "Opyat' pobedel Luzhkov" [Luzhkov has won again], *Vedomosti*, December 5, 2005, available at <http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article.shtml?2005/12/05/100370>; and Nikolay Gul'ko, "Yabloku est' kuda popast" [Yabloko has something to aim at], *Kommersant*, December 5, 2005, available at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.html?DocID=632425&IssueId=23578>.
10. Asked if they would vote for a party other than United Russia if Luzhkov switched his affiliation, one in four supporters of United Russia said that he would vote for the party of Luzhkov's choice. Levada Center, "Opros moskvicey: vybory v Mosgordumu" [Questioning Muscovites: Moscow City Duma elections], poll, September 26, 2005, available through www.levada.ru.
11. Levada Center, "Prognoz golosovaniya na vyborakh v MGD" [Estimates of the Moscow City Duma elections outcome], poll, November 26, 2005, available through www.levada.ru.
12. Less than a month before, on November 4, authorities allowed the nationalists and racists to march unimpeded through Moscow, while later prohibiting and disrupting an anti-racists demonstration organized by the democrats.
13. Vladimir Kara-Murza, "The Moscow Election."
14. "Yabloko obratilos' v sud po faktam narusheniy na vyborakh" [Yabloko went to court alleging violations during the election], www.polit.ru, December 6, 2005, available at <http://www.polit.ru/news/2005/12/06/yabloko.html>.
15. "Yabloko—ob'yedinyonnye demokraty poluchili 14 protsentov" [Yabloko-United Democrats gained 14 percent], press conference of Grigorii Yavlinskii, Nikita Byelykh, Yevgenii Bunimovich and Ivan Novitskii, December 5, 2005, available through www.yabloko.ru.
16. Yabloko-United Democrats, "Ob'edinyonnye demokraty za/Ob'edinyonnye demokraty protiv" [The United Democrats "for" and the United Democrats "against"] (Moscow, Russia: Yabloko-United Democrats, 2005).
17. VTsIOM (All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center), "Vybory v Mosgordumu i problemy volnuyushchiye moskvicey" [Moscow City Duma elections and the problems that trouble Muscovites], poll, November 15, 2005, available through www.wciom.ru.
18. ROMIR Monitoring, "Dve tryeti moskvicey sobirayutsya poyti na vybory, khotya polovina iz nikh poka ne opredyelilis, za kogo budut golosovat" [Two thirds of the Muscovites are going to participate in the elections, although a half of them haven't decided yet, who they are going to vote for], poll, November 28, 2005, available through www.rmh.ru.
19. Levada Center, "Rossiyane o neobkhdimosti opozitsii" [Russians on the necessity of opposition], poll, October 24, 2005, available through www.levada.ru.
20. For details see Leon Aron, "Liberty above All: Vladimir Ryzhkov and the Republican Party of Russia," *Russian Outlook*, Fall 2005, 6, available at www.aei.org/publication23338.
21. Levada Center, "Sotsialno-politicheskaya situatsia v Rossii v noyabre 2005 goda" [Socio-political situation in Russia in November 2005], poll, December 8, 2005, available through www.levada.ru.
22. Ibid.
23. Vladimir Kara-Murza, "The Moscow Election."
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Liliya Mukhamediyarova, "Demokraty zadumalis' ob obnovlenii" [Democrats started thinking of renewal], *Gazyeta*, December 5, 2005, available at www.gzt.ru/politics/2005/12/05/214152.html.
27. Leon Aron, "Liberty above All," 6.
28. Alexei Sitnikov, "Giving Voters More than Meetings," *Moscow Times*, May 12, 2005, available at <http://moscowtimes.ru/stories/2005/05/12/005/html>.
29. Liliya Mukhamediyarova, "Demokraty zadumalis'."