



Russian Duma elections 'not held on a level playing field', say parliamentary observers

Moscow, 3 December 2007 – The State Duma elections in the Russian Federation on 2 December 2007 were not fair and failed to meet many OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections, according to an observation mission of parliamentarians from these two bodies.

The observation, bringing together over 70 parliamentarians from 28 countries, was a joint effort of delegations from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), led by Luc van den Brande, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE PA), led by Göran Lenmarker. The Nordic Council also joins these two bodies in this statement. A broader participation of international observers would have been preferable and could have contributed to greater transparency.

In general, the elections were well organised and observers noticed significant technical improvements. However, they took place in an atmosphere which seriously limited political competition and with frequent abuse of administrative resources, media coverage strongly in favour of the ruling party, and an election code whose cumulative effect hindered political pluralism. There was not a level political playing field in Russia in 2007.

In particular, the following major areas raised concern:

- The merging of the state and a political party is an abuse of power and a clear violation of international commitments and standards.
- The media showed strong bias in favour of President Putin and the ruling United Russia party.
- The new election code makes it extremely difficult for new and smaller parties to develop and compete effectively.
- There were widespread reports of harassment of opposition parties.

The Copenhagen Commitments (5.4), agreed by all OSCE participating states, specifically state that there should be "a clear separation between the State and political parties; in particular, political parties will not be merged with the State". The Council of Europe's *Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters* (I.2.3) lays down that state authorities must have "a neutral attitude" to the election campaign, media coverage and party and campaign funding.

The extensive use of administrative resources – such as state infrastructure and personnel on the public payroll – on behalf of United Russia is a clear violation of these commitments and standards. Most appointed governors are included on United Russia lists, which is misleading to voters as these senior officials are unlikely to abandon high public office to take up seats in the Duma. The active role of the head of state on behalf of United Russia, in spite of not being a member of that party, turned a parliamentary election into a referendum on the President.

Broadcast media, particularly television, is under almost total state control. President Putin and United Russia dominated the airwaves during the election campaign with overwhelmingly positive coverage. According to monitoring reports, the state-funded media failed in their public mandate to offer balanced and objective coverage and this made it very difficult for the voters to get an accurate and unbiased picture of the political parties and the issues.

The print media have been more dynamic and there have been examples of balanced coverage in several newspapers. However, the print media, in particular the more independent papers, do not reach a wide audience.

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The new election law creates a pure proportional list system in which only established political parties can seek election, eliminating the possibility for local and independent candidates to run for office.

The total effect of the new election code makes it extremely difficult for new and small parties to develop and compete effectively. The registration procedure is complicated and requires either a substantial fee or a high number of signatures. The code also contains significant financial disincentives for smaller parties to participate in the campaign. The seven percent threshold and the ban on parties forming electoral blocs discourage the development of new political parties and more pluralistic parliamentary representation.

The pre-election campaign was marked by the authorities' clampdowns on opposition rallies and demonstrations. Voters were denied an open campaign, as United Russia chose not to participate in political debates, making it more difficult for voters to directly compare the platforms of the various political parties.

There were persistent reports of harassment of opposition candidates, detentions, confiscation of election material, threats against voters and allegations of the potential misuse of absentee certificates. NGOs have faced restrictions on their work, and some also reported they were not allowed to observe the voting at polling stations on election day.

On election day, polling stations seemed well-run, although they were at times crowded. The voting took place in a mostly calm and friendly atmosphere. Election officials were generally welcoming, although the observers experienced some over-zealous policemen. Domestic observers representing various political parties were present in many polling stations.

Observers noticed that people who were not registered and without absentee certificates were allowed to vote. Voting arrangements, such as the use of electronic boxes and voting booths that did not provide adequate privacy, failed to protect the secrecy of the vote. The seals on some ballot-boxes were inadequate. Some international observers faced obstructions to their work – including, in isolated cases, refusal of access.

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