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Election Still Waiting for a Big Question

By Konstantin Sonin

Although December's State Duma elections will doubtless fail to meet democratic standards, this doesn't mean that they won't address serious issues. At the end of the Duma election campaign in 2003, the country's voters were faced with a clear choice. On the one hand, they could support the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, still the CEO of Yukos at the time, and the presidential administration's populist policies for the deprivatization and redistribution of natural resource wealth by voting for the pro-presidential United Russia party. Otherwise, they could vote against. As we saw, the Kremlin's strategy paid off. Voters sided with the authorities on the question and voted accordingly.

It is entirely possible that Khodorkovsky might be a free man today and Sibneft might still be in private hands if United Russia had garnered only 25 percent of the vote instead of the 40 percent that it actually polled in 2003 and the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko had ended up with some of the Duma seats that went to Rodina. The Putin administration can be accused of many sins, but there is no denying that its actions and policies have more closely reflected the public mood than did President Boris Yeltsin's elitist, more progressive government.

The most interesting aspect of the Duma elections is not finding out the identities of the politicians who will grab the top spots on the party lists. This is important for the destinies of the people involved, but of little interest to the country as a whole. The most interesting aspect so far is that the main issue to be brought before voters has yet to be defined.

It is possible, however, to guess what it might end up being. Asking voters whether they back the more aggressive foreign policy stance that the country has taken of late might seem like a good candidate, but the problem is that there has been no appreciable domestic opposition to policy in this area. There is little to be gained in asking people to vote for something nobody seems to be against. Public opinion is divided over attitudes toward people not of ethnic-Russian origin in the country, but the political elites are likely still so gun-shy following last year's anti-Georgian hysteria that they will be reticent to stir up that hornet's nest by making a big issue of it.

The closer we get to the elections, the more it seems that the main question will concern whether President Vladimir Putin should be allowed a third term. The different parties would then have to decide and state clearly where they stand on the question.

What would happen, for instance, if United Russia started trumpeting third-term slogans toward the end of the campaign and, as a result, managed to grab more than 50 percent of the vote? That would settle the question of the political legitimacy of the third term proposal, leaving only the "minor" task of amending the Constitution to allow this to happen. Changing the law would be a lot easier following such an electoral show of support. If the majority of Russians voted for a third term, then Putin would have to agree to stay.

And public opinion surveys clearly indicate that most Russians do back the idea of a third presidential term. Given Putin's strong popularity, it is hard to imagine how this question could not appear atop the political agenda. It is bound to find the spotlight.

Back in 2003, the Duma elections not only determined Yukos' ultimate fate, but also set the general course for the country's further development. In just the same way, the third-term question could end up as a litmus test for the legitimacy of current rollbacks on democratic practices and the nationalization of large chunks of the economy.

Whether this would be good or bad is an interesting question. While it might seem like a weak candidate at present, whether it will become the issue this election is looking for remains to be seen.

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