

Tuesday, November 16, 2004. Issue 3049. Page 10.

Russia Can Be the Elder, Not the Bully

By Konstantin Sonin

Last week it became perfectly clear which candidate Russia -- specifically President Vladimir Putin and parliament -- should support in the Ukrainian presidential election. Such support may well require our leaders to break with existing agreements and personal prejudices. There will be no shortage of hard feelings both in Ukraine and here at home. This show of support will require the expenditure of precious political capital on the international stage. But the election presents Russia's leaders with a unique opportunity to do the right thing: They must support the candidate who receives the most votes in Sunday's runoff election.

This may seem an obvious point to make. Your chances of hitting the lottery are clearly greater if you're allowed to pick your numbers after the winning combination has been announced. The urge to make a wager in a very risky game may nonetheless win out, though it would require us to ensure that the right man wins on election day.

History teaches, however, that "our man" is not the candidate who seems favorably disposed to Russia before the election, but the candidate who is willing to work with us after he has won. If Viktor Yushchenko is elected, the necessity to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity will tie him to Russia far more strongly than any campaign promises. And if Viktor Yanukovich is elected, his position will depend least of all on secret deals made before the votes were cast.

Promises that candidates make to the voters, unlike those made behind closed doors, are normally kept - more or less. And not just because the man who wins on Sunday will be eligible to run for a second term. Campaign promises, as a rule, reflect the real political situation in the country, and that won't change come Monday morning.

By announcing that the first round of Ukraine's presidential election was a dead heat, the Central Elections Commission has done Russia a great service. The first-round result amounted to a political declaration that Sunday's runoff vote will be won by the candidate who receives the most votes. The track record of Ukraine's Supreme Court on election issues also provides reason to believe that any intervention it might be called upon to undertake in the election process would be aimed at determining the true result, not distorting it.

For his part, President Vladimir Putin should take steps to ensure that outgoing Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma hands over power peacefully. Leaders of other countries would doubtless be more than happy to help him in this endeavor. Whether the loser in Sunday's runoff concedes defeat or the Supreme Court is called upon to declare the winner, the next president of Ukraine will be either Yushchenko or Yanukovich. If Russia has to offer Kuchma political asylum -- even a luxurious villa and a private yacht -- to make sure this happens, we can afford to do so.

Those who are concerned with Russia's status and influence on the international stage should realize that the Ukrainian election gives this country a unique opportunity to be the strict but fair elder within the Commonwealth of Independent States, not just the toughest guy on the block. The elder doesn't have to get worked up and stick his nose into everyone else's business to establish order. All he has to do is walk down the street, surveying the scene with a serious gaze, and order will be established on its own.

Konstantin Sonin is an assistant professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR.