



Duma elections in December. Photo: Smirnov Vladimir, Corbis

Putin continues his march to a consolidation of power

# *Démocratie à la Russe*

Russian president Vladimir Putin managed to consolidate his power in - heavily criticized - parliamentary elections in December. On March 2, he will most likely manage to repeat this act in the presidential elections. If both elections have something in common, it is that they cannot escape strict Kremlin control. No doubt Putin will also keep a tight control over the country's energy resources.

| *By Hans van Koningsbrugge*

The parliamentary elections took place in the context of a completely different framework than those of 2003. The Duma elected in that year had a large number of political parties and independents. This colourful political landscape was created by the electoral system whereby one half of the representatives was elected by proportional representation and the other half by a constituency system. This meant that a large number of independents from the regions were able to enter the parliament. However, these people - 74 out of 450 members of parliament - soon shifted their loyalty to the Kremlin, when it became clear that the centre of power in Russia lay with the United Russia party - President Putin's political vehicle. As a result, the number of seats of United Russia rose from 222 to 305 - a comfortable majority that was reached with just 38% of the votes. In the elections last December, by contrast, United Russia increased its seats to 315, but it needed 64% of the votes to achieve this result.

Although the elections of 2003 did not work out badly for the President and

his entourage, they had not been fully controlled. The independents produced a high level of unpredictability. Consequently, the electoral rules were changed. Shortly after the Chechen hostage crisis in Beslan in September 2004, it was decided that parliament would only be elected on the basis of proportional representation. The war against terrorism required a further centralization of power, argued the Kremlin. Furthermore, parties that

The same strategy was also felt in the economy.

Since the formation of the new Russia in 1991, there has been a constant coming and going of political parties. But these parties have little interest in voters - their relationship with the Kremlin elite in power is more important, as the elite control the parliamentary landscape. On the other hand, Ivan Ivanovich, the average

*The Russian consumer will increasingly compete with Chinese and European consumers for Russian gas*

wished to register required at least 50,000 members, with branches in at least half of Russia's 89 regions. It was also prohibited to form a party on the basis of profession, race, religious, or regional principles. Another important move was to raise the electoral threshold from 5 to 7%. These measures were part of a much wider centralization strategy implemented by the Kremlin.

Russian, has, for various reasons, little interest in political parties. During the 1990s, the Yeltsin regime declared that all things good came from the West. A liberal economy and parliamentary democracy would be the solution to all Russian problems. This optimism was nipped in the bud in October 1993, when tanks put an end to the constitutional crisis that pitted the

Duma and the President against each other in a direct conflict. For the Russian man on the street the conclusion was simple: democracy clearly had shortcomings, if the executive and legislative branches were able to fight government to a standstill.

These political stand-offs took place in the context of an economic recession. A quick transition from a planned economy to a western liberal economic system appeared impossible. Russian GDP fell by half. In other words, the

West form the third movement. However, the main one, Yabloko, did not reach the electoral threshold of 7% in the December elections. It got less than 2% of the vote.

The fourth and most important political movement is formed by the so-called parties of power. Their most significant aspect is their direct link with the political elite, which founded them. In fact, these movements are the presidential guard dogs of the Duma. The party of power phenomenon is often

a more controlled scenario. In April 2001, Putin formed his own 'party of power' by uniting the Fatherland-All Russia Party, originally an opposition party led by the mayor of Moscow Luzhkov, with the Unity Party of Russia into United Russia. This was to be his main vehicle of parliamentary power. However, the Kremlin wanted to have a second 'party of power', to give the voters at least a semblance of choice. First, in 2003, the Kremlin stimulated the foundation of a party called the 'Motherland'. Although this party gained electoral ground on the KPRF, it was not a great success. For the recent elections, the presidential entourage pulled a new rabbit from the hat - Just Russia (Spravedlivaya Rossiya). This party just passed the electoral threshold by getting 7.8% of the votes in December.

Putin himself opted specifically for United Russia by profiling himself as the leader of the party list. However, although Putin heads up the party list, he does not actually have a formal position in United Russia - he is not even a member. This gives him room, if necessary, to distance himself from United Russia. Even so, by heading the party list, Putin introduced something new in Russian politics - a very explicit identification with the party of power. This gives Putin the option to profile himself as a 'national leader' with the 'moral right' to meddle with Russian politics even after the presidential elections of March 2008. The Russian constitution does not afford him this option. However, it is possible to amend the constitution if two thirds of the members of parliament choose to do so, and that made an overwhelming election victory by United Russia a bitter necessity for Putin. We know now of course that the party managed to gain its two-thirds majority.

## *The question is not who will succeed Putin but what are Putin's plans*

notion that western values and standards were not suitable for Russia became increasingly popular. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that democracy is not exactly deeply rooted in Russian history.

### Party of power |

In broad outlines, it is possible to identify four remaining political movements or parties. First there is the KPRF, the Communist Party. As heir of the communist party of the Soviet Union, this group has a considerable degree of organization. As a result, their party leader Zyuganov could provide good opposition to the sitting President Yeltsin during the presidential elections of 1996. As the party profiles itself explicitly as an opposition movement and President Putin is exceptionally popular, the support for the Communists is eroding.

A second structural presence in the Duma is the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). This party is largely known because of its flamboyant leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who did not hesitate to call for the restoration of the Russian empire, including Poland and Finland, during the 1990s. In general, Zhirinovskiy et al support the Kremlin, and consequently the party is tolerated.

The reform parties that are focused on

associated with the Putin era, but that is incorrect. During the elections of 1993, 'Russia's choice', the most important liberal grouping of that time, gained 15% of the vote and that made them the largest faction in parliament. President Yeltsin had explicitly supported this grouping, without actually becoming a member. However, 'Russia's choice' turned out to be significantly less docile than the Kremlin wanted, when the party condemned the violent presidential strategy against Chechnya during 1994-1995. Since then, various parties of power have formed, even though most of them disappeared due to a lack of political effectiveness.

In 1999, then Prime Minister Putin won the presidential elections after a series of extraordinary events. The explosions in residential areas of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other Russian cities were attributed to Chechen rebels, and the Kremlin could triumph on the waves of public fear and insecurity. All of this was very ad-hoc. Afterwards Putin strove for

Putin's party of choice United Russia gained 64% of the votes in the parliamentary elections of December, giving them 315 of the 450 seats in the Duma. The communist party KPRF got 11.6% and 57 seats. The ultranationalist LDPR got 8.2% and Just Russia, another Kremlin-party, 7.8%. The 'liberal' reform party Yabloko and the United Right Forces got less than 2% and will not be represented in parliament, as they failed to make the threshold of 7%.

### Election strategy |

What has been the Kremlin's electoral strategy to date? On the one hand, the government played the anti-corruption card quite specifically with the public arrest of a Deputy Minister of Finance. This appeals to the feelings of the average Russian voter, who respects President Putin, but is critical of the minimal way in which the government has combated corruption. At the same time, large sums were released from the national stability fund for the benefit of the Ministry of Regional Development and the Ministry of Education and Science - a clear attempt to please the regions and parts of the government machinery. The representatives from United Russia have not looked for public debate in any way. What the Russian voter is really voting on is a yes-no referendum on the Putin chapter. The question is whether the current political landscape will remain unchanged after December 2007 or whether new barriers will be erected for the anti-Kremlin parties, such as the KPRF.

The result of the parliamentary elections, where the United Russia party obtained more than 64% of the vote, gives the sitting president a clear mandate - if of course one accepts the election results as fair, which many do not. The only opposition in the Duma will come from the Communist Party

that gained more than 11% of the vote - and is disputing the outcome of the elections. The government knows, therefore, that it is supported by a comfortable two thirds majority in parliament, particularly as the second Kremlin party, Just Russia, also reached the electoral threshold. As Putin identified himself so clearly with United Russia as the party of power, it is evident that Putin is not about to leave the Russian political stage. The fact that the president has designated vice-premier Dmitry Medvedev as presidential candidate, puts an end to a lot of uncertainty. It means the existing government can be continued.

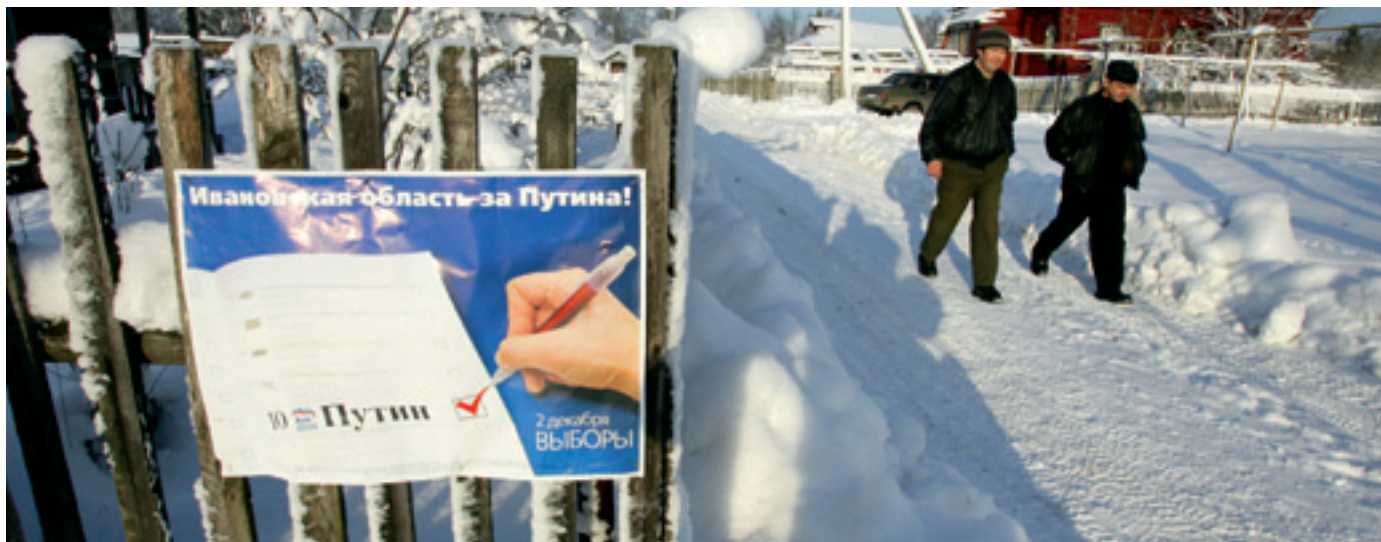
### Gazprom |

What does all this mean for the energy sector? If something can be said about the past years, it is that the income from the energy sector has driven the Russian economy. Having and maintaining control of this sector has been one of the central objectives of Russian governmental policy. This is not about to change, especially not as the creation and enhancement of national economic champions, also outside the oil and gas sector, will be continued. It may be expected that the Russian government will champion its national champions even more than before, not only inside Russia but also internationally.

The Just Russia party has announced that it will tackle the 'Gazprom' issue in parliament. That means that they will demand that the Russian internal energy market gains priority over exports. Although it is questionable whether United Russia will agree with this, it is a way for Just Russia to gain some political profile. With the growth of the Russian economy, domestic consumption of gas is increasing, so the Russian consumer will increasingly compete with foreign consumers in Europe and China. In view of the fact that Gazprom has recently signed a long-term gas contract with China, Europe might well wonder whether Russia will be able to fulfil its long-term obligations to Europe.

Another issue is what will happen to the policy of selling gas to the former Soviet states at reduced prices. The Russian government has already started to change this policy and will most likely continue to do so. The Russians will increasingly want to sell their gas at world market prices - which, incidentally, is exactly what the World Trade Organisation (WTO) wants them to do. ■

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Voters go to a rural polling station to vote in the Duma elections. Photo: Smirnov Vladimir, Corbis