

# Cats and Mice

## The Presidential Campaign in the Russian Heartland

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This article analyzes the social and political aspect of the Russian presidential election campaign in one rather typical Russian region: Perm. The author does not carry out a sophisticated and profound political analysis, but instead has endeavored to lay out in systematic fashion the facts about the pre-election situation in the region, drawn from diverse sources: polls, sociological research, interviews with the directors of local organizations and parties, local and regional press reports, and the author's personal experience as a resident of Perm.

### **Perm's Economy, Society, and Politics**

The Perm oblast is located at the juncture of the Russian flatlands with the Ural mountains; it occupies the easternmost part of Europe, spanning an area of 150,000 square kilometers, or one-fifth of the entire Urals. The climate is relatively temperate. The oblast is rich in minerals and natural resources, including coal, diamonds, and timber (60 percent of the area is forested).

At the beginning of 1995, the population of the Perm oblast was around 3 million, 77 percent of whom live in cities or suburbs; the population of the city of Perm was slightly more than one million. One characteristic of this oblast is its multinational composition: Russians make up only 84 percent of the population; Tatars and Bashkirs 6.6 percent; and Komi-Permiaks 4 percent. Included in the Perm oblast is the Komi-Permiak autonomous district, with a population of 161,000, which has the rights of a subject of the Russian Federation. Forty-five percent of the population is economically productive.

The Perm oblast developed historically as a major site of arms manufacturing, and is presently one of the main suppliers of weapons to the Russian army. But in the 1990s much of the armaments manufacturing facilities have been converted into plants producing consumer goods (auto parts, telephones, bicycles, kitchenware, and so on). Perestroika affected Perm markedly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the January-August period of 1995, the private sector accounted for 76 percent of capital investments in local firms, which was the same as in Russia as a whole. A wide network of private banks, commercial businesses, and insurance companies has arisen in the region. At present, only 8 percent of local businesses are state-owned, and 5 percent municipally owned.

Agriculture in the region is in a difficult situation. The oblast provides itself with 40 to 45 percent of its grain, and 65 to 70 percent of its meat, milk, and vegetables. At the beginning of the 1996 sowing season, only 50 percent of the

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tractors needed, and 43 percent of the plows, were in working order. Agricultural technology is outdated, but there are no funds for purchasing new models. The oblast was forced to export roughly 27.5 million dollars worth of food products last year.

The socioeconomic situation varies widely in the various parts of the oblast. Thirty-two of its forty sectors needed subsidies from the oblast budget; almost half of the oblast budget is spent on such subsidies. And even so, the quality of life of the population remains extremely poor. Unemployment in the oblast on average is at 4.6 percent, but in some areas reaches 8 to 10 percent. Twenty-five percent of the population is on pension. Prices have risen steeply, especially for transportation and utilities. In February the oblast administration increased housing and utilities payments by 69 percent. Monthly household expenditures on the nineteen main staple goods were estimated at 252,000 rubles in February, and the minimum income at 303,000 rubles. Yet the average salary in the oblast in spring was 748,000 rubles for industry workers, and 343,000 rubles for workers in education and the cultural domain. Pensioners, whose average monthly income was only 213,000 rubles, suffered most acutely. Crime rates have increased sharply, with Perm now the fourth most crime-ridden city in Russia. Almost all small businesses are forced to pay regular sums to racketeers. Sociological polls taken in the oblast in March 1996 show the percentage of the population that considers the following problems to be most threatening to them and their families:

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Inflation	49.0
Rise in crime	41.4
Armed conflicts on Russian borders	37.7
Fall in productivity	34.0
Unemployment	34.0

Analysis of these polls shows that the population has a pessimistic view of the general social prospects in the region, but a much more optimistic view of professional possibilities connected with the shift to a market economy and the crisis it has brought about. Here the ratio of pessimists to optimists is roughly one to two. These polls also shed light on the region's attitudes toward the various organs of government power. The results showed that there was no increase in trust in any of them and that popular trust in the courts and armed forces is actually declining. (There is, however, a slight increase in trust in local organs of power.) The table below shows the trust coefficient for various power institutions, i.e., the ratio of those who place trust in the following institutions to those who do not, according to the results of three monitored polls:

<b>How much do you trust this organ of central or local power?</b>	<b>Fall 94</b>	<b>Spring 95</b>	<b>Spring 96</b>
President Yeltsin	.52	.19	.42
Chernomyrdin's administration	.42	.19	.35
The oblast legislative body	.45	.29	.54
The Perm oblast administration	.51	.47	.73
The courts and prosecutor's office	1.05	.97	.67
The army	2.27	1.37	.97

Almost 42 percent of Perm oblast residents believe that "Russia has gotten stuck" or that it "is headed in the wrong direction."

Insofar as the political life of the region is concerned, its outward aspect (meetings, party activities, etc.) is less clearly visible than in other regions of Russia, a fact which prompted one of its main publications a few years ago to call Perm "a political swampland." But judging by its political activity and its voting patterns, the region belongs to the right-centrist category, as do more than 50 percent of all Russian regions. The level of political activity is somewhat less than in Russia as a whole; in 1995, 57.3 percent of the population voted in the Duma elections, and in the 1993 federal deputy elections, only 46 percent voted (compared with 54 percent in Russia generally). A comparison of the election results for the highest legislative organ of the country for 1993 and 1995 shows that if three years ago Perm voters were to the right of Russian voters overall, then now the Perm electorate has moved toward the center, although it is still farther right than most Russian voters.

Party	<i>Percentage of votes</i>			
	<i>1993 Elections</i>		<i>1995 Elections</i>	
	<i>oblast</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>oblast</i>	<i>Russia</i>
Russia's Choice	27.20	15.51	5.8	3.4
LDPR	14.8	22.9	14.8	11.2
Yabloko	8.24	7.86	5.6	6.9
KPRF	6.7	12.4	1.1	22.3
Our Home Is Russia	--	--	9.6	10.13

### **Analysis of Election Campaigns in Perm**

Regional political activity connected with the presidential elections is not very visible. There are no election slogans on building walls, no posters or handouts; and meetings of the various political parties and movements are not numerous. With the exception of one Perm newspaper, all the rest provide information on the campaigns only irregularly and unsystematically. Local elections, squabbles over the budget with the regional or federal administration, problems with social services, and so on are the focus of attention for many local and oblast newspapers.

On the other hand, the upcoming elections are of deep interest to all strata of the oblast population and leave no one indifferent. Wherever one goes and whatever one begins to talk about, the conversation always turns to the presidential elections and the consequences of a victory for this or that candidate. Oblast residents have divided into two groups: those awaiting the coming to power of a Communist candidate, on whom they have placed all their hopes for ending their current problems, and others who fear a Communist takeover as a return to the old economic troubles—lines for goods, deficits of all products, ration coupons, and so on—that are still fresh in their minds. This division of people into two opposing groups that cannot talk to each other is reinforced by objective differences in economic and social positions—the entrepreneur anxious about the fate of his business cannot find the words with which to talk to the peasant who has not received his modest salary for several months. All the major political events in Russia (except the war in Chechnya) generally elicit contrary reactions. This is true, for example, of the State Duma's recent denunciation of the Belovezhsky agreements that dissolved the Soviet Union in December 1991. Not only the major parties, but the simple people as well are split in their views on this.

It must be said that the preparation for the presidential elections, after the candidates had been reduced to four—Boris Yeltsin, Gennady Zyuganov, Grigory Yavlinsky, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy—has enlivened the political life of the region. First, the party press has started to develop; a whole range of new publications has appeared, and the circulation of those already existing has

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increased. It is true that Perm journalists are not professional enough in the majority of such publications. Their main failing is a lack of “hot news,” and a failure to react to the main events in the life of the oblast. The lack of their own professional staff makes party newspapers dependent on non-partisan authors. Sometimes the papers of particular parties are forced to reprint materials from other regional papers in order to fill up their own columns. Nevertheless, people dissatisfied with the political and social system around them often make productive use of even these somewhat inferior newspapers to filter contemporary events through the lens of a particular party.

Secondly, activity has increased not only in political parties, but also in a variety of unions and associations that do not at first glance seem to have direct relationship to politics or the presidential campaign. One can mention the example of the association of entrepreneurs, politicians, economists, and cultural figures created by State Duma deputy Viktor Pokhmelkin of the Russia’s Democratic Choice party, the goal of which is stirring up support in Russia and the region for reforms. Third, the role of the oblast administration in the region’s political life has increased. On 20 March, for example, a meeting for the mass media and social organizations was called by the administration, and the subject was the creation of a council of consultants from political parties and movements. The aim of the council would be to guarantee interaction between those parties and the administration. Representatives from the whole spectrum of Russian politics—from Russia’s Democratic Choice to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF)—took part in this meeting. The administration representative stated that he did not at all want “to sit at the head of a round table so as not to give the impression that government power was attempting to manipulate the council in some way.” The council would convene only to discuss concrete proposals to the governor for resolving actual issues in the socio-economic life of the oblast.

The most pre-election activity at the time of the writing of this article (early April 1996) has been displayed by the KPRF. The formation of an oblast committee of the Communist Party recalls the “revolutionary headquarters” at Smolny before the 1917 Revolution, only without armed soldiers and sailors. In accordance with the program for its presidential campaign, campaign headquarters have been prepared by the secretary of the local party committee. Instead of the irregularly published and low-circulation bulletin *Prikamye Kommunist*, a newspaper called *Communist of the Western Urals* started in March to appear bimonthly, for which a circulation of 100,000 has been targeted. Party activists will distribute this publication throughout all the parts of the oblast, but especially in small towns and rural areas where political opposition to the current president is strongest. Party committee representatives travel to villages, meet with people, and advertise their presidential candidate.

The success of the KPRF in the last Duma elections and the consequent rise in their prestige has, undoubtedly, increased their membership. New regional party committees are being formed, and there has been a rush of people wishing to reinstate their former membership in the Communist Party. The social base of the KPRF is becoming broader. Its regional committees are occupied mainly by former and current heads of collective farms, who in Russia are a sort of local despot responsible for the fate and well-being of the farm workers. It is to be expected that, in the current conditions, peasants will follow the orders of their directors. They support Zyuganov's program; the Peasants' Union actively cooperates with the Communists, and supports their presidential candidate. Several entrepreneurs also support

the KPRF, in the hopes of winning some reward when the Communists finally accede to power again. The secretary of the Perm committee of the KPRF sees as his most important task the drawing in of the military and the younger generation into the party. In this author's opinion, however, young people today are

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quite anti-Communist; generally in Russia they are frivolous and apolitical and do not perceive the danger that could be introduced by the victory of the Communists or Zhirinovskiy, who wants to increase the ranks of the army to five million men. Moreover, the Communists' attempts to influence the voting patterns of youth are insignificant. Although membership in the KPRF is still increasing, it has yet to exceed 2,200 people—though the storm and uproar it is creating makes it seem a hundred times larger.

By no means did all groups of the population and party representatives approve Boris Yeltsin's decision to seek reelection—even among some actively supporting him. Viktor Pokhmelkin, the well-known political activist in the region and State Duma deputy, wrote in January: “under the influence of the Duma election results, the president started working against democratic institutions in the country, projecting an authoritarian image. For this reason democrats must refuse to support Yeltsin in the upcoming elections, and must choose a candidate from their own ranks who could oppose not only Zyuganov, but Yeltsin as well.” Later, when it turned out that the party was in no shape to put forth its own candidate, he changed his position in Yeltsin's favor: “Ultimately we have no choice,” he wrote in mid-March in the newspaper *Perm News*, “but to vote in support of the lesser evil.” At a recent meeting of Yeltsin supporters in Perm, attended by the governor of the oblast, the mayor of Perm, the president's representative in the oblast, and leading businessmen, governor Gennady Igumnov noted that “during the last three years, the oblast government has not erred at all in following the president's reforms, as critical as some situations have been. Our population also actively supports those reforms.” In this way, Yeltsin's campaign has been led from the beginning by regional bureaucrats, and carried out according to bureaucratic methods. Vladimir Lisovenko, chairman of the Perm oblast chapter of Our Home Is Russia, waited for 6 April, when the party support for Yeltsin was formally announced; until then he did essentially nothing.

This official and officious approach to running the election campaign was also evident in the collecting of signatures in support of Yeltsin's candidacy. On 26 January, the oblast newspaper *Star* informed its readers that on direct orders from the government, a petition was being circulated among workers in the Perm branch of the Sverdlovsk Railroad in support of Yeltsin's reelection campaign. As a worker who was afraid of giving his name informed the paper,

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the workers were forced to sign the petition under threat of being fired, including family members as well. Pressure was also placed on management: anyone unable to collect the required number of signatures would be demoted. These bureaucratic measures led, however, to the opposite outcome:

gritting their teeth, workers signed the petition, but vowed not in any circumstances to vote for Yeltsin.

The chairman of the Perm oblast chapter of Yabloko joined his organization only quite recently; earlier he was with the Democratic Russia movement. He made the shift because he sensed the political force of Grigory Yavlinsky's organization and believed that his political career would have better prospects there. Presently, he is awaiting instructions from his leadership in Moscow. Meanwhile, Yabloko supporters are collecting signatures that will allow Yavlinsky to become a presidential candidate, conducting polls on the streets of Perm to assess public opinion about their candidate, and trying to draw more voters over to Yavlinsky's side. They are not attracting many followers. The Perm chapter of Yabloko initiated a meeting of the leaders of the democratic organizations for working out a cooperative agenda, one of the proposals for which was the possibility of joint candidates for all levels of posts, as well as collaborative meetings with voters in various parts of the oblast. At this meeting, all the Perm democrats supported the idea of a single presidential candidate from the pro-reform forces. But some preferred Yeltsin for this role, while others preferred Yavlinsky.

The political commentator Vladimir Vinnichenko, well known in Perm, believed that the reason for the fruitlessness of this meeting was the inability of its participants to rise above their own private ambitions and narrow party interests. Each of them was focused only on its own Moscow leader, whom they believed to be the only worthy democratic candidate. Provincial political leaders are simply repeating on a smaller scale the gestures of their bosses in the capital. Many of them are concerned with their personal success, refusing to acknowledge their own inexperience and unfitness for serious political activity. The situation is such that dissent among democrats may lead to electoral success for Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Gennady Zyuganov, thus depriving Russia of all hope for a way out of its historic crisis. "Here the provincial democrats could say the magic word," writes one commentator, "if they would only acknowledge that what is at stake is not victory for a particular personality, but the fate of Russia, their own lives and deaths." This point of view has been affirmed by the local press and other politicians.

The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia's campaign in Perm has no integrated form, compared with the campaigns of Yeltsin's or Zyuganov's supporters. It seems that Zhirinovskiy's supporters in Perm are relying on the charisma of their leader to bring about a sprint to the finish-line in the electoral race. It is known that the Moscow headquarters of the party assigned their representatives the task of collecting 35,000 signatures for their candidate, promising to pay 500 rubles for every signature collected. But the signature drive went poorly, since the promised money was not immediately delivered. The party has resumed its publishing activity, promising that their paper *LDPR* will reach a circulation of 20,000 and will—like the efforts of the Communists—penetrate into every last corner of the oblast. Although local leaders of the LDPR held a press conference in late January to triumphantly proclaim the beginning of their presidential campaign, describing their tactics in detail, it is rather hard to analyze those tactics, since the local director of Zhirinovskiy's party is head of a large commercial business and cannot devote much time to politics, while another prominent activist recently decided to go over to the democrats' camp.

Commentators on local politics remarked in late March that the main claimants for the presidency were undoubtedly Boris Yeltsin and Gennady Zyuganov. Not one of the democratic candidates besides Yeltsin has any real chance of success. They claim that these two rivals are neck to neck in the race, holding close to each other constantly, each refusing to let the other burst ahead. Zyuganov, however, is bringing himself in his public appearances closer and closer to the national-patriotic forces. A meeting he held for the Union of Officers in Pushkin Square on 23 February was strongly reminiscent, in its form and atmosphere, of national-socialist rallies. This could have a powerful effect on the average voter, who has been able to see first hand who is actually standing behind the respectable Zyuganov, and what forces may come to power along with him.

### **Voter Composition: An Analysis of the Polls**

The mood of voters is analyzed here on the basis of polls conducted throughout Perm oblast by the sociological monitoring sector of the oblast administration. The most recent was conducted in the first half of March. A collation of responses in summer 1995 and spring 1996 to the question "Will you personally take part in the Russian Federation presidential elections?" allows one to conclude that the willingness to vote in the Perm region has risen during this period (in percentages):

	<b>Summer 1995</b>	<b>Spring 1996</b>
I will vote	67.8	75.8
I will not vote	16.7	9.7
Undecided, no answer	15.5	13.1

Voter participation in the last State Duma elections was no higher than 40 percent. It is expected that participation in the presidential elections will exceed this. In response to the poll question "Why do you doubt that you will vote in the presidential elections?" 36.4 percent of those who said they would not vote stated, "I do not trust anyone"; 20.4 percent were disappointed in the performance of previous presidents. Twenty-three percent of those who were undecided said

that it was possible that they would vote, but that it would depend on who the candidates were, how the campaigns were being run, and so on. Of the undecided group, 17.6 percent claimed family obligations or other reasons: health, household affairs, work, and so on. In summer 1995, these percentages were all roughly the same.

The rating of candidates was determined by responses to the question "Who would you vote for today in the presidential elections, choosing from the names on this list?" The percentages here reflect only those who said they would vote:

	Summer 1995	Spring 1996
Gaidar	8.7	3.3
Gorbachev	3.7	1.6
Yeltsin	12.9	21.7
Zhirinovskiy	7.0	8.7
Zyuganov	8.1	14.6
Lebed	7.2	5.1
Nemtsov	--	6.5
Boris Fyodorov	5.4	2.2
Svyatoslav Fyodorov	13.7	4.7
Shakhrai	3.2	0.8
Yavlinsky	11.7	6.8

This data shows that two candidates stand out from all the competitors in the presidential race, Yeltsin and Zyuganov, who are acquiring new supporters in the region as the others are losing them.

Moreover, in the second half of February a similar poll was conducted by the Russian branch of the Gallup Institute, in which 1,501 persons were given a list of candidates from which they were to select the one they would most like to see as president of Russia from 1996 to 2000. Of those polled, 12.7 percent refused to answer, saying they did not trust anyone or anything. Another 13.3 percent declined to give a direct answer, saying that although they were sure they would vote, they had not yet decided for whom. The percentages (reflecting only those who would vote, and knew for whom) show a significant shift in voter sympathies toward the left. Zyuganov received 26.3 percent, and only 21.4 percent supported Yeltsin. Zhirinovskiy got 19.2 percent, and Yavlinsky an uncharacteristically high 20.0 percent (that is, higher even than Zhirinovskiy). The same poll showed Lebed receiving 10.0 percent, Svyatoslav Fyodorov only 2.7 percent, Nemtsov 13.0 percent, Gaidar 7.6 percent, and Chernomyrdin 4.8 percent. These results are another indication of the well-proven fact that the pre-election sympathies of Russian voters are unreliable, and can change quickly and radically.

Significant research on families during market reforms, conducted by sociologists at the Perm Technical University, suggested that there are three general socio-cultural types currently dispersed through Russian society.<sup>1</sup>

The *contemporary* socio-cultural type is distinguished by his or her active assimilation of the values and norms of market society. He or she perceives current market-oriented economic relations as favorable for the social sphere's development. One of the main courses of this development is entrepreneurial activity, the ethical norms of which are acceptable to him or her. A focus on hard work is combined with a focus on attainments—a high level of income, professional growth, and social advancement. This type is well informed not only in business affairs, but in politics and culture too.



The *traditional* socio-cultural type is distinguished by an adherence to the norms and values of a society governed by a centralized economy of the Soviet variety. This type rejects free entrepreneurship, which it sees as the source of material disadvantages for the majority of the population, and of exploitation of man by man—an unethical, dishonorable, and even criminal way to become rich. This type is characterized by a belief in simple hard labor, modest ambitions, minimal consumption, and a low level of information about the cultural and political sphere. He or she believes in strong social control, and in political and cultural passivity.

The *material* type shows some of the contradictions of the transitional stage of present-day Russian society. While he tends in many ways toward the traditional type, he shows other characteristics of the contemporary type, and is a mixture of the two. He has a traditional view of labor, and a paternalistic model of state power. Yet he also has a new attitude toward the market and business activity: he sees the market economy as a sort of consumerist heaven, and business activity as a way to earthly delights. He has high materialist demands for comfort and entertainment, but an apathy toward working to satisfy those demands. This type has a poor understanding of contemporary reality, and is unpredictable in his voting. In the political sphere he shows a preference for strong power.

An analysis of these three socio-cultural types shows us fairly clearly that the first one is a supporter of reforms and democratic changes, the second a supporter of the leftist powers, and the third (less clearly) a supporter of the Zhirinovskiy type of politician.

One has the impression that, because of the active and unrelenting Communist propaganda that is having a certain success with a significant part of the population, as well as the active Communist unification with the most diverse leftist forces, the ranks of democrats are diminishing, that they cannot get together and agree on anything, and that they will be unable to withstand the Communist advances. In this regard, the democrats are like the mouse watched over by the cat, the mouse who, instead of trying actively to escape this mortal danger, only fearfully moves slowly toward its ruin.

## Note

1. *Problemy stratifikatsii rossiiskogo obshchestva v perekhodnyi k rynku period* (Perm: Perm State University, 1995), 41-44.