

Strategies of the Main Presidential Candidates

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The roster of candidates for the Russian presidency has now been set, and no major surprises have emerged. Although it includes a whole constellation of illustrious names—Mikhail Gorbachev, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Gennady Zyuganov, Boris Yeltsin, Alexander Lebed, Svyatoslav Fyodorov, and Grigory Yavlinsky—the main competitors, judging from recent polls, are the current Russian president Yeltsin and the leader of the Russian Communists, Zyuganov. The prospects of the other politicians seem much bleaker, and Gorbachev's virtually nonexistent. Democracy, however, is a game with unpredictable results, and the political process in Russia is extraordinarily dynamic and volatile. Thus it is useful to examine the electoral strategies of the "big five" candidates—Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Gennady Zyuganov, Boris Yeltsin, Alexander Lebed, and Grigory Yavlinsky—to evaluate their effectiveness, giving special attention to Yeltsin and Zyuganov. (A separate analysis of Svyatoslav Fyodorov's campaign would be unproductive here, since he considers himself part of a "third force.")

The Evolution of Yeltsin's Campaign Strategy

Boris Yeltsin began his re-election campaign in highly unfavorable circumstances. The parliamentary election results in December 1995 had painted a grim picture: the failure of the "party of power"—the Our Home Is Russia (NDR) movement—raised doubts about the effectiveness of his administrative apparatus and the regional elite's loyalty to him; the success of the Communists was far more significant than had been expected. The president's own popularity had sunk to an unprecedented low: in early January his ratings were not only considerably lower than his main opponent Zyuganov's, but lower than those of Zhirinovskiy, Lebed, and Yavlinsky as well.

To win the elections, Yeltsin needed to bring about a rapid change in public opinion, which depended on two factors: (1) the government's ability to give an adequate response to the demands placed on it by Russian society in the parliamentary elections, and (2) its ability to take the strategic initiative away from the leftist opposition. Thus the agenda for Yeltsin's campaign was clearly determined; it included creating for the president the image of a healthy, dynamic, and responsible politician, devoting more attention to public welfare, fighting corruption, forcing a resolution of the Chechen conflict, and putting plans into motion for a large-scale integration project. The experience of the parliamentary campaign had shown the necessity of reaching consensus with the regional elites. The result of these measures was expected to be a significant broadening of Yeltsin's electoral base.

Such was the content of his campaign from the very beginning. But its style, methods, and form underwent essential changes over time. These changes in strategy depended in large part (though not completely) on the balance of

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political groups around the president. In late 1995 and early 1996 the fierce statist, led by Alexander Korzhakov and Oleg Soskovets, gained sudden power, and there was a noticeable weakening of Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's position, as well as that of the whole democratic pro-Western lobby, whose main representatives (Andrei Kozыrev, Sergei Filatov, Anatoly Chubais) were driven out of the structures of power. The first group was left pulling the strings of Yeltsin's campaign. Judging by their actions, they planned to rely exclusively on administrative power resources, and to attract to the presidential camp the sympathies of the statist-oriented sectors of society—that is, to play on the opposition's own electoral field. It was proposed that Yeltsin change his aloof style by making regular media appearances, though without stooping to immediate contact with the people.

For a whole set of reasons, the Korzhakov-Soskovets group was unable either to secure long-term political power, or to have any say in the creation of the president's electoral strategy. One important factor was the fact that the activities of the campaign headquarters, run by Oleg Soskovets, were not entirely effective. Organizationally, the first stage of the campaign was simply disastrous, and all efforts to use the media for electoral purposes ended in failure. The democratic lobby around the president started to win back positions that had been lost. Decisive changes occurred in early April, when campaign headquarters were reorganized: key positions in the new organization were occupied by representatives of the democratic contingent and supporters of Chernomyrdin (Igor Malashenko, Sergei Filatov, Anatoly Chubais, Yuri Yarov, et al.), and the statist were forced into secondary roles.

The style and tactics of Yeltsin's campaign started, as a result, to change in April. "Bureaucratic mobilization" (reliance on the administrative apparatus) was supplemented with a strategy for attracting democrats and functionaries from NDR and Vladimir Shumeiko's movement, "Reforms, A New Path." An active style of publicity management was adopted: the president made a series of trips throughout Russia on which he met with many groups. Copying his own tactics from 1990-91, Yeltsin tried to assume the role of the politician intent on consolidating rather than dividing Russian society. Although the president did not refrain from anti-Communist rhetoric, he softened it somewhat. Continuing to hypnotize Russians with his absolute certainty that he would win, and underscoring that his candidacy was the only real option available, he started appealing more and more often to voters to make "the right choice" and to "trust their president."

Despite all its problems, Yeltsin's strategy looked rather effective. By the end of March his ratings had risen to more than twice what they had been in January, and the gap between Yeltsin and Zyuganov had narrowed considerably. But although the president beat all the other candidates in the speed with which he gained electoral support, his ratings levelled off in April. This occurred because Yeltsin's ratings increases were due primarily to the supporters of NDR and Russia's Democratic Choice. By April, that reserve had been almost wholly exhausted. Yeltsin was not able to consolidate the whole democratic electorate. Attempts by the president's team to convince the oppositional democrat Yavlinsky to leave the race, and thereby help the president, were fruitless. Meanwhile, the gap between Yeltsin and Zyuganov is still rather large (according to different evaluations, from 4 to 8 percent). If this lasts until 16 June, and remains constant during the first round of elections, then it will create an extremely unfavorable psychological climate for the president's appearance in the second round.

Struggling to broaden his electoral support, Yeltsin started turning from the right toward the center and even the left. This strategy has not yet produced any discernible results. Like Yavlinsky, the left-centrist Svyatoslav Fyodorov has refused to cooperate with Yeltsin. Active publicity management has not enhanced Yeltsin's charisma in any noticeable way, and the public's attitude toward him is still highly ironic. Some of his campaign strategies were clearly borrowed from the West, and do not conform to Russian political culture. (For example, Russian voters took a negative view of the participation of Yeltsin's wife in the campaign.) The payment of long-deferred salaries and the large-scale integration initiatives that Yeltsin was responsible for did not bring about any substantial improvement in the public's view of him. The number of voters who had a favorable impression of the president's actions in February and March equalled the number of those who had a negative reaction. Russians generally have a skeptical view of Yeltsin's "new path," seeing it usually as a simple campaign tactic.

The president also tried to attract a segment of the leftist electorate over to his side. He visited Belgorodsky oblast and the Krasnodar and Stavropol areas, which are traditionally considered Communist bastions. Although these visits were greeted with delight by the Russian media, Yeltsin's goals were not attained. The "red belt" held fast to its former political sympathies. (According to polls, after Yeltsin's trip to Belgorodshchina, his ratings in the region were still only at 1.5 percent.) The regional and branch elites (military-industrial complex and the collective farm system), promising to help the president, are using his election campaign as a successful pretext for lobbying for their own local interests. At the same time, their desire for influencing voters, and more importantly their real ability to do so, are not very significant.

As before, the ghastly Chechen crisis still has a colossal impact on voters. Russians gave only minimal support to Yeltsin's peace plan, not trusting his ability to untie that knot. After Dzhokhar Dudayev's death, the prospects for settling the Chechen conflict are no clearer than before. Since almost two-thirds of Russian voters see ending the war in Chechnya as one of the main tasks of the future president, this problem may determine Yeltsin's political fate.

The solidarity with Yeltsin that Western leaders are displaying is not the best way to attract Russian voters to the president's camp. Russians do not feel open hostility toward the West, but their distrust of it is growing steadily. Yeltsin is constantly telling voters: If you don't elect me president, there will be no more Western investments. This argument works for Westernizing metropolises like Moscow and St. Petersburg, but is hardly persuasive for the conservative Russian provinces.

Yeltsin's strategy allowed a large part of the democratic and pro-government electorate to be mobilized and consolidated, which guaranteed a swift rise in the president's ratings. By April this reserve had been exhausted, and Yeltsin faced the task of broadening his support base. Today this problem, which is an urgent one for the president, has not yet been solved. Neither a new campaign style nor a new agenda have led to a decisive improvement in public opinion. Yeltsin's electoral strategy is in a state of crisis. The principal question of whether it will succeed in attracting sufficient numbers of voters to Yeltsin's camp is still an open one.

Zyuganov Strengthens His Position

The victory of the Communist Party of Russia (KPRF) in the parliamentary elections has guaranteed strong prospects for the Communist presidential

candidate. Its success in December 1995 was due to the combination of social factors that pushed voters toward the left with a political apparatus that knew how to take advantage of them. Meanwhile, the qualitative differences between the parliamentary and presidential campaigns has forced the Communists to modernize their electoral strategy. During the presidential campaign, the Communists had four main tasks: first, to create an organizational stronghold within the walls of the Duma; second, to reach a consensus with the elite groups in Russian society, or at least guarantee their neutrality toward the Communist candidate; third, to consolidate the whole left electorate around a single candidate; fourth, to mobilize electoral support beyond the confines of their own party constituency.

The KPRF was able to convert its victory at the parliamentary elections into control over the Duma. The Communists managed to get one of their men elected Duma speaker, won a vice-speaker seat as well, and gained representation on nine important parliamentary committees. Three more committees are headed by members of the KPRF, and yet another vice-speaker was elected from the ranks of the leftist group Power to the People, a KPRF ally. Having gotten control of the Duma and created a leftist majority in the lower house of Parliament, the Communists were able to use all the bureaucratic and financial resources of the Duma for their electoral campaign, and to use the Duma as a platform for their political pronouncements.

The KPRF leadership understands very clearly that Russian elite groups are unlikely to allow the representative of an outside political force to gain the presidency. But it understands just as clearly that there may be not a full but a limited consensus with the elite: for some Russian politicians and certain groups of businessmen, the coming to power of a Communist, no matter how moderate he may be, is absolutely unacceptable. The ground-work for limited consensus was created during the parliamentary elections, when a certain part of the regional political and business elites, as well as the bureaucratic apparatus, showed open or covert support for the KPRF. In early 1996 the Communists intensified their campaign to attract elite groups in the hope of winning their electoral support. Little is known about its strategies, but judging from some indirect evidence, the process of bringing Russian elite groups over to the Communist Party is going rather well.

At the parliamentary elections, the leftists appeared fractured, while the Communists devoted as much energy to calling Zyuganov an "opportunist" and a "revisionist" as to criticizing Yeltsin. But for the KPRF leaders, a coalition with Communist fundamentalists seemed counterproductive, since it could drive away moderately oppositional voters from Zyuganov's party. By January 1996, the situation had changed substantially. The imperative of the presidential elections forced the KPRF to try to mobilize all leftist voters without exception. In turn, the KPRF's position as focus of the leftist camp forced Communists in competing organizations to join ranks with Zyuganov. Practically all Communist organizations, and the majority of left-leaning ones, endorsed the KPRF candidate.

A decisive role in the mobilization of the leftist electorate and its consolidation around Zyuganov was played by the 15 March Duma resolution condemning the Belovezhsky Forest agreements, which in December 1991 dissolved the USSR. The USSR is one of the key symbols for the leftist-conservative mind, and so by initiating the anti-Belovezhsky vote, the KPRF did not simply show its supporters how ready it was to carry out its own promises, but made a clear identification of the party and the leftist electorate on a familiar

level. The process of unifying the left's opposition intensified in the second half of March.

Unlike Yeltsin, Zyuganov was able to consolidate virtually his entire electorate. But while a united leftist electorate guarantees that the Communists will make it to the second round, the substantial gap between Yeltsin and Zyuganov does not necessarily guarantee victory to the latter, especially when one considers the possibility that the presidential camp may falsify returns. This makes the KPRF's task of broadening its support base all the more urgent. Zyuganov has two main ways to achieve this goal: to attract undecided voters, and to draw the supporters of the other parties over to the Communist Party.

Formally, Zyuganov is not a narrow party candidate, since he was selected by the national-patriotic bloc that aims to unite all oppositional forces. Zyuganov's campaign platform was a vague document of a moderate leftist bent that contained nothing specifically Communist. The KPRF leadership conducted a series of intensive meetings with Svyatoslav Fyodorov and Alexander Lebed, intending to bolster Zyuganov's base by attracting left-centrist voters. After some hesitation, however, those politicians preferred to remain fully independent, or to form a sort of "third force"—a triple coalition with Grigory Yavlinsky. Nevertheless, polls indicate that some of Lebed's supporters should be considered potential supporters of the leftist candidate in the second round. This is even more true of Zhirinovskiy's supporters, who are more likely to support Zyuganov than Yeltsin.

In their struggle to broaden their electorate, the Communists are relying on the same methods that brought them success at the parliamentary elections: a lot of speechmaking, an emphasis on regional rather than central media systems, and trips through the regions by Zyuganov. And if Yeltsin aimed for success in the "red" regions, the campaign routes of the KPRF's leader included visits to those parts of the Federation where pro-democratic and pro-presidential sympathies predominate (in April, for example, Zyuganov travelled to Chelyabinsk and Nizhny-Novgorod oblasts). Today, the problem of broadening support for the Communist candidate has not yet been solved. By early April, Zyuganov's ratings, like Yeltsin's, had stabilized, showing no signs of future growth. And while Zyuganov is currently outstripping Yeltsin, there is no guarantee that this margin can be maintained until 16 June. Thus, the task of mobilizing voter support is at present no less pressing for Zyuganov than for Yeltsin.

Zhirinovskiy Wants to Be Second

In Russian society there is a strong negative feeling toward Zhirinovskiy, which gives him no chance of victory at the presidential elections. The main task for the leader of the Liberal Democrats (LDPR) is to make it into the second round of elections. That would guarantee him the status of a leading Russian politician, and would either allow him to join the power structure or secure his position as an influential opposition leader. The Russian government itself is giving Zhirinovskiy some indirect help by coopting some of his views for the presidential elections. Since early 1996 there has been an idea, popular in the president's camp, that Zhirinovskiy is an unwitting ally of Yeltsin, so that Zhirinovskiy's presidential campaign should be welcomed. This idea is based on two mutually contradictory and oversimplified assumptions: (1) that Zhirinovskiy the nationalist could take away oppositional votes from Zyuganov, and (2) that in the second round, those who voted for the LDPR would vote for Yeltsin. Polls indicate that both of these assumptions are untrue.

Although Zhirinovskiy is not rejecting the possibility of collaborating with the present administration, and is willingly using any help he can get, in his public appearances he prefers to distance himself both from Yeltsin and from Zyuganov. Zhirinovskiy stated that he did not intend to join any coalitions. In voters' eyes, he is a completely independent politician, whose position is incompatible with the views of both democrats and Communists. During the anti-Belovezhskiy votes in the Duma on 15 March, some Liberal Democrats supported the leftists, showing their electorate that they were dedicated to the idea of empire and would not allow themselves to be identified with the president. But at the same time, Zhirinovskiy accused the Communists as well as the radical democrats of allowing the USSR to disintegrate, asserting that his own party was the only one free from responsibility for past mistakes and crimes. Zhirinovskiy's strong point is his ability to attract attention, which he can do far better than any other Russian politician. He uses any opportunity for the noisy self-promoting tactics that are the core of his presidential campaign. He methodically and sophisticatedly creates the powerful image of an eccentric and dynamic politician, an image that gains strength subconsciously in the minds of voters. The LDPR's success in the 1993 and 1995 parliamentary elections was largely the result of professionally produced mass-media advertising. It is precisely on television that Zhirinovskiy is relying in his presidential campaign.

Zhirinovskiy has too many strong competitors in the race to make it into the second round of elections: besides Yeltsin, there are Yavlinsky and Lebed. (Beating Zyuganov is clearly not possible for the LDPR's leader.) His chances of reaching the second round today seem quite slim: his ratings are considerably lower than Yeltsin's, and often lower than Yavlinsky's and Lebed's as well. Zhirinovskiy has, however, repeatedly shown his ability for last-minute successes, which is probably what he is counting on for the presidential elections.

Yavlinsky's Democratic Alternative

Yavlinsky's campaign strategy is based on the assumption that he is the focus of the main democratic forces of Russia. This assumption, however, is open to doubt: as the parliamentary elections showed, the popularity of his Yabloko party and its leader is not yet impressive; Yavlinsky is somewhat unacceptable to the majority of Russian elite groups, and even to some democrats. Yeltsin's entry into the presidential race prevented the formation of a full-scale democratic party headed by Yavlinsky. Not a single major democratic organization agreed to join ranks with Yabloko. The latter's attempt to develop a broad anti-war campaign, and to win points from doing so, was unsuccessful. President Yeltsin wisely decided to wait out the Chechen conflict. Yabloko's financial and staff resources are minimal, and so Yavlinsky has only a limited ability to make television appearances. This forced him to enter negotiations with Lebed and Fyodorov about forming a campaign coalition.

Meanwhile, Yavlinsky was carrying on behind-the-scenes negotiations with Yeltsin, in which he used the possibility of a "third force" as a way to threaten and put pressure on the presidential camp. He publicly mentioned his willingness to compromise, contingent upon an end to the Chechen conflict and a change in economic policy. It seems that Yavlinsky was not far from withdrawing from the race in exchange for the post of prime minister. But the benefits of such a trade-off seem highly dubious, considering Yeltsin's election prospects. Passing Yavlinsky's voters over to Yeltsin would be offset by the exodus of a large number of dissatisfied supporters of Our Home Is Russia and

Chernomyrdin, the group that constitutes the core of the president's support base.

At present, the possibility of a compromise between Yeltsin and Yavlinsky, while not impossible, seems highly unlikely. Meanwhile, the level of Yavlinsky's electoral support is clearly not high enough to warrant counting on his success independently: his ratings show no signs of rising. It must be said, of course, that Yavlinsky has not yet even really begun his election campaign. Theoretically, one must admit that if Yavlinsky gets the resources to organize a large-scale intensive campaign, his prospects could improve.

Lebed as a Russian de Gaulle

In the fall of 1995, the retired general Lebed was considered the strongest candidate for president of Russia. The defeat in the parliamentary elections of his Congress of Russian Communities (KRO), however, significantly worsened his prospects. The rift between Lebed and KRO leader Yuri Skokov deprived the general of solid financial and organizational support, which put into serious doubt his ability even to participate in the presidential race. Lebed's attempts to persuade Communists to support his candidacy have not been productive. Interest in the general started rising again after his registration with the Central Election Commission. He won the support of many regional KRO organizations, which expressed the hope that the KRO would support Lebed in the elections. The general himself has been conducting intensive meetings with Russian businessmen with the aim of funding his campaign. His official campaign began with a trip to Novgorod oblast, which can be called an effective measure, since KRO won relatively large support in the northwest region.

Lebed's best strategy is to project the image of a leader who can reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions between the various political camps, and heal the nation's deep social discord. Because of his image as a charismatic leader who is able to rise above party quarrels, he is equally acceptable to the left and the right. This approach, however, must be backed up with staff and informational and financial resources that would help create a highly professional team, which the general does not have today. It is not likely that he will have them in the future. Thus, as with Yavlinsky, Lebed's chances for making it into the second round on his own are rather slim.

Prospects for a "Third Force"

The idea of forming a "third force," a political coalition acting in the presidential elections as an alternative to Yeltsin as well as Zyuganov, is favorable to the section of Russian society that does not accept the bipolar political system that has been created during the campaign period. This idea took concrete form in the meetings between Yavlinsky, Lebed, and Fyodorov that began to be held in late February about the possible formation of a pre-election alliance. At first glance, the idea of a third force looks very attractive: if these politicians separately have no serious chances to make it into the second round of elections, a merging of their resources and their electorates would allow the representative of their coalition not only a real possibility to compete with Yeltsin and Zyuganov, but even a chance at victory as well. A whole set of serious obstacles, however, stands in the way of such a success.

The three politicians are not fully compatible ideologically: Yavlinsky is a liberal democrat, Fyodorov tends to the social-democratic model, and Lebed is a moderate Russian nationalist and populist. For this reason a merging of their electorates, if it were possible, would not add up arithmetically. Although

Yavlinsky's and Fyodorov's electorates are compatible, they would probably not be inclined to vote for Lebed. Selecting a common candidate by comparing their ratings raises the possibility of manipulation, and is thus open to doubt. Only Fyodorov is willing to withdraw his candidacy for the benefit of another candidate, but Lebed and Yavlinsky are both extremely ambitious, and neither of them can be expected to agree to cede willingly to anyone else. Let us suppose, however, that these difficulties could be overcome, and that in late May a real coalition were formed. Wouldn't this happen too late? According to polls, the bipolar political system is becoming more and more entrenched in the popular mind. Nonetheless, the third force in any case represents more of a threat for Yeltsin than for Zyuganov. The Communists do not seem to be frightened by the idea of competing with a representative of a political coalition. It is thus possible that they do not believe such a plan could be successful.

Conclusion

The leadership of Boris Yeltsin and Gennady Zyuganov in the presidential race is confirmed both by polls and by the scale and intensity of their election campaigns. Zhirinovskiy, Lebed, and Yavlinsky occupy the second tier of candidates in the popular mind, and their ambitions to make it into the second round of elections are not very well founded. The balance of power could be altered by extraordinary circumstances (for example, sudden illness afflicting the president), or by the effective consolidation of a "third force" coalition. But the latter case would pose more of a threat to Yeltsin than to Zyuganov. Despite the enormous funds that have been invested in Yeltsin's campaign, Zyuganov's position remains stronger. Although both major candidates have exhausted their own electoral potential, the ratings gap between the two still exists—and in Zyuganov's favor. This is extremely dangerous for Yeltsin, since there is no reason to suppose that a poor showing in the first round of elections will be offset by success in the second. The president's camp is undergoing a serious crisis of electoral strategy. It should either take some extraordinary steps to improve Yeltsin's electoral prospects, or try to cancel the presidential elections altogether.