

Russia - 1993 - General Election

The experience of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections is a matter of deep division between the two countries. However, it must be noted that there was a time when the United States and Russia cooperated on elections. In Russia, the halcyon days of Russia's attempted transition from Communism to democracy can be benchmarked to have begun in 1993 and then back-slided by the late 1990s, as Vladimir Putin took office.

The electoral catalyst was in April 1993, a referendum put forward by the Congress of People's Deputies to approve or reject the policies of President Boris Yeltsin. The referendum was sponsored by hardliners in the Congress who disagreed with the "Western tilt" of Yeltsin's policies. Congress presented 4 questions about his policies and Yeltsin obtained a majority on three out of four of them. For this April referendum, the International Republican Institute, IRI, conducted an observation programme and the National Democratic Institute, NDI, trained domestic observers on election monitoring techniques. So US-based organizations were active early in supporting the emergent Russian electoral process.

This victory was followed by Yeltsin's dissolution of the Congress in September 1993. The elections for a new federal assembly and a referendum on the Constitution were scheduled for December 12th. So it was a period of robust political debate emerging from *perestroika* and the vacuum resulting from the Communist Party's fall from power and constitutional reform was at the centre of it during this period. The differences surrounding reform initiatives involve disagreement over the structure and distribution of powers among the presidency, Parliament and subnational.

In response to the gridlock and the results of the April referendum, Yeltsin unilaterally established a constitutional assembly in May. While the results of the April referendum showed support for dissolving the Congress and electing a new legislature, the turnout percentage was not sufficient for the results to be binding. While the Assembly debated the language of both the presidential and parliamentary versions of the draft constitution, they could not agree on a final draft. And in the midst of the constitutional debate, the imperative to adopt a new election law and conduct elections was increasingly viewed as a solution to the current political crisis. Thus, the constitutional debate was formed along the lines of hardliners and reformers. So too was the debate on the electoral law, with two drafts, one by People's Deputy Victor Balala, and one by reformist politician Hector Shamis. The principal difference was that the Balala draft put forward single district constituencies for Parliament and the Shamis draft proposed proportional representation. In the end the drafts were combined and the electoral

system possessed both a majoritarian and a proportional component. The preparation of the election law acted as a catalyst for existing political parties and movements to begin organizing for an election campaign. However, except those claiming the mantle of the former Communist Party, many of these parties faced difficulties, including limited membership, few resources and weak influence in Russian politics.

A number of other factors combined to thwart the development of a viable multi-party system in post-Soviet Russia including a general suspicion about political parties and weak civil society within the Russian electorate; limited knowledge of the functions of political parties in a pluralistic system; disproportionate resources to parties with former communist affiliations; and the inability of parties to develop themes and establish priorities and consolidate their organizations. These were some of the weaknesses that the US programming sought to address. Nevertheless, according to ITAW TAAS, the news Agency, 21 political parties and blocks out of 35 initially registered presented lists of the required minimum of 100,000 signatures necessary to contest in the December 12th election.

This recounting of history during this window is highlighted because it was basically the beginning and the end of the democratic experiment in Russia. During this period, democracy promotion organizations from the United States were engaged with the Russian counterparts in fostering this democratic transition. As mentioned above, IRI and NDI work with domestic election observer groups and conducted capacity building and training for the nascent political parties. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems, IFES, provided advisors to the Central Election Commission, the CEC, in electoral administration, in particular in areas to enhance ballot security; improve the tabulation process; provide standardized training for poll workers; conduct a non-partisan voter education program; and introduce technologies into electoral administration. The programming was implemented collegially and transparently.

My experience with this window of engagement began in June 1993, when I led an initial assessment team for IFES in Russia. The assessment team was composed of eight members and upon arrival we formed three groups and deployed to Moscow, to Novosibirsk in Siberia, and the 3rd to Voronezh in Central Russia. We went with Members of Parliament, Regional and Presidential Council members, Regional Presidential Representatives. Constitutional Committee representatives. Presidential Constitutional Assembly, academics and representatives of emergent political parties and civil society organizations. After that assessment, IFES established an office in Moscow to administer the electoral assistance program with the CEC.

The relationship was a successful one, particularly under the new chairman, Alexander Ivanchenko. A more reformed minded leader than his predecessor, Vasily Kozakov, who kept a portrait of Vladimir Lenin on the wall of his office. Ongoing electoral assistance was conducted with the CEC. Election conferences were organized in Moscow. Russian election officials visited the US to observe our elections. And in an ironic testament to the freedom of the voting in the 1995 State Duma elections, the Communist Party and Liberal Democratic Party, both staunch anti-Western hardliners, were the first and second top tier vote getters in the proportional seat voting.

However, this engagement was short lived and the US electoral assistance presence in Moscow ended after the ascension of Vladimir Putin as acting president on New Year's Eve 1999, resulting from the abrupt resignation of Boris Yeltsin. Since that time, under Putin the Russian electoral process has basically served as a closed instrument to legitimize the status quo. But for a brief window, the US and Russia cooperated in a collegial and transparent manner on programming to improve Russian elections and fostering a democratic political transition.

This is Jeff Fischer and I thank you.