

The Role Of Foreign Policy In The Russian Presidential Elections – OpEd

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In the absence of clear domestic political issues, foreign policy, including national security issues, is playing a greater than usual role in Russia's presidential election campaign.

The poor performance of the ruling United Russia (UR) party in the Duma elections of December 4 has been described by its supporters as evidence that the election met "European standards." However, the reality is quite different. Elections held in mature European parliamentary democracies usually focus on key political, social and economic issues. In contrast, the December Duma campaign was largely devoid of debates on these specific issues and at times revolved around nothing more than who could outspend or rig the election better than their opponents.

The United Russia party is the one to blame for failing to formulate a consistent, contemporary and European-type ideology, one based on domestic issues. Its platform is simply that it is the party of power and wants to stay in that place. The party and the executive branch of the Russian government are, to all intents and purposes, one and the same thing, which explains a great deal why United Russia almost invariably takes credit for every "positive action" the Kremlin undertakes, with public money. Opposition parties – if we assume that such parties really exist – were no better – none of the six which participated in the elections managed to present any platform more attractive than the one of the UR to the electorate. In spite of its current standing, the UR has seen in recent years a consistent decrease in the percentage of votes it gets from the populace. Nevertheless, opposition parties have chosen to remain bystanders and watch from a privileged position the effective erosion of the UR mandate among ordinary Russians.

Consequently, debates and exchanges on foreign policy issues were quite limited during the December legislative election. Two factors can explain this omission. First, Russia is not currently at war; no major military conflicts are taking place on its borders. In the absence of a clear and overriding threat to the national security, Russians prefer to fix their attention on domestic issues, as political parties elsewhere do in similar circumstances.

Second, Russia's foreign policy is within the sole domination of the executive branch, traditionally conducted by the interaction between the Presidential Administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although in 2008 the office of the Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, was also added to the mix. The foreign policy function of the Duma is almost purely symbolic, usually limited to the approval of international treaties.

However, international issues have returned to the forefront of public debate during the current presidential campaign, and this issue has been raised by the leading presidential candidate, Vladimir Putin. He has emphasized them in setting his campaign apart from the pack. This is a predictable strategy given that he is the only candidate with previous foreign affairs experience. Putin can easily portray himself as being far more capable than any other in this sphere of expertise.

Putin's sudden interest in foreign affairs is, partly, motivated by tactical considerations. Stability, the main achievement brought about by Putin's leadership, seems to be hit by decreased demand. Standing for election on the same track as President's Medvedev's "modernization" program cannot alone carry the day. Putin might be asked why he, and not the one who proposed the modernization program, Medvedev, is now seeking the presidency. Since Putin's advisors are unable to formulate a dominant theme for the election campaign, especially on the home front, he has no other alternative but to discuss Russia's stormy relations with the outside world.

This subject is not entirely devoid of immediate relevancy. There is growing concern in Russia about the deployment of anti-missile defense systems in Eastern Europe and the need to modernize the Russian military. Russia genuinely believes that these systems, deployed next to its European border, constitute an acute threat to its national security. The Kremlin sees no reason to hide its security fears from the wider public and the international community.

While the attention placed by Russian officials on such concerns is legitimate and understandable, it is the tone of their rhetoric that is worrying. In a speech at a campaign rally on Manezh Square in Moscow on December 12, Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's former ambassador to NATO, warned that Russia could become the "easy prey" of some (unnamed) antagonistic "forces in Europe." Naturally, it is easy to dismiss such a statement as just another typical piece of extremist anti-Western propaganda from the mouth of the confrontational and hawkish ex-ambassador if not for the fact that the very next day after the meeting, Rogozin became one of the senior organizers of Putin's election campaign. It is clear that such views, and the way they are expressed, are likely to become government practice should Putin be elected.

Putin himself stirred things up a bit by pointing his finger at the United States, and specifically Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for the massive protests which erupted in Russia after last December's State Duma elections. According to Putin, "[Clinton] set the tone for some of the activists inside our country, gave them a signal, they heard this signal and started active work with support from US State Department" (Daily Telegraph, December 8, 2012).

It is inconceivable to any person well-versed in Russian politics that Putin does not realize the absurdity of this accusation. Yet the idea of Russia being stalked by an "enemy at the gate" resonates with many voters in the ex-communist country, as a new level of mistrust has developed towards the United States, 20 years after the Cold War officially ended. Interestingly, Putin's statement was enthusiastically backed by Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party – Putin's main "rival" in the presidential race, who called the protest meetings an "orange leprosy," and claimed it had been organized by "American secret services." Undoubtedly, the topic of foreign interference in Russia's internal affairs is going to play a prominent role in election debates until March 4, the last day of the election campaign.

Putin's heightened anti-Western rhetoric may act as a cold shower for those who a few months ago opined that the "possible election of Putin as the president of Russia will not signify a fundamental change in the direction of U.S.-Russia relations" (Andrew Kuchins, the Valdai Discussion Club, September 29, 2011). They might still be correct in the final analysis: Soon-to-be President-elect, Putin may well correct his tendency to fire-off malapropos statements while in office after March and effectively return to the characteristically pragmatic approach to foreign policy of his first presidential term. Words, however, are important in politics, even if they are uttered in the heat of election campaigns. They may be taken at face value.

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