

Thomas Kunze, Nuru Packmohr: Taking Stock of the Work of the Legislative Assembly of the Russian Duma in the Legislative Period from 2003 to 2007

For some time, the Russian Duma has been dominated by United Russia, the 'party of power' that is faithful to Putin. Its current majority of 67.56% enables it to change the constitution without assistance. Acting in concert with the Fair Russia Party, the result of a merger between the Rodina and Shisn parties in 2006, United Russia largely supports the policies of the Kremlin, whereas alternative opinions are only intermittently heard in the Duma. United Russia controls legislation, acting as an instrument of the national government and particularly the Russian president.

Between 2003 and 2007, the Duma passed quite a number of important laws relating to social matters, civil society, the fight against terrorism, electoral rules, and the structure of the Russian state.

The Russian social system was – and still is – extremely complex, expensive, and inefficient. Problems are caused especially by the numerous privileges in the form of benefits in kind, such as the right of soldiers to use public transport without paying. When a bill was introduced in 2004 to monetarise these privileges by replacing them with lump-sum payments, the people concerned responded with mass protests. Their concrete criticism was that the envisaged compensation did not reach the actual value of the benefits that had been granted before. Even so, the Duma passed the law in August 2004, causing the opposition parties to take action. However, a demonstration in Perm early in 2005 had no effect because the parties that organised it, which all originated in the Yeltsin era, are regarded as part of 'the system' and have by now gambled away most of the trust they once enjoyed among the population.

The mood of the Russians after the social reform is reflected in survey results: 80% of the country's citizens think the reform ill-considered, badly prepared, or even harmful – an opinion that becomes even more explosive when viewed against the background of the growing number of people in Russia who are afraid of falling into destitution and poverty.

At the same time, innovations were introduced in the laws relating to the civil society. In Russia, only few people belong to civil-society organisations. Late in 2005, their activities were given a new legal foundation by the Duma, officially in order to combat terrorism and money-laundering. From now on, non-governmental organisations have to report their existence and objectives to a newly-created authority, an obligation that extends to foreign NGOs. Both Russian and foreign organisations are now required to account for their finances and submit their programmes for inspection. Should the result be negative, registration may be denied, as happened to an organisation dedicated to the protection of homosexuals which, according to the authorities, undermined the values of the population and accelerated the decimation of the Russian nation.

In the field of media rights and liberties, a law adopted in July 2006 restricted the freedom of speech. According to the law, slandering or denigrating government officials may now constitute an act of extremism.

Responding to the growing number of terrorist attacks by Chechnyan brigades and suicide bombers, the Duma passed a new anti-terror act which extended the range of repressive instruments available to the government but gave no consideration to preventive approaches, such as eliminating the social causes of terrorism. The law imposes a ban on making political concessions to terrorists which is especially controversial after the liberation of hostages from a

Moscow theatre late in 2002 and the storming of a school occupied by terrorists in the Caucasian town of Beslan, in which more than 400 died late in 2004. Since 2006, not only isolated objects but entire regions may be declared areas of anti-terrorist operation in the fight against terrorism. When danger threatens, aircraft and ships may be destroyed, and Russian troops are allowed to operate abroad. Critics say that at the end of the day, the restrictions of human and civil rights allowed by the law are the same as those permitted in a state of emergency.

The electoral and party laws as well as the system by which governors are elected were redesigned as well. Once again, the object was to concentrate power at the centre and strengthen the position of the head of state. The gubernatorial election system was changed inasmuch as the presidents or governors of federation subjects will henceforth be proposed by the head of state and confirmed by the regional parliament. In the opinion of its proponents, this rule ensures a double democratic legitimation for the incumbents, whereas critics believe it mainly adds to the power of the head of state, who is also entitled to dismiss any regional presidents or governors who incur his displeasure.

The party system was modified late in 2004. To register, a party now has to prove a membership of 50,000 instead of merely 10,000 as before. In addition, it must furnish evidence that it has no less than 500 enrolled members in at least half the regions of the country. Among the existing parties, the bigger ones were strengthened while the smaller ones were robbed of most of their chances. We may fairly say that federalism was weakened by all this.

The reform of the electoral laws had a similar effect. All 450 members of the Duma will now be elected under the proportional-representation system. Smaller parties are threatened by failure to jump the seven-percent hurdle, up from five percent before. And while popular but unaffiliated candidates could be elected directly before, only parties may join the contest now. The objective probably is to centralise the party system. As a side effect, the strictures of the new party legislation tend to curb the increase in the number of parties which a change from the first-past-the-post to the proportional-representation system often entails.

There can be no doubt that the reform of the electoral law strengthened the bigger parties who are now no longer forced to make many concessions to the regions. It also strengthened the lure of party membership, without which it is practically impossible to become a member of parliament. As parties are now more strictly controlled by the Kremlin, critics suggest that conformity is being enforced in politics, as opposed to the unpredictable behaviour of unaffiliated MPs.

The reform of the electoral and party laws aims at establishing a system of two strong parties, one of which will probably be United Russia. Very likely, the Kremlin would prefer the newly-established Fair Russia party as the other half of the pair – a 'party of power' even today. Voting against everyone, an option that existed until 2006, was abolished together with minimum turnout quotas in elections. All in all, it is to be feared that the recent changes in Russia's political system will enhance the alienation which the people feel towards their representatives.

Not one but several restructuring measures were directed at the country's federal structure. Larger objects were formed of several federation subjects. Aimed at simplifying the administration, this wave of structural measures began when the district of Perm was merged with the autonomous district of the Komi-Permyaks.

A law adopted in January 2007 prohibits foreigners from offering goods on Russian markets. Next to its protectionist and nationalist character, the law is problematic also because most

people who sell goods in the markets of the country are not of Russian nationality. While the rigorous enforcement of the law did not cause the market to collapse, as some had feared, foreign traders gradually trickled away, and supply bottlenecks cropped up.

Public holidays were also re-arranged. From the end of 2002, November 4th became the day of national unity, replacing November 7 which had until then been celebrated as the anniversary of the October Revolution. More and more of the old Soviet holidays are being replaced by new Russian ones, although many Russians do not really know what to make of them yet.

Russia's political development under Putin is viewed with pessimism by the West, which pillories the curtailment of political and social freedoms. Yeltsin's economic policies certainly did bring the country to the brink of economic ruin and marginalised its power. Under Putin, matters were set right: the national economy recovered, and Russia reappeared as a great power – a process which demands the sacrifice of democratic ideals in the opinion of many Russians.

It is against this background that we must see the laws passed by the Russian Duma. The Kremlin's 'control' over it was strengthened, as was the power of the president. However, as most Russians show little interest in politics, the steps adopted by the Duma hardly met with any resistance. Ultimately, they serve to concentrate and strengthen the power of the state, an effect which the majority of the citizens tend to welcome as it is associated with the country's resurgence in foreign politics.