Veto Players and Major Electoral Reforms in Russia

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Abstract

Within the period of 1993–2014 Russia experienced four major electoral reforms: in 1993, 2002, 2005 and 2014. One further attempt to change the Russian electoral system, initiated by President Yeltsin in 1994–95, was unsuccessful. We suggest that the successes as well as the failures of the electoral reforms in Russia can be explained with the same reasons as in other countries regardless of their political regime. In our view, electoral reforms within any political system are rooted in the specific arrangement of the veto players within the system and their political preferences. This paper demonstrates that major electoral reforms were successfully implemented in cases when the executive branch headed by the Russian president, striving for maximum control over the legislative process, was interested in such implementation and there were no other veto players able to block passage of the law.

Keywords
electoral reform – electoral laws – institutional change – veto players – Russia

Introduction

On 22 February 2014 Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, signed a new law concerning elections to the Russia’s lower house of parliament, the State Duma, reintroducing a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) electoral system.
This system had already been used in the Duma elections of 1993, 1995, 1999 and 2003. At the federal parliamentary elections of 2007 and 2011, the solely party-list proportional representation (PR) system brought into the Russian electoral practice in 2005 had been applied.

The reintroduction of the MMM system in 2014, after a short period of experiments with the list PR system, became the fourth major electoral reform conducted in post-communist Russia within the last two decades. It followed the establishment of the electoral competition rules in 1993, thorough amendments to them in 2002, and their fundamental change in 2005 (see Table 1). Yet during the end of the 1990s – early 2000s, neither political experts nor officials considered such sharp changes in the Russian electoral competition rules to be possible. For instance, in his article devoted to the process of formation and passage of Russian electoral legislation in 1993–95, Vladimir Gel’man wrote: ‘Of course, Russia’s electoral system has been modified since the 1993–96 founding elections, but there are no grounds to expect major changes in its features’. Alexandr Veshnyakov, then head of the Central Electoral Commission, spoke in a similar vein about the newly adopted electoral legislation and the law on political parties in July 2002, and claimed: ‘It was the last serious change; there will be no need for any more such changes’.

Major electoral reforms are rare in democracies. However, even if we consider the political regime in Russia in the mid-2000s to be electoral authoritarianism, is it clear why the State Duma electoral law has experienced so many changes within the last two decades? The aim of this article...

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1 In accordance with Arend Lijphart’s definition, this article considers ‘major’ electoral reform to involve significant changes in one or more of the four main dimensions of electoral systems: any change in the electoral formula and 20 per cent or greater change in district magnitude, the national legal threshold or assembly size. See, A. Lijphart, Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of Twenty-Seven Democracies, 1945–1990 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 13).


Table 1  Major electoral reforms in Russia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Introduction of a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system at the first election to the State Duma. Half of the parliamentary seats (225) were to be distributed in accordance with a single-member plurality (SMP) system and the other half (225) were to be distributed in accordance with a proportional representation (PR) system. A 5 per cent threshold was applied to the PR system.</td>
<td>Passed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>The president’s proposal to change the balance between the SMP and the PR mandates within the MMM system, applying a proportion of 300–150 instead of 225–225.</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Increase of the PR electoral threshold from 5 to 7 per cent.</td>
<td>Passed for Duma elections after 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Replacement of the MMM system by the closed list PR. Increase of the electoral threshold from 5 to 7 per cent by the 2007 Duma election, as was provided for in 2002.</td>
<td>Passed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Reintroduction of the MMM system, applied until 2003, with equal balance between the SMP and the PR mandates. Lowering of the threshold applied to the PR system from 7 to 5 per cent.</td>
<td>Passed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

is to present an explanatory framework that reveals the rationale of the major electoral reforms in post-communist Russia.

We suggest that the successes as well as the failures of electoral reforms in Russia can be explained with the same reasons as in other countries regardless of their political regime. In our view, electoral reforms within any political system are rooted in the specific arrangement of the veto players within the system and their political preferences.6

Our research on the dynamics of major electoral reforms in Russia through the lens of the veto player theory is based on the large volume of secondary literature devoted to the political grounds of these reforms, and on analysis of the main institutions of the Russian super-presidential political system. In this article we will summarize the existing attempts to clarify the causes of the electoral system reforms in Russia.

The paper consists of three parts. The first part contains a review of the literature on electoral reforms in the Russian Federation, and the theoretical model on which the analysis is based. The second part of the work is devoted to the four major electoral reforms conducted within the period from 1993 to 2014 through the lens of the veto player theory. The final part contains the main conclusions.

**Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations**

Political researchers have been attempting to analyze the nature of major electoral reforms in modern Russia since the second half of the 1990s. A large amount of the research concerning this topic is devoted to explaining the rationale of the 1993 electoral reform and the causes of the failure of Boris Yeltsin's attempt to increase the number of SMP mandates within the MMM system from 225 to 300 at the end of 1994.7 Some scholars have focused on analyzing the reasons for the electoral reform of 2005, when the MMM system was replaced by the closed list PR one.8 In 2014 the list PR system was rolled

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back to the MMM system. It was the last significant reform of the Russian electoral competition rules and has not been very well studied up to the present moment, although researchers have already made some attempts to provide explanations.9

At the same time, the scientific literature has not so far described the general approach to electoral reform policy in the Russian Federation. Why was only one electoral reform, which established the electoral competition rules for the initial elections of 1993, conducted within the period from 1993 to 2001, while since 2002 there have been three major electoral changes? Why were the reforms of 1993, 2002, 2005 and 2014 successful, and why did the reform of 1994–95 fail? The main purpose of this article is to answer all of these questions.

We suppose that the veto player approach introduced by George Tsebelis10 can provide an explanation for the major electoral reform trends in Russia. This approach is ‘intuitive, testable, and transparent’11 and has already proved itself to be valuable in conducting empirical studies devoted to explaining the causes of political stability and instability.12 The veto player approach has been applied to studying electoral reform policy in Ukraine,13 in the United Kingdom,14 in Slovenia, in the Czech Republic, in Romania15 and in Belgium.16

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9 See, e.g. V. Sheinis, “The Devolution of the Electoral System in Russia”, Russian Politics and Law, 52, no 2 (2014): 64; Gel’man, Authoritarian Russia, 133.
10 Tsebelis, “Decision making in political systems”; Tsebelis, Veto Players.
The main advantage of this model is that it has a universal scope of applicability for studying the causes of political stability or instability, and can be applied to countries with different types of political and party systems and different political regimes.17

The veto player theory has several variations.18 This article is based on Tsebelis’s pure approach, as described in detail in his monograph.19 This theory rests on some key points. Any policy change requires the unanimous consent of all veto players, who are the ‘individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo’.20 There are two kinds of veto players. If a veto player’s status is formalized, generally in the constitution, such a veto player is called ‘institutional’. Partisan veto players, which ‘are generated by the political game’,21 can exist in parallel with institutional ones. Each political system has a certain veto player configuration which is determined by the number of veto players, their position regarding political issues, and their internal cohesion (for collective veto players). The arrangement of veto players can be changed with the course of time or may depend on the issue under consideration.

The policy stability of a political system decreases when the number of veto players decreases, when the gap between them decreases and when their cohesion decreases. Implementation of these conditions makes political changes possible, but not inevitable. According to Tsebelis, ‘when policy change is possible, whether it occurs or not will be a matter of the specific choices of actors themselves’.22 Discussing the veto player theory for the purposes of our analysis, it is also important to highlight that, in Tsebelis’s view, in cases when all the veto players within a political system are controlled by one actor, they can be absorbed, and consequently it is appropriate to consider such political systems as systems with only one veto player.23

In this article we apply the veto player approach to the analysis of electoral reform policy in post-communist Russia. For this purpose we will consider the examples of successful and failed major electoral reforms in Russia in chronological order. We will recreate the structure and preferences of the veto players involved in the decision-making process for each particular case.

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18 See Ganghof, “Empirical Uses”.
19 Tsebelis, Veto Players.
20 Tsebelis, Veto Players, 19.
21 Tsebelis, Veto Players, 19.
22 Tsebelis, Veto Players, 17.
23 Tsebelis, Veto Players, 78.
For simplicity we will consider the State Duma and the Federation Council — the two institutional veto players in the Russian political system — as if they had a consolidated majority sharing the same political views at all times (which became an empirical fact rather than an analytical assumption for the Federation Council in 2002 and the State Duma in 2004). We consider this appropriate because in all cases of major electoral reform, both the upper and the lower houses of the Russian legislative branch showed a high rate of internal cohesion, even if no political group (or political party, in the case of the Duma) dominated the parliament as had happened in the 1990s. We are not going to consider the Russian Constitutional Court as a veto player, because its intense confrontation with the presidential government in 1992–93 had negative consequences and led it to avoid political issues thereafter.24

Analysis of Major Electoral Reforms in Russia

Electoral Reforms in the 1990s
The electoral reform of 1993 was conducted in an institution-free setting where President Yeltsin was the only veto player.25 This exceptional political environment occurred as the result of the constitutional crisis of September–October of 1993, when Yeltsin made the decision to dissolve the Congress of People’s Deputies and called for conduction of the first post-Soviet parliamentary elections and the constitutional referendum on December 1993.

The electoral system for the first State Duma elections was introduced by Presidential Decree No. 1557, issued on 1 October 1993.26 One of the main purposes of this reform was to maximize the representation of the pro-presidential political forces among the Duma deputies.27 However, the situation in which the electoral competition rules were established was characterized by a high degree of uncertainty concerning the impact of various electoral formulae on the partisan structure of the new Russian Parliament. In these circumstances the MMM electoral system, with an equal balance between the number of the seats to be distributed in accordance with the SMP system and the list PR

27 Gel’man, “Institutional Design”.
system (225–225), was introduced for the initial elections to the State Duma. The point is that the isolated introduction of one of these systems would be risky for the decision-makers, because the effect of these electoral formulae on the political structure of the first post-Soviet Russian Parliament was uncertain. It was not clear whether the communists or the reformists would benefit from the application of a given system.28

However, the results of the Duma elections of December 1993 were disappointing for the Russian president and his team.29 The Russia’s Choice party, which was closely associated with Yeltsin, gained slightly over 15 per cent of the total number of seats. These results provoked Yeltsin to initiate a new electoral reform, which was intended to drastically curtail the number of the PR deputies relative to the SMP ones. This is because the election results showed that it was the opposition parties, namely the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), which benefited from the application of the PR system. At the same time, Russia’s Choice performed quite well in the single-member constituencies. Moreover, the average deputy elected under the SMP system shared the centrist position which was profitable for the president. Thus, from the point of view of the president’s advisers, a reduction in the number of PR deputies would have facilitated an increase in the political influence of the head of state within the next Duma.30

Nevertheless, the Russian president had to work under fundamentally new conditions compared to the end of 1993. The referendum on ratification of the new constitution of the Russian Federation and the first and only elections to the Federation Council (the upper chamber of Russia’s parliament), were held simultaneously with the first State Duma elections. Consequently, institutions restricting the power of the president appeared in Russia.31

Despite the fact that the president enjoyed significant legislative authority, including suspensive veto power, a bill could be adopted only with the approval of the two houses of the Russian Parliament,32 and Yeltsin’s presidency

28 Remington & Smith, “Political goals”; Moser & Thames, “Compromise Amidst Political Conflict”; Birch et al., *Embodying Democracy*.
29 Gel’man, “Institutional Design”.
31 Gel’man, “Institutional Design”, 57–58.
32 The Federation Council only has suspensive veto power concerning bills proposed by the State Duma, but the latter can override the veto with a two-thirds majority of deputies.
was characterized by a permanent conflict between the president and the parliament because neither the Duma nor the Federation Council had a pro-presidential majority. Thus, in 1994–95 the new electoral reform draft was considered in the presence of not one but three veto players: the president, the State Duma, and the Federation Council.

On 1 November 1994 Yeltsin submitted the draft electoral law which, among other issues, provided for a decrease in the number of PR deputies from 225 to 150 and, accordingly, an increase in the number of deputies elected to the Duma in single-member districts from 225 to 300. The process of developing the new electoral law took about eight months and was completed only by the end of June 1995. Nevertheless, the electoral competition rules for the Duma elections of 1995 were only slightly different from the ones applied at the elections of 1993 and, most importantly, they kept an equal balance between the deputies from the single-member districts and the national party lists (225–225).

Why did Yeltsin’s attempt to reform the Russian electoral system in 1994–95 fail? At that time the Duma was a genuine veto player, and its majority preferred to leave the MMM system unchanged. Few Duma deputies were inclined to approve the version of the electoral law proposed by the president. Almost all the deputies elected under the PR system were completely opposed to the decrease in the PR component. Moreover, several dozen SMP deputies did not support the amendments either, because they were members of the parties which received a substantial number of votes under the PR system. Most parties, including the liberals (Yabloko), the nationalists (LDPR) and the communists (KPRF), voted for the status quo electoral system. Even the members

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34 We do not consider the government to be a veto player because it is controlled by the president. See, Gel’man, “Institutional Design”; Moser & Thames, “Compromise Amidst Political Conflict”.
35 If this electoral reform had passed, the average district magnitude would have decreased by nearly 25 per cent and the effective electoral threshold would have increased by approximately 20 per cent.
36 Gel’man, “Institutional Design”; White & McAllister, “Reforming the Russian Electoral System”.  
of the pro-presidential parties in the Duma, such as Russia’s Choice and the Party of Russian Unity and Accord, were not unanimous in voting for Yeltsin’s draft. Thus, the presence of a veto player (the State Duma) which opposed the president and the Federation Council on the subject of the electoral reform in the Russian political system resulted in the impossibility of major electoral changes and the continuity of the previous electoral formula.

Electoral Reforms in the 2000s and 2010s

Until 2002 no major electoral reform was brought up for discussion in Parliament. In our opinion, the issue of electoral system change did not appear on the political agenda due to the presence of several veto players which had very different views on the issue of electoral reform. Thus, these veto players contributed to the preservation of the status quo.

However, by 2000 conditions developed which encouraged changes in the previous veto player structure of the Russian political system. In March 2000 Vladimir Putin won the presidential elections. Due to the high level of electoral legitimacy, the economic growth caused by the windfall of oil revenues, and manipulation of the formal and informal rules of the game, Putin managed to get the main segments of the Russian political and business elites under his control.

In May 2000 Putin launched the reform of the Federation Council. He planned to remove the heads of the regional executive and legislative bodies, who had been holding their positions ex officio since 1996, and in the upper house were often governed by their own interests in the decision-making process. The new structure of the Federation Council was formed by early 2002. The upper house now consisted of officials representing the executive and the

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41 The members of the Federation Council supported the president in regard to the electoral reform, as they considered the PR component of the Russian MMM electoral system to advantage the Moscow-based political parties and, consequently, to be an obstacle to the promotion of regional interests in the lower house of parliament. See, for example, Remington & Smith, “Political Goals”; White & McAllister “Reforming the Russian Electoral System”; Moser & Thames, “Compromise Amidst Political Conflict”.
42 Tsebelis, Veto Players.
legislative branches instead of the regional leaders, with two representatives per region. At the very beginning of the reform, the majority of the Federation Council became pro-Kremlin. Thus, since the end of 2001 bills proposed by the president, regardless of their content, have seldom faced opposition from the upper house of parliament. By 2002 the Federation Council was completely taken over by presidential preferences.

By the middle of 2001 the State Duma had a pro-presidential majority for the first time since it was established. This majority consisted of the deputies of four factions: Unity, Fatherland-All Russia, Russia's Regions and People's Deputy. But this coalition, including the deputies, was elected under both the PR and the SMP systems, and was far from unanimous with regard to many issues. The Kremlin often needed additional votes from the deputies outside the aforementioned coalition in order to pass a law. Thus, the Duma to an extent remained a veto player until the parliamentary elections of 2003.

However, another major electoral reform took place in 2002, being the second reform of its kind since 1993. On December 20th a new electoral law concerning the Duma elections was successfully passed. Although the MMM system, with its equal balance between the PR and the SMP components, still remained, the electoral threshold for parties to participate in further parliamentary elections was raised from 5% to 7%. This increase of the electoral threshold by almost a third reflected the Kremlin's intention to bring the party system under its control.

But why was the 7% threshold not applied in the parliamentary elections of 2003? In our view, the reason is that while the Duma and the president shared similar positions in regard to some political issues, especially after the formation of the pro-Kremlin majority in the middle of 2001, the lower
house of parliament remained a veto player not yet taken over by the head of state. Meanwhile, the increase of the threshold at the 2003 elections was quite risky for the Duma’s parties. Consequently, the president had to agree to a compromise with the Duma regarding the terms of the higher threshold’s introduction.52

As the result of the parliamentary elections in December 2003 the United Russia party53 gained the constitutional majority of the Duma seats. The party managed to convert 37.6 per cent of the votes into 68.3 per cent of the seats. Often called ‘the party of power’ for its close relations with President Putin,54 United Russia’s success at the elections led to the lower house of the Russian Parliament being embedded into the vertical power structure headed by the president.55 United Russia’s hegemony in the legislative arena was achieved by means of advantageous conversion of the votes attained under both the PR and SMP systems, by taking seats and as the outcome of pre-election agreements with certain formally independent SMP nominees.56 In the aftermath of the State Duma elections of 2003, the Duma’s power was absorbed by the president,57 as had happened with the Federation Council. United Russia became a political instrument for the promotion of Putin’s interests in parliament.58

With the Fourth Duma, initiation of new electoral reforms became dependent on the preferences of the only veto player remaining in the Russian political system, which was the president.59 It is worth mentioning that the point when the number of veto players diminished to one marked the beginning of the cardinal changes aimed at eliminating real political

53 United Russia is the successor of Unity, formed by the merging of Unity and Fatherland-All Russia on July 2001 with the Kremlin’s permission, see Reuter & Remington, “Dominant Party Regimes”.
54 Reuter & Remington, “Dominant Party Regimes”.
55 Moraski, “Electoral System Reform”.
57 Tsebelis, Veto Players.
59 Moraski, “Electoral System Reform”; Gel’m an, Authoritarian Russia.
As a result, the number of amendments made to Russian electoral legislation since 2004 has grown significantly compared to the previous decade (see Figure 1).

A new major electoral reform took place in 2005. In accordance with the new electoral law, the MMM system applied to the Duma elections in 1993, 1995, 1999 and 2003 was completely replaced with the list PR system, defining a unified nationwide district magnitude of 450. It was the presidential competition.

In this article we first and foremost consider major electoral reforms in Russia. At the same time, along with the relatively few major reforms there were also numerous minor and technical ones, see K. Jacobs & M. Leyenaar, “A Conceptual Framework for Major, Minor, and Technical Electoral Reform”, *West European Politics*, 34, no 3 (2011). Their frequency is also clearly dependent on the number of veto players. To determine the number of electoral reforms per year, we used the calculations of changes in Russian legislation originally undertaken by Arkady Lyubarev in 2009, and updated in 2014. Since his calculations ended in early June 2014, we added data using the official site of the State Duma.

**Figure 1** Changes in Russian electoral legislation, 1993–2014
*Source: HTTP://WWW.GOLOSINFO.ORG/TIMELINE, HTTP://WWW.DUMA.GOV.RU/, LYUBAREV, 'KHRONOLOGIYA', AND OUR CALCULATIONS*
administration which played the main role in the development of the new electoral competition rules.\textsuperscript{62} There were no other veto players, and thus no one who could prevent the reform implementation process from taking place.\textsuperscript{63}

The electoral reform of 2005 was a link in the chain of ‘counter-reforms’\textsuperscript{64} aimed at the centralization of Russian political life and the executive branch gaining total control over the legislative process.\textsuperscript{65} In particular, the introduction of the pure PR system led to the disposal of independent (i.e. non-party) candidates and nominees closely related with the regional leaders.\textsuperscript{66} Another purpose of the 2005 electoral reform was the long-term consolidation of Putin’s party, United Russia, and reinforcement of its internal cohesion.\textsuperscript{67} The loyalty of the United Russia deputies was ensured by the Kremlin’s control over the formation of the party list.\textsuperscript{68}

Though the list PR system is considered to be unfavorable for large parties,\textsuperscript{69} United Russia was guaranteed success, at least at the Duma election of 2007. Firstly, success was expected due to the replacement, in early 2005, of the direct election of regional leaders with nomination by the president, which took place so that regional governors were co-opted into the party of power along with their political machines.\textsuperscript{70} Secondly, by 2007 the Kremlin had successfully taken control of Russia’s party system by establishing restrictive rules

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[63] Moraski, “Electoral System Reform”, 544.
\item[64] See, e.g. Sheinis, “The Devolution of the Electoral System”.
\item[65] Among the most important changes of such kind one can mention the requirement to raise the minimal number of party members to 50,000, the prohibition of electoral blocs and electoral alliances at all the elections, introduction of an official polling day, hardening of the rules of registration of nominees and party lists, based on the signatures of the registered electors, and the abolition of electoral deposit. See, for example, Wilson, “Party-System Reform”; Kynev & Lyubarev, \textit{Partii i Vybor}; Sheinis, “The Devolution of the Electoral System”.
\item[68] Moraski, “Electoral System Reform”.
\item[70] Reuter & Remington, “Dominant Party Regimes”; G.V. Golosov, “The Territorial Genealogies of Russia’s Political Parties and the Transferability of Political Machines”, \textit{Post-Soviet Affairs}, 30, no 6 (2014); Gel’man, \textit{Authoritarian Russia}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
concerning the creation and operation of political parties.\textsuperscript{71} Thirdly, President Putin, who was extremely popular among voters, took the lead in United Russia’s list at the 2007 election.\textsuperscript{72} Due to United Russia’s overwhelming victory at the 2007 elections, where the party managed to gain 64.3 per cent of votes and 315 seats in the Duma, thus achieving the constitutional majority, Putin and his allies had no stimuli to initiate a new electoral reform.

During Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency the number of veto players in the Russian political system remained the same. The Federation Council and the State Duma remained subordinate. The particular feature of that period was the Medvedev–Putin tandem, in which Medvedev held the position of president and Putin acted as the head of the government. However, Medvedev was completely loyal to Putin and they shared similar positions concerning the general trends of Russian policy.\textsuperscript{73}

But at the Duma elections of 2011, the application of the PR system resulted in a poor outcome for United Russia and, consequently, for the Kremlin. Three opposition parties (KPRF, A Just Russia and LDPR) managed to overcome the 7 per cent threshold and collectively gained only slightly fewer votes than United Russia.\textsuperscript{74} Thus, the application of the PR system, which had originally been intended as a means for the consolidation of United Russia, led to consequences which had already been predicted in the scientific literature even in 2007, in particular to the emergence of a better-organized opposition and consequently of conditions encouraging further democratization.\textsuperscript{75}

United Russia’s unexpected failure in the 2011 elections, when it managed to achieve a majority by the skin of its teeth (gaining only 238 seats of 450), forced the Kremlin to update the rules of electoral competition for the next parliamentary elections. This update (or, to be precise, major electoral reform) was conducted in 2014.

The Duma remained under the president’s control during the 2011 elections, being dominated by United Russia. At the same time, as a result of the presidential election of 2012, Putin became the head of state once again. Consequently, the arrangement of veto players within the Russian political system

\textsuperscript{71} Kynev & Lyubarev, \textit{Partii i Vybori}.
\textsuperscript{72} Roberts, “United Russia”.
\textsuperscript{73} Gel’man, \textit{Authoritarian Russia}, 106–108.
\textsuperscript{74} Meanwhile, for a study of the official results of those elections, see, R. Enikolopov et al., “Field Experiment Estimate of Electoral Fraud in Russian Parliamentary Elections”, \textit{Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences}, 110, no 2 (2013) which clearly shows that a large number of votes were artificially assigned to the party of power.
\textsuperscript{75} Moraski, “Electoral System Reform”, 551.
did not change. This is why the reintroduction of the MMM system in early 2014 did not face any obstacles.76

Putin’s decision to reintroduce the MMM system which had been already been applied to the Duma elections in the past can be explained by his intention to compensate for the possible poor results of United Russia under the list PR system. In accordance with the results of the 2003 elections, the SMP component has provided a high conversion rating for the party of power77 and has given it many opportunities relating to the availability of coalition and co-optation strategies in single-member districts.78

Conclusion

The electoral reform of 1993 was conducted in an environment with no formal restrictions on presidential power. Another special feature of that period was the high level of uncertainty.79 The result was the failure of the MMM system introduced by presidential decree in order to allow the reformist parties to achieve wide parliamentary representation in the First Duma. President Yeltsin’s reaction was to initiate a new electoral reform at the end of 1994, which subsequently failed. The key point is that after December 1993, when the constitution came into force and the two houses of the Russian Parliament were elected, any political reform, including an electoral one, ceased to be dependent on a single veto player. Yeltsin’s attempt to change the electoral system faced strong resistance from the majority of the Duma, which did not share the president’s and the Federation Council’s view on the electoral reform. While such a veto player configuration remained, there was a powerful barrier80 preventing major electoral system reforms.

The next major electoral system reform after 1993 took place in 2002, when the Federation Council’s power had already been absorbed by the president through its reform conducted by President Putin about two years prior, and the formation of the pro-presidential coalition in the State Duma in mid-2001. However, the Duma remained a veto player. That is why the electoral reform came into effect only after the next parliamentary elections. The electoral

76 Sheinis, “The Devolution of the Electoral System”.
77 Golosov, “Sfabrikovannoe bol’shinstvo”.
78 Sheinis, “The Devolution of the Electoral System”; Gel’man, Authoritarian Russia.
79 McFaul, “Institutional Design”.
reforms of 2005 and 2014 became possible due to the fact that after the elections of 2003 only one veto player remained in the Russian political system. This was the case after the absorption of the State Duma’s power by the president, who was interested in promoting major electoral changes prior to the Duma elections of 2007 and after the Duma elections of 2011.

We suggest that the major electoral reforms in post-communist Russia became possible as a result of the principal changes in veto player configuration. Upon the absorption of the Federation Council’s and, subsequently, the State Duma’s power by the president in the first half of the 2000s, initiation of electoral reforms became dependent only on the interests of the president, and such reforms were initiated each time the electoral status quo did not correspond to those interests. Application of the veto player approach contributes to a better understanding of electoral policy in Russia. It allows us to embed the existing explanations of changes in the electoral system of the Russian Federation into a unified explanatory framework.

References


