

*Improvements Continuing***Voter Registries in the Russian Federation***by Paul S. DeGregorio*

Compilation of voter lists has improved significantly in the Russian Federation over the past decade. For the most part, the handwritten or typewritten list of voters that could be found at polling stations in the first half of the decade, when competitive elections were in their infancy, are gone. Today, in nearly all of the 89 subjects of the Russian Federation, computerized voter lists are the standard. This has allowed for greater efficiency in processing voters on election day. In addition, creating such a database of voters provides election authorities with the opportunity to move towards a uniform federal voter registry that eliminates duplications and discourages voter fraud.

108,073,956 Russian citizens were on the voter registry for the December 1999 Duma election, while the March 2000 Presidential election saw that number rise to 109,372,046.

The Russian electoral system provides for a permanent Central Election Commission (CEC) charged with overseeing elections in the Russian Federation. In addition, four subordinate levels of election commissions under the CEC are established: election commissions of the Subjects of the Russian Federation (SEC); district election commissions (DEC), used only for Duma elections; territorial election commissions (TEC); and precinct election commissions (PEC). While each of these plays a critical role in ensuring the proper registry of voters, only the CEC and SEC are permanent bodies.

The current system, based on a noncontinuous registration system, provides for particularly liberal registration procedures. The main source of input and update, the Internal Affairs Office and Housing Registry, references the "internal passports" that all citizens must carry for identification. It has been suggested by some, however, that governmental agencies compiling nonvoter information on Russian citizens in areas such as housing, employment, pension, etc., do not cooperate sufficiently with the authorities charged with the responsibility of updating the voter lists.

When potential voters approach the polling station on election day, they must identify themselves to election

officials before they receive ballots. This allows election officials to check the voters' names against the voter list and make certain that they are included. Each name is then checked off, or the voter is asked to sign the register.

On election day, voters who have moved recently and have not yet completed the change of registration forms, can be placed on a supplementary roll or have their passports stamped, thus enabling them to vote at the precinct. Although these procedures could lend themselves to electoral fraud, criminal sanctions against multiple voting have seriously discouraged such activity.

The Right to Be Registered to Vote

The Constitution of the Russian Federation, along with the Law on Basic Guarantees, provides the legal basis for the registration of voters. Article 32.2 of the Russian Constitution gives citizens of the Russian Federation who have reached the age of 18 the basic right to vote in elections. Under the law, the government places eligible Russian citizens on a voter registry. This registration takes place at the municipal or local administrative level on January 1 and July 1 of each year. The law also provides that citizens are to be placed on the voter registry on election day if they have been erroneously omitted.

Voter registration is compiled electronically utilizing the State Automated System (SAS) known as Vybory.

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Vybory creates a database of voters that allows for electronic comparisons and sorting. Only the Constitution can establish restrictions regarding permanent residence (where the citizen could be registered) or current residence (where he lives most of the time).

Compiling the Voter Lists

Voter lists are created on the basis of long-established methods and practices. Federal and subject governmental bodies assist local bodies and election commissions in the registration of voters. In addition, Passport services, the Department for Civil Acts Registration, and other federal agencies are involved in the compilation and verification of voter lists. Lists are maintained and updated by an authorized body, usually a local government official.

On election day, the PECs must be provided with two printed copies of the voter lists having the names placed in alphabetical or street address order. The list must contain the voter's first, middle, and last names and date of birth. The lists shall be certified and signed by the chairman and secretary of the TEC or PEC. Those in the military shall also have the right to be on a voter list that may be compiled by a commanding officer of the unit. A citizen can only be placed on a voter list in one precinct.

While there is a database created for each TEC and, in some cases, for each SEC, there is no uniform, countrywide database available at the present time.

Appealing the Voter Lists

Voter lists are transferred from the TECs to the PECs no later than 25 days prior to an election. The PECs shall update the list and post it no later than 20 days before the election. According to Article 18.14 of the Basic Guarantees Law, at any time until the close of polls on election day, an eligible citizen may make an appeal to the PEC if his name is not found on the voter list. Before election day, PEC officials have 24 hours to act on such an appeal, and on the voting day, they have only two hours to make a decision. Voters can be denied an appeal of their non-enrollment only on the basis of a valid reason and with proper documentation from the appropriate authorities. A voter may appeal this denial to a higher election commission that must consider such appeals within three days or on election day.

Permanent National Registration

In Russia, experience with permanent national registration has been limited. In recent times there has been no opportunity to automate national population registration and the country has limited possibilities for storing information at a central site. Today, only a few TECs maintain a permanent voter list system. The temporary voter registration system (also known as the Periodic List system) has been in existence for more than two decades, while the automated system is less than a decade old.

Several of the 89 SECs in the Russian Federation have taken the initiative to develop a comprehensive computerized voter registry list for their jurisdictions. They have used these databases to eliminate duplications and update records. The International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) has made a series of recommendations to the CEC to undertake an effort to develop a nationwide civil registry. Such a registry would greatly assist the 89 subjects in keeping their records updated.

Recommendations

During the past decade, IFES has provided considerable technical assistance to the Russian Federation in the area of voter registration. Indeed, based on IFES recommendations, many significant improvements have been made to the system of compiling the list of eligible voters. Because of the increasing population movements within the country resulting from democratization coupled with the influx of refugees, registration of citizens and voters will likely be the most complex issue in public administration and eventual elections in the Russian Federation. Civic and electoral planning will need to include elements that take into account the issues of returning to vote at one's place of residence, implementation of restrictions on voting at one's place of residence, voter eligibility, and the possibility of out-of-country voting.

Mr. Jorge I. Tirado, a technical expert in management information systems, has recommended legislative and procedural changes to develop a national population registry in the Russian Federation. Some of the advantages of such a registry would include:

- A permanent voter registry could be shared with other Russian governmental agencies or departments, while safe-guarding the privacy of electors. (Moving to a shared registry would eliminate the current duplication of effort and expense of registering electors at the national, provincial, territorial, and local levels of government, and ensure the elimination of duplication at the national level.)
- A registry would allow election administrators to make preliminary lists of electors for each electoral precinct available to political parties and candidates immediately after the call of an election or referendum.
- The establishment of a permanent system of citizen registration would allow local officials to save money for subsequent elections and avoid a "spike" in the numbers on the voter list just before an election.

In order to implement a permanent voter registry, legislative changes to the federal electoral system would have to be adopted, authorizing the CEC to enter into data-sharing arrangements with other governmental agencies or departments as necessary.

It has been noted that since 1990, the Russian Federation has taken strides in making significant improvements to its electoral system. At the same time, questions were also raised regarding more than 1,000,000 voters who were added to the voter registry in the short three-month period between the December 1999 Duma election and the March 2000 Presidential election.

As Russia begins the new Millennium and continues to make democratic reforms to ensure the voting rights of its citizens, the Federation should take steps to develop a comprehensive and permanent national registry in time for the next federal elections in 2003 and 2004. □

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