On December 31, 1999, Boris Yeltsin surprised everyone by resigning from the presidency of the Russian Federation. By constitutional mandate, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin became the Acting President with the presidential election scheduled to take place three months after the resignation. On March 26, 2000, Putin won the election in the first round with 52.9% of the votes. The election marked a historic moment since Russia will now be led for the first time by someone other than Yeltsin in its post-Soviet era. In light of the election, this issue of the Update reviews the Russian government structure and the election process and provides a quick overview of the candidates and parties involved in the election.

RUSSIA’S DECISION 2000
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The Russian Government Structure and the Election Process

Legislative Branch. The legislative body, which is called the Federal Assembly, is bicameral, with the upper Federation Council and the lower State Duma.1

The Federation Council is made up of 178 deputies, two from each of Russia's 89 regions/constituent units. The two deputies are the regional governor and the head of the legislature, who are elected in regional elections. Therefore, no national elections are held for the Federation Council.

Although the Federation Council is the upper chamber, it is the weaker half of the legislature. Most legislations are handled by the State Duma (as discussed below), and most laws passed by the Duma do not require approvals by the Federation Council. The Council has the option of voting on these legislations, but if the Council does not make a decision within 14 days of the submission by the Duma, the legislation is automatically passed to the president for approval or veto. The Council, however, must vote on laws regarding the federal budget, taxes, currency, international treaties and international borders and the declarations of war and peace.

As previously noted, the State Duma wields more legislative power than the Federation Council, and this of course is the reason why one has heard so much in the media about Yeltsin’s power struggle with the Duma and not the Federation Council.

1 Note that this legislative structure has been in place only since the new Russian Constitution was passed by a national referendum in December 1993. The previous parliament, the Supreme Soviet, which was a carryover from the Gorbachev era, was violently dissolved in October 1993 by Russian tanks bombing the White House, the parliamentary building.
The Duma holds the main responsibility of passing federal laws. Usually, legislation is adopted by a majority vote (unless otherwise stipulated in the constitution). If the Federation Council does not vote on it within the allotted 14 days, it is passed to the president. If the Federation Council rejects the legislation, it is returned to the Duma, which then requires two-thirds vote to override the Council’s rejection. The president can also veto a legislation, which then requires two-thirds vote in both the Duma and the Federation Council for the legislation to become law.

The Duma also has the responsibility of approving the president's choice of prime minister and the right to begin impeachment proceedings against the president.

The Duma is made up of 450 deputies and headed by the speaker. The deputies are elected in national elections in the following two ways. Half of the seats, that is, 225 deputies, are elected in single-member districts. The format of this process is somewhat similar to the elections for the US House of Representatives. The Russian Federation is divided into districts based on population, and whoever wins the plurality of votes in the district wins the seat.

The other half of the Duma’s 450 seats is elected through party-list votes. In this process, the voter votes for the party of his/her choice from a list of parties (or party blocs) on the national election ballot. Then, the parties that received at least 5 percent of the votes divide up the 225 seats according to the percentages of votes that they received. The parties that do not cross the 5% threshold do not receive any seats in this process. All 450 deputies are elected in a single national election, and serve four-year terms.

Executive Branch. The executive branch of the Russian government is headed by the President. According to the 1993 Constitution, which Yeltsin’s team wrote to bolster the power of the presidency over the parliament, the president has very broad executive powers. The president can draft and submit his own legislation to the parliament and has the power to veto legislations passed by the parliament, which is difficult to override. Moreover, the president has the power to dissolve the Duma and schedule its elections. The president is also the commander in chief of the armed forces and has the power to declare martial law or a state of emergency.

The president is elected by popular vote in a national election. Because there is usually a long list of candidates on the ballot, a candidate must receive more than 50% of the vote in the first round to be declared the winner. If no one receives the majority of the vote, a run-off election is held two weeks later between the top two candidates. In the 1996 presidential election, which in fact was the first presidential election of the Russian Federation, a run-off election was held between Yeltsin and Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party, which Yeltsin won. Also, if the voter turnout is less than 50%, then the election is considered void, and a new election is held 4 months later. The president serves 4-year terms, and a person can serve for only two terms.

The Russian executive branch also has a Prime Minister, who heads the ministries and reports to the president. The prime minister is chosen by the president but must be approved by the Duma. If the president's nominee is rejected three times, the president has the power to dismiss the Duma and call for new elections. As Yeltsin hired and fired a series of prime ministers, there were a number of close calls when the Duma refused to approve Yeltsin’s nominees. The prime minister, while an important political figure, is ultimately at the mercy of the president, who, as we know, can dismiss him at will. Of course, Yeltsin’s last selection for the prime minister was Vladimir Putin, who Yeltsin essentially anointed as his heir to the presidential throne.

Political Parties and the 1999 Duma Election

After decades of single-party rule, post-Soviet Russia witnessed a proliferation of political
parties. In the 1995 Duma elections, 43 parties were represented; in December 1999, 27 parties/blocs vied for seats in the Duma. Out of 27, only 6 parties/blocs received at least 5% of the vote to receive seats in the Duma in the party-list vote:

**Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF),** led by Gennady Zyuganov. CPRF is the most organized and popular of all political parties. It won the the greatest number of seats in the 1995 and 1999 Duma elections, although its numbers dropped from 1995 to 1999.

**Unity,** considered as Vladimir Putin’s party. Called the “virtual party” and the “party of power” by political analysts, Unity was formed in September 1999 by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin elites to garner votes in the December Duma elections. Headed by Yeltsin’s Emergencies Minister, Sergei Shoigu, and backed by almost unlimited resources of the Kremlin, Unity, without having any type of a platform, received almost 20% of the vote in December. The fact that a handful of elites can create a party less than three months before the elections and win 20% of the vote is a clear indication of how weak the Russian party, as well as the electoral, system is.

**Fatherland-All Russia** bloc, led by former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov and Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Formed in August 1999, this party bloc was supposed to be the powerhouse with Primakov as the main contender to challenge Putin for the presidency. However, the bloc did not do as well as expected in the December Duma elections, and Primakov saw this as an indicator of his chances in the presidential election and decided not to run.

**Union of Right Forces,** led by former Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko. This is also new bloc created by uniting two reformist, pro-Western parties – New Force and Right Cause. This bloc surprised everyone and did better than expected in the 1999 Duma elections, crossing the 5% threshold.

**Yabloko,** led by Grigory Yavlinsky. It is one of the main reformist parties that has been involved in post-Soviet Russian politics since its earliest years and has managed to develop a grassroots party organization and a definable platform. It, however, never seems to receive much more than 5% of the vote.

**Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)/Zhirinovsky Bloc,** led by Vladimir Zhirinovsky. This party is neither liberal nor democratic, and Zhirinovsky is viewed as an extremist-nationalist by some and a buffoon by others. The popularity of this party has actually waned although it managed to cross the 5% threshold to gain seats in the Duma in December.

**2000 Presidential Election**

Following the December Duma elections and Yeltsin’s resignation, Acting President Vladimir Putin appeared to be all but a certain winner of the presidential election. Putin’s meteoric rise to power has been startling. He was a KGB careerist, working as a spy in East Germany. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, he made an unusual career move for a KGB spy and became a deputy mayor to Anatoly Sobchak, the reformist mayor of St. Petersburg. Later, Yeltsin appointed him to head the FSB, the successor to the KGB, and then prime minister in August 1999.

After becoming the prime minister, his popularity remained high, especially because of his tough stance on the Chechen war. Because he already appeared to have the popular support, his presidential campaign tactic was to say as little as possible as to what his future policy may be. As Putin declared, “once you make it public, it will begin to be gnawed and torn into
Rather, his campaign was to promote a certain image of Putin, as a man of vigor, unlike the sickly Yeltsin, and a man of law and order. In fact, once elected, he promised a “dictatorship of the law.”

With the powerful support of the Kremlin and its backers particularly in the media, Putin easily won the presidential election on March 26, Russia’s second presidential election in the post-Soviet era (see below for election results.)

Thus, Putin became the man to lead Russia into a new century. It is still unclear what Putin’s policies will be, but it is certain that Russia has entered a new era.

### Presidential Election Results

(Percent of the vote)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vladimir Putin</td>
<td>52.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gennady Zyuganov</td>
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<td>Grigory Yavlinsky</td>
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<td>Aman Tuleyev</td>
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<td>Vladimir Zhirinovsky</td>
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<td>Konstantin Titov</td>
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<td>Ella Pamfilova</td>
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<td>Stanislav Govorukhin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yuri Skuratov</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexei Podberyozkin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Umar Dzhabrailov</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against all</td>
<td>1.88</td>
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### SOURCES

Much of the information presented here were gathered from Harvard University’s Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project (SDI)’s monthly bulletin, Russian Election Watch, is probably the best source of analysis on the Russian elections (You can download the bulletins from its website at: http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/bcsia/library.nsf/election

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2 Quoted in “Who is Putin?: His Philosophy, Diagnosis, and Cure,” Russian Election Watch, No. 8 (March 15, 2000), p.2.