

Life Lessons

By Konstantin Sonin



The autobiography of former U.S. President Bill Clinton, "My Life," has come out in Russian translation under the title "*Moya Zhizn.*"

The book describes exactly what's lacking in Russian politics, such as the recognition that election campaigns aren't a waste of time and money, but a way for the voters to express their will. That campaign fundraising isn't some kind of shameful, mysterious endeavor, but the very thing that obliges politicians to stay in touch with the rank and file. That local and regional elections provide the best possible training for politicians and voters alike.

In the book, Clinton tells how, as the youngest governor in the United States, he lost his first re-election bid just two years after taking office. Back then, the good people of Arkansas considered gubernatorial elections so important that they held them every two years along with elections to the state legislature. After coming up short at the polls in 1980, Clinton hit the road and visited nearly every town and hamlet in Arkansas -- a state that boasts no large cities -- in order to figure out what he had done wrong and how to ensure victory the next time around. What he learned was that he was as popular as ever with the voters, but they were upset about a new automobile tax.

He also learned that what went over well with the voters before he became governor -- his Yale Law School charm and progressive stand on the death penalty -- was far less attractive in a former governor seeking re-election. As a result, in the next election he campaigned as an opponent of the unpopular tax and an advocate of the death penalty.

This is exactly how democracy is supposed to work: The newly elected governor represents the views of the majority.

This sort of responsiveness was just starting to emerge in Russia in the 1990s, but it has been all too easily eliminated by recent changes to the electoral system. Rather than meeting with their constituents, Russian politicians spend their time negotiating with the presidential administration, although this is hardly likely to give them an idea of what the voters back home are thinking.

After losing in his second attempt, Clinton went on to be elected governor of Arkansas four more times in a row. And that was enough to make him a strong contender for the presidency of the United States. But he had a long way to go before the election. Clinton visited nearly every state in the nation and spoke at hundreds of rallies to raise money for his campaign. No contribution was too small; in fact, contributions of \$100 and less accounted for the greater part of his campaign war chest.

In Russia, by contrast, party leaders do not raise money from tens of thousands of supporters, but from a handful of major companies. It should come as no surprise that, once elected, they represent the interests not of the majority, but of this handful of wealthy backers.

In the United States, the newly elected president fills some 3,000 government posts, usually with people from his own party. Clinton appointed the very people he had got to know on the campaign trail over the years, who had worked on his campaigns for Arkansas attorney general and governor, and whom he had come across as he traveled the country supporting other Democratic candidates. Election campaigns serve as a way of promoting the careers of people who are tireless, capable and loyal recruitment specialists.

We in Russia can only look on with envy at this institution. The "democratic career ladder" began to take shape under Boris Yeltsin, but President Vladimir Putin's personnel policy has proven horribly ineffective.

On the whole, Clinton's autobiography makes for interesting reading -- a chance for Russians to find out what we don't have.

Konstantin Sonin, professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR, wrote this column for Vedomosti.