



## Russian revolt?

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The election for the Russian State Duma (lower house of parliament) saw a dramatic slump in the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's regime. The Kremlin was widely perceived to have falsified the results but still lost many seats. This note looks at the difficulties faced by the Russian elite and some possible consequences for relations with western neighbours.

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## 1 2011 election to the State Duma (lower house of parliament)

Election to the Russian State Duma 2011

Party	2007		2011	
	%	Seats	%	Seats
United Russia	64.3	315	49.3	238
Communist Party	11.6	57	19.2	92
A Just Russia	7.7	38	13.2	64
Liberal Democratic Party	8.1	40	11.7	56

Source: RIA Novosti

The result of the 2011 legislative election in Russia came as something of an upset. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's United Russia lost 77 seats, but retained a slim majority, as its share of the vote fell just below half. United Russia's nearest rival, the Communist Party, gained 35 seats and gained nearly one in five votes. There is a threshold of 7% of the vote to gain seats in the Duma; only four parties passed this threshold. The threshold will be set at 5% at the next election, in 2016.

On the face of it, the result was still a strong one for United Russia. Most governing parties would be happy with half the vote and an outright majority in parliament. But this was an election in Russia's 'managed democracy', where the opportunities for genuine opposition parties to form and compete are limited, and where the Russian government has significant control over the media, particularly television. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly, which sent an observer mission to the election, also said that many political websites were down during the day of the election.<sup>1</sup>

Another factor in United Russia's poor showing was reported to be a dull and complacent election campaign.

Most importantly, there were many allegations that the election was rigged. If a governing party with so much control over an election can do no better than United Russia in 2011, it perhaps shows that important changes are taking place in society.

The OSCE said that the vote was marked by irregularities and said that fraud probably took place:

[The count] was characterized by frequent procedural violations and instances of apparent manipulation, including several serious indications of ballot box stuffing.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Security and Cooperation In Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Russian Federation, State Duma Elections – 4 December 2011, [Statement of Preliminary findings and conclusions](#), p2

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Security and Cooperation In Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Russian Federation, State Duma Elections – 4 December 2011, [Statement of Preliminary findings and conclusions](#), p2

There was particular concern about the voting in some of the remote republics of the Russian Federation.

Groups inside Russia were unhappy with the conduct of the vote. The Communist Party described the election as “illegitimate”:

KPRF states that the passed State Duma elections were unfair and non-free. We consider them illegitimate from a moral and political point of view.<sup>3</sup>

Many called for a re-run of the election, but the government did not concede one.

### **1.1 Regional variations**

Two exit polls in Moscow initially suggested that United Russia had got less than 28% of the vote in the capital.<sup>4</sup> After official results had come out, after a delay, at 46.5%, the exit poll was withdrawn. In Chechnya, United Russia received 99.5% according to official returns and in Dagestan 92%.<sup>5</sup> While 99.5% looks generous, the outlying republics of the Russian Federation have traditionally supported United Russia; it is in Moscow, St Petersburg and other urban centres where support for Putin is slipping. In St Petersburg the official vote for UR was 36%, suggesting less fraud in that city. There has been much discussion of the creation of a Russian middle class that will demand a say in government; the 2011 election and protests after it may be a sign that that is happening. A particularly blatant ballot-stuffing exercise in Moscow appears to have provoked that nascent middle class.

### **1.2 Constitutional majority**

The loss of seats means that United Russia has lost its ability to make amendments to the constitution unilaterally, for which a two-thirds majority of the seats is necessary. That is unlikely to be a serious problem for Putin, however. Since constitutional changes made in 1993 by the then president Boris Yeltsin, the Russian presidency has been the dominant power in the country, able to disband the Duma if it refuses to accept the president’s nomination for prime minister three times, and to rule by decree in most policy areas.

No constitutional changes are really necessary, then; if a change is needed, compliant ‘opposition’ members of the Duma could probably be drafted in to help. Even the Communist Party, the most realistic opposition party in the assembly and the only one not created by the Kremlin, rarely opposes the presidency on important legislation.

United Russia will also lose the chairmanship of some parliamentary committees to other parties.

### **1.3 UK reaction**

Foreign Office minister David Lidington said that the findings of the OSCE mission showed that allegations of irregularities should be investigated:

These conclusions underline the need for alleged electoral violations to be investigated rapidly and transparently, and to ensure that all democratic institutions – including the media, civil society, and opposition political groups – are able to operate freely in Russia.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Communists slam Duma vote”, *RIA Novosti*, 10 December 2011

<sup>4</sup> “Voting, Russian style”, *Economist*, 10 December 2011

<sup>5</sup> “Voting, Russian style”, *Economist*, 10 December 2011

<sup>6</sup> “[Independent assessment of Russian elections raises UK concern](#)” FCO press release, 6 December 2011

## 2 Demonstrations

Moscow and other cities have seen the biggest demonstrations for years. On 10 January, there was a demonstration of about 40,000 in Moscow and another of 10,000 in St Petersburg.<sup>7</sup>

On 12 December, a pro-government counter-demonstration was held in Moscow. It was reportedly thinly-attended and many who were there had been persuaded to go by the authorities.<sup>8</sup> Democracy campaigners such as Alexei Navalny, who was detained for 15 days for obstructing the police, say that more demonstrations will take place. Organisers have used internet social media to organise themselves, as was the case in the Arab uprisings. The internet has also had a broader influence in undermining the legitimacy of the regime, which normally boosts itself through substantial control over television broadcasting.

### ***Speaker resigns***

On 14 December, the Speaker of the Duma, Boris Gryzlov resigned his post. In what appeared to be part of the government's effort to minimise public discontent over the allegations of fraud, Gryzlov, a Putin loyalist who had been Speaker of the Duma for eight years and had helped to deliver parliament's support to the Kremlin, will be keeping his party job.

The Kremlin's candidate for replacement Speaker, Sergei Naryshkin, a staunch Putin ally and thought to be a former KGB officer, was elected on 21 December. However, the opposition parties did not vote for him. In contrast, when Gryzlov was elected Speaker in 2003, only 15 members voted against him, with four abstentions.<sup>9</sup> Whether the Kremlin encouraged the vote against its candidate Naryshkin, in order to bolster the impression of a genuine opposition, or whether the opposition parties have been encouraged by the political atmosphere to challenge the Kremlin is not clear.

On 24 December, there were further demonstrations on the streets of Moscow. This time crowds of some 120,000 gathered in the capital and there were large demonstrations in other centres. The demonstrations showed that the movement was not simply a one-off reaction to the election but retains momentum. Significant, too, was the participation of Alexei Kudrin, a respected former minister who headed the finance ministry from 2000 to 2011. Kudrin resigned in September, saying that he would not serve with Medvedev as prime minister. One commentator has suggested that Kudrin may become a credible interlocutor between the Kremlin and the protest movement.<sup>10</sup>

## 3 Restoring legitimacy?

Three of the four parties in the Duma were created by the Kremlin, the only genuinely independent party being the Communist party. Reports say that many liberal-minded and younger urban voters are voting for the Communist Party simply because it is the one most likely to oppose the Kremlin regime.

The Kremlin is reported to be considering approving the creation of a more liberal and democratic opposition party to represent the disaffected middle class and urban voters who

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<sup>7</sup> "Russia silenced", *Sunday Times*, 11 December 2011

<sup>8</sup> "Few at Putin Party's Rally, And Even Fewer Willingly", *New York Times*, 13 December 2011

<sup>9</sup> "Putin Tells New Duma to Work On Improving Russians' Lives", *Wall Street Journal Europe*, 20 December 2003

<sup>10</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "[Protests in Russia](#)", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 December 2011

appear to have deserted United Russia at the Duma election. How the government will convince voters that there is a genuine opposition is not clear, when there are already 'tame' opposition parties in the Duma which are widely distrusted.

In an important response to public disaffection with the election, President Medvedev told a United Russia meeting on 17 December that the political system needed reforming:

We are obviously entering a new stage in the development of our political system, and we should not close our eyes to that. It has already begun. And it began not as a result of some demonstrations -- that is just superficial, it is foam, if you like -- it is a manifestation of human dissatisfaction.

It began because the old model -- which faithfully and truly served our state in recent years, and didn't serve it badly, and which we all defended -- it has exhausted itself. need to change the model, and only then will there be dynamic development in our country.

...

It is categorically inadmissible that the political system be delegitimized. This would only mean one thing for our country: the collapse of the state. What Russia is without government is something that everyone remembers well from history books, it's 1917.<sup>11</sup>

While that sounded like a resounding endorsement of the calls for a genuinely competitive and more democratic system, Medvedev has made reformist statements before which critics say produced little change. Even more doubt was cast on the significance of his comments because Medvedev's chances of becoming Prime Minister again after the presidential election are fading (see below).

In his last end-of-year address before surrendering the presidency, Medvedev also called for a "public" television channel that would be independent of the state.

He also suggested

- re-instating direct elections for regional governors, abolished in 2004 during Vladimir Putin's presidency
- lowering the barriers to registration for new parties (at present parties are required to gather 40,000 signatures) and
- reducing the number of signatures presidential candidates must collect: at present need to collect two million signatures.

Whether Medvedev genuinely intends to try to push meaningful reforms through and, if so, whether he has the time or the influence to achieve such change against powerful vested interests is doubtful.

#### **4 2012 presidential election**

Established opposition party leaders Vladimir Zhirinovsky of the nationalist Liberal Democtaric Party, Gennady Zyuganov of the Communist Party, Sergei Mironov of A Just Russia, and Grigory Yavlinsky of the liberal anti-Kremlin Yabloko party will stand for president in 2012. Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov has also declared his candidacy. He is the

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<sup>11</sup> "Medvedev Urges Reform Of Russia Political System", *New York Times*, 18 December 2011

former leader of the Right Cause party who was ousted from the party leadership on grounds that are far from clear. Some think that his party threw him out because of pressure from Kremlin, others have suggested that it may be a double bluff to set Mr Prokhorov up as an apparently more credible opposition figure.

In September, Dmitry Medvedev nominated Putin as United Russia's candidate for the presidency in 2012. Putin then nominated Medvedev as his candidate for prime minister, if and when he wins the presidency in 2012. Faced with a disappointing result at the Duma election, however, Putin made that offer dependent on United Russia's result at the election.

Reports suggest that Putin's decision to move back into the presidency in 2012 was a major factor in undermining many Russians' tolerance for 'managed democracy', the sight of Putin and Medvedev happily swapping jobs being taken as a humiliation by the urban middle class. Combined with reports of electoral fraud, it is this which has brought about a crisis of legitimacy for Putin. Analysts suggest that the biggest casualty of the crisis is likely to be Medvedev: he may want to sacrifice Medvedev and have a new face at least in the prime minister's job.<sup>12</sup>

That may not be enough to save Putin's reputation. His approval ratings have fallen consistently since the beginning of 2011. By November they had fallen from 68% at the beginning of the year to 61%. After the Duma election controversies, the number approving of Putin had fallen to 51%.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this slump in his popularity, analysts do not think that it is conceivable that Putin will not be president after May 2012.

## 5 Outlook for Putinism

Analysts predict a difficult time for the forthcoming Putin presidency. The popularity that he enjoyed in his first period, when he oversaw rapid economic growth and a re-establishment of the credibility of the Russian state, will be difficult to regain. Russian economic growth since the world economic crisis has been disappointing and Russians are reported not to be confident any longer that their country is a true 'BRIC', in economic ascendancy along with China.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the increasingly gloomy perception is that Russia is in decline along with Europe.

### 5.1 Corruption and the rule of law

The failure of Russia's system to ensure the rule of law and protect citizens from rampant corruption and abuse of power undermines competition, discourages investment and stifles innovation. In Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2011, Russia shares the same ranking as Nigeria: 143<sup>rd</sup> position out of 182.<sup>15</sup>

Russia's economic prospects are weakened partly because to enhance mineral extraction, it needs foreign investment and technology. But to attract that, it needs to provide stability, security and property protection for to potential foreign investors. Despite making comments in favour of this sort of reform, Russia appears to have made little or no progress. The slogan chanted at some of the demonstrations – 'United Russia, the party of crooks and thieves' –

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<sup>12</sup> "A warning shot for Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 December 2011

<sup>13</sup> "Vladimir Putin's approval rating drops in first poll since street protests", *Guardian*, 16 December 2011

<sup>14</sup> Ben Judah, Jana Kobzova and Nicu Popescu, "[Dealing with a post-BRIC Russia](#)", European Council on Foreign Relations, 30 November 2011

<sup>15</sup> Transparency International, [Corruption Perceptions Index 2011](#)

shows how little faith some Russians have in the rule of law under Putin. His return to the presidency will increase the personalisation of power and undermine legitimate institutions even further. Foreign investors are not likely to find this reassuring.

## 5.2 Relations with the West

Without the support of strong economic growth, and with declining public tolerance for his 'managed democracy', some worry that Vladimir Putin will resort to a populist, aggressive foreign policy, reversing whatever gains in relations with the West that were made under the Obama administration's 'reset' policy.

That could signify further bitter confrontations over Georgia, Belarus and Ukraine, with a weakened West seemingly on the back foot. Russia has announced that it will create a Eurasian Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan by 2013. Some Western leaders are worried that Russia intends to create some sort of replacement Soviet Union, although Russia denies this and many analysts question whether Russia now has the resources to exert effective control over a wide area.

US plans for installing ballistic missile defence systems in Poland and Romania is another argument that could deteriorate further next year. NATO supply routes through the Central Asian states to Afghanistan need Russian approval and this is vital to the Afghan military action, particularly since poor relations with Pakistan have led to the closure, at least temporarily, of that route.

The EU is beset by financial problems and showing signs of fatigue when it comes to projecting its influence eastwards. Europeans are also divided about what is perhaps its most important foreign policy question: how to deal with Russia. In November 2011, German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle and his Polish counterpart Radek Sikorski sent a joint letter to EU High Representative Catherine Ashton. The letter urged the EU to help in modernising Russia's economy ensure reliable supplies of Russian energy rather than focus on democracy:

Although the 'swapping of posts' between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is not encouraging, we must stay the course to intensify ties with Russia and overcome political and economic lethargy.<sup>16</sup>

### **Visas**

France and Germany, who tend to favour close relations with Russia, have reportedly suggested that the EU should open talks with the Russians on visa-free travel to the EU for Russian citizens. The question of visas is the most immediate problem for Russia, reportedly because members of the elite want the ability to escape Russia quickly should the political climate turn against them. The two sides agreed on 15 December a plan to move towards visa-free travel, involving steps such as the introduction of biometric passports and the implementation of measures to prevent illegal immigration.<sup>17</sup> The announcement came at the same time as Russia pledged to invest 10 billion dollars in the IMF, with a view to easing the euro crisis.

Others have taken a less positive view. Guy Verhofstadt, leader of the liberal group in the European Parliament, for example, has said that Russian MPs should be excluded from entering the European Parliament because they have no democratic legitimacy.

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<sup>16</sup> "Putins return poses questions for EU strategy", *EUobserver*, 14 November 2011

<sup>17</sup> "Russia-EU move towards visa-free travel", *Reuters*, 15 December 2011

### 5.3 Russian spring?

Some opposition figures in Russia say that the EU should stand firm against Russian abuses, because the situation in the country is becoming unsustainable.

Mikhail Kasyanov, former Prime Minister and no ally of Putin's said:

The country is becoming a shambles and an Arab Spring situation is becoming inevitable. The [economic] situation is very fragile. Oil needs to stay at \$120 a barrel to balance the budget. If it falls to \$60 or \$70, then our currency will be devalued by 30 percent.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Sir Anthony Brenton, who was British ambassador to Moscow from 2004 to 2008, said that the regime would not fall in the foreseeable future:

We are almost certainly not seeing a "Russian Spring". But the events of the last few days have cracked the plinth on which the regime stands. It may be years rather than months, but it is only a matter of time before Russia takes its rightful place among the other European democracies.<sup>19</sup>

The point about the price of oil seems very pertinent. With increased fears of global stagnation in the coming year, the present Russian regime would seem particularly vulnerable to a fall in the oil price. Whether upheavals will lead Russia in a more democratic direction in the coming years is open to doubt.

Dmitri Trenin suggests that the Kremlin will be anxious to avoid the appearance of gross manipulation of the forthcoming presidential election results and will not willingly resort to mass repression to stop demonstrations.<sup>20</sup> However, the concessions so far offered to the opposition will not be enough to placate it. How Putin and the present authorities manage the discontent will be crucial for 2012, which promises to be the most interesting year politically in Russia for some time.

One satirical Russian comedian, popular on television before being pushed out under Putin, said that the jeers for Putin at a wrestling match in November marked a true turning point, because these were ordinary people, not the liberal middle class of Moscow and St Petersburg. After the event, video of which was seen across Russia on You Tube, he said:

After these significant boos and the cry of 'Get lost,' the end for Putinism could be very near or very far. It makes no sense to guess the timing. But it's a fact that a point of no return has been passed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Tony Brenton, "Moscow protests: is this the start of the Russian Spring?", *Daily Telegraph*, 12 December 2011

<sup>20</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "[Protests in Russia](#)", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 December 2011

<sup>21</sup> David Remnick, "The Civil Archipelago: How far can the resistance to Vladimir Putin go?" *New Yorker*, December 19, 2011