

The Putin Machine Sputters: First Impressions of the 2011 Duma Election Campaign

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Abstract

A decline in public support, related in part to campaign dynamics, caused United Russia to perform below expectations in the 2011 Duma election. While fraud was an important part of the story, generating massive public protests, the election also indicates that actual ballot box falsification is less integral to the survival of the system than a combination of genuine popularity and strong-arm manipulation taking place before voters ever get to the polling place. These events demonstrate that political machines like Putin's are more vulnerable than often thought.

The Sudden Revival of Russian Electoral Politics

Just as observers were pronouncing it dead, Russian electoral politics suddenly and dramatically came to life in December 2011, suggesting some important lessons about both Russian politics and post-Soviet political systems more generally.

As recently as this summer, observers were predicting that the dominant United Russia Party would manufacture a supermajority of seats in the December 4, 2011, parliamentary race and that if Prime Minister Vladimir Putin decided to return to the presidency, he would waltz in and reinvigorate authoritarianism in Russia. When election day rolled around, however, the results were remarkable: Not only did the exit polls reported on state-controlled television concede that United Russia had failed to win a majority of the ballots, but even the official count awarded the party just 49 percent of the vote and (after the votes won by parties failing to clear the 7-percent threshold were redistributed) only a bare majority of the seats. Even more dramatically, many voters doubted that the party had won even that much and turned out en masse to protest falsification, mobilizing what even official state statistics registered as a stunning 25,000 citizens on Bolotnaia Square in Moscow on December 10 and thousands more across the country.

One widely drawn lesson from all of this is that there is election fraud in Russia. Indeed, many of those who poured out onto the streets had seen, as did many Western reporters and observers, video recordings posted on YouTube of officials outrageously pressuring voters and teachers (state employed, hence vulnerable to state pressure) apparently preparing ballots for stuffing. This, however, is perhaps the least interesting lesson of the 2011 Duma elections. Specialists have long known there is fraud, and the previous federal election season in 2007–08 was also replete with Internet postings documenting what strongly appeared to be fraud.

Counterintuitively, one of the most important lessons of the December 2011 election may be that ballot

box fraud actually plays a much smaller role in Russia's political system (and those like it) than is often thought. In fact, the events of the last month reveal that the political system is not built to perpetrate complete and total vote falsification with no heed to public opinion. Instead, the ruling authorities' success remaining in power for over a decade has been based more on a combination of genuine popular support and the muscular manipulation of the political system, including pressuring voters, restricting the choices voters face, and biasing television, among many other nefarious tactics common to political machines.¹ Popularity and manipulation do most of their work before the ballot box is reached, leaving a limited amount of outright falsification to provide a certain cushion or to serve particular local goals, such as tipping the scales in a close local election or preventing any public demonstration of possible disloyalty in restive republics like Chechnya.

Kremlin Missteps and Public Opinion

What the 2011 Duma election appears to have done is illustrate how the cogs of the political machine can start to come loose and threaten the system as a whole when the leadership popularity that underpins it is significantly weakened. While further study of these elections—including careful analysis of mass surveys of voter behavior—is needed before firm conclusions can be reached, signs point to a significant drop in the popularity of the Kremlin leadership leading into election day. While both Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev had experienced ups and downs in popular support over the years, they went into the 2011 election season

1 See Henry E. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman, and Henry E. Hale, "Overmanaged Democracy in Russia: Dilemmas of Hybrid Regime Governance," Carnegie Paper no. 106, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2010, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/overmanaged_democracy_2.pdf.

in the middle of a gradual decline that dates, according to some measures, to at least early 2011.

Russian observers widely believe that two events during fall 2011 were crucial, although the major public opinion agencies' polls released as of this writing do not clearly register this effect.² The first was the infamous September 24 announcement by Medvedev that he was supporting Putin's return to the presidency and that he himself would head the party list and become prime minister after the election, and—especially—Putin's subsequent statement that this switcheroo had been planned long ago. This conveyed that the ruling tandem had essentially regarded Russian voters as dupes. The second crucial event is widely seen as a result of the first: After a mixed martial arts match at Moscow's Olimpiskii Stadium during which a Russian beat an American, Putin strutted to the microphone, apparently expecting a rowdy and positive reception, but instead was whistled (booed) as he began to speak. These events, many believe, combined to crystallize a long-growing "Putin fatigue" and turn it into a strong protest sentiment that bore at least some resemblance to the late-breaking surge in anti-Kremlin sentiment in 1993 that led to humiliation for the main pro-presidential party (Russia's Choice) and a completely unexpected protest vote for Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's radical nationalist party.

Exacerbating the tandem's predicament was the constitutional change Medvedev had initiated in 2008 that had extended presidential terms from four to six years starting with the 2012 election: Because of this change, the switcheroo meant not only that an increasingly tiresome Putin would be returning to the presidency, but that voters would be stuck with him for six years, possibly twelve if one assumed he would successfully orchestrate reelection for the second successive term that would be allowed him. This seems to have created a kind of "now-or-never moment" for Russian voters, a sense that if one did not act now, one may not have another chance for a dozen years.

The Campaign

On the surface, the campaign itself did not seem to reflect anything new or dramatic. Even more so than in the highly orchestrated 2007 Duma election, there was relatively little sign of campaign activity on the ground: few posters, few street agitators, and few people gathering at non-United Russia campaign rallies. Candidate debates were often brief and aired at odd times of day (such as 7 a.m. on First Channel) and typically featured strange pairings of parties and not always the top fig-

ures on their party lists. United Russia Party Chairman Putin and party list leader Medvedev did not participate in them at all. Television campaign ads were not frequently aired, and what ads that ran tended to be of strikingly low production value. Even so, the Central Election Commission initiated the removal of several key spots for parties other than United Russia from television. And more generally, despite the palpable change in public opinion, the main other parties allowed to compete did not appear to change strategy so as to take advantage of the new environment, instead featuring the same old leaders who had each lost at least one presidential election before (the Communist Party's Gennady Zyuganov, A Just Russia's Sergei Mironov, the Liberal Democratic Party's Zhirinovskiy, and the Yabloko Party's Grigory Yavlinskiy). As expected, television heavily featured United Russia and government officials and paid relatively little attention to any other party.

A closer look on the ground, however, revealed several interesting dynamics. For one thing, a negative aura was palpable around United Russia in the media environment, a sharp contrast with 2007. Commentators on several radio stations and many newspapers blasted United Russia either directly or implicitly, and some even openly used the moniker coined by blogger and rising political star Aleksei Naval'ny: the "Party of Swindlers and Thieves." One could tell the party was in trouble when party representatives themselves scaled down their expectations over the course of the autumn, by the end declaring that a simple majority would be a good result.

United Russia's own campaign did not offer much to counteract its downward trend in public opinion. While it enjoyed thick coverage of the party and its patrons on the main television channels, even this was not always inspiring. Speakers at the United Russia Party congress that nominated Putin for president shortly before the Duma election (broadcast live on NTV), for example, sometimes seemed to damn the party with faint praise, acknowledging that it was imperfect but averring that it nevertheless had accomplished real deeds and was at least better than other parties. Some reports indicated that the switcheroo had taken the party's campaign organization by surprise, in particular the decision that Medvedev instead of Putin would head United Russia's party list. Since the initial campaign had been planned around Putin, the party had to develop a new strategy on the fly that gave Medvedev pride of place—just as the switcheroo had revealed him to be little more than a Putin puppet.³

In the closing week of the campaign, the party started to hit stride with two television advertisements—

2 Konstantin Sonin, "Podschety sotsiologov," <http://ksonin.livejournal.com/412894.html>, December 16, 00:43, accessed December 18, 2011.

3 *Moskovskie Novosti*, November 25, 2011, p.1.

one featuring Putin's voice and the other Medvedev's—stressing inspiring economic and social developments in the country since 2000 and contrasting this with what they essentially portrayed as state failure in the 1990s. But this was not enough to stop the downward trend. To make matters worse, United Russia was also saddled with many regional governors who also had relatively little public appeal. For this reason, only 31 governors were selected to lead regional party lists, and in some cases where the governors were unpopular and left off the party list, the party's own Duma campaign organizations were allowed actually to campaign *against* their own governors.⁴ Since a strong United Russia result in such cases would represent endorsement of the criticism directed against them, one has to wonder how motivated such governors were to put full effort into generating large vote totals for their own party.

In another unexpected development, the debates, constrained as they were, wound up being noteworthy. For one thing, the state-owned Rossiia 1 television channel broke with recent tradition and not only scheduled debates for a time when people would actually watch them (at 10:50 p.m. between popular shows on weekdays), but broadcast them live, assigned a popular television personality to host them (Vladimir Solov'ev), and even advertised them as being dramatic events worth watching. At least one of these debates produced a significant moment in the campaign: The tenacious Zhirinovskiy managed to goad United Russia representative Aleksandr Khinshtein into bursting out "Better to be a party of swindlers and thieves than a party of murderers, robbers, and rapists!"⁵ Others picked up on this to claim in later debates that United Russia had itself *admitted* it was a party of swindlers and thieves. According to one measure, close to a fifth of people watching TV at that time had this debate on.⁶

The Other Parties Allowed to Run

Another major surprise was the autumn surge of the A Just Russia (Spravedlivaia Rossiia) Party led by Sergei Mironov. Some observers had pronounced the party all but dead after Mironov was drummed out of his former post of Federation Council chief. It reportedly also came under Kremlin attack, with campaign material confiscated by authorities and several of its ads blocked from appearing on a major state television network.⁷ While other parties attacked it mercilessly for being a puppet

of the Kremlin, pointing to Mironov's long association with Putin, A Just Russia managed to pull off a remarkable comeback thanks to two considerations. For one thing, while Mironov himself was often seen as a Putin stooge, the party had managed to attract quite a number of strong political figures, including regional notables with strong local followings. One example is economist Oksana Dmitrieva, whom some were touting as a potentially strong challenger to Putin for the presidency were she to run. Secondly, A Just Russia managed to turn itself into a credible receptacle for anti-United Russia votes through an aggressive campaign attacking the party. While some of its critical ads were blocked, it still managed to air others that blasted official corruption and declared that "swindlers and thieves" (a clear implicit reference to United Russia) were not needed.⁸

Helping A Just Russia's chances was a voting strategy propagated by Naval'ny and reported both on the Internet and in print publications like *The New Times*: To weaken United Russia, voters should neither boycott the election nor spoil their ballots, but instead cast their votes for any party other than United Russia they expect to clear the 7-percent threshold necessary to win a delegation in the next Duma.⁹ A Just Russia proved to be less unacceptable among the three non-United Russia parties widely expected to clear 7 percent, and surged to an impressive third-place finish with 13 percent of the vote. The Communist Party also clearly benefited from this strategy, netting over 19 percent in the official ballot (up from just 12 percent in 2007) count and even more according to analysts who argue large-scale fraud took place. Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia garnered 12 percent, up from 8 percent in 2007. Even Yabloko, written off for dead by many observers after receiving only about 1 percent of the official vote count in 2007 and having lost all of its delegations in regional legislatures, surged back to life with over 3 percent of the vote (meaning that it now qualifies for federal funding) and several delegations in regional legislatures. Yabloko officials claim observer reports indicate they actually received more than 7 percent of the vote.

Implications

All this combined to produce a drop in the number of people who turned up to vote for United Russia and a rise in ballots cast for all the other significant parties. Moreover, how the system reacted seems to reveal that such genuine expressions of public opinion still matter

4 *Vedomosti*, December 1, 2011, p.2.

5 *Kommersant*, November 28, 2011, p.2.

6 E.g., the statement made by A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov in his debate with United Russia representative Oleg Morozov broadcast on First Channel, November 29, 2011, 18:25.

7 *Vedomosti*, November 28, 2011, p.2.

8 For example, an ad broadcast on First Channel, November 29, 2011, 07:25, after a debate and before the popular morning program "Dobroe Utro Rossii."

9 See articles in the Russian-language journal *The New Times*, November 28, 2011.

even in the otherwise highly manipulated Putinite system and despite the widely cited reality of fraud. Evidently panicked by the dropping ratings, officials of various levels scrambled to find ways to manufacture votes by hook or by crook. While these rightly generated outrage, what is perhaps most interesting is that they failed even to give the party a symbolic majority in the official vote count. A system built to perpetrate wholesale ballot box fraud without regard to public opinion would surely have generated the two-thirds majority that regime leaders clearly hoped for just months before the vote. But it turns out that even the attempts to generate enough fraud to eke out a bare United Russia majority in Duma seats were often sloppy and were frequently exposed (sometimes apparently by people within the system). This, in turn, stoked the voter anger that led tens of thousands marching to Bolotnaia Square.

The system can clearly pull off a certain level of fraud relatively smoothly, as observer and analyst accounts

of the 2007–08 cycle indicate. But 2011 suggests that beyond a certain measure—and especially when it is seen as producing a result dramatically out of step with intense public opinion that is obvious on an everyday level—fraud starts to become very difficult or costly to pull off and can itself begin to threaten the stability of the system as a whole.

The impact on the March 2012 presidential race of course remains to be seen, but at a minimum the events of the fall call into question whether Putin can win without a runoff. And in the bigger picture, they indicate that regimes like Russia's are in fact more vulnerable than is often thought, with public opinion being one particularly powerful threat, especially when combined with an election where at least some opposition is on the ballot and where a transfer of the presidency is soon anticipated.¹⁰

About the Author

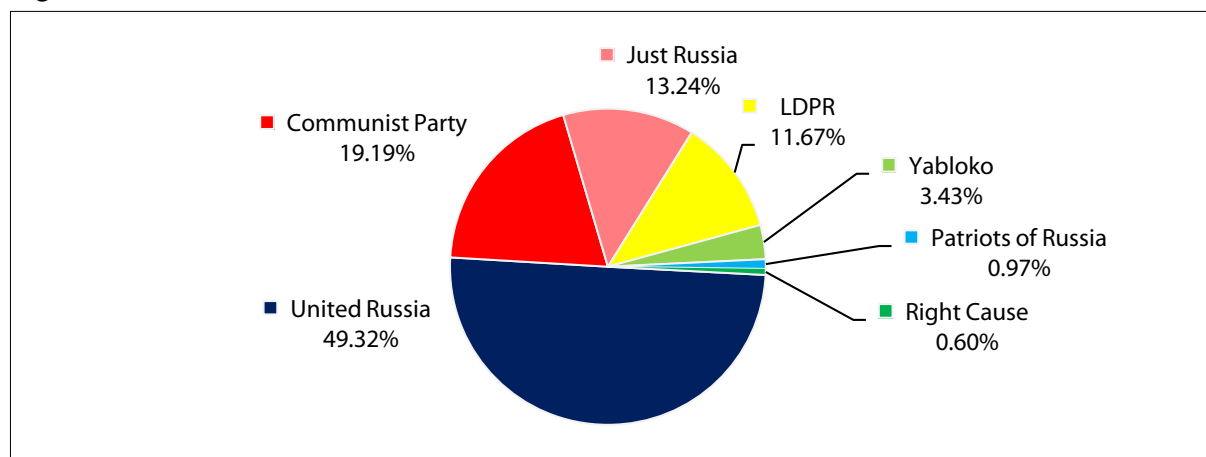
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¹⁰ Henry E. Hale, "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *World Politics*, v.58, no.1, October 2005, pp.133–65.

DOCUMENTATION

The Result of the Duma Elections

Figure 1: Final Result of the Duma Elections, 4 December 2011



Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100028713304&vrn=100100028713299®ion=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vibid=100100028713304&type=242