

## The Regime, the Opposition, and Challenges to Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia

By Vladimir Gel'man, St. Petersburg/Helsinki

### Abstract

The consequences of the 2011–2012 electoral cycle in Russia were a huge blow for the dominance of the ruling group (“the regime”) and contributed to the rise of its political rivals (“the opposition”). Why did this unexpected outcome occur “here and now”? The article focuses on the key role of political actors, their resources and strategies of political struggle.

### The Opposition’s Surprising Rise

The outcome of the 2011–2012 electoral cycle and its consequences were unexpected for many participants and observers of Russian politics. On the eve of the campaign, virtually all predictions assumed that the “party of power” United Russia, wielding control over the state apparatus, dominating the media, and enjoying the support of popular political leaders, would gain an overwhelming majority of seats in the State Duma without serious difficulty and open the door for Putin to return to the presidency.

But the outcome of the December 4, 2011, elections overturned these expectations. At a time when the official results claimed that United Russia won only 49.3 percent of the vote, considerable direct and indirect evidence, from exit polls to the reports of election observers, identified a wide range of abuses in determining the voting results; there is no doubt that United Russia’s share of the vote was much lower than reported. After the voting, a wave of protests against the results swept the country, mobilizing crowds whose size was unprecedented in post-Soviet Russia: demonstrations in Moscow gathered several dozens of thousands of participants.

By the presidential elections of March 4, 2012, the authorities had managed to reestablish control over the situation and achieved the necessary voting result using all the means at their disposal. According to the official results, Putin won 63.6 percent of the votes against a background of numerous abuses during the campaign and in the vote-counting process.

The authorities’ subsequent attack on the opposition was supposed to return the country to the previous status quo. However, as a result of the 2011–2012 electoral cycle, the Russian authoritarian regime suffered significant losses. It is still too early to speak of a full crisis, much less the regime’s imminent demise, but the challenges that the regime encountered during the elections have a systemic and ineradicable character. Why did these challenges appear now? What determined the election results and which mechanisms and reasons caused both the partial electoral loss of the ruling group, and the rise and subsequent decline in protest activism? How will

these events affect the further development trajectory of the political regime in Russia?

### Stunning Elections: Why?

Many scholars evaluated the political regime that developed in Russia during the 2000s as “electoral authoritarianism.” In such regimes, the institution of elections is important and meaningful: it allows the participation of various political parties and candidates—in contrast to “classical” authoritarianism, which mainly held “elections without choice” (as in Turkmenistan, for example). But the formal and informal rules of such elections include high entry barriers to run, consciously unequal access to resources for the participants, the use of the state apparatus for maximizing votes in favor of the ruling party and candidates, and abuses in favor of the incumbents at all stages of the elections, including during the vote count. The knowingly unequal “rules of the game,” designed to guarantee victory for the incumbents at any cost independently of the preferences of the voters, distinguishes electoral authoritarianism from electoral democracy in post-Soviet states and beyond. But there have been prominent cases of the phenomenon of “stunning elections,” when authoritarian regimes conduct elections to strengthen their legitimacy, but as a result, the voting turns into a loss for the ruling groups and, at times, paves a way toward full-scale democratization (as happened in the USSR in 1989–90).

In recent years, particularly under the influence of the waves of “color revolutions,” from Serbia (2000) to Moldova (2009), specialists began to examine the influence of the regime and opposition on the decline of electoral authoritarianism. Some experts noted the critical role of mass mobilization, which strengthened the opposition, emphasizing cooperation between the various opponents of the regime and the tactics of the opposition forces. Other scholars examined the vulnerability of the authoritarian regimes due to their openness to the West, as well as the weakness of the state apparatus and/or the dominant parties, which were not able to provide full control over the political process.

The defeat of electoral authoritarianism in Russia in December 2011 could serve to support either point of view. On one hand, the Russian leaders exerted considerable effort in strengthening the political monopoly, basing this effort on the hierarchy of the state apparatus (the “power vertical”) and the dominant party (United Russia), while fencing domestic politics off from the influence of the West. On the other hand, the systematic actions of the authorities, seeking to marginalize the opposition, pushed it into a political “ghetto.” Dividing the opposition into “systemic parties,” which were officially registered but under Kremlin control, and “non-systemic” groups, which were excluded from the political process, further weakened the scattered and segmented opposition.

It turned out, however, that the regime was insufficiently united and monolithic. The authorities’ expectations were based on previous experience and did not take into account the changing political demands; the balance between the stick and the carrot, which the regime proposed to its citizens, was lopsided. Ultimately, the 2011 Duma campaign tactics were poorly thought out. To put it bluntly, on the eve of the campaign, the Russian authorities basically were concerned about decorating the façade of a Potemkin Village and did not give sufficient significance to the fact that it hid a wall where new cracks were appearing. The authorities counted on the idea that in the wake of Putin’s return to the presidency, the Potemkin village would disappear on its own. However this plan did not take into account that the citizenry of the country lived in the Potemkin village and that eliminating it together with the façade (for example, through mass repressions) was risky, while convincing the population to accept this fact voluntarily (for example, by buying their loyalty) was too expensive. The authorities used the stick ineffectively, while the carrot remained only on the level of pledges.

At the same time, the campaign opened the “window of opportunity” for the opposition, and new figures began to join it, which led to a series of effects that the authorities had not anticipated. The non-systemic opposition succeeded in creating a new political identity on the basis of a “negative consensus” (with the slogan “Vote for anyone but United Russia”) and attracted to its side part of the systemic opposition that previously had been loyal to the Kremlin, including members of Just Russia and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. The reaction of the authorities to these processes was not always adequate. With each step the regime incurred deeper and more noticeable losses, the old methods did not provide control over the political processes in the country, and the level of mass support for the status quo dropped. The opposition managed

not only to exit out of the ghetto, but its leaders even took the initiative, demonstrating their ability to cooperate with each other and to mobilize mass participation against the regime. As a result, after the 2011 State Duma elections the regime lost the political support of the “advanced” voters (especially, the younger, more educated, and wealthier residents of the large cities), and the base of their political support remained the “peripheral” electorate (the elderly, poorly educated, impoverished residents living beyond the big city limits). Although these events did not lead to regime change, they posed serious threats and forced the authorities to adopt more active and aggressive tactics, which ultimately allowed the regime to achieve the necessary result in the 2012 presidential elections.

### Agenda for the Future

The partial decline of electoral authoritarianism in Russia determines the current and future political agenda. This failure in the 2011 Duma voting was in no way inevitable or earlier pre-determined; in fact, it was the consequence of the ruling group’s strategic miscalculations. After unjustifiably overestimating the effectiveness of political manipulations on the basis of previous experience, the regime clearly underestimated the risks resulting from the awakening of the more advanced voters. The famous statement of the prominent American political scientist V.O. Key that “voters are not fools,” which is widely quoted in analyzing elections in democracies, also applies to studying elections in the conditions of electoral authoritarianism. This statement resembles Lincoln’s aphorism that “You can *fool some of the people* all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” The Russian voters could have preserved their indifference to the manipulations and abuses by the regime for some time longer if not for the actions of the opposition, which took advantage of the ruling group’s mistakes in a timely manner and used effective means to awake and mobilize its supporters. But the resource potential of the regime turned out to be sufficiently high that the authorities managed to preserve the support of the majority of their voters, and ultimately, although not without difficulty, retained control in March 2012. Does this mean that after the electoral cycle Russian politics will return to the way it was before the elections? The answer to this question depends on what lessons the regime and the opposition learn from the experience of 2011–2.

For the Russian regime (and for other authoritarian regimes in the world) the major lesson for the future could be the conclusion that any form of liberalization threatens the preservation of the status quo, and that to stay in power, it is necessary to “tighten the screws.”

The recent increase in fines for violating laws on demonstrations and labeling all non-profit organizations that receive foreign financial support as “foreign agents” are designed to serve these goals. However, it is hard to say whether the regime will further successfully use political parties and the parliament to coopt the systemic opposition and successfully isolate the non-systemic opposition.

Likewise, serious challenges stand before the opposition. It will be extremely difficult to maintain the “negative consensus” against the existing regime for a long period, to say nothing of efforts to secure organizational consolidation, particularly since the regime does not shy away from using “divide and conquer” tactics against the opposition. Nevertheless, the protest mobi-

lization experience of 2011–2 will not be wasted for the opposition or for the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of its supporters. The seeds planted last winter in the protest rallies in Moscow and other cities, will ultimately bear fruits, although not necessarily in the near future. In favor of the opposition works the fact that the mood of the more advanced voters over time will transfer to part of the peripheral electorate, expanding the potential base of its supporters. In other words, citizens’ demand for an alternative to the status quo will increase and the key question is: Will the current Russian opposition or other political actors satisfy it in the coming years?

#### *About the Author*

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#### ANALYSIS

## Russian Riot: Senseless and Ruthless or Legal Protest?

By Dmitry Oreshkin, Moscow

### **Abstract**

The Putin regime, which draws its power from control of Russia’s natural resources, is likely to launch a crackdown on society in order to preserve its power. At the same time the protest movement is slowly moving from the capitals into the provinces. The only question is how long it will take for it to gain the strength necessary to make change. Upcoming local elections will provide greater clarity.

### **From Ally to Enemy?**

The Western view on Russia today resembles the incomprehension that prevailed during the first years after World War II. It is almost as if Kennan has sent his Long Telegram, Churchill gave his speech in Fulton, Missouri, and the Iron Curtain has appeared, but no one can believe that yesterday’s ally has become an enemy.

The same thing (although in a lite version) is happening now: only yesterday we were talking about a “reset” in U.S.–Russian relations, pragmatic projects such as North Stream and South Stream, negotiations about canceling visa requirements, and rational actions regarding Russia’s entry to the World Trade Organization. Everything was predictable and was taking place within a reasonable framework. If Russia was not an ally, it was a solid and reliable partner. Does it make sense to change the picture because of the events of the last six–eight months?

### **The Nature of the Regime**

There is a Checkpoint Charlie which sharply divides Western rationalism from Soviet or post-Soviet Putin-style rationalism: it is the question of power. If the problem of who will hold power is resolved and does not raise any concerns, the Putin strategy is reasonably stable, at least for the short-term: trading resources, corruptly purchasing the loyalty of the elites, regularly increasing living standards, and supporting stability. Everything is rational and competent.

But as soon as the question of power appears, which in a resource economy is the basis for the economic well-being of the elites, European rationality disappears like spring snow and rationality of a different type replaces it. It also follows its own kind of pragmatism, but addresses a different problem. It is irrational, from the point of view of a European observer, to preserve control at any price! Doing this means stopping development, freezing social activism, and threatening state institutions. But