

# Russian Parliamentary Elections and the Future of Putin Regime

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The elections to the Russian State Duma were held on December 4. Just as in the previous election, four parties crossed the 7% threshold to the Duma and succeeded to enter the lower house of the Russian parliament.

According to the official election results, United Russia, the ‘party of power’ suffered its worst setback when it garnered 49.5% of the vote, compared with 64.3% in 2007. It will enjoy a simple majority in parliament but no longer the two-thirds. This was shock to the ruling party. A public survey held prior to the election showed that United Russia was expected to get at least 60% of the vote.

The central election commission of Russia banned nine anti-Kremlin parties from participating in the Duma elections. The benefits from this measure did not come to United Russia but to the so-called ‘licensed opposition’ parties, which have not challenged the domination of the Kremlin. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation and A Just Russia nearly doubled their seats in parliament with 19.2% and 13.2% of the vote. The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) gained 11.7%.

United Russia advocates political stability and the revival of Russia’s status as a super power. It describes itself as centrist and conservative. The Communists, led by Zyuganov since 1993, draw much of their support from older and middle-aged working-class people and pensioners, especially in rural areas. The LDPR led by the populist Zhirinovskiy is the third largest party. It describes itself as the anti-Western and right-wing party.

A Just Russia led by the former speaker of the upper house, Mironov, was initially established by the Kremlin in 2006. It uses social democratic slogans promoting social justice, order and stability. The party absorbs the moderate left-wing people damaging the second biggest party, the Communists.

There were allegedly widespread irregularities in the polls. An exit poll suggested that United Russia won less than 30% of the vote in Moscow, but after a delay, the result was announced at 46.5%. In Chechnya, ruled by the Kremlin-friendly Kadyrov, United Russia scored 99.5%. A similar result was reported in a Moscow psychiatric hospital.

The websites of Ekho Moskvy, a popular radio station, and of Golos, an independent election monitor was brought down by a massive cyber-attack during the election. Around 400,000 civic observers engaged in election monitoring used social networking sites such as YouTube and Facebook instead to post mobile phone videos about election fraud. Russia is an internet-based society with 50 million internet users, more than any other country in Europe. The internet has replaced books that Russians traditionally used for their leisure, over the long - cold winter.

The rigged election caused large-scale widespread protests in Russia despite the cold weather. The largest rally broke out in central Moscow. The participants were predominantly young and middle class people. Prominent figures from the Yeltsin administration, such as former Prime Minister Kasyanov and former Deputy Prime Minister Nemtsov, joined the rally.

The demonstrations were initially brutally suppressed by the police and hundreds were arrested. But the Russian government changed its position and allowed the peaceful rallies, which were also reported by state television.

The civic protests testify the public discontent with the current governance model of the ruling elite's predominance. Protesters chanted "Russia without Putin." This means that Russians are bored with political stagnation and interested in competition on the political scene.

The main reason for the poor performance of United Russia and the nation-wide protests is Putin's come back to Kremlin. Prime Minister, Putin, has accepted the party's nomination to run for president next year, while President Medvedev, was expected to take over as prime minister after the presidential election. The elections and the following protests demonstrate that his political legitimacy has been undermined. The damage to the legitimacy is considerably higher, particularly in big cities. In St. Petersburg, Putin's home town, United Russia got only 34% of the vote.

However, it is not the end of Putin's political life, because his victory in the presidential election of March 2012 seems to be inevitable. The civic protests have some limitations for political regime

change in Russia. First, demonstrators include diverse people such as liberals, nationalists, and communists. Moreover, there is no alternative political leader to Putin. Second, the Russian people still prefer stability rather than change. According to a public survey held in the spring 2011, almost 60% of the respondents preferred a strong leader to a democratic government and 70% preferred a life of security to political freedom.

The ruling elite need a new tactic, which will relieve the current discontent and allow Putin to be re-elected in a credible manner. The new tactic has to pursue ‘renewal’ of the political elite, particularly personnel reshuffles in the state administration.

For this purpose the Kremlin is likely to place ‘liberal’ politicians to the foreground to limited competition in the political arena. Trusted associate of Putin and former Finance Minister Kudrin plans to set up a new liberal party. The pro-government billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov declared a bid for the presidential election in the same context. After the presidential election, a political coalition between this liberal group and the ruling party seems likely.

Then, the current president, Medvedev, is less likely to become prime minister next year. He has to take political responsibility for the poor performance of United Russia to some extent because he ran for the election as the party’s top parliamentary candidate. Putin stepped down from leading United Russia into the elections and put Medvedev, who was unpopular in the party, at the head of its campaign. Thus, Medvedev’s political mandate has clearly weakened.

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