

Parliamentary elections in Russia: politics is back

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On 4 December elections to the Russian State Duma were held. They were won by United Russia, the 'party of power', even though it achieved a much inferior result to that of four years ago. Meanwhile, the elections have strengthened the position of the so-called 'licensed opposition' parties – the Communists and A Just Russia – which nearly doubled their seats in parliament.

The election results confirm what has been evident for months now – a downward trend in support for the 'party of power' and the ruling tandem. Much of the population voted against the 'stability' of the kind proposed by the ruling elite (which is increasingly frequently perceived as stagnation), and signalled a desire for change, including in the political sphere. Before the election there was an unprecedented mobilisation of anti-government-oriented forces, both the purely political and those concerned with civil rights in a broader sense. This shows the evolution which Russian society has undergone over the last few years. The current model of governance, based on society's acceptance of the domination of Putin's elite, seems to be wearing thin. A growing proportion of society wants to see the government relax the overly restrictive regulations which limit economic and social activity. More and more groups have been displaying their own ambitions for political representation. Although the current government still has potential to endure, and there is no threat to victory for Vladimir Putin in the March presidential elections, the political legitimacy of the current ruling elite has clearly been weakened.

The new Duma

The new Duma – just as in the previous one – will contain four parties: United Russia, which gained 49.5% of the vote, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (19.2%), the left-wing A Just Russia (13.2%), and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia under Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (11.7%). The Yabloko party failed to cross the electoral threshold (3.3%), and the anti-government opposition group Parnas was not allowed to participate. The turnout was 60.2%. According to the amendments to the Constitution introduced in 2008, the term of office for the newly elected deputies to the Duma has been extended from four to five years.

Despite United Russia's victory, the elections confirmed the downward trend in its support (in the previous parliamentary elections it gained 63%). In several important areas where the local communities were more active, the results of United Russia were very low (around 30%), and in several cities (including Kaliningrad and Vladivostok), the party lost to the Communists (see Appendix 1).

The future parliament will be more pluralistic. The so-called licensed opposition (which has not challenged the domination of the Kremlin) – the Communists and A Just Russia – have nearly doubled their representation. The 'party of power' has lost its constitutional majority, but retains a simple majority (in those cases requiring it to form a qualified majority, it will be able to do so, for example, with Zhirinovskiy's LDPR). Despite the changes in the composition of parliament, it will most likely remain the ruling elite's legislative tool in the coming years, and its constitutional autonomy will be merely a formality. However, the improved performance of the opposition parties will strengthen the legitimacy of their struggle for influence on the political arena.

A carousel of electoral fraud

The 'party of power's ratings, which have been falling for months, and the mobilisation of its opponents forced the state apparatus to interfere deeply with the electoral process to improve United Russia's showing. A large number of electoral violations were made public, and have become the subject of much discussion. This is in part due to the availability of new technologies, including smartphones and the Internet, but the scale of these practices also appears to have been greater than at previous elections. Among the examples of fraud were the involvement of local authorities in boosting United Russia's performance (for example, 'instructions' they received from the Kremlin), and various reports of pressure being put on voters, especially those working in the public sector. There were also many reports of the voting results being rigged (forged election reports; and also the so-called 'carousel', or multiple voting by the same persons with certificates that they are eligible to vote outside their home area; this year a record number of such certificates [2.4 million] was issued). The Central Election Commission adopted a partisan attitude, voicing many reservations about the independent observers and the election campaigns of many parties – except that of United Russia. On the evening after the election, there was an incident when the state television news Rossiya24 presented the results of the election as summarised by the CEC; in statements from several regions, the sum of votes totalled well over 100%. United Russia has also been supported by the state-controlled media for several months now, especially by television.

The voters indignant, but rational

An important novelty in this year's election was the scale on which the government's opponents mobilised, after Russia was dominated for many years by attitudes of indifference, or the belief that their influence on the situation could only be negligible at best. The growing group of 'indignant' voters is heterogeneous, and includes both the democratic-minded and nationalists. However, despite many differences, the attitude of the discontented towards the elections reveals the existence of a coherent and rational strategy. It is a 'systematic' strategy – not involving boycotting the elections or voting 'according to their consciences' (for example, for the democratic parties), but to demonstrate the potential of the indignation, and to make it harder for the government to carry out electoral fraud. In Russia it is not possible to vote 'against all candidates' (this option was removed in 2006). Therefore, the informal leaders of the discontented called for people to participate in the elections and vote for any party that had a chance to cross the

electoral threshold – just not for United Russia. In this context, even those with democratic views were encouraged to vote not for the Yabloko party (which had no chance of crossing the electoral threshold, so most of the votes cast for it would be added to the total of the victorious 'party of power'), but for A Just Russia and the Communists, whose programs they would not have supported in normal conditions.

Civic involvement in monitoring the elections was surprisingly large; the number of observers reached 400,000. These were people who represented the opposition, civil society organisations, or who were not affiliated with any political force. The Internet hosted an extensive campaign to organise protest voting and election monitoring, as well as a revival of political satire; the web was filled with jokes about the government and Vladimir Putin himself.

Also, the scale of post-election protests was unprecedented for Russia; on 5 and 6 December, many people came out protesting against the rigged election in the streets of many Russian cities. The biggest rally, on 5 December in Moscow, numbered between five and eight thousand people (similar acts had previously only numbered several hundred). The participants were predominantly young people, many well-known activists and journalists; but there were also some show-business personalities, who had previously not been associated with opposition viewpoints. These large-scale protests made the authorities nervous; the rallies were brutally suppressed by the OMON, hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, and internal troops were sent to Moscow, to remain there until the end of the week when the official election results were announced.

A public tired of 'stability'

Although the parliamentary elections did give the formal victory to the 'party of power', they also showed how far Russian society has evolved. Over the past four years, the percentage satisfied with the 'stability' of the political scene in Russia – that is, the complete domination of the ruling elite and its political wing, United Russia – has clearly fallen. The catalyst for this social discontent was the decision announced on 24 September that Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev would 'swap places'. The announcement of this decision ('top-down' in nature, without any pretence of democratic appearances) showed that the government has lost its ability to communicate adequately with the public. The weakening of its mechanisms of feedback over many years has led to a situation where the government's awareness of the changes that have occurred in society is very limited, and so is its ability of developing an effective social strategy. To the surprise of the elite, the decision to return Vladimir Putin, the most popular politician in Russian, to the Kremlin prompted a broadly negative reaction in society, and was reflected in the results of the parliamentary elections.

The election results and the reactions to Vladimir Putin's plans indicate that Russia is slowly exhausting the current model of governance by Putin's elite, which has been based on society's acceptance of the ruling elite's predominance. A growing proportion of the public is beginning to manifest an interest in changing the current model. This is not a homogeneous social group, and their visions for change are also diverse. On the one hand, a group is growing which could be conventionally described as middle-class (the intellectual elite, business executives and professionals, some bureaucrats). Its demands are focused

on changing the relationship between the state and society: the reduction of bureaucratic barriers, and reducing the arbitrariness of state bodies and systemic corruption. In turn, the growing nationalist circles accuse the government of corruption and disregarding the interests of ethnic Russians. Both these groups' rhetoric increasingly resonates with political demands: more and more Russians are interested in increasing competition in the political arena and the creation of political formations which would represent their interests (the Communists and A Just Russia, which received 'tactical' support in these elections, do not perform this function). In a poll conducted by the Centre for Strategic Studies at the beginning of 2011, a significant portion of respondents expressed a preference for a new candidate in the presidential election – that is, neither Putin nor Medvedev.

Prospects

The growing unrest in society confronts the ruling elite with a choice: to make some concessions to the discontented, or to maintain the current strategy, which consists in holding onto power and repressing opponents. So far, the government has employed the latter strategy, ensuring the 'party of power's victory and pacifying all protests, regardless of the political costs of such actions. It seems unlikely that the current elite will agree to make any major concessions in the near future. Meanwhile, the populist measures it is taking to improve its image are becoming ever less trustworthy in the public's eyes.

The prospect of the upcoming presidential election (4 March 2012) leads us to expect further mobilisation by the opposition, which has been motivated both by the results of the parliamentary elections and the popularity of recent protests. Victory for Vladimir Putin in the upcoming election seems to be inevitable, but the political mandate he has enjoyed hitherto is clearly weakening. The potential for dissatisfaction is growing in Russian society, a dissatisfaction which is primarily being turned against Putin (and to a lesser extent against United Russia and Medvedev). The presidential election may therefore repeat the scenario of the parliamentary elections: the high likelihood of protest voting, and ever greater government interference in the electoral process. On the other hand, the opponents of the current elite will seek to publicise these manipulations, and thus undermine the democratic legitimacy of the next president.

Appendix 1

Election results from selected regions: best and worst results for United Russia*

Regions showing high support for the 'party of power'	United Russia	Communists	A Just Russia	LDPR	
Chechnya	99,8	0,1	0,2	0,02	
Dagestan	91,4	7,5	<1	<1	

Ingushetia	90,9	2,9	2,3	0,4	
Regions showing low support for the 'party of power'	United Russia	Communists	A Just Russia	LDPR	
Primorsky kray	33,06	23,7	19,7	19,8	
Kaliningrad region	37,1	25,5	13,3	14,1	
St Petersburg	32,5	15,9	25,3	10,5	
Cities where United Russia lost to the Communists	United Russia	Communists			
Kaliningrad	25,4	31,2			
Irkutsk	25,5	31,2			
Vladivostok	ok. 27**	ok. 23**			
Omsk	27,5	30,6			

* Official data has not yet been published by the CEC; this data comes from press agencies (data prepared by <agaw> and <JR>)

** Full data is not yet available; this data is an average figure taken from 4 of the 5 city districts

Appendix 2

Composition of the previous and current State Duma

Party	Number of deputies in the 5th Duma (2007-11)	Number of deputies in the 6th Duma (2011)-16
United Russia	302*	238
Communist Party of the Russian Federation	57	92

A Just Russia	38	64
LDPR	39	56

** The faction of United Russia numbered 316 seats, but several deputies left some months before the elections (mainly to take up positions in the cabinet, or other government appointments)*