

Presidential Elections in Russia: Massive Vote Fraud Ensures that Legitimacy is in Doubt, but the Policy Direction is not

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The March 4th, 2012, elections formally returned Vladimir Putin, the paramount leader of Russia since 1999, to the presidency. Despite Draconian restrictions on entry, financing, campaigning by other candidates, Putin's dominance of TV, blatant use of state employees and funds to his own advantage, and significant vote fraud, the victory was underwhelming in the end. While the official tally was only 63.6 percent in Putin's favor, estimates of his vote share by independent observers relying on networks of tens of thousands of volunteers were in the range of 49-57 percent of the turnout; even lower. (If his share was truly below 50 percent, a run-off vote would have to take place between Putin and the runner up) The second major outcome of the elections was the successful attempt by civic society to ensure a fair vote count in Russia's largest city and capital, Moscow, where Putin's official vote share (45 percent) on March 4th was the same that United Russia achieved in the December 4th parliamentary elections. (Generally, Putin polls much higher than United Russia.) The third outcome was the emergence of Mikhail Prokhorov, a billionaire with negligible experience in politics, as a major political force representing large cities and young educated voters.

The Success of Civic Society in Moscow and Vote Fraud Elsewhere

The central issue in the wake of the March 4th elections is the extent of fraud organized by the incumbent. Massive fraud during the December 4th parliamentary elections generated mass protests in response. In total, hundreds of thousands of Muscovites took part in four large rallies held during this winter. (No political rallies of comparable size, except for the state-sponsored pro-Putin ones, have taken place during the last 15 years.) A similar discrepancy between the actual vote and official returns was expected to generate even larger protests this time round.

Despite dozens of reported and video-documented cases of organized groups brought in to Moscow to vote multiple times and the presence of tens of thousands of observers, public outrage after massive vote fraud in the parliamentary elections last December is likely to have prevented the most outrageous and blatant forms of fraud during these elections. No less important, it is also likely that they generated less directly observable forms of electoral manipulation. Not surprisingly, for Moscow, the vote count by *Citizen Observer*, *Golos*, and other independent and highly respected observer organizations nearly coincided with the official election results, certified by the widely despised Central Election Commission (CEC). (Since December, the name of the head of CEC, Vladimir Churov, has become a synonym for incompetence and of fawning loyalty to the

incumbent.) This does not mean, however, that no fraud took place outside the capital.

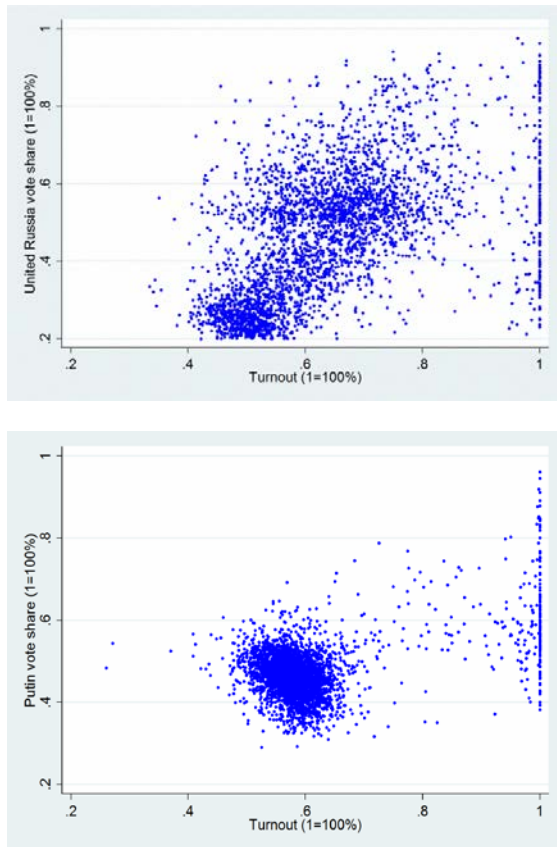


Figure 1. Cross-plot of the United Russia (Putin) vote share vs. turnout in the December 4, 2011, parliamentary elections and the March 4, 2011, presidential elections in Moscow. (Courtesy of Alexei Zakharov, HSE and Citizen Observer, using the CEC data.)

A side effect of the fair vote count on March 4th, 2012, in Moscow was that it highlighted the extensive centrally-organized fraud in parliamentary elections held on December 4th, 2011. (See the December 2011 issue of the FREE Policy Brief for a snap analysis of the parliamentary elections.) Figure 1 shows that the suspicious-looking relationship between the turnout and the Putin-led United Russia Party, highly visible in December (top figure), completely disappeared in March (bottom figure). Thus, the strong correlation between turnout and the United Russia vote share is a result of ballot-stuffing rather than anything else (theoretically, such a correlation might be caused by some socio-demographic characteristics of United Russia's supporters).

Similarly, Figure 2 exhibits a “normal” (Gaussian) distribution of total votes for United Russia/Putin by turnout (this is what should be expected theoretically, and is consistently observed in democratic elections around the world) on March 4th (bottom figure) and an unusual distribution, a result of changed voting protocols on December 4th (top figure).

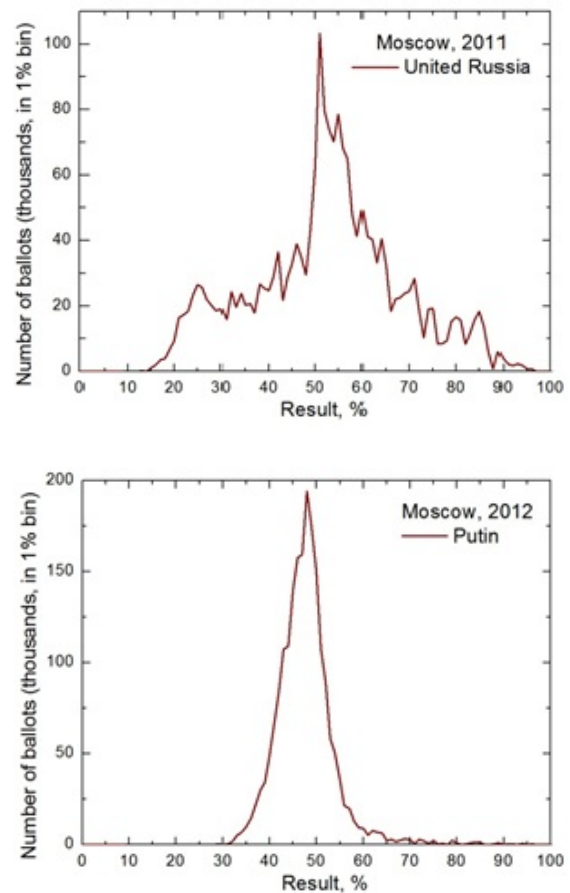


Figure 2. Number of ballots by turnout in the December 4, 2011, parliamentary elections, and the March 4, 2011, presidential elections in Moscow. (Courtesy of Maxim Pshenichnikov using the CEC data.) Note the spikes on 70,75,80,85, and 90 percentiles on the left graph, a result of “targeting” by election officials.

Outside Moscow, the situation was different. Across the country, independent observers documented ballot stuffing and manipulation of local vote returns. St. Petersburg, the second largest city in Russia with a population of just over 4 million and the cradle of the “Putin’s

team”, is a case in point. The preliminary estimates, based on a (nearly random for these purposes) sample of 269 polling stations (which is about 12 percent of the total number of stations in the city), shows that the actual vote share for Putin was 50 percent rather than the officially reported 65 percent, while for Prokhorov it was 22 percent instead of 14 percent, and for Zyuganov 15 percent instead of 11 percent in the official tally. These estimates are based on the comparison between the official results as certified by the Central Electoral Commission with official copies of vote protocols signed by accredited observers and members of local electoral commissions at the polling stations. In other words, the discrepancy is a result of vote fraud at the level of the territorial electoral commission instead of more conventional forms of fraud, such as ballot-stuffing at polling stations.

New Faces of Russian Politics

Three of the four competitors against Putin on March 4th were veterans of Russian politics. The Communist party Chairman, Gennady Zyuganov, lost presidential elections to Boris Yeltsin in 1996, Putin himself in 2000, and to Dmitry Medvedev, Putin’s figurehead “heir,” in 2008. (In 2004, the communists ran a minor candidate). Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a perennial nationalist candidate for presidency since 1991, has maintained a parliamentary faction for his one-man party for 20 years, but has never come close to winning the presidency. Sergei Mironov, a former Putin ally (in 2004 he ran for presidency with the announced goal “to help Putin win presidency”), was the main beneficiary of the December 4th, 2011, vote when many people supported his party primarily for the reason that parties they would have otherwise voted for were banned from participation. By official tally, Zyuganov got 17.2 percent (2nd place), Zhirinovskiy 6.2 percent (4th place), and Mironov 3.9 percent (5th place). Despite the fact that these three

have been on the ballot for a long time, they have never succeeded in presenting a genuine alternative choice for Russian voters at the polls and therefore posed no serious threat to Putin’s authority.

Mikhail Prokhorov, the 2nd richest person in Russia according to Forbes, ran a campaign that was watched warily by both Putin in Kremlin and Putin’s opponents in the liberal camp, and came in 3rd place with an official total of 8.0 percent. In Moscow, his result was even more impressive with 22 percent of the vote, second only to Putin’s 45 percent. While Prokhorov certainly benefited from the absence of Grigory Yavlinsky, who failed to clear the (unheard of in democratic countries) requirement to collect 2 000 000 signatures, and other liberal politicians, his results exceeded the previous combined returns of the liberal parties and candidates in parliamentary and presidential elections in 2000. The success of his candidacy have raised doubts on a long-held assumption in Russian politics that a rich, not to mention very rich, candidate has no chance of gaining traction in popular vote.

Another new face in Russian politics, Alexei Navalny has a law degree, business background, and was a member of the leadership in the Yabloko party (expelled in 2007) before becoming a famous blogger and shareholder activist in the beginning of 2010. His blog (navalny.livejournal.com) is now one of the most popular blogs in Russia, with more than 66,000 followers. A major boost to its popularity was the “Rospil” project that focused on protecting minority shareholders of large state-owned companies (and, by extent, on the management of the taxpayers’ property by the Putin government). Navalny used his blog to organize large-scale petitioning and litigation campaigns related to corruption in state-controlled companies. As a result of these activities, Navalny was described by the BBC in 2011 as “arguably the only major opposition figure to emerge in Russia in the past five years.” (Obviously the BBC has not foreseen the rise of Prokhorov.) After December 4th, 2011, Navalny became a major

leader of the protests and organizers of election observers.

“Staying the Course”

President-elect Vladimir Putin will start his new 6-year term in difficult times. The election raised questions about his true legitimate level of popular support, yet there is little doubt that he does not face any viable alternative challengers in the near future. Given that Putin has proven himself extremely rigid in the choice of policy and personnel (he would not get rid of close subordinates even if wide-spread corruption allegation would make them a visible drag on his popularity), the new government is not expected to be radically different from the current one (which features most of the ministers serving for 5-10 years in their current capacity). His anointed prime-minister is not a new face either. Dmitry Medvedev, who served as Russia’s president for the last 4 years, is not expected to bring forward any major policy changes.

Fortunately for Putin the opposition is not organized and cannot settle on any particular message or alternative policy direction, let alone viable leader. The protest movement during the winter of 2011-12 was characterized more by decentralized leadership, featuring a number of prominent literature, arts, and entertainment figures. With its goal to ensure fair elections, it has, however, united a very diverse group of smaller movements ranging from radical young communists to libertarians despite its not having provided an alternative leader to Putin. In the end, the outcome of the March 2, 2012, presidential election has ended the myth of a significant Putin majority, casted considerable doubt on his legitimacy and has shown that Russians seem hungry for a change. It has, however, also left a big question mark on what the opposition’s next steps are and who the alternative could be.

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In 2002 and 2003, Sonin was awarded the Best Economist prize by the President of the Russian Academy of Science. In 2004, he received the Gold Medal of the Global Development Network for his paper on the sources of political demand for bad institutions. His academic papers appeared in leading international journals such as *Journal of Comparative Economics*, *International Finance*, *Economics Letters*, and *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy*. His fortnightly column on economics and politics appears in “*Vedomosti*”, the leading Russian business daily, published jointly by WSJ and FT, and “the *Moscow Times*”, the main Russian English newspaper.

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