

A Resonant Signal: the Russian Parliamentary Elections of December 2011

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Days before December 4, prospects of electoral democracy in Russia looked bleak. Consolidation of the authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin, Russia's paramount leader since 1999, adoption of non-democratic electoral laws and politically-motivated law enforcement, constant harassment of media, civil society organizations, and election observers, and outright involvement of the government in the electoral process gave little hope that elections would make the political leadership accountable. The courts and electoral officials were used to prevent most opposition leaders from registering a party or participating in elections; opposition financial supporters had been driven into exile. Parliamentary elections in December 2007 and presidential elections in March 2008 were marred by such irregularities that many observers, myself included, had stopped counting. However, the outcome of December 4, 2011 will arguably have a major impact on future political developments in Russia.

Firstly, the official results of United Russia, the party that is led by Vladimir Putin and had a constitutional majority in the previous parliament, showed a significant drop in support for the current political leadership among the general public. Despite overwhelming presence on state-controlled TV channels, significant support by government officials, and outright vote fraud, the official results show the ruling party deserted by more than a quarter of its supporters (12.8 million out of 44.7 million who voted for United Russia in 2007).

Secondly, those who turned out to vote (the turnout was significantly lower than at previous parliamentary elections) showed obvious discontent with Putin/United Russia policy and, possibly, with the way elections were conducted. In particular, millions of Russians voted for Just Russia, a party with no charismatic leader and a platform that is not substantively different from that of United Russia.

Thirdly – and perhaps most importantly – there was a visible and dramatic upsurge of voter activism on the Election Day. Without any large-scale centrally organized campaign, hundreds of volunteers went to polling stations to work as election observers. They witnessed, prevented and/or reported hundreds of violations by electoral officials via social networks (despite coordinated DDoS attacks on the most important networks and popular news sites on the Election Day) and via YouTube. By December 5, some of the YouTube clips showing electoral fraud had more than 1,000,000 hits.

Reported Results and Corrections for Voter Fraud

As is always the case in a semi-democratic state, result of the official count may deviate significantly from how people actually voted. In Russia, the parliament is formed by

representatives of political parties: voters vote for party lists, rather than for individual candidates. The officially announced results were: 49.5 percent for United Russia, 19.2 for Communist party, 13.2 for Just Russia, and 11.7 for the Liberal Democrats (Vladimir Zhirinovsky). Other parties, including Yabloko, the only liberal-leaning party that was allowed to participate in elections, fell short of the 7 percent required to enter parliament. However, the observations of international observers concur with those of opposition parties and independent Russian observers: ballot stuffing in favor of United Russia was witnessed/recorded and was widespread; electoral laws, draconian in themselves, were grossly violated by state officials, including police, at polling stations. In a number of cases, the elections results certified by local election boards do not coincide with the data presented by the central electoral commission, with every major discrepancy being in favor of United Russia.

Results obtained by the Citizen Observer project, which brought about 500 Moscovites to 160 polling stations as observers, give an impression of the scale of the fraud. Unfortunately, the project did not use a randomized distribution of observers, which would make the sample statistically representative of the whole of Moscow. However, Moscow districts have demonstrated fairly homogenous voting patterns in the last two decades, and there is no reason to think that any major change in this pattern occurred, so the report offers a fairly reliable estimate of election fraud. Averaging across polling stations where the observers did not report any serious violations, the Communist party won 25.3 percent of votes, United Russia 23.4, Just Russia and Yabloko 17.6 percent each, and the Liberal Democrats 12.5 percent. Turnout was 49 percent.

I would therefore estimate the effects of irregularities at 10 percentage points, i.e. the real share of votes cast for United Russia nationwide would be 39 percent rather than the reported 49 percent. But it would be

reasonable to suppose the effect of irregularities at between 7 and 15 percentage points, so real votes for United Russia would be between 34 and 42 percent of votes cast. It is conceivable that the real share of votes cast for the Communist Party in Moscow (19.4 percent in official returns) was close to that of United Russia; it is not inconceivable that the Communists won the majority of real (not “counted”) votes by Moscovites.

Explanations

Following such a major surprise, any explanation offered only three days after the event risks being way off mark. Public opinion surveys predicted a significantly larger plurality for United Russia. (Personally, I have doubts about the quality of surveys of electoral intentions by major Russian polling firms. I find it particularly disturbing that, in the past, such firms have proved good at predicting – supposedly based on voter intentions – the *reported* results, rather than the results as adjusted by a realistic estimate of electoral fraud.)

The most obvious explanation for the United Russia setback is economic. Russia suffered more than any other G20 country as a result of the world financial crisis in 2008-09: an EBRD Transition Report 2011 found, based on an extensive survey of Russian citizens, that 38 percent of households had to cut their food consumption as a result of the crisis (11 percent of West European households were affected the same way). This is a major impact. In a democracy, such economic impact alone would most probably result in loss of power for the incumbent leadership.

Another explanation is growing discontent among Russians with the harshness of Putin’s administration and with rampant corruption. When oil prices were rising and real incomes were growing by double digits, the Russian public exhibited markedly high tolerance even when political decisions ran contrary to the

will of the majority (for example, no opinion survey in five years showed majority approval of the abolition of regional gubernatorial elections, which was a cornerstone of Putin's political changes) or when they had to pay substantial corruption premiums in the marketplace. In harder times, people are less willing to have their wishes ignored or to tolerate high and rising prices.

Consequences

In the Yeltsin era, such an outcome of parliamentary elections (even by the official count, United Russia lost almost 13 million votes as compared to 2007) would have triggered a major change in the composition of the cabinet. In 2011, there is even more reason for such a change: a number of prominent cabinet members, who had remits to run United Russia slates in specific provinces led their slates to dismal results (low 30s by the official count). However, low mobility in the upper echelons of the Russian elite during the last decade suggests that drastic changes in the near future are unlikely.

More important than the loss of seats in parliament for United Russia is the possibility that Vladimir Putin, the current prime minister with *de facto* presidential powers and the head of United Russia, is no longer assured a safe victory in March 2012 presidential elections, which looked a foregone conclusion just a couple of months ago. He is still arguably the favorite, even if (very improbably) there is no ban on opposition candidates participating in the elections (in 2008, the field was restricted to three contenders, all of them effectively pseudo-candidates; in 2004, other candidates were *de facto* prohibited from raising money for the campaign, while the incumbent had the full capacity of the state at his disposal). With a ban on opposition participation, he is the overwhelming favorite. However, we do not rule out an initiative by the government to make outcome of presidential elections even

more secure in the near future by a major crackdown on the opposition.

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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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