The Duma Drubbing: In an election marred by fraud, Putin’s United Russia still loses significant support

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Introduction

On 4 December, the Russian Federation held elections to the Duma, the lower house of Parliament. 96% of the voting results have been counted by the Commission. The current ruling party, United Russia, has won 49% of the vote, which should deliver a working majority but represents a 15% drop from the 2007 parliamentary elections. This included a relatively high percentage of protest votes for the Communist Party—receiving 19% of the vote thus far.

While such results would be welcome in most democratic countries, United Russia are accustomed to securing much higher levels of support, obtained through a mixture of genuine popular appeal, the pseudo-legal marginalisation of opposition voices, censorship and electoral fraud.

The following is the current breakdown of results according to the Central Election Commission:

◊ United Russia: 49.34%
◊ Communist Party: 19.19%
◊ A Just Russia: 13.24%
◊ Liberal Democratic Party: 11.65%
◊ Yabloko: 3.42%
◊ Patriots of Russia: 0.97%
◊ Right Cause: 0.6%

The reduced support for United Russia—now almost universally known as the “party of crooks and thieves,” a term coined by popular anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny—has been primarily attributed to economic troubles, an increase in civic activism, rampant corruption and a general weariness with the strongman tactics of the party of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. While the elections were free enough to allow a significant portion of the population to vote against the ruling party, initial reports by international observers suggest the use of cyber warfare as an instrument of censorship, widespread intimidation and electoral fraud.

Cyber censorship.

The Kremlin typically prefers indirect censorship to the direct proscription of speech and the press. The evidence suggests that the regime is devoting an increasing amount of resources towards the use of cyber warfare to restrict free debate and silence critics. The practice appears to have been heavily employed in response to this weekend’s Duma elections. Access to LiveJournal, the blogging platform which hosts the sites of many regime critics, including Alexei Navalny, has been interrupted or nonexistent for the past week.

One blogger summed it up pithily: “It's very easy to figure out that Russia is having elections tomorrow: LiveJournal is down.”

Additionally, the websites of the radio station Ekho Moskvy, the independent newspaper Kommersant and the country’s only independent election-monitoring group, GOLOS, were among the webpages reportedly attacked by hackers on Election Day. According to a Yandex.ru information security expert, an estimated...
Electoral fraud and voter intimidation.

The 4 December elections were characterised by widespread electoral fraud and manipulation, but retained enough elements of competition that it enabled the Russian people to communicate their dissatisfaction with the ruling party. In a preliminary analysis released by the OSCE, international observers concluded that the elections were undermined by the “convergence of the State and governing party,” but found that “despite the lack of a level playing field throughout the process, voters took advantage of their right to express their choice.” Among other criticisms, the preliminary report criticised the government for denying the right of registration to numerous parties, preventing civil society groups from monitoring the elections, and failing to ensure the independence of local electoral authorities from the government. The report also notes “frequent procedural violations and instances of apparent manipulation, including several serious indications of ballot box stuffing.” However, the preliminary report does note some improvements in the legal framework for elections since the 2007 parliamentary election.

Both the Communist party and the liberal Yabloko party have complained of electoral fraud, intimidation, bribery and other violations by United Russia party officials and activists. Grigory Yavlinsky of the Yabloko Party has vowed to contest the election results. The election also featured a suspiciously high turnout from the former Soviet republics where United Russia exerts a disproportionate amount of power, often through puppets like the brutal Chechen president Ramzan Kadyarov. In the North Caucasus republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya, United Russia received over 90% of the vote and 99.48% in Chechnya.

One of the most significant examples of state meddling and manipulation was the recent spate of charges and criticisms leveled by the state against GOLOS, the country’s only independent election monitor. The group has been subjected to an escalating campaign of harassment in recent weeks, including cyber attacks on their websites, allegations of bias against United Russia, and criticism by Putin himself in the form of a thinly-veiled allusion to the group’s acceptance of foreign grants as equivalent to Judas Iscariot. Journalists from the state-owned television station NTV also arrived at GOLOS deputy director Grigory Melkonyants’ office unannounced and filmed him whilst they berated the group for the group’s alleged ties to the United States—footage which is available on YouTube. Presumably to add weight to the transparently trumped-up complaints against the group, on 2 December, two days prior to the election, Golos was found guilty of electoral violations and ordered to pay a small fine.

Additionally, according to Ekho Moskvy 10% of GOLOS’s 2,500 observers were unable to carry out election-monitoring, often being barred from entering 200,000 computers operating from around the world have been traced to the hacking attacks. Russkaya Platforma, the nationalist group behind November’s chauvinist “Stop feeding the Caucasus” protests, also reported that its website was hacked. In addition, local officials reportedly inhibited journalists’ ability to report from polling stations on Election Day. As usual, the state also relied upon its control of much of the media to drown out criticism: for example, in the last week of the campaign NTV, TV Centre and Channel 5 all broadcast programmes praising the accomplishments of the current government.
the polling stations after being accused of “illegally posing as journalists” or for supposedly lacking the necessary documents to enter. The group reportedly received over 2,000 complaints of violations and fraud during Election Day. Novaya Gazeta—one of Russia’s few remaining independent newspapers—has documented numerous reports of election violations across the country, including ballot stuffing, bribery and intimidation, videos of which continue to surface on YouTube.

Looking forward: is Vladimir Putin in trouble?

Vladimir Putin is the presidential candidate for United Russia, and his official return to the Kremlin as President following the March 2012 elections is virtually assured. However, United Russia’s relatively poor showing in the Duma elections has caused some to ask whether this could be the beginning of the end for Putin.

The question is given added impetus by the so-called “booing revolution,” the recent trend of crowds heckling United Russia—and even Putin himself—and large public events. This phenomenon, which cuts to the core of the popular image of Putin as a revered strongman, threatens one of his key sources of legitimacy: his personal popularity. Instead of the triumphal return of the strongman saviour who, in popular myth, delivered Russia out of the corrupt 1990s into an economically and culturally assertive future, many of the Russian people have responded to his re-emergence with a shrug.

Putin’s retro strongman antics, which once carried a comforting nostalgic appeal, now seem patronising and tired to an increasing number of Russians.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that Putin faces any significant threat to his planned return to office this spring: opposition parties and leaders currently lack the power and broad-based appeal to challenge the still-strong—if somewhat battered—Putin. More troublingly, the disappointing Duma results may inspire the regime to shift gears and assume the attributes of a more classic repressive authoritarian system, a possibility which Lilya Shevstova of the Moscow Carnegie Center fears is likely: “Putin has already started reacting to this,” she said. “The budget for 2012 has earmarked 33 percent of budgetary funds for defence and the power ministries. Clearly they are thinking about basing their regime and their system on force.”

However, the signs of weakness presaged in the run-up to the election and in the election results themselves point to the overarching weakness of the current political system in Russia, which relies on a hybrid of semi- legality, semi-democratic practice and re-hashed authoritarianism and cultural chauvinism to keep the “party of crooks and thieves” in power and out of jail.

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