



FPC Briefing: Russia Protests Parliamentary Elections- Winds of Change or Just a Lot of Hot Air?

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On 4th December, citizens of the Russian Federation went to the polls to elect members of the lower house of parliament (Duma). Widespread claims of election rigging have triggered a backlash against the ruling party, United Russia, culminating in a day of action across the country on 10th December. Peaceful rallies were held in [more than 80 Russian cities](#), and solidarity gatherings attended by ex-pats and Russia-watchers took place in locations across the world from Los Angeles to Helsinki. The Moscow rally attracted over 60,000 people, according to [BBC Russian Service](#), making it the largest rally in the capital for a decade and the largest pro-democracy protest since the 1990s.

The big question on everyone's lips, of course, is what does this mean for United Russia and for Prime Minister Putin's bid in the March presidential elections? The mainstream press in Russia still expect him to win, though frequently citing the lack of a better candidate rather than genuine support for Putin. But various Western commentators and the small but growing Russian opposition movement have posited a kaleidoscope of possible alternatives: the word 'revolution' has spread like wildfire across blogs and social networking sites, and influential voices in the US (most notably [John McCain](#)) have predicted a [Russian 'Arab Spring'](#). On Sunday, however, the majority on the streets, with the turmoil of Soviet collapse still fresh in collective memory, rallied under the motto '[against revolution – for honest elections](#)'. Influential blogger Oleg Kozyrev has referred to the [Great December Evolution](#), a witty play on the Bolshevik Great October Revolution and an epithet that is becoming increasingly popular in attempts to define developments in the country since 4th. Other liberal commentators have simply claimed we are witnessing '[the re-emergence of Russian civil society](#)', while the bulk of Western broadsheet newspapers and think tanks (who always love to view events as 'heralding' something) are pointing to the beginning of the end of the 'Putin era'.

In what follows below I try to debunk some of cynicism surrounding the Russian media reports, while at the same time levelling the hubris that frequently accompanies analysis from the West. I delineate the background to the protests, consider Putin's position, and evaluate the opposition. My prognosis is that, while they demonstrate that Russia's so-called 'managed democracy' is increasing unpopular with its citizens, the protests are unlikely to elicit the change in Russia's high politics that the Western media and domestic liberals are hoping for.

The Problem

Elections in post-Soviet Russia have never been free from accusations of fraud, and most educated citizens have long been aware of the chicanery engaged in by elites to ensure 'appropriate' results. But until now, most chose to view this situation with cynicism, unleashing frustration in Russia's vibrant blogosphere rather than on the streets. What has changed? The relationship between the Russian leader and the public has been called the '[Putin contract](#)', in a snide reference to Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory. It refers to the way citizens have put up with the steady erosion of democracy that has taken place under Putin because the economic growth he has overseen has provided a measure of stability and a steady improvement to their living standards. But living standards are stagnating and, despite the promises, Putin's party has failed to deal with the country's rampant corruption, a major perceived cause of the stagnation. Alexei Navalny, founder of the anti-corruption website [RosPil](#), nicknamed United Russia the 'party of crooks and thieves', a title which has become so entrenched in public consciousness, that a simple Google search retrieves almost two million sites.



In the last few months, actions by United Russia have only served to distance the party even further from the public. When Putin announced his intention to return as president, admitting that he and Medvedev had [agreed everything a long time ago](#), he unwittingly exposed the extent to which elites view themselves as invincible. This admission was seen by the Russian middle classes as a huge insult, making it clear to them precisely how irrelevant they had become in the domestic political process. On December 4th, people went out to vote to express their anger at this *fait accompli*, with many voices urging people to [vote for any party except United Russia](#). Voters were also offended by the arrogance of the United Russia election campaign; it was hard to tell the difference between the United Russia campaign boards and the general boards advertising the election. United Russia had chosen exactly the same style, colour scheme and font. The message was clear: to vote meant to vote for United Russia.

In the run-up to the elections, Russia's only independent electoral monitoring organisation, Golos, (meaning both 'voice' and 'vote' in Russian) launched a [website](#) where citizens could post evidence of violations recorded with smartphones. By 4th December, more than 7,000 incidents had been reported. Golos, which is funded by US humanitarian assistance agency, USAID, and the European Union, was also subject to intimidation by the Russian government in the days preceding the election. Upon her return from Poland, Golos director Lilia Shabanova was detained for 12 hours in Moscow's Sheremetevo Airport on account that her laptop contained illegal software. On the day of the elections themselves Golos' website, as well as those of the liberal media ([Novaya Gazeta](#), [Bolshoi Gorod](#), [Slon](#), [New Times](#)) and the Russian blogosphere platform, [Live Journal](#), were hacked and rendered inaccessible for the whole day (with a similar attack also occurring on the day of the protests). People reporting violations, however, were directed via Facebook and its Russian equivalent Vkontakte to a Google spread-sheet where they could continue to upload their videos.

Evidence emerged of a veritable rainbow of different falsification tactics: piles of [extra ballot sheets](#) were filled out by polling station staff; groups of young people were bussed to different polling stations to vote multiple times for United Russia in what is known as a '[carousel](#)'; 1000 roubles were offered to citizens who would '[sell](#)' their vote to United Russia; piles of 'unwanted' ballot sheets were found in the gents' toilets [dumped in a dustbin](#); [pens with invisible ink](#) were installed in booths so that ballots sheets could be filled out 'correctly' afterwards; and [ballots](#) filled in favour of United Russia were added to the pile during the vote count, to name just a few of the multitude of reported incidents. In St. Petersburg there were 150 independent citizen observers and each of them had violations of some type to report. Golos' verdict was that these elections were [the dirtiest in the last 11 years](#), while Boris Nemtsov, an opposition leader in the liberal political movement [Solidarnost](#), called them [the dirtiest and the most rigged in the 20 history of the Russian Federation](#).

As the [exit polls](#) predicted that United Russia would win approximately 50% of the vote, small crowds of between several hundred and a thousand angry voters gathered daily in Moscow and St. Petersburg to protest what they saw as a stolen election. These rallies were unsanctioned and were quickly met with a heavy-handed police response where, in Moscow alone, [up to a thousand people were arrested](#). Prominent opposition leaders Ilya Yashin and Alexei Navalny, who had also been present, were sentenced to 15 days behind bars. At this point, most people on the streets belonged either to a middle-class intelligentsia or the so-called Facebook generation of teens and twenty-somethings. Conservatives claimed that the protests were merely a manifestation of a politically irrelevant liberal minority. However, the demographic broadened substantially on 10th, with people participating of all ages and incomes.

The final counts are now in, and United Russia has won with a clear, though heavily reduced, majority of [49.3%](#), down 15% from 2007. The rest of the results are as follows: in second place, the



Communist Party received 19.2%, up from 12.7% in 2007; third place was taken by A Just Russia with 13.25%; and the misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party of Russia came in fourth with 11.7%. Of course, these three parties cannot be considered as genuine opposition to United Russia. Those that can, liberal-progressive Yabloko, far right Patriots of Russia, and independent liberal-conservative Right Cause, did not pass the 7% barrier required for seats in the Duma. But in the few areas where no violations were reported, there is a [very different picture](#): the Communists win with 25.4%, followed by United Russia with 23.4%, and tied in third place are Yabloko and A Just Russia with 17.6%. And in polling stations in Europe and America, Russian ex-pats voted for [Yabloko](#) with an overwhelming 40%. The Moscow-based independent public opinion centre, Levada, has reported that more than half of all Russians considered the elections to be a [simulation](#), while the [Citizen Observer](#) movement, which encourages locals to monitor their election booth on Election Day, has claimed that United Russia's real share of the vote stands at just under 30%, a figure which the opposition have [gladly echoed](#). [Yabloko](#) leader, Grigory Yavlinsky has demanded the sacking of the head of the Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov, vowing that his party will contest the election results in court. Mikhail Gorbachev, the veteran politician who presided over the Soviet Union's collapse, has also thrown his weight behind calls for new elections to be held. It is these calls which were being echoed on the street on Saturday 10th December. Protesters are promising to re-assemble on 24th December if new elections have not been held by then.

The Response

On the day following the rallies, President Medvedev claimed in a [post on his Facebook](#) page that he was planning to ensure that all the information about the violations would be checked. But the Facebook community did not appear to believe him: his statement has received upwards of 14,000 comments to date, many of which are derisive, sarcastic and rude. Seemingly confirming the suspicions of Medvedev's Facebook commenters, Putin press secretary, [Dmitry Peskov](#), later said that even if all the violations identified by citizens were investigated, it would not change the overall outcome of the elections. According to him, rigging amounted to just 0.5% and as such, the results would stand.

Putin himself has kept very quiet since the protests began, and has not commented publicly on the unrest. Yet with hindsight, it is perhaps possible to identify a change of tactic in the Russian leader. In May he initiated a move away from United Russia with the establishment of another group, the [Russian Popular Front](#) (RPF). This group, whose founding purpose was to inject 'fresh people and new ideas' into United Russia, is a somewhat nebulous coalition of social organisations and politicians, who support the broad agenda of the ruling party. Since its creation, however, it has retained a low profile, and only finally made mainstream headlines when Putin announced on 8th December that that he [preferred run for president on the back of the RPF](#) than on United Russia. He also disclosed that the man in charge of his electoral campaign will be [Stanislav Govorukhin](#), a popular Soviet and Russian film director – until now a relatively inconsequential member of the Duma, who had, during 1990s, supported the [red-brown coalition](#). Govorukhin is clearly a populist choice – a move by Putin, whose approval ratings have been [steadily dropping since 2007](#), to improve his public image. This, coupled with the tactical separation of RPF from United Russia, indicates that he has long sensed the slow demise of the latter, and has been working quickly and quietly to ensure a solid support base that is seen by the electorate as distinct from 'the party of crooks and thieves' as well as from the bumbling Medvedev. Will this strategy be successful? It is too early to test the effectiveness of the RPF in its support for Putin, or indeed its political effectiveness in general, since it has to date been kept out of public affairs. It is likely that in the coming months we will be hearing much more frequently about its activities. However, a pro-Putin rally held in



Moscow two days after the rally on 10th attracted a much smaller crowd, with [estimates](#) ranging from 5,000 (Reuters) to 25,000 (Kremlin).

The Opposition

Pessimists and realists claim that regardless of the aptitude of the RFP, the March elections belong to Putin simply by virtue of the lack of a better candidate. The Russian opposition has traditionally been composed of somewhat amorphous and marginal groups with largely implausible or vacuous agendas. Those that were viewed by government as otherwise are promptly eviscerated. The parties that currently hold seats in the Duma have all publically declared their willingness to support United Russia policies and can in no way be considered as genuine opposition. This is why Russia's political system has been labelled a 'managed democracy'. However, in the aftermath of the election furore three faces have emerged that could potentially challenge Putin.

The first is Russia's third richest man, [Mikhail Prokhorov](#), nickel magnate and owner of US basketball team, New Jersey Nets. At a snap press conference on Monday, he declared his intention to run against Putin in March, claiming it was the '[most important decision](#)' of his life. His political career to date includes the creation of the Right Cause party in May 2011, and from which he was ousted a few months later after disagreements with other members of the party's leadership. However, Prokhorov has never been seen as a true member of the opposition, despite the vitriol he unleashed against the 'puppet regime' in September. A man of his wealth must remain in favour with the government in order to retain his position – one only has to look at the fate of Khodorkovsky to understand what happens when oligarchs step out of line. As such, Prokhorov has refrained from making direct criticism of Putin or Medvedev. Western [commentators](#) do not see the magnate as a viable contender to Putin, denouncing him as little more than a puppet in a charade of opposition. In Russia, by contrast, liberals see him as [far from the worst option](#). But since liberals are a minority in Russia, and receive fractional support outside European centres of Moscow and St. Petersburg, it is improbable that Prokhorov will receive more overall support than Putin.

Another disgruntled member of Putin's circle to signify his intention to join the race to the presidency is Alexei Kudrin. Fired by Medvedev in September after criticising the President's budgetary policy, the former finance minister had been viewed as the most liberal force in Medvedev's cabinet. Without making direct reference to any aims for Russia's top job, on 12th December Kudrin stated his intention to form a new liberal party designed to attract reformist voters. It is not yet clear how this party will differ from existing liberal party Yabloko and, with the three months left to the election, organising a campaign from scratch is likely to be extremely costly.

Finally, 35 year-old Alexei Navalny, influential blogger and anti-corruption crusader has also been tipped by some as a potential for the premiership. Of the three candidates presented here, he is the only one that represents a genuine alternative to Putin and United Russia, and Russia's liberal online media has been agog with speculations about a presidential bid. The extent of his support was confirmed in October 2010 when he won a landslide victory in the virtual [Mayor of Moscow](#) competition held by two respected newspapers, garnering 30,000, or 45%, of the votes. His anti-corruption activities are somewhat akin to an on-going WikiLeaks attack on the Russian government, with numerous large-scale transactions exposed on his RosPil website. A controversial figure, he attended the Russian nationalists march on National Unity Day on 4 November, claiming that the event needed to be 'cleaned up'. It is improbable that Navalny, however heroic he may be in single-handedly taking on the Russian government, will attract the generally conservative Russian electorate.

The Prognosis



Russia's opposition is currently very weak. Neither Prokhorov, nor Kudrin, nor Navalny stand a chance against Vladimir Putin, who has vast (though diminishing) financial resources at his fingertips and has been working to secure a deepened support base since the spring. Contrary to the cries of the Western media, we are not likely to see the 'end of Putinism' any time soon. It is also too early to tell whether we will see any 'evolution' of the political system as a result of the rallies, as predicted by blogger Kozyrev. So far the political elite have refused to make any concessions to the protesters. In the medium term in the run-up to the elections, there may be some negligible compromises on the part of the government, in an attempt to secure more votes. In the long term, however, rather than evolution to liberalism, there could be a shift towards tighter authoritarian control. In the aftermath of 2005 pensioners' protests against reductions in welfare benefits, new legislation was introduced to reign in the Russia public sphere. In the aftermath of what has been dubbed Russia's [Facebook Revolution](#), it is possible that tighter restrictions on internet usage could be introduced, something that has already been suggested by the [Interior Ministry](#).

In order for any real changes to take place in Russia, more people will need to take to the streets, more often and with more fury. In the meantime, independent opposition leaders need to overcome their differences and work out a moderate but progressive set of reforms that could unite them as an electable party. This is a process that will take a long time in Russia's sluggish political environment. The one thing that these protests have proven, however, is that this is no longer such a remote possibility.