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The aftermath of the 2011 Duma elections: moving to Russia 2.0

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The parliamentary elections that took place in Russia on 4 December 2011 usher in a new era for the post-Soviet political system in the country. The poor results registered by the Kremlin's party, United Russia – amid allegations of widespread vote-rigging – show that its decade-long domination is over. United Russia got only 49.3% of the votes, which is far behind the 64.1% the party obtained in 2007. This situation makes the next Duma more open for debate and the next March presidential elections more competitive.

Despite the loss of the constitutional two-thirds majority (315 seats out of 450 in 2007), United Russia won 238 seats, meaning that it still holds the majority necessary to pass laws alone. Three other parties made their way into the Lower House: the Communist party came in second with 19.2% (up from 11.6%) and 92 seats, A Just Russia gathered 13.25% (up from 7.7%) and 64 seats, and the far-right Liberal Democratic Party, or LDPR, got 12% (up from 8.1%) and 56 seats. These results reflect a better picture of the balance of political forces in the country than the former Duma, but the elections took place in a tense atmosphere. In the run-up to the election, opposition activists were rounded up by police or detained in Moscow.¹ During the elections a wide array of traditional

manipulations were used such as ballot box stuffing or pressure on civil servants to vote. Similar to former elections, regional leaders were ordered to return high votes in favor of the incumbent ruling party.² Thus, Soviet-like high figures were registered in the North Caucasus republics, with a special mention for Chechnya, where allegedly 99.48% of voters backed United Russia, with a turnout of 99.51%, while United Russia support in Dagestan, Ingushetia or Kabardino-Balkaria reached a record high of 90%-91%. These results can be explained – to a great extent – by a system based on authority. North Caucasian leaders rule these republics like their private fiefdoms, especially in Chechnya, where Ramzan Kadyrov has ruled with an iron fist since 2007.

A more modern way to silence the opposition was also employed: cyber attacks on liberal media websites (Kommersant daily, LiveJournal blogs) and on the site of the sole Russian independent election observer, Golos. In the two days following the election, between 6,000 and 15,000 people rallied in Moscow to protest the results and several hundred did the same in other regions. According to independent rights group Agora, up to 1,000 people were arrested in the capital. In the meantime, opposition Yabloko party head Sergei Mitrokin was briefly

¹ Particularly those supporting The Other Russia Eduard Limonov's opposition movement. See "United Russia wins less than 50%" (*The Moscow Times*, 5 December 2011).

² "Chechnya Backs Ruling Party 99.5%" (*The Moscow Times*, 5 December 2011).



detained. On 10 December, at least 25,000 people, the biggest demonstration since 1991, gathered in the center of Moscow to denounce the election outcome. Given all these events, we can consider that Russia has entered a new cycle in its political life.

United Russia's monopolization of power has ended, as it could not change the Constitution to please the Kremlin again. The next Duma will be more open for debate, especially in serious matters like the federal budget vote. Thus, real parliamentarianism and democracy could emerge in the country, if the three other parties play the role of constructive opponents and take an active part in decision-making. The future of United Russia will depend on its ability to compromise with the other political forces for the sake of the country. Yet, since the early 2000s this party has been used to impose its views on every matter. In order to reach a new qualitative level, it should renew its staff and recruit younger and more inventive people. The Duma elections showed the limits of Vladimir Putin's vertical system of power built at the beginning of the 2000s. If centralization was much needed at the time in order to avoid the collapse of the Russian state, this system does not apply anymore in a world, and in a country, where information travels at the speed of social networks. Contrary to many analysts' beliefs,³ the announcement by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at United Russia Congress on 24 September 2011 of job swapping with Dmitry Medvedev, in case he returns to the Kremlin in March 2012, deeply shocked many Russians, especially among the emerging urban middle-class, the young and educated people. Those people were attracted by Medvedev's promises of modernization and the corresponding changes in the economy, society and politics. By preventing President Medvedev from running for a second term, Putin committed a political mistake. Instead, he should

have decided to leave as his historical role – the consolidation of the Russian state – has been achieved. The aftermath of Duma elections lays the ground for a more competitive presidential election, on 4 March 2012, which will be closely watched by the Russian voters, as well as by national and foreign observers.

If Putin wants to become president (and popular) again, he will have no choice but to take into account the demonstrators' demands for democratization and endorse Medvedev's modernization plans. Immediate political reforms, after taking office in the Kremlin, should be reinstating direct elections for regional governors and lowering the threshold for parties to enter the Duma from 7% to 3%. Procedures for registering new parties should also be eased in order to make way for future representation of the 47 million-strong Internet savvy middle class. The modernization strategy should not merely stress the creation of innovation centers like the one being built in Skolkovo.⁴ It should also implement independent courts and enforce a real fight against corruption by putting in jail high-ranking officials accepting bribes. All these reforms would turn Russia more business-friendly and would help the country to diversify its economy away from energy to an innovative one.

At the end of 2011, or 20 years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia finds itself at the crossroads again. In 2012, if Putin returns to the Kremlin, he will have a hard job getting rid of the system he established during the 2000s and setting up a fundamentally new paradigm. He will have to find the proper balance between technology and democracy that will fit the country for, at least, the next ten years. It is high time to move to Russia 2.0.

3 "Russia Profile Weekly Experts Panel: Putin for President, Medvedev for Prime Minister" (*Russia Profile*, 30 September 2011).

4 In March 2010, President Medvedev decided to build a Russian Silicon Valley in the town of Skolkovo (20 km from Moscow city centre). The Skolkovo Valley will focus on five priority areas for modernization: biotechnology, energy, IT, telecommunication and nuclear technology.

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