

The Show Must Go On: Elections, United Russia and the Putin Regime¹

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In one respect, the results of the December 2011 elections were not a huge surprise for Russia-watchers. Polls, the results of the March regional elections, various experts and even Vladislav Surkov's announcements had prepared the ground for United Russia to lose its 2/3 majority in the Duma and retain just a simple majority. What was a shock for almost everyone was that the party got less than 50% of the votes cast. This was a huge psychological blow for the regime that continues to have repercussions. In certain respects, nothing has changed: The Kremlin still has a loyal and disciplined majority in the Duma and will be able to get its legislation adopted with few questions asked. And Russia is still, twenty years after the end of USSR, not close to experiencing a change of regime via the ballot box, as Vladimir Putin is still Russia's most popular politician. Yet, for a regime that is used to dominating the formal political system via its 'party of power's overwhelming control of the national as well as regional legislatures, and demonstrating its invincibility in successive elections, less than 50% of votes is not an auspicious position, and is one that some commentators are already seeing as the beginning of the end of the Putin period, if not necessarily of the regime he relies on.²

In this paper, the aim is to explore why United Russia did not manage to obtain 50% of the votes and what this signifies about the current regime. It is argued that United Russia is a personalised party, dependent above all on the personal popularity and resources of Vladimir Putin and, to a lesser extent, on the personal resources of regional notables (governors, mayors etc). Therefore the party's performance in elections can be interpreted as an indicator of the incumbent regime's integrity, legitimacy and capacity to manage electoral outcomes. Principally what went wrong for the regime in 2011 was that the core pillars upon which United Russia's electoral performance rested – the popularity and personal power of Vladimir Putin; the effectiveness of 'governor-locomotives'; and administrative resources - were all less effective in 2011 than 2007, resulting in the lacklustre result for United Russia, puncturing the 'aura of invincibility'³ around the regime.

What are elections for?

Elections do matter in Russia, but not necessarily for the same reasons as in consolidated democracies: they do not act a mechanism for a democratic transfer of power, nor (or at least only in a very limited sense) do they serve as a mechanism for popular accountability of those in power. Instead, elections are better understood as an indicator of incumbent strength and integrity; of the incumbent's ability to control the electoral sphere.⁴ Secondly, elections can be understood as a signal of popular acquiescence (which during the Putin period was perhaps akin to the 'Brezhnev social contract') which crucially conferred democratic legitimacy on the regime and the legitimacy of the Russian state is formally based on the idea of democratic origin. In this light, the December 2011 elections (and indeed the March 2011 regional elections which presaged them) indicate tectonic shifts in Russian politics as United Russia lost its constitutional majority and symbolically failed to win at least half of the popular vote.

What is United Russia (for)?

United Russia is the most successful 'party of power' in Russia's history. Unlike in the 1990s, when parties of power did not survive an election cycle, United Russia has won 3 national legislative elections and nearly all regional elections since 2003. However this is not a party in the classic sense: it does not perform a role in aggregating or articulating societal interests; it does not have a discernible role in influencing policy (or seeking to do so *as a party*); it does not have an identifiable ideology.⁵ Elsewhere we have adapted the concept of the dominant party in authoritarian regimes, arguing that United Russia's personalised nature and lack of agency distinguishes it from typical dominant parties like the People's Action Party in Singapore so it is not able to play the typical roles expected of such parties.⁶ For Magaloni and Kricheli, dominant parties perform two main functions in non-democratic regimes 'a bargaining function, whereby the dictator uses the party to bargain with elites and minimise potential threats to their stability; and a mobilising function, whereby dictators use the party machine to mobilise mass support'.⁷ Both functions are important for maintaining regime cohesion and deterring would-be challengers. However, we argue that while United Russia assisted with the managing of elites via the party's domination of legislatures, its influence on executives (regional and national) remained minimal and at regional level the party was less successful at managing elite conflict. Likewise, while the party assisted in propagating the notion of Putin as the 'national leader', the role of the party in mobilising the masses and managing elections was at best a subaltern one.⁸ This is because of United Russia's dependence upon, above all, the personal popularity of the president or national leader as well as other notables at regional level for their electoral support. In other words, it is not so much that the party mobilises support for the leader, but the other way around: the party harvests the national leader's popularity at parliamentary and regional elections, underpinned by those of regional leaders, electoral clientelism, a skewed playing field (in terms of laws (and their selective application) on the registration of political parties and on elections),⁹ administrative resources, media control and, to some extent, fraud. However, if one or more of these buttresses of party support are undermined, in particular the most important, personalistic, elements, then the party can struggle to maintain its seemingly invincible position in the political system, and this is what occurred during 2011.

The 2011 Duma Elections

Duma elections, coming just 4 months prior to presidential elections, have the sense of a presidential primary, with the vote for United Russia being an indicator of regime strength prior to the presidential elections, delivering popular legitimacy boost to the regime and the necessary support in the Duma to ensure a stable and favourable political climate for the subsequent all-important election. This was especially significant in the 2007-08 presidential succession, where a 2/3 Duma majority for United Russia was needed to guarantee Putin's unassailable position as Prime Minister and to amend the constitution to extend the presidential term to 6 years.

United Russia's performance in Duma Elections

	2003	2007	2011
% vote	37.56*	64.3	49.32
No. (%) Duma seats	315 (70%)	385 (85.5%)	238 (52.3%)

*in party list portion of the vote

Source: <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>

In 2003 and especially 2007 there were several pillars to United Russia's electoral success which faltered in 2011. The most important was the popularity and personal power of Vladimir Putin and the ability of the party to forge a close association with him personally in what remains a very personalised political system at national and regional levels. Indirectly in 2003 and very directly in 2007, Putin played the role of a 'locomotive' dragging the party to victory (but never intending to take up his Duma seat). In 2007 United Russia's poll rating remained around 50%, which was insufficient to guarantee the smooth succession, and so rather unexpectedly, Putin headed the party list, and ratings immediately improved.¹⁰ In 2011, the situation was more complicated as both the party and Putin's personal rating were falling, so Putin's ability to act as a locomotive was reduced (see below).

Personal Approval Ratings

	2010	Jan-Jul 2011	Aug-Nov 2011	Net change
Vladimir Putin	78-80%	69-68%	67-68%	-10-15%
Dmitri Medvedev	72-77%	66-69%	62-63%	-10-12%

Source: <http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/noyabrskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya-reitingi-partij>, accessed 10.1.12

Furthermore, after the party's poor showing in the March 2011 regional elections, where United Russia's vote share fell ~15-20%, Putin began actively to distance himself from the party and authorised Vycheslav Volodin to form the All-Russian People's Front (ONF) in an attempt to rebrand the party, to draw fresh blood into it and, if necessary, provide an alternate basis for his presidential nomination. Putin has *always* had a rather ambivalent attitude to the party, which he led from 2008 until April 2012, but never actually became a formal member. In 2011, he chose not to head the party list, fearful it could harm his presidential bid, and handed to 'locomotive' role to Dmitri Medvedev. Even though analysts say Putin campaigned harder than ever for the party,¹¹ his refusal to head the list and the fact that they had no advance warning about his planned return to the presidency insulted the party, and threw them into disarray for several weeks at the beginning of the campaign. The 'castling' of Putin and Medvedev did not impress (urban, educated, middle class) voters either and evoked a surge of internet discourse about stagnation.¹² Furthermore, Medvedev was a poor fit with the party's voters – not only had he declined to join the party, but he'd often been critical of it as he sought to cultivate a younger, more liberal image.

'Governor-locomotives' were traditionally the second pillar of United Russia's electoral success. During the 1990s, many governors were able to build electoral machines which enabled them to mobilise and direct voters¹³ and during the 2000s, the Kremlin sought to harness these machines to serve United Russia. So governors were recruited to head regional party lists and corralled into the party: in 2003 28 governors acted as 'locomotives', and by 2007 the number rose to 65. This strategy forced governors to take personal responsibility for the electoral performance of the party in their region and helped orientate regional and federal resources to a unified goal. However, in 2011 this tactic was not so effective. Why? The end of governors' direct election (in 2004) and the widespread replacement of governors 2009-11 was intended to strengthen the 'power vertical' by making governors' entirely dependent upon the president. However it had the unintended

consequence of reducing many governors capacity to act as locomotives: some governors lacked popularity in their regions, or perhaps more importantly, had not yet established good relations with local elites.¹⁴ Instead, in regions like Stavropol', Leningrad and Volgograd the role of locomotive was passed to national figures like deputy Prime Ministers or celebrities like Valentina Tereshkova. Soon after the disappointing results, Medvedev announced plans to reintroduce directly elected governors, which *inter alia* can be interpreted as affirming the significance of governor's personal popularity and resources in ensuring high turnout and pro-regime voting.

The third pillar of United Russia's success can be summarised under the umbrella term administrative resources. It is widely documented that the party was the beneficiary of the connections and resources that could be accessed by state officials who were party members or at least needed to demonstrate their loyalty to the Kremlin to ensure the appropriate flow of budget receipts. In a state as large and diverse as Russia there are a number of dimensions to this, but certain trends can be identified. There were attempts to mobilise voters through distributing resources in the name of United Russia. At national level this included electoral populism such a Prime Minister Putin's 2011 cancellation of annual vehicle roadworthiness tests and a domestic energy price freeze.¹⁵ At the regional level this meant local direct clientelism e.g. distributing food hampers to veterans. We should also differentiate by region. In well-established authoritarian sub-regimes like Chechnya, Dagestan and Karbardino-Balkaria the election results directly reflected the extent of local elites' control over the political sphere. Other regions required more subtle 'political technologies' such as promises of long awaited infrastructure projects like roads or funding for pensioners' organisations.¹⁶ So direct and indirect means were used to enforce the connection in voters' minds between more resources for them personally or for their locality if they voted for United Russia. Clearly such resources were effective in mobilising voters especially in rural areas and ethnic republics but by 2011 advancing communication technologies meant that voters' were much more aware of such tactics, that in fact it was not a product of United Russia's efforts and resources, and that it was illegal.¹⁷ Therefore such tactics became less effective among urban populations, and particularly among younger and better educated voters.

So the three pillars of support on which United Russia's vote rested – Vladimir Putin's popularity and personal power; governor-locomotives and administrative resources were all less effective in 2011 than in 2007 and this created some space for the opposition (parliamentary and non-parliamentary) to become more visible. While United Russia struggled to come up with a narrative: stability just was not as convincing in 2011 as it had been in 2003 when most of the electorate remembered the 1990s or in the context of the Chechen war; and coinciding with Putin's anticipated return, sounded too much like stagnation. Bloggers like Aleksey Navalny's branding of United Russia as 'the party of swindlers and thieves' reached an impressive 46% of voters¹⁸ and despite the uneven playing field and marginalisation of opposition political parties, the 'vote for anyone but United Russia' campaign also seems to have had some effect in terms of getting voters to turn out and vote against the party.

Contours and Significance of 2011 Election Results

United Russia's result below 50% (49.32%) was a significant blow to the regime. Authoritarian regimes need high voter turnout and high levels of support for the regime (over 2/3 preferably) even in the absence of competitive elections with real alternatives. This is because supermajorities based on very high turnouts help to create what Magaloni and Kricheli call an 'aura of invincibility' around the ruling regime. This image of invincibility helps to deter potential challengers, and especially defectors from the regime.¹⁹ In this way, legislative elections perform what Golosov calls a 'signalling' function – transmitting the message that the regime is 'rock solid'.²⁰ What happened on December 4th then sent another signal – that the regime was losing its popular support and ability to control the outcome of elections.

The regional breakdown of the voting for United Russia reveals a very stark differentiation in the levels of support in the ethnic Russian oblasts (where support was around 32-45% vote) and in non-Russian ethnic republics (e.g. results in 70s in Chukotka, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and in the 80s in Karbardino-Balkari, Tuva and Karachai-Cherkessia and in the 90s in Chechnya, Dagestan and Mordovia).²¹ These patterns continue those established in previous elections, but are more pronounced because of the significant drop in the vote for United Russia in the ethnically Russian regions. Further breakdowns point to the continued distinction between urban and rural voting, with rural voting being much more controlled and subject to administrative resources. Large cities consistently reported significant falls in the vote for United Russia.²² All this suggests that, even if we put aside the widespread allegations of fraud, and indeed the spectacular public reaction to them, United Russia's support was pushed back into the provinces and non-Russian regions, further limiting its ability to perform important stabilising functions for the regime such as integrating elites and co-opting potential challengers.

In lieu of a conclusion

The aura of invincibility essential to the long-term stability of Putin's regime was irrevocably punctured by the 2011 Duma election results. United Russia receiving less than half the votes cast meant quite simply that the Kremlin was losing its ability to control elites sufficiently to ensure adequate pro-regime voting. This revealed the known weaknesses of the 'power vertical' all too clearly and in turn raised further questions about the effectiveness of Putin's rule. The subsequent 'authoritarian reaction' in the form of laws further restricting the activity of NGOs, demonstrations, extending the legal definition of treason, creating a legal pretext for internet censorship, the prosecution of a number of opposition activists, the unseating of critical deputies and senators, and the removal of governors in regions where United Russia fared poorly all serve to underline the extent to which the regime was frightened by the December 2011 events and the large-scale mass protests that followed. The crackdown was intended to raise the costs of defecting from the regime for elites and of supporting the opposition for the masses. It also represented an attempt to claw back a sense in the minds of elites and the population that the regime was firmly in control, that there was no alternative to it.

While such measures may work to some extent in the short-term – for example the December 2012 protests were very small compared to those one year previously – it is unlikely to do so in the longer term as a sense that ‘There Is No Alternative’ is not the same as democratic legitimacy to rule, which was undermined not only by the election result for United Russia and also by the waves of popular protest contesting the legitimacy of the result, and the three main supports for United Russia’s electoral performance outlined above are also key props for the regime itself. Putin’s rating will never recover its earlier dizzy heights and the unassailable position it conveyed. The ‘power vertical’ is not an effective form of governance²³ and the capacity of ‘political technologies’ to manufacture convincing electoral support is waning. Moreover United Russia’s political capital (always a function of Putin’s) is increasingly viewed as a political liability by elites at all levels of the political system,²⁴ making the future of the party uncertain. However, the party does perform important functions for the regime, albeit not exactly effectively, and the next parliamentary elections are a still long time away. After all, as Putin said in 2007, ‘[United Russia] lacks a stable ideology or principles ... [and attracts] all sorts of freeloaders ... nevertheless we have nothing better...’²⁵ In sum, the regime was profoundly shaken by the 2011 Duma election results as some of its weaknesses were revealed both to elites and to the masses. The role of United Russia as the principle formal mechanism for integrating and co-opting elites and for harvesting Putin’s popularity at election time is consequently being reviewed – as indicated by the relaxation of the party registration rules and particularly discussions about a reversion to a mixed electoral system – but it may not be substantively changed. It is likely that the Kremlin will prefer an increasingly ineffective personalised dominant party to starting from scratch without a clear idea or consensus on what might constitute a viable alternative.

¹ This research was conducted as part of the project ‘Personalised Dominant Parties in Russia and Kazakhstan’ conducted with Rico Isaacs, funded by Oxford Brookes University. An earlier version of the paper was presented to the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki, 25 January 2012.

² For a particularly illuminating example, see Krastev, I. and Holmes, S. ‘An Autopsy of Managed Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy*, 23(3), pp.33-45.

³ Magaloni, B. and Kricheli, R., ‘Political Order and One-Party Rule’, *The Annual review of Political Science*, 13, December 2009, p. 123-43.

⁴ Brownlee, J., *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratisation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.9.

⁵ See Roberts, S., *Putin’s United Russia Party*, Routledge, 2012.

⁶ Isaacs, R. and Whitmore, S., ‘The Limited Agency and Life-Cycles of Personalised Dominant Parties in the post-Soviet Space: The cases of United Russia and Nur Otan’, *Democratization*, 2013 (forthcoming)

⁷ Magaloni. and Kricheli, op cit, p.124-5.

⁸ Isaacs and Whitmore, op cit.

⁹ See Ross, C., ‘The Rise and Fall of Political Parties in Russia’s Regional Assemblies’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 63(3), 2011, pp.429-448

¹⁰ Roberts, op cit, p.99

¹¹ Interviews with Aleksei Makarkhin, 1.11.11 and Andrei Riabov, 23.9.11

¹² For example see Kynev, A., ‘Demotivator’, *Gazeta.Ru*, 26.10.11, <http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2011/blogs/3781490.shtml> (accessed 30.10.11, no longer available online)

¹³ Hale, H. *Why Not Parties in Russia?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.166-73

¹⁴ Interviews with Nikolai Petrov, 28.9.11, Irina Busygina, 21.10.11 and Aleksandr Kynev, 24.10.11, Kynev, A., ‘S figoy v karmane’, *Gazeta.ru*, 14.3.11, www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/03/14_x_3553753.shtml (accessed 20.3.11). Furthermore *Moskovskie Novosti* 12.10.11 reported how conflicts between governors and local

businesses were expected to negatively affect the election campaigns in Irkutsk and Volgograd (reproduced in Johnson's Russia List, 184, 12.10.11)

¹⁵ Loginov, M., 'Fixing Russian Elections: Manipulation (voters) and Massage (Results)', 22.11.11

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/mikhail-loginov/fixing-russian-elections-manipulation-voters-and-massage-results> (accessed 22.11.11)

¹⁶ A particularly famous example was Denis Agashin, the city manager of Ijevsk, who on 24.10.11 bluntly articulated to local pensioners a direct relationship between the amount of budgetary funds for their district and the size of the vote for United Russia, and was filmed by a pensioner

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G3_xxtxBKI (last accessed 20.12.12)

¹⁷ Kynev, op cit; interviews with Ilya Ponamarev, 30.09.11, Irina Busygina, 21.10.11 and Andrei Zakharov, 18.10.11.

¹⁸ Levada Centre survey 25-8.11.11 reported that 62% voters had heard the term, and 46% associated it with United Russia (www.levada.ru, accessed 6.1.11, no longer available online).

¹⁹ Magaloni. and Kricheli, op cit, p.129

²⁰ Golosov, G., 'A Defeat in all but name', *Open Democracy*, 5.12.11, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/grigorii-golosov/defeat-in-all-but-name> (accessed 6.12.11)

²¹ Zubarevich, N. 'Four Russias: Rethinking the Post-Soviet Map', *Open Democracy*, 29.3.12, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/natalia-zubarevich/four-russias-rethinking-post-soviet-map> (accessed 29.3.12)

²² Ibid.

²³ See Monaghan, A., 'The Vertikal: Power and Authority in Russia', *International Affairs*, 88(1), 2012, pp.1-16

²⁴ During elections in 2012, United Russia candidates either dropped the party's branding (like Mr Putin, see Kashin, O., "Единая Россия" останется с нами, даже если завтра нам скажут, что она переименована или распущена", 13.2.12, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1872430?isSearch=True>, accessed 13.2.12) or chose to run as independents (as in Moscow's municipal elections as well as a number of mayoral contests (Sliva, E., 'The Party is Over', *Russia Profile*, 8.2.12, <http://russiaprofile.org/politics/54137.html> accessed 8.2.12))

²⁵ Sakwa, R., *The Crisis of Russian Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.235.