



NDC Research Report

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Flattering to deceive? Change (and continuity) in post election Russia

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The Elections

Since December, something new has appeared to emerge in Russian politics, even perhaps hinting at a democratic upheaval. A series of rather large demonstrations after the parliamentary elections appeared to unsettle the leadership team, and commentators observed with increasing certainty that even as Putin appeared set to win the election, the Putin era is coming to an end. This assumption has rapidly become orthodoxy: he is, many have averred, out of touch and even at odds with the Russian population. One of the main questions, which resulted in much speculation, became whether he could even win in a first round or be forced into a second round run off.

In among a plethora of polls and conflicting data, however, Vladimir Putin's ratings have risen steadily over the last month, from the low forties to the low fifties among more pro-Putin oriented polling organisations by mid February. By late February, most polling organisations suggested that he would win in the first round. His victory when it came on the 4th March, with the official result of 63.6%, was in fact slightly above most polling predictions, with Putin and his campaign team praising the role of new elements introduced to improve reliability, such as the closed circuit television cameras installed at polling booths. The head of the Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov, asserted that it was the cleanest election Russia has ever had.

The result is disputed by some who assert large scale falsification of the results, including through new methods such as the last minute creation of new polling stations and the use of company structures to allow the same person to vote numerous times undetected (a version of carousel voting). Opposition or independent sources suggest that the falsifications were on a scale of some 10%, but this still indicates that Putin won more than the required 50% to win in the first round: Golos suggested he won 54%, and the League of Voters estimated 53%. By most counts, therefore, including those of a more independent or opposition inclination, Putin won in the first round.²

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2 The exception to this was in Moscow, where Putin gained 47% of the vote. His nearest competitors in Moscow were Mikhail Prokhorov, who garnered 20% and Gennadiy Zyuganov who gained 19%. Opposition figures who claim that Putin "lost" in Moscow are unable to point to a different candidate who "won". It should also be noted that opposition figure Alexey Navalny's RosVybory organisation estimated Putin's result to be 49%.

The sense in Moscow in the aftermath of the elections seems to have been an attempt to wrap up proceedings and effect a quick closure. On the evening of Sunday 4 March, a large celebratory rally was held next to the Kremlin, at which an estimated 110,000 Putin supporters met. The president elect spoke of winning “fair and square” and having “passed an important test”, and was photographed shedding a tear (though he claimed it was due to the wind). The following day, Putin met three of the other candidates (Gennadiy Zyganov, the leader of the Communist party refused to recognise the legitimacy of the result and declined to attend) and stated that “combat operations” were now over. As the newspaper *Kommersant* reported on 11 March, “the elections have passed, responsibilities remain” as the president elect turned to attend to formulating the 2013 budget.

The Demonstrations

Some echoes of the campaign continued, however, and pro- and anti- Putin demonstrations were held in the centre of Moscow on the evening of Monday 5 March. There was a sense of impending confrontation between the two sets of demonstrations. The pro-Putin demonstrations, spread out between Manezh and Teatralnaya Squares, were difficult to quantify in numbers, but appeared to be made up of mostly younger people, some apparently even of school age. Nevertheless, notable by its presence also was a stiffening of more physically robust supporters. Two of the main motifs of the demonstrators were “Vuibor sdelan” (the choice is made/the election is done) and “our president is Putin” – accompanied by the symbol of an orange snake being gripped in a black fist.³

The anti-Putin demonstration was held at the same time at Pushkin square, a ten minute walk from the pro-Putin events. Though it shared some similarities with previous opposition meetings, this demonstration was notably different. It was considerably smaller than previous events.⁴ Most estimates range from 14,000 to 30,000. However, others have put it at some 10,000, and even this may be a generous estimate. The constitution of the crowd seemed to be a more core protest group, with some additional “casual” support, rather than the much more swollen groups of 10th and 24th December and early February, and there were numerous unsavoury elements present.

Indeed, the atmosphere was notably more aggressive, more combative than that of the 10th December, and some chants appeared to be deliberately intended to provoke the police. The crowd was not, however, notably more united than at previous events: the only slogans that gained support in the crowd revolved around denying the results of the election, decrying Putin as a thief and calling for a “Russia without Putin”. Much commentary has focused on the rise of a “discontented urban middle class” in Russia this winter, of which more below. Yet, even though some representatives of such a group may have been present, it would be hard to describe this meeting accurately as a gathering of the frustrated “urban middle class”. It was much more a gathering of frustrated political groupings, and other small, unregistered parties. Communists, nationalists and supporters of Grigory Yavlinsky and Vladimir Ryzhkov were all present in the crowd, but not united by common aim. Indeed, beyond obvious political differences between communists and liberals, for instance, tensions between the organisers were much more visible. Some were clearly more intent on provoking conflict with the authorities than others, and it was a hard core that remained at the end beyond the official close of the event: the large majority had left.

3 A strong element of Putin’s election campaign was the need to counter the “orange threat”, a reference to the “Orange revolution” in Ukraine in 2004: hence the orange snake. Equally, some opposition elements also used pro “orange” symbols in their cause, and seek to echo techniques used in Kyiv such as sit-ins and civil disobedience.

4 In fact, the demonstrations, with the exception of Moscow and a couple of other cities, for the most part, had already been fluctuating in December and even shrinking.

A further anti-Putin demonstration took place on 10th March. Again, numbers were significantly lower than the main events in December and February. Some estimates suggest 20-25,000 but again, this may be generous.⁵ Again, though the atmosphere of the event was lighter than on 5 March, there was a strong sense that this was the core protest group, but one made up of numerous different elements. Most of the demands were for new elections, but few of the political figures who addressed the audience from the platform were roundly cheered by the audience. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, the most coherent and thoughtful speaker was Ksenia Sobchak, until recently known as a popular celebrity rather than as a political figure, who stated that everyone present (in the demonstration/movement) knew what they were against, but if they could not formulate what they were for, then everything would be in vain.

These numbers are a far cry from what some of the opposition leadership had hoped to achieve: Navalny at one point for instance claimed that it would be possible to muster one million participants in time for the elections. Instead, however, the size of the gatherings has headed firmly in the opposite direction. As a result of the decline in numbers, some see the opposition demonstrations as a spent force – and it does appear that the movement has haemorrhaged the main popular support that it garnered in December. The media was present at the demonstration, but apart from the *Moscow Times*, which covered it as a front page story, the other newspapers no longer seemed interested, and coverage of the 10 March demonstration was relegated to the depths of the inner pages.

How the opposition/protest movement develops will be interesting to watch. Some participants and observers are claiming that the movement is evolving from a more romantic period and entering a new phase, but, as noted above, it appears that the movement itself is far from united about what shape this new phase should take. It seems likely that the demonstrations will continue, but on a much smaller scale – effectively bristling against the regime rather than leading to change.

More broadly, the demonstrations warrant some careful consideration. They have been hailed as “unprecedented” and as reflecting the emergence of the “urban middle class” as a political force – both being signs of the beginning of change in Russia and the end of the Putin era. This approach, however, raises questions. Although some aspects of the demonstrations are new, including some of the openly derogatory remarks about Putin, it is harder to claim that they represent something “unprecedented” in Russian politics. Numerous other important demonstrations have taken place, and in terms of scale if not aim, the pensions protests and demonstrations in 2005 offer a comparable example. Claims about the size of the 2005 demonstrations are difficult to verify – some (left wing) assessments propose 300,000 across Russia, a scale which would dwarf the current anti-regime demonstrations, even at their peak. Others put the pensioner demonstrations at some 100,000 across Russia, which would mean they were approximately equal to the peak of the current demonstrations. Importantly, however, the protests in 2005 had a major impact both on Russian politics and Putin himself, resulting in a reversal by the government and seeming to make Putin more cautious in his approach to subsequent reform. Although they have generated considerable noise, it is unclear yet what these recent demonstrations have achieved – none of their stated aims so far (new elections, resignations of senior figures).

Here it is worth considering the response of the authorities to the demonstrations. Officials have sanctioned the great majority of the large demonstrations – though it should be noted that sometimes the processes for securing the permission have been complicated. The police force – a body well acquainted with scandal – has conducted itself with considerable skill. The events have been closely monitored and a large number of police, riot police and interior ministry troops have been deployed to the centre of Moscow. At the same time, the majority of the demonstrations have passed off peacefully.

⁵ Police estimates suggest 10,000, demonstration organizers anticipated 50,000, which was the agreed limit with the authorities.

The exception to this is the opposition demonstration on 5 March in Moscow as noted above: acting on what they claim to have been information about disturbances, the authorities prepared a sizeable riot squad for the Pushkin square demonstration. Even so, the police only moved in to break up the demonstration one hour after the official end of the sanctioned event as the core of the demonstrators attempted to prolong their protest. Those arrested were quickly released. The police presence on 10 March was much more relaxed. Although riot police were present, they were much less visible than on 5 March – instead the “visibility” duties were carried out by younger and less armoured police.

The second question regarding the role of the middle class also requires careful consideration. It is a long held tenet in the West that the middle class will emerge and generate, even force, reform in Russia. Yet, we must be careful not to see only what we want to see. As suggested above, the “urban middle class” formed only one element of this movement, and not necessarily the strongest. Now it appears, at least for the time being, to have melted away from the demonstrations. One of the reasons for this is a lack of support for those who seek to lead the movement: almost all those who have some support are artists and writers, not political figures. One opposition political figure, Alexei Navalny, for instance, is considered by many Russia watchers in the west to be a “talismanic figure” in Russian politics and one of the “bright stars” to have emerged from the demonstrations. But the Russian “urban middle class” itself appears to have a more ambiguous approach to the main opposition figures. Navalny does not have widespread support and even incurs some disapprobation: “avanturist” (“adventurer”), an ambiguous term in Russian, seems to arise often in debates about him. Mikhail Prokhorov is another who appears to have an ambiguous profile, and many seem to believe that he is part of the (Kremlin) leadership team rather than a real alternative to it. One further point here is that the movement may prove somewhat transient: as the more “euphoric” phase of the demonstrations ends, the meetings and the social networking and debates are going to be replaced by the chores of real politics. It remains to be seen what dynamism the opposition movement will retain in this new context.

What Next?

The results of the election are in, and will not be reconsidered – as Medvedev stated, they “will not give up the victory to anyone”. It is far from clear that Putin is losing power in Russia: he remains by some distance the most popular politician, or, perhaps in other words, the politician with the greatest capacity to mobilise support. His campaign, which offered a trident-style approach of Putin himself, public campaign manager Stanislav Govorukhin and political manager Vyacheslav Volodin, was remarkably successful. Demonstrations may well continue, and again opposition figures are calling for million participant marches in May just prior to Putin’s inauguration. We shall see what support they garner. But it is interesting to note that polls are now suggesting that a majority see the elections as broadly fair, and also that nearly 50% wish to see Putin running for election in 2018.

The next stage to observe is the long-promised “rotation” of officials, and this is generating as much, if not more speculation than the elections. While some appointments have already been made, the rotation itself has not yet taken place. Many rumours are flying about who will be appointed and who could lose out – these rumours are even circulating in high profile media about senior figures such as Igor Sechin, currently Deputy Prime Minister with the energy portfolio. We should remember, however, that similar rumours have lengthy histories and not always come to fruition, and not jump to hasty conclusions. Management of the leadership team and coordination of positions and appointments is the important question facing Putin.

In this line, many have questioned whether Putin will appoint Medvedev to the position of prime

minister, speculating about whether Medvedev has lost too much political credibility since the September announcement of Putin running for the presidency, or whether Alexei Kudrin will be appointed instead. Putin, however, has repeatedly stated that Medvedev would be his choice for the position. We shall see in due course, but given Putin's statements (and our poor record at predicting a split between the two men), for the time the working assumption should be that Medvedev will be PM. One point to watch may be the related speculation about how long Medvedev will remain prime minister, but in considering this, we should (again) remember the lengthy speculation – and with the benefit of hindsight, clearly misguided – that Putin would replace Medvedev during his term as President in 2008. Interestingly, some Russian commentators are now speculating that Medvedev will be a stronger PM than he was president. Two more specific points bear consideration. First, Putin and Medvedev met for three days of (apparently inconclusive) consultation after the election to debate the nature of the Cabinet. One wonders about the nature of the discussions, given their close relationship. How much was there to discuss? What terms were being hammered out and how? Second, if Medvedev is indeed appointed PM, it will be worth returning to consider the idea of a “two key leadership team” that appeared to emerge in 2010-2011, only for a common expert consensus to eliminate both it and the tandem arrangement from the debate when Putin's candidacy was announced in September. Rather than focusing on Putin alone, therefore, it is worth posing other questions. How will this arrangement evolve – will it become some form of a triumvirate? How big will the central leadership team be? Who will be in it?

Regarding rotations, some aspects of the leadership's intentions are clear already. Some regional governors have been dismissed, for instance. Equally, the newspaper *Vedomosti* reported on 6 March that the first action of the president elect was to begin to try to clean up state companies. Igor Sechin submitted the first results of an investigation into state companies to Putin, providing more than 200 instances where top managers faced conflicts of interest, for which Putin promised criminal proceedings. Putin may see his re-election, therefore, as an opportunity to attempt to reshape the currently inefficient vertical of power. Though the leadership team at the top is unlikely to see really significant changes (numerous firings from the leadership team, for instance), there may well be numerous changes at the secondary and tertiary levels.

Related to the rotation, it appears that too many in the West have only a very loose grasp of who the main and emerging figures in Russia are (beyond some of the obvious candidates such as Putin and Medvedev) – this may well lead to another round of “surprises” and the appointment of “unknowns”. Some biographical work may therefore be useful to understand better with whom we are dealing and what their aims may be. This is not just important for apparent “newcomers” such as Sergei Udaltsov and Alexei Navalny, who, despite perhaps rather questionable agendas, have rather seduced many in the West, becoming darlings of the opposition movement (they are not so much “newcomers” as previously ignored – Navalny, for instance, though often considered to be a “blogger and activist” is a politician with a ten year political career behind him). This would include consideration of others who might not immediately appear to be politically important, such as Ksenia Sobchak. Until very recently, Sobchak, the second daughter of Anatoliy Sobchak, formerly Mayor of St. Petersburg and for whom Vladimir Putin worked, was known best as “Russia's version of Paris Hilton”, a celebrity who presented Russia's version of the television series “Big Brother”. It is only since December that she has emerged as a more political figure. It might also include those who may have been insufficiently considered in the past, such as Mikhail Prokhorov, who is considered by some to be a “new face” in Russian politics. Here, it seems that the failed effort to invigorate the *Pravoe Delo* party in 2011 and the time between Prokhorov's removal from the position as party head and his decision to run in the presidential campaign would benefit from deeper consideration.

More sophisticated conclusions than those that he was fired by Kremlin intrigue for being too independent are necessary. Finally, it would also include some of the recent appointments to official positions: the career of Vyacheslav Volodin, for instance, is worthy of deeper consideration.⁶ Who are the people in the secondary and tertiary echelons of power who are being appointed?

Similarly, it is worth being aware of the possibility of an impending evolution in the wider political horizon in three ways. First, how will the United Russia party respond to the recent results? So far, it has responded by attempting to establish a “three pillar approach”, of conservative, liberal and patriotic elements. It may also be that United Russia is rebranded somehow to emphasise “fairness” in Russian politics – Rossiya Edinaya i Spravedlivaya [RES] would make for a slogan fully congruent with Putin’s campaign and victory speeches, for instance.

Second, some of the old warhorses of Russian politics appear to be unlikely to be candidates for the next presidential election – and given the nature of their defeats on this occasion, it is likely that some early politicking to replace them and begin to build a party to compete in the next presidential elections six years hence will take place soon. Gennadiy Zyuganov is one example: already the question appears to have been raised about Sergei Udaltsov being a possible successor, a suggestion quickly and rather resoundingly denied by a member of the KPRF who stated that Udaltsov is not even a party member. Equally, Udaltsov has been mentioned as a possible leader for Just Russia. Given the gap in results between the success of the party Spravedlivaya Rossiya in the parliamentary elections and (the party’s presidential candidate) Sergei Mironov’s rather weak performance in the presidential elections, it may be that he also faces a challenge. Similar statements could be made for the leader of the nationalist party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Watch this space, as they say.

Third, new groups and parties may emerge, and gain some success. Some are already emerging. How Dmitri Rogozin uses his position will be important to monitor. Another example may be the party that Mikhail Prokhorov has stated he will establish (a party “without a political agenda”, he claims). It is worth remembering one of the proposals made in early December by Vladislav Surkov, then deputy head of the presidential administration, that a party should be created to soak up urban discontent. It seems likely that this could be the central aim of Prokhorov’s new party – and in so doing would of course have the blessing of the leadership.

Beyond these possible evolutions in the political sphere, two further points merit attention. First, and importantly, what has been happening while attention has been focused on the demonstrations and democratic electoral standards in Russia? What has gone on in the corridors of power, what developments in business? In fact, a number of noteworthy developments have taken place, such as the signature of a strategic cooperation agreement between the gas company Itera and state oil company Rosneft.⁷ Other important debates are also underway about the control of Russia’s ports and the possible privatisations of infrastructure.

Second, in terms of Russian foreign affairs and relations aspects of the strategic overhaul conducted during Medvedev’s term as president may be refreshed, for instance the foreign policy documentation. This should not be taken as a “new direction” but as reflecting an updating of the situation. Here, for instance, it may be that some of the lessons learned from the so called “Arab Spring” are incorporated into Moscow’s thinking – the role that NATO played in Libya for instance (whether this sets a precedent), and what can be learned from the use of social media in international affairs.

6 Prior to joining United Russia, the 48 year old Volodin was a Duma Deputy in the Fatherland-All Russia block. He became head of the Fatherland-All Russia block in September 2001. In December 2001, Fatherland-All Russia party merged with Unity to form United Russia, and Volodin’s rise to the top of that party has been steady. In October 2010, he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, as part of his role as chief of staff of the Russian government.

7 The Itera Group is one of the largest producers and traders of natural gas in the Eurasian region.

It may also be that Moscow again proposes reforms of the European security and energy architectures. An important element of the Russian foreign policy agenda in 2008-2009, the proposals have been less prominent in Moscow's rhetoric over the last couple of years, but have remained an important part of policy itself (particularly in seeking to mediate in Libya and building a missile defence relationship with NATO).

In sum, the results of the elections threaten a potential dual perspective. First, there may be a wider drop in Western interest in Russian affairs after the elections. Some prominent western international affairs thinkers have noted a strong sense of Russia fatigue and that Russia is no longer a priority either as a partner or as a threat. The anticipated result of the elections, and the apparent dwindling of the romantic opposition demonstration movement may well allow observers to draw the conclusion that they do not need to focus on Russia, since there is no "news": Putin's next presidential term simply reflects well known old bats in old belfries.

At the same time, these elections offer another possible dissonant episode in Russia-Western relations, another illustration of different conclusions being drawn from the same body of evidence. While Putin stated that he had won "fair and square" and sees the result as a clear legitimisation of his presidency, some Western leaders have only slowly or partially congratulated him on his victory. On 5 March, the EU joined the OSCE in voicing its concerns about the elections, noting shortcomings in their preparation and conduct. The OSCE emphasised that there was "no real competition and the use of government resources ensured that the ultimate winner of the election was never in doubt." Such critiques are vigorously rebutted by various Russian officials, and Vladimir Churov appears to have suggested that the monitoring missions of the OSCE and European Council provided opportunities for gathering political and military information. Accusations of police brutality in Russia in breaking up the demonstration on 5 March were rebutted with the affirmation that the police acted appropriately and their actions were not as brutal as those of the police breaking up demonstrations in the US. Such rebuttals should also be seen in the light of the strong accusations by senior Russian officials, including Putin himself, of western (particularly US) support for the opposition demonstrations. Electioneering or not, the accusations were harsh and likely to have at least a temporary negative impact on what remains of the US-Russia reset. Gaps in perceptions of Putin's legitimacy as president may shroud relations in tension – relations that show some strain over Libya, Syria and other issues such as missile defence. Such differences may become all the more stark as a summit season approaches – the G-8 (Camp David) and NATO (Chicago) summits and the EU-Russia summit before the summer are likely to offer opportunities for friction.