

“UNITED RUSSIA” UNITES RUSSIANS

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The Duma 2011 elections turned out to be business unusual for the Kremlin and the political establishment in Russia. Although United Russia remained united to a large extent, the Sunday elections marked the biggest backdrop for PM V. Putin since 1999.

With more than 96% of the voted counted official results indicate a sharp drop in United Russia's percentage, dropping for the first time to than 50%, that is 49.5% of the votes while the Communist Party, Fair Russia Party and the Liberal Democrats got 19.2, 13.2 and 11.7 respectively while Yabloko remained below 4%ⁱ and the threshold to enter the Duma.

Those results, officially, do not mean too much as the 238 seats of United Russia (down from 315) assure the absolute majority within the Duma, in any case enough to pass most of the laws at hand. However, for the first time the governing party achieved less than 50% of the votes and, although secure now, it would be easier to lose the absolute majority in the Duma should serious opposition rises from within, in view of possible frictions between Vladimir Putin and current president Dmitri Medvedev or succession struggles among the elite of the current government and its allies throughout the federation.

Nevertheless, widespread corruption and allegations by several different parties regarding election fraud have sparked an unprecedented, for the time being, some 3 days after the elections, reaction from various groups including all the opposition and other civil groups and individuals. Last week Tuesday night saw some serious clashes on the streets of Moscow between opposition groups and the police who made several arrests of opposition supporters on the merits of 'protesting unsanctioned' while simultaneously pro-Putin supporters held parallel pro-government rallies.

While opposition protests are not uncommon in Russia (albeit less usual than in the West), this may be the first time since Putin took office in 2000 where there is an open confrontation between people supporting different groups, that is pro and anti-Putin and United Russia fans while this is also the first time when police are taking a firm stance, targeting the morale of the opposition.

Allegations for fraud have were made by the leader of the Communist Party who called the elections "the dirtiest ever"ⁱⁱⁱ, as well as OSCE which noted numerous apparent, 'numerous violations' such as the staffing of pollsⁱⁱⁱ. A senior official of OSCE, former member of Greek government, Petros Efthymiou, said that "the contest was slanted in favor of the ruling party"^{iv}. Boris Nemtsov, the leader of the Liberal Party Boris Nemtsov who was briefly arrested on Tuesday and released without charges said that "people finally realize they are being lied to. United Russia stole 13 million votes. Putin must go"^v. Russian print media also criticized the results of the elections while some, such as Mikhail Rostovski of Maskovski Komsomolet fear of gradual 'erosion of the legitimacy of the authorities' because the Kremlin, according to Rostovskli will ensure whatever results^{vi}.

On the other hand, Aleksandr Rubtsov of Novaya Gazeta highlights the fact that without Putin or with a weak politically Putin, United Russia is doomed to disperse^{vii}. Maria Lipman of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace in Moscow said that in any case "the Kremlin was used to having a monopoly of decision making, but no longer does" and that now "it looks weaker" while she pointed out that the Kremlin cannot amend the constitution unopposed^{viii}.

Washington was also not short on criticism. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cited on Tuesday "serious concerns" and voiced doubts about the elections being free and fair during her speech at the OSCE meeting^{ix}. That was the second criticism by Secretary Clinton while her comments were criticized as "unacceptable" by the Kremlin.

Indeed many urge to make clear that despite the hundreds of arrests in Moscow^x and elsewhere during the demonstrations, Russia will not experience any kind of 'color revolution'. However, regardless of any fraud and any extend this may had the results of last Sunday's elections may have set in force a series of events that will ultimately test and shake the current political establishment in Moscow.

As it is still early to predict what will follow between now and the March 2012 presidential elections, it would be premature to estimate Putin's popularity and political future in general at the moment. One thing is certain however and that is that Russia is now under the spotlight of the global community.

Although Russia has come a long way since the turbulent and 'dark' Yeltsin years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians have started to realize that the country and its civil society may now deserve and are more ready to progress to a more western version of parliamentary democracy. Putin's war on some Russian tycoons soon after he first became president and initial hopes of a somewhat authoritarian yet just and non-corrupt regime that would stabilize Russia for the better of all concerned. However, hopes soon started to weaken as it was becoming obvious that the Kremlin targeted not those who were corrupt or who were concentrating unidentified wealth but those who had serious leverage vis-à-vis the government (namely owners of large energy companies) and those with political ambitions and the wealth as well as popularity to back them.

Corruption ranges free in Russia at all levels of the government, maybe in somewhat more 'westernized' fashion. Corruption was followed by severe political control, consolidation of federal power, media and opposition crackdown and consolidation of the media to name some of the backdrops of Putin's era as president and man in power. The latest agreement for yet another swap between Putin's and Medvedev's posts and the alleged election fraud was the decisive and final drop that forced people react and clash with authorities at an unprecedented extend.

Russia has come a long way since *perestroika* and *glasnost*. It has also come a long way sine Yeltsin and the absurd atmosphere that surrounded Russian politics in the 1990s. Nevertheless, this may be yet a new turning point for the political reality of Russia. Moscow has become too important for Europe and the World to be left ungoverned or in a continuous turbulence. It would be up to both the citizens of Russia and the political leadership as well as opposition to prove in practice they are determined to move forward for the benefit or all concerned.

The Presidential elections of March 2012 are the Kremlin's and people's first test.

Notes:

ⁱ CNN.com, December 5, 2011. Accessed via: <http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/05/world/europe/russia-elections/index.html?iref=allsearch>

ⁱⁱ Irishtimes.com, December 5, 2011. Accessed via: <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2011/12/05/breaking6.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ BBC News, December 5, 2011. Accessed via: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16037975>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Sky News, December 6, 2011. Accessed via: <http://news.sky.com/home/world-news/article/16124860>

^{vi} BBC News, December 5, 2011. Accessed via: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16033460>

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} CNN.com, December 5, 2011. Accessed via: <http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/05/world/europe/russia-elections/index.html?iref=allsearch>

^{ix} Reuters, December 6, 2011. Accessed via: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/06/us-russia-election-usa-idUSTRE7B50IE20111206>

^x Deutsche Welle, December 6, 2011. Accessed via: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,15581878,00.html>