



# russian analytical digest

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## POLITICAL PARTIES

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## ANALYSIS

## United Russia and the 2011 Elections

By Ora John Reuter, Miami, Ohio

### Abstract

The December 2011 elections will be the third time that Russia's current party of power, United Russia, has competed in a national election. United Russia has dominated elections over the past decade by ensuring cohesion among the regional elite, crafting an effective catch-all ideology, and capitalizing on Putin's popularity. This election will be no different. The only remaining questions are 1) whether the Kremlin's potent PR machine can revive United Russia's popularity, which has lagged slightly over the past several months and 2) whether the inclusion of outsiders from the All-Russian People's Front on United Russia's party list will frustrate party loyalists enough to cause them to defect. All signs indicate that the party is prepared to manage these issues and that United Russia will win the December polls by a large margin.

### Putin, Medvedev, and the Party of Power

United Russia's most significant resource has always been its association with Vladimir Putin. Putin identified much more closely with the party than Yeltsin had with any party of power in the 1990s. Prior to the 2007 Duma elections Putin announced that, while he would not formally join the party, he would agree to head the United Russia list. Since that time he has served as party chairman without being a formal party member. As Figure 1 shows, United Russia's popularity does indeed trend with Putin's.

In 2008, responsibility for coordinating the executive branch's relations with United Russia was transferred from the Presidential Administration to the Apparat of the Government. Beginning in March 2010, Putin has presided over a series of eight interregional party conferences. Putin uses these conferences to announce major party initiatives oriented toward the regions. In short, Putin has settled into the role of party chairman in deeds as well as name.

The paradox of Putin's relationship with the party is that by closely tying his name and reputation to United Russia, Putin generates greater elite and mass support for the ruling party, but close affiliation also brings with it the risk that Putin could become constrained by the party and its image. Putin has sought to manage this tradeoff by refraining from joining the party formally while simultaneously ramping up his commitments to the party. Whether as prime minister or president, Putin has tied his name to the party to such an extent that it seems unlikely he will now abandon it.

President Medvedev, meanwhile, has not affiliated as closely with United Russia and often levels criticism at the mono-centric nature of Russia's party system. He took part in United Russia congresses in 2008 and 2009, but has not taken part in the inter-regional conferences since then. He rarely meets with United Russia leaders exclusively, preferring instead to hold joint meetings with all parliamentary parties. Thus, Medve-

dev's role has been more akin to that of Yeltsin in the 1990s: a non-partisan president who, while implicitly aligned with the party of power, fancies himself in the role of an impartial arbiter.

Several scenarios exist for Medvedev's future relations with the party. If Medvedev remains as president, the current status quo could persist, with Putin at the helm of United Russia and Medvedev continuing in his role as non-partisan arbiter. Another possible scenario has Medvedev affiliating even more closely with United Russia in a bid that would seek to boost United Russia's ratings by bringing Medvedev's personal electorate to the party. Either way, United Russia's chances in December depend, in large part, on strong executive support and it seems certain that it will receive such support.

### United Russia and the Political Elite

United Russia's success in winning elections has always depended not only on support from the Kremlin, but also on its ability recruit prominent elites into its ranks. Indeed, the coordination of almost all of Russia's regional political elite inside the party is one of its greatest strengths. In Russia, as in many other countries, political elites, such as regional governors, prominent legislators, enterprise directors, and mayors are important opinion leaders whose autonomous resources drive the vote. United Russia's main task in the 2000s was the cooptation of Russia's fractious and powerful regional elites.

It has not always been easy for United Russia to attract commitments from regional elites. In exchange for relinquishing their autonomy to United Russia, Russia's regional elites need assurances that they will receive ample spoils and career opportunities within the party. They need credible signals that the Kremlin will be investing its own resources in the party and making it a forum where spoils could be accessed and career advancement secured. In the early 2000s, many of Russia's regional elites did not see any such assurances and

calculated that maintaining control of their own autonomous political resources was more politically beneficial than linking their fates to the party of power.

But as the decade wore on it became clear that United Russia had the full support of the Kremlin and would be made a part of the regime's apparatus for distributing spoils and careers. Thus, more and more elites signed on to the dominant party project. In 2003, the party was only able to enlist 29 regional governors to place their names on the party list and put their powerful political machines to work for the party. By December 2007, however, 78 of Russia's 83 governors (now appointed by the president rather than elected directly by constituents) had joined the party. The party obtained a constitutional majority in the 2007 Duma elections, owing in no small measure to the administrative resources of the governors that it had recruited. Since that time, the party's influence among governors has only grown, as the vast majority of newly appointed governors are already party members (see Figure 2).

Progress in recruiting regional legislators, who also tend to represent the most powerful business interests in a region, has been gradual. But the party now enjoys the allegiance of an overwhelming majority of regional parliamentary deputies. As Figure 3 shows, United Russia initially had difficulty winning large majorities in regional elections. Majoritarian electoral rules disproportionately favored large parties, so the inability of United Russia to consistently dominate single member district (SMD) races in the early and mid 2000s is a strong indication of its difficulty closing out the market on strong candidates in the locales. Only after 2005 did United Russia begin dependably winning a majority of SMD races. Since 2008, United Russia has consistently won over 80% of single member races in the regions. Thus, even as its rating among voters fell in 2010 and 2011, the party maintained average seat shares near 80%. This is undoubtedly due to the party's monopoly on strong elite candidates, and speaks to the party's solid position among regional economic elites.

United Russia's (UR) representation among local and municipal elites has recently grown significantly. As of 2010, 21 of Russia's 25 largest cities had UR mayors. Data on other local and municipal posts is not easily available, but a United Russia press release from October 2010 indicated that 71.5% of the 42,335 local council positions elected in October 2010 were United Russia members, including 79.5% of city council deputies in regional capitals. Of the 2,325 municipal heads elected during that election cycle 67.5% were UR members. These figures are all the more impressive when one considers that the party with the next highest share of local deputies, the Communist Party of the Russian Federa-

tion (KPRF), held only 4 percent of seats and 2% of the heads of municipal administrations. These figures suggest a robust and penetrating ruling party organization with tentacles in all levels of representative government.

In sum, the vast majority of regional elites have now coordinated inside the ruling party. In return for linking their fates to the party and making their resources available to the Kremlin these elites receive access to intra-party logrolls that often determine the outcome of policy making and career advancement for themselves and their clients. Thus, the rules and norms embedded in the party, such that they are, reduce uncertainty for elites about how career opportunities will be distributed. This arrangement has given most elites little reason to abandon the party. Their prospects for career advancement are better inside the party, especially if they follow party discipline. One of United Russia's great success stories is the remarkable lack of defections that occurred during the economic crisis. To date, the party has experienced almost no high level defections.

In return for these career opportunities, regional elites put their machines, resources, authority and name recognition to work for the party in elections. This strategy of winning elections has proved wildly successful for United Russia. In the early 2000s, the party attempted to run candidates against locally popular gubernatorial candidates with disastrous results. In regional elections from 2003–2007, the party performed much better in regional elections where the governor headed the list, and the party's victory in the 2007 Duma elections owed as much to governors' machines as much as it did to Putin's popularity.<sup>1</sup>

The consolidation of Russia's regional political elite inside United Russia will remain one of the ruling party's greatest resources in the 2011–12 election cycle. But the electoral resources of Russia's regional elites have lost some of their former potency. Russia's most powerful regional governors, deputies, and mayors cut their teeth on relatively competitive elections in the 1990s and early 2000s. Only the most charismatic and resourceful survived these contests. In many regions, these powerful elected governors and mayors have been replaced with loyal appointees who lack the political machines and autonomous resources of their predecessors. Thus, in its search for loyal agents, the Kremlin may have undermined its own vote mobilizing capacity.

For the 2011 elections, the Kremlin is attempting to compensate for this lack of political talent by dispatching federal ministers to key regions to head United Russia

1 Golosov, Grigori. 2011. "Russia's Regional Legislative Elections, 2003–2007: Authoritarianism Incorporated" *Europe-Asia Studies* 63.3.

lists. Sergei Shoigu (Krasnoyarsk), Igor Shuvalov (Primoriya), Aleksandr Zhukov (Kaliningrad), Viktor Zubkov (Volgograd), Dmitrii Kozak (St. Petersburg), Igor Trutnev (Perm) and Igor Sechin (Stavropol) have thus far been proposed as candidates to head regional lists. The idea is not that these individuals are especially charismatic politicians, but simply that the direct involvement of a federal minister in a regional contest will give regional authorities an extra impetus to ensure that voters are mobilized for the ruling party. Hegemonic parties in other countries mobilize votes with the help of tentacle-like party organizations that penetrate social networks at the local level. With 2.2 million members, 54,000 primary party cells, and strong representation in organs of local self-government, United Russia's organization is much stronger than it was in 2007, but its organization still lags behind that of well-known hegemonic parties such as the PRI in Mexico or the KMT in Taiwan.

### A Hegemonic Party in the Electorate?

The United Russia vote is primarily a function of Putin's popularity, the consolidation of regional elites, and economic perceptions, but the role of voter appeals and partisanship is non-negligible. Studies have found that United Russia voters in 2007 tended to be 1) younger, and 2) more market-oriented than the average voter.<sup>2</sup> These same studies reveal that United Russia partisanship is important even while holding constant support for Putin, evaluations of economic performance, and ideological stances. One poll from 2007 indicated that 40% of voters thought that United Russia was an independent political party, while 38% viewed it only as an instrument of Putin.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, United Russia also captures for itself that segment of the population that is comfortable with the idea of limited democracy and a strong ruling party. United Russia's electorate also consists of dependent voters (e.g. rural voters, pensioners, state employees) who respond to patronage appeals. Lavish government spending on National Projects clearly had an electoral purpose in 2007, as many of the objects built under those programs were advertised as initiatives of United Russia.

United Russia's typical campaign strategy reflects a combination of these elements. United Russia's former campaign initiatives to build the middle class reflect the liberal ideological strand in its platform. At the same

time, the party's erstwhile embrace of sovereign democracy embodied its appeals to voters that were more concerned with stability than democracy and corruption. Meanwhile, the party's long-time moniker as "*partiya realnykh del*" (party of real deeds) reflects its emphasis on clientelistic appeals to voters. In spite of all this, however, the dominant theme in the party's 2007 campaign materials was Putin.

Heading into the 2011 elections, the ratings of both Putin and United Russia have declined from their peak after the 2008 Presidential election (see Figure 1). The decline, which began in earnest at the beginning of 2011, comes amid high inflation over the first six months of the year, which led to a drop in real incomes. It also comes as an increasing number of Russians are expressing preferences for political liberalization and dissatisfaction with corruption. Prominent blogger and political activist, Alexei Navalny, whose anti-corruption efforts have gained widespread attention on the internet, has criticized United Russia relentlessly, labeling it as a "party of thieves and swindlers" (*partiya vorov i zhulikov*). While few average Russians are familiar with Navalny, the vitriolic dissatisfaction with United Russia among members of the liberal elite and in the blogosphere has certainly stained the party's image.

However, the Ministry of Finance's efforts to curb inflation appear to have worked, as real wages are now rising again. In addition, United Russia's ratings, at 54%, are about where they stood at the start of the campaign in 2007. In both of the past two election cycles, United Russia's ratings went up 10% in the three months between September and December. As the Kremlin's PR machine swings into action, there is no reason to believe that the same will not happen this year.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin appears to be reacting to perceived changes in voter preferences by changing its campaign strategy. First, in May, Putin announced the creation of the All-Russian People's Front (ONF), an umbrella organization uniting social organizations and trade unions in support of United Russia. Putin announced that 1/3 of the spots on United Russia's party list will be reserved for representatives of these organizations, although it remains to be seen how many of those will secure Duma seats. The ONF is clearly an attempt by the Kremlin to broaden the electoral appeal of United Russia, coopt new elites, and create a façade of liberalization for moderate-liberal voters.

Yet, the party recognizes that opportunities for expanding its electorate among liberal votes are limited. Thus, all signs point toward a leftward turn in United Russia's platform, with a strong focus on patronage spending. Indeed, at United Russia's 8<sup>th</sup> Interregional party conference, Putin previewed a series of initiatives

2 Hale, Henry. 2009. "What Makes Dominant Parties Dominant in Hybrid Regimes?: The Unlikely Importance of Ideas in the Case of United Russia" Paper Presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.

3 Levada Center, Nationwide Survey 5–10 October, 2007, N=1600

from the party's draft platform. Much of it centered on increases in spending on infrastructure, healthcare, and government salaries. United Russia's leftward turn is also evidenced by the apparent decision to jettison Just Russia as the Kremlin's other sanctioned party.

### Having Their Cake and Eating it Too?: The Creation of the All-Russia People's Front

United Russia is faced with two tasks ahead of the 2011–12 election cycle: 1) expanding its electorate and 2) maintaining cohesion among the current political elite. The ONF was created primarily to achieve the first task. The difficulty is that bringing new cadres into the party severely complicates the task of maintaining elite cohesion. Authoritarian leaders often need to coopt outsiders with access to spoils; but by distributing spoils to opposition elites on an ad hoc basis, they run the risk of undermining their own ruling party coalitions, which are held together by the promise that elites will have privileged access to spoils if they remain loyal to the party. If upwardly mobile United Russia cadres are snubbed in favor of outsiders for places on United Russia's party list, then ruling party elites may calculate that their chances of gaining career advancement are just as good outside the party, where they do not have

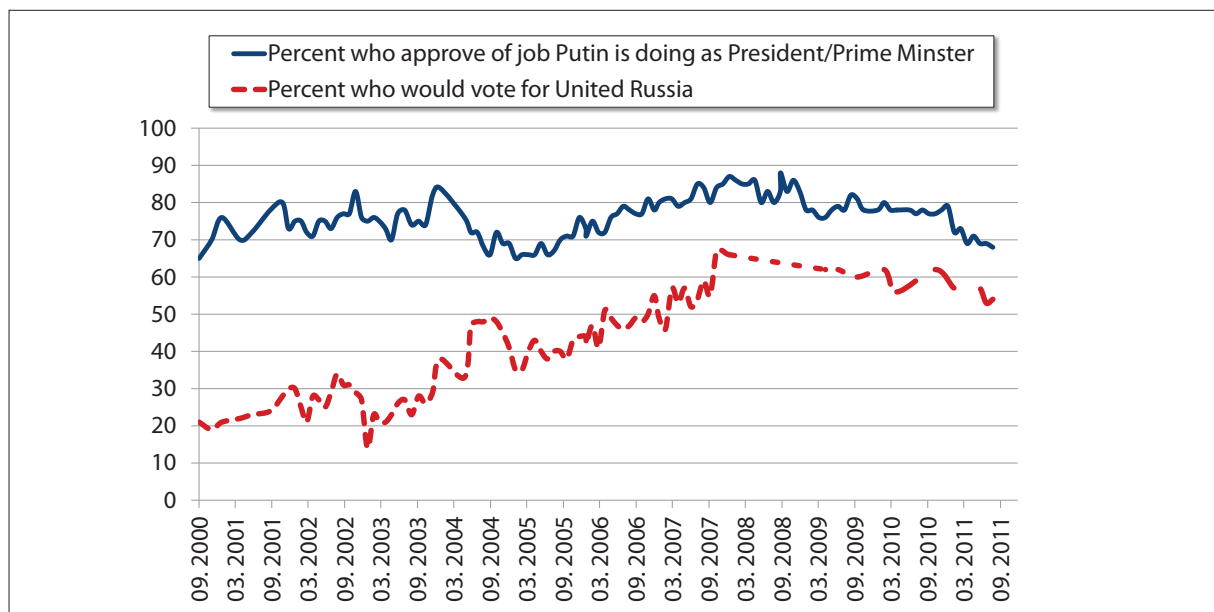
to relinquish their freedom of maneuver to a centralized party leadership.

Unstable hegemonic parties are those that either promote too much rotation of cadres, in which case uncertainty among the elite prompts unrest, or too little rotation, in which case ambitious cadres become frustrated. UR leaders have announced that the party's Duma faction will be renewed by 50%. This figure is not as important as who is replaced, why they are replaced, and what happens to those who are replaced. If party loyalists are replaced by non-partisans, then the bonds of the ruling party may weaken. On the other hand, if up and coming United Russia cadres from the regions replace inactive or older deputies in the Duma, then the bonds of the party may strengthen. For United Russia, the best option may be to replace inactive deputies with both ambitious party cadres and outsiders. To the extent that displacing loyal partisans in the Duma is necessary, they could be transferred to higher posts in the Presidential Administration and government, or at the very least to the Federation Council. If United Russia can successfully coopt new elites without creating schisms within the current ruling elite, then the ONF will be judged a success by its creators, and United Russia will perform well in December.

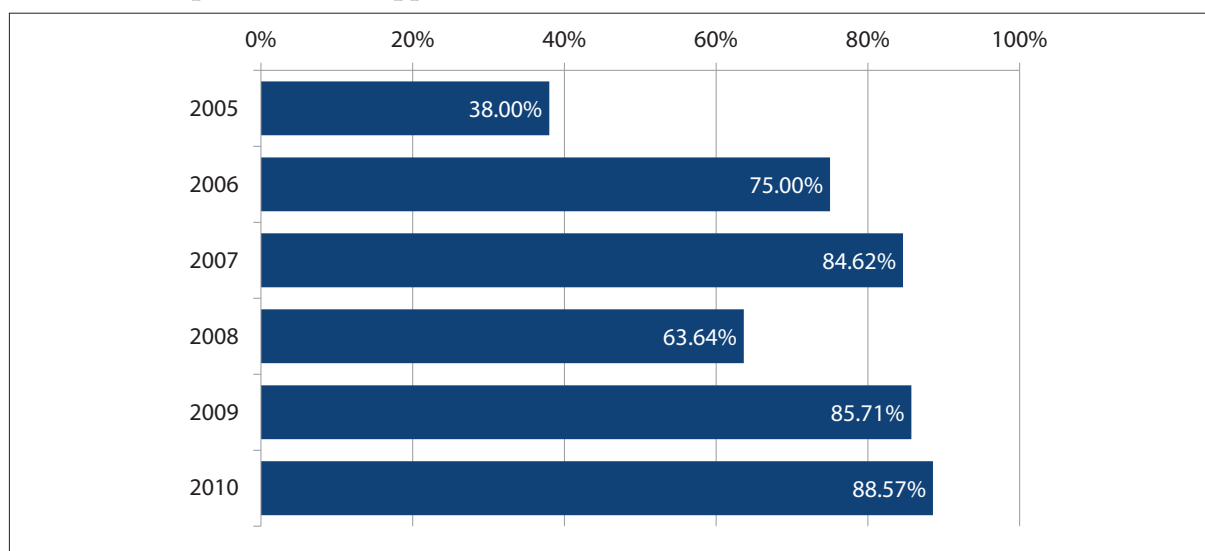
#### *About the Author*

Ora John Reuter is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science at Miami University and Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Havighurst Center at Miami University. He is also Senior Researcher at the Center for the Study of Institutions and Development, National Research University, Higher School of Economics.

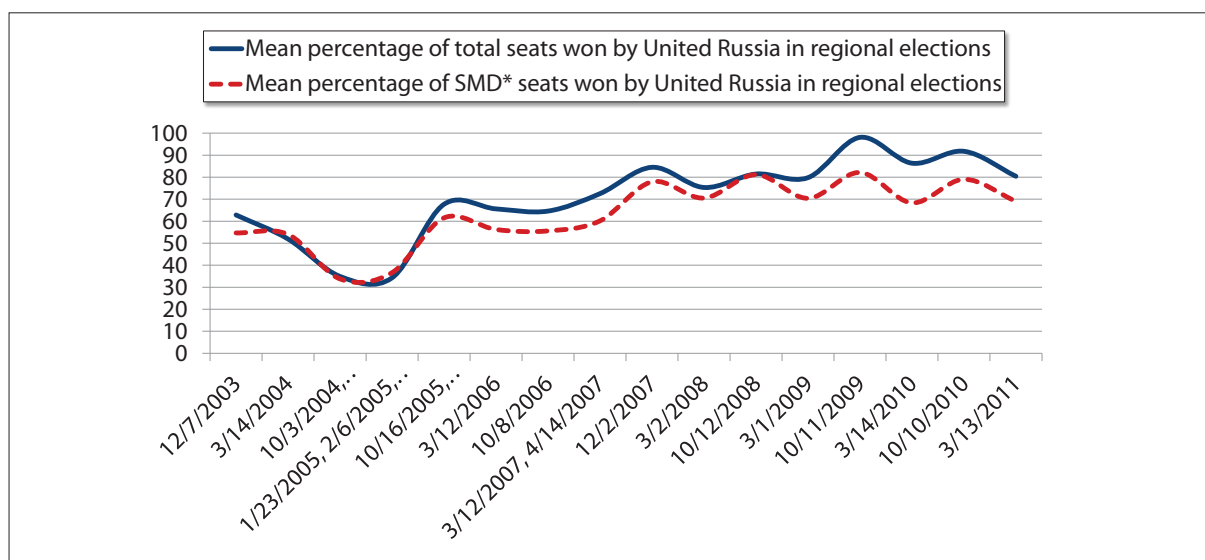
**Figure 1: Popularity Ratings of Putin and United Russia 2000–2011**



**Figure 2: United Russia and Gubernatorial Appointments: 2005–2010**  
(Proportion of All Appointees Who Are Members of United Russia)



**Figure 3: United Russia in Regional Elections**



\* SMD = single member districts

Entries reflect averages for all regional elections held on unified election days indicated. For regional elections held prior to implementation of unified election days in 2006, averages are for elections held in the first and second six months of a given year.

Source: Levada Center.



## ANALYSIS

## Just Russia—From “Second Leg” to “Footnote”?

By Luke March, Edinburgh

### Abstract

At the onset of the 2011–12 election campaign, the left-wing social democratic Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*, sometimes translated as “A Just Russia” or “Fair Russia”) is the fourth-placed party at the national level (with 38 of 450 State Duma seats, making it the smallest of the four parliamentary factions). However, it claims over 400,000 members, making it the second largest membership party after United Russia. Moreover, it is the third-placed regionally, polling at approximately 10 percent of the vote in 2007–2011 and having representatives in 72 regional parliaments. The party is not insignificant then. However, Just Russia (JR) is the only Duma party that may drop out after December 2011, with the consensus of the Russian commentariat that it has failed to develop a stable niche in the party system and will soon become a historical footnote. While this expectation is by no means guaranteed, it is very plausible. Accordingly, this article examines why the considerable potential the party showed at its formation has failed to materialise.

### The Kremlin’s “Second Leg”

Just Russia originated in 2006 as the merger of three smaller left-leaning parties: the largest, Motherland (*Rodina*) was a populist-nationalist bloc created by the Kremlin in 2003 to siphon off communist votes; the Pensioner’s Party had gained an increasing regional foothold with an oppositionist platform supporting strong social policies. The weakest component, the Party of Life, was an esoteric ecologically-minded party, whose primary purpose was to increase the visibility and influence of its founder, the head of the Federation Council Sergei Mironov, among the public and federal elites.

Why 2006? Just Russia’s foundation served several aims simultaneously: for the parties in question, merger was a question of simple survival in the context of the authorities’ attempts to consolidate the party system: both Motherland and the Pensioner’s Party in particular had started to take their opposition status seriously and had accordingly run afoul of the authorities (most notably, Motherland head Dmitrii Rogozin “resigned” in March 2006 after the party sustained a media offensive and was debarred from most regional election campaigns).

Without question, the founding also served the strategic and tactical aims of the Kremlin. Since at least 1995 the authorities had mooted the strategy of pivoting the party system round two pro-Kremlin parties, “a little to the left” a “little to the right”, a project which would marginalise the communists, promote a loyal, systemic opposition and simultaneously project an image of modernity that having the communists as the principal opposition undermined. At the same time, the Kremlin appeared fully aware that a large number of Russian voters could be regarded as left-wing (i.e. with a preference for paternalist state-welfare values)—as VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) noted there was a “huge unfulfilled niche of left-statist orientation”. For a while, the Kremlin had hoped that the Commu-

nist Party itself could be prevailed on to modernise, but this aspiration was finally abandoned by 2004. Motherland, on the other hand, had shown the dangers of more dynamic “opposition” projects escaping Kremlin control. Analyst Alexei Makarkin noted that the Kremlin’s major short-term calculation in the 2007 elections was to secure the affections of United Russia’s “electoral periphery”—pro-Putin voters sceptical of the chief party of power, either because of its centre-right ideological colouring or its enmeshment with corrupt regional bureaucracy. United Russia’s national popularity has consistently lagged behind Putin’s and Medvedev’s, and has been impossible to sustain without manipulation. A second “party of power” would act as a “sparring partner” for United Russia and provide an alternative avenue for elite recruitment, preventing disaffected regime figures from defecting to the extra-systemic opposition (as former PM Mikhail Kasyanov did with the “Other Russia” coalition). In sum, it would channel the political competition in regime-supporting ways, incentivising United Russia (UR) to perform well: either UR would gain the all-important Duma constitutional majority (301 seats) or a strong performance for Just Russia would “have Putin’s influence spread all over the political field” as Kremlin-connected politician Sergei Markov put it, allowing a second pro-Kremlin party Duma positions that could act as auxiliary support for the authorities.

It was for this reason that the Kremlin gave JR its conditional blessing—presidential administration deputy head Vladislav Surkov’s statement to the Party of Life in March 2006 that the regime needed a “second leg” eventually to replace the dominant party was widely reported. Symptomatically, it was unsurprising that the least prominent component dominated the party merger, i.e. the Party of Life and its unthreatening leader Mironov, a close personal friend of Vladimir Putin and one of his most publically sycophantic acolytes. The

more electorally successful (and dangerous) Motherland provided the statutes and party structure, but was otherwise marginalised. Prominent ex-Motherland figures, such as Sergei Glaz'ev or the financier Aleksandr Lebedev, conspicuously failed to join the new party, allegedly under pressure. Putin's indirect approval of the new party was evident in his audiences with the leadership of Motherland and the Pensioner's Party, which occurred just before the merger.

### Difficult Relations with United Russia

Whereas the Kremlin's promotion of Just Russia shows a keen awareness of its own power needs, it demonstrates that the leadership's understanding of party-system dynamics (and the role of opposition!) has been less acute. JR's role as "second party of power" was envisaged as incentivising, but not undermining, the primary party of power. At the same time, it was a genuine "programmatic" party (articulating the vacant moderate social-democratic niche) and a "project" party, competing with the communists for the protest vote. But these aims are basically incompatible, a dilemma which JR has never yet been able to overcome. Since the communists had already been reduced to their core vote by 2003, JR's ability to make further inroads into their electorate by promoting a moderate centre-left strategy is limited—it has always been more likely to take votes from other parties (including United Russia). But attempts to compete effectively with the communists by appropriating their radical slogans will inexorably lead Just Russia into further criticism of the authorities and United Russia.

These problems were graphically shown in the March 2007 regional elections, where JR performed strongly on its electoral debut with a 15 percent vote average. But the elections opened up fierce elite competition (particularly in Stavropol, where JR gained 37.6 % of the vote by vilifying the United Russia governor). This proved counterproductive for the Kremlin: either JR failed to supplant the communists, or it seriously undermined United Russia, or (more problematically still), competition between the parties of power boosted the communists' protest vote. Although these elections showed that in conditions of free competition JR could realistically aspire to 15–20 percent of the vote, open elite competition in the run-up to "Operation Successor" was the last thing the Kremlin required and Just Russia was reined in as the elite lost interest in the project. The Kremlin warned the party to avoid "populism", mudslinging and sparring with United Russia—it should concentrate on fighting the communists. Surkov has consistently remained supportive of Just Russia only to the degree it can strengthen United Russia, ultimately not so supportive after all.

Of course, the plug was dramatically pulled on JR in September 2007 when Putin headed the United Russia party list, which immediately consolidated its "electoral periphery" and completely undermined JR's claim to represent any realistic pro-regime alternative. Similarly, JR's decision to join UR in nominating Medvedev for the presidency resulted in some tortuous and sophisticated rationalisation as its support ebbed away. It was as if the Democrats fought the Republicans tooth-and-nail for Congressional seats, but offered no alternative to a Republican presidency. That JR got into parliament at all in 2007, with 7.7 of the vote, was a success of sorts given the circumstances and indicates that 1) the authorities did not actively campaign *against* the party, continuing to give it funding and low-level logistical support as a "reserve" party of power: 2) the party, albeit in a diminished way, had appealed to moderate left-leaning voters unimpressed by either United Russia or the Communists.

### Finding a Niche

In the 2007–2011 Duma, JR appeared to gain a recognised position in the party system, avoiding the administrative pressures that had dogged it in its early years and benefitting from approving statements from Medvedev's team. It more regularly entered regional parliaments and leapfrogged Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democrats into the third-placed regional party (albeit still far behind the communists). Indeed, the party appeared to develop a more consistent ideological and strategic position as an ardent promoter of Medvedev's modernisation programme, thoroughly endorsing his view of the 2007–9 economic crisis as necessitating a breakthrough towards the post-industrial economy and democratisation of the political system. However, in the latter sphere, the party's aims were more radical than the president's—as in the 2007 elections the party tried to tap into the protest vote, and now offered the return of elected regional governors, the "against all" ballot and the lowering of the parliamentary threshold from 7 to 3 percent. Moreover this was consistent with a genuine social democratic position that combined an emphasis on overcoming inequality and poverty through progressive taxation and promoting greater political liberalisation (the latter emphasis being far more consistently articulated than that of the communists).

Overall, a definite move towards Medvedev was discernable. Just Russia voted against Putin's anti-crisis plan in April 2009 and the government's 2010–11 budgets. This was not yet a definitive change of presidential patron, but merely reflected that the nuances of "tandemocracy" allowed a pro-regime but anti-governmental position more scope—in this way JR could develop



clearer policy differences from United Russia while still declaring its “constructive opposition”.

However, within the 2007–2011 parliamentary term, Just Russia conspicuously failed to transcend its founding flaws or develop beyond a severely compromised opposition. Medvedev signally failed to give any party apart from UR more than lukewarm endorsement (indeed, some allege that he was privately increasingly irritated with Mironov’s declarations of support) while JR’s attempts to criticise Putin’s government were denounced by United Russia. The result was a tortuous “coalition agreement” between UR and JR in early 2010, whereby JR agreed with both Medvedev and Putin’s strategic direction but was allowed to criticise the government on economic policy and remain an opposition party towards United Russia. Yet, JR’s claims to be an “opposition” in any real sense were constantly undermined by its compromising parliamentary behaviour (e.g. by supporting further restrictions on street protests in 2009). Although its party platform was increasingly ideologically consistent, it had no monopoly over Medvedev’s “modernisation strategy” (ALL the parliamentary parties support this to some degree). Its “Forward Russia” movement in support of modernisation announced in September 2010 was obstructed by United Russia and refused registration. Moreover, unlike all other parliamentary parties, JR lacks strong national leadership: United Russia of course has Putin, while Mironov and his close ally Nikolai Levichev are colourless, even compared with Zyuganov’s peculiar form of non-charisma.

In compensation, what Mironov did provide as chair of the Federation Council (the third position in the national hierarchy) was national visibility, high-level links and patronage abilities. However, in May 2011 he was forced to relinquish even these attributes by being recalled as representative of the St Petersburg Municipal Assembly (where UR has the largest fraction). He temporarily relinquished leadership of JR in an unsuccessful attempt to forestall this. Afterwards, he was parachuted into the Duma as head of the JR parliamentary faction when MP Elena Vtorygina ceded him her deputy’s mandate.

This episode revealed that certain patterns of the 2007 electoral campaign are repeating themselves. In the March 2011 regional elections, Just Russia, without scaling its 2007 heights, gained a respectable 13 percent, while United Russia’s 50 percent was well-down on its 2007 rating. With the rating of president and PM also declining perceptibly, the problem of maintaining a presidential majority in the new Duma has again become acute. In this context, even the limited intra-elite competition that Just Russia provides is again surplus to (regime) requirements. Moreover, as with so

many regime-sponsored projects before, JR clearly has an incentive to develop genuine opposition stances, if only to guarantee its own electoral survival—as Stanislav Belkovskii has argued, Mironov now “has to believe his own oppositional story”. But such opposition cannot develop: Mironov’s April 2011 statement that JR would not support UR’s presidential candidate whoever it was, although a logical stance from a genuine opposition, was widely considered an infringement of the informal rules of the game (whereby only the KPRF can (occasionally) directly criticise prime minister and president), making his removal from the Federation Council inevitable.

Even without this faux pas, JR’s opposition to United Russia in St Petersburg, where UR governor Valentina Matvienko is deeply unpopular and Petersburg native Mironov has strong links, had begun to threaten an embarrassing defeat for United Russia in Putin and Medvedev’s hometown. Although Mironov’s removal has long been mooted, moving both him and Matvienko out of the conflict zone (with Matvienko due to replace him as Federation Council head after a stage-managed election) is aimed to defuse the threat and simultaneously to put Mironov in his place.

### The 2011 Duma Campaign

Accordingly, Just Russia enters the 2011 Duma campaign in worse shape than 2007, without even the limited high-level patronage of four years before. Its opinion-poll ratings are dipping, from a high of 9.4 percent in June 2011 to 7.1 percent currently, making surpassing the 7-percent barrier no sure thing. The consensus view is that if JR makes parliament at all, it will be as a “pygmy” party granted 1–2 seats for polling between 5 and 7 percent of the vote by Medvedev’s party system reforms. There are many other reasons to expect that even this result is beyond it. For instance, the Kremlin’s dalliance with “Right Cause” as a liberal party-of-power indicates that JR has fallen far in its priorities. Right Cause’s ongoing difficulties might re-open scope for JR but could equally indicate that the Kremlin would settle for three parties returning to the Duma (perhaps the simplest way of securing a presidential majority after all). Indeed, the formation of the “Popular Front” and United Russia’s candidate primaries indicates that the Kremlin has settled on a new method, both of expanding United Russia’s electoral periphery and enabling elite recruitment without the inconvenience of forming a second party of power. Moreover, this could be a way of drawing the left-patriotic vote directly behind United Russia for the first time. Certainly, the defection of former Motherland leader (and Just Russia’s chief financier) Aleksandr Babakov to the Popular Front in July 2011 and the possible return of Dmitrii Rogozin from Brus-

sels to join him indicates this. If so, Just Russia's niche will be further squeezed.

At the same time, as analyst Tat'ana Stanovaya argues, Just Russia *can* make parliament if it radicalises its rhetoric and becomes a real opposition. Although the obvious questions are whether such a real opposition is permissible beyond very narrow regime-defined limits, and whether it may be psychologically and intellectually beyond the Mironov-Levichev leadership, Mironov's release from the Federation Council does make this more feasible and plausible than hitherto. Indeed, Just Russia's 2011 draft electoral programme mentions Mironov's re-employment as an indication of his principled opposition to the government's "anti-popular" laws (a favoured phrase of the Communists). As in 2007, the platform is a hard-hitting left-wing social democratic critique of the Russian authorities, essentially similar to the communists' programme without (much) Soviet rhetoric and with a more liberal stance. JR lays heavy emphasis on the party's role as a constructive opposition that opposes high-level corruption, seeks the democratisation of the political system and has the primary aim of improving the socio-economic position of ordinary Russians. Now though, the party declares its absolute opposition to Putin's government (but not Medvedev). In Russia's post-crisis climate, such a programme might have a significant appeal. Moreover, although Mironov has

fallen from elite favour, he is hardly *persona non grata* in the Kremlin—if so, one would hardly expect him to transfer to the party's Duma fraction unhindered. It is quite possible that as in 2007, he has been given license to develop a moderately oppositional campaign, so long as it targets the communists and protest electorate.

Whether or not JR makes the 2011 Duma might appear unimportant. It is the least significant national party, its contribution to political life to date has been negligible and its absence after December will make little obvious difference. Yet, it has at least, however imperfectly so far, represented the potential of a different future for Russia, one where the party system is based more on programme than personality, and one that approximates European norms where social democratic parties anchor the left of the party system. Indeed, as the only parliamentary party with strong links to a European party family (JR is a consultative member of the Socialist International), Just Russia may represent Russia's most European political party. Its programme, promising a more equitable, democratic and socially-orientated constructive opposition, is potentially electorally attractive, particularly since the communists have long failed to offer such an alternative. It would be hard not to see its demise as another nail in the coffin of genuine multiparty politics in Russia.

#### *About the Author*

Luke March is Senior Lecturer in Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Deputy Director of the Princess Dashkova Russia Centre at the University of Edinburgh.

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## ANALYSIS

## The Communist Party of the Russian Federation: “Paper Tiger” of the Opposition

By Vladimir Gel'man, St. Petersburg

### Abstract

If you were to rank Russia's political parties by their most visible attributes, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) would definitely be Russia's most boring. The party, which is an indispensable actor within Russia's political scene, does not distinguish itself with ideological innovation, new slogans, charismatic political leaders, or prominent activism in parliament or beyond. To the contrary, the Communists sadly and boringly repeat in various forums official Soviet-style propaganda clichés; second-tier Soviet era bureaucrats have led the party for nearly two decades; and all criticism directed against the “criminal regime in Russia” remains primitive and ineffective. Accordingly, the KPRF cannot present an alternative to the existing authorities that would be attractive to the Russian elite or society at large. Nevertheless, the Levada Center public opinion polls regularly show that the party's public support is stable at 15–20 percent and no one doubts that the party will preserve its seats in the new State Duma to be elected in December 2011. But, of course, these figures do not compare with the party's “golden age” in 1996, when the KPRF and its allies controlled nearly half the seats in parliament and party leader Gennady Zyuganov was the front-runner in that year's presidential elections. What explains the KPRF's current situation and what can be expected from it in the future?

### Heading toward a Dead End

After the crash of the Soviet regime, the Communists suffered through a difficult time. In 1991 Boris Yeltsin issued a decree that officially banned Communist Party activities in Russia, while public opinion and the media blamed the Communists for the numerous problems of Russia's past and present. The Communists' defeat in the 1992–3 conflict between the president and the Russian Supreme Soviet (where the Communists played a major role) also weakened their position. Not surprisingly, the politicians who sought to revive the party faced a difficult choice of political strategy. Initially, caution brought them several benefits. In 1992 the group led by Zyuganov succeeded in winning the Constitutional Court's trial about the party's right to exist and in February 1993 this group served as the core of the newly-created and officially-recognized Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Following the letter of the law, KPRF leaders carefully distanced themselves from the October 1993 street fighting. Working with a country-wide network of party cells and numerous local activists in nearly every region, they performed reasonably well in the 1993 State Duma elections (winning 11.6% of the votes and 45 out of the 450 seats) and even better in the 1995 round (22.2% of the vote and 157 seats), establishing their monopoly as the main opposition party in the country. Other communist parties and movements either became satellites of the KPRF or were marginalized. The mass disappointment among Russians with the government's policy during the deep and protracted economic recession of the 1990s seemed to open the road for the Communists to return to power through the legal electoral process.

However, the Communists were unable to score a victory in the 1996 presidential elections due to the fierce resistance of then President Boris Yeltsin's team (including the threat of a coup) and the radicalism of the KPRF itself, which frightened a significant part of the Russian electorate. Ideologically, the party, which contains a mixture of different political streams, has not been very consistent in its choice of programmatic positions. However, its basic slogan could be summed up as “Back in the USSR.” The Communists ably used the nostalgia of a large number of Russians for the “good old days” of the Soviet era, but were not able to propose any sort of positive program. Moreover, in the 1990s, the party had maximally mobilized its core activists and supporters with the goal of preserving its status as the only “real” opposition (in contrast to the LDPR or Yabloko) and as a coherent organization. Several high-profile anti-system public performances served this goal, including the March 1996 resolution on denouncing the Belovezhsky Accords, which dissolved the USSR, or the unsuccessful attempt to impeach the president in May 1999. Although this approach helped the Communists preserve a core of ideologically-driven followers, it did not allow them to win the support of a majority of voters, to say nothing of the new ruling class—politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats. They viewed the party as one whose time had passed.

It is not surprising that in August 1996, the KPRF leaders changed strategy and officially announced a new approach: “infusion into power.” Some of the party activists joined the government and regional administrations and the Communists in the State Duma success-

fully began to bargain with the Kremlin across a number of second-order policy issues, but systematically refused to adopt any decisions which would change the political status quo. Such was the case with the aborted effort to instigate a Duma vote of no confidence in Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's cabinet (Fall 1997), the parliamentary acceptance (under Kremlin pressure) of Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko (April 1998), and the failure of the impeachment of Yeltsin (May 1999), when some of the Communists refused to vote to unseat the president. The Communists 1999 parliamentary campaign took place in the same spirit: the main goal was to preserve the gains that the party had made and ensure a continuation of the status quo. Most likely, the Communists counted on the likelihood that given the numerous political and economic crises in the country, power would fall into their hands. However, skeptical observers in that period noted that the party leaders did not try very hard to engage in a real battle to grab the key levers for running the country and were more or less satisfied with their party's status as the major opposition force.

While tactically these steps (or, more precisely, the lack of them) brought the KPRF significant dividends, strategically they led to failure. After the 1999 elections, when the Communists, although slightly increasing their share of the vote (24.3%, 88 seats in the Duma), lost their position as the leading parliamentary party, their former inactivity turned out to be untenable. At first, the KPRF sought a role as a junior partner of the ruling group, making an implicit agreement with the pro-Kremlin Unity faction about dividing up several Duma posts and preserving the post of speaker. However, as a result, the KPRF's potential was weakened and the benefits of the deal turned out to be symbolic. Beginning in 2000, the non-Communist parties in the parliament had a constitutional majority, with the "party of power" and its allies controlling more than half of the mandates. Since all important decisions in the Duma could be adopted without the participation of the Communists, they no longer played the important role of "veto actor". When the Communists sought to return to active protest, speaking out against a series of government bills, they did not have to wait long for their punishment: in the Spring of 2002, United Russia initiated a redistribution of the committee chairmen posts, removing the Communists from all of them. Several KPRF activists, including then Duma Chair Gennady Seleznev, chose to retain their parliamentary posts in exchange for loyalty to the Kremlin, and were expelled from the party. At the same time, the level of electoral support for the KPRF after 2000 began to decline at both the federal and regional levels. The poor showing of the Communists in the 2003 Duma elections was the logical con-

clusion of this process. In the course of the campaign, the Communists became the main target of the Kremlin, which used a variety of techniques against them, including nominating alternative electoral lists, seeking to split the party's electorate, running a negative campaign in the media, and pressuring sympathetic governors and businesspeople. The KPRF again followed its previous strategy of preserving the status quo, leaving its ideological positions and organizational structures essentially unchanged. The results of the vote (12.6% support and 52 seats) severely deprived the KPRF of its role as an influential opposition party.

### Life After Death?

During the 2000s, the KPRF faced several serious challenges simultaneously. First, the Kremlin did not give up its attempts, if not to eliminate the Communists, then to squeeze them toward the political periphery. The KPRF pushed back several efforts to organize an internal split in the party, eliminating dissidents from its ranks (such as by excluding from the party former Deputy Duma Chair Gennady Semigin, while his supporters lost their party posts). In 2007, the presidential administration supported the creation of a "manageable" left-center party, Just Russia, designed to siphon votes away from the Communists. Although the Communists did not in fact suffer major losses at the hands of their competitors, the risk of pressure from the Kremlin remained serious.

Second, the profile of the party's electorate changed. While in the 1990s, the average KPRF voter was an elderly impoverished and poorly educated female resident of a small town or village; in the 2000s younger and better educated urban residents were more frequently supporting the Communists. At the same time the slogan "Back in the USSR" became associated less with the Communists and more with the party of power, United Russia. Despite this shift, the Communists could not (and did not want to) offer their voters anything different in exchange.

Third, there was a growing understanding among Communist activists and supporters themselves that preserving the status quo within the milieu of the Communists would lead the party nowhere. Rejecting any changes (which would ultimately raise the question of replacing the party leadership), Zyuganov and his allies among the party's upper echelons sought to preserve their leadership in the organization at any cost. They cruelly blocked challenges from the promising young politicians and experienced leaders of regional organizations, accusing them of rejecting the party line and often even expelling them from the KPRF. Even the number of party members shrank during this time. Demonstrat-

ing its political and ideological immobilism, the party essentially fell into hibernation during the period of the long political winter. Due to the fact that the party leadership systematically cut off attempts to modernize the KPRF in terms of its organization, ideology, style and methods of everyday party activism, the party hurt its political prospects: closing itself into a narrow “ghetto” of its supporters, the KPRF became a harmless sparring partner for the Kremlin in the Russian electoral arena.

However, with only seven officially registered parties in the country, the KPRF turned out to be the only representative of the opposition in parliament. It therefore became a natural “center of gravity” for politicians and voters who opposed the political regime in the country and the government’s policies. Although this situation did not bring the KPRF great dividends (in the Duma elections of 2007, the party received only 11.6% of the vote and 57 seats while the average share of votes for the KPRF in the regional elections of 2008–11 was 16.8%), it did prevent a further shrinking of Communist support. Moreover, in municipal elections, Communist-backed candidates more frequently defeated United Russia-backed candidates (e.g. in the recent Irkutsk and Bratsk mayoral elections and in the Tver City Duma), although several of the victorious candidates later joined the party of power after their election.

On the eve of the December 4, 2011, State Duma elections, the calls of several public activists to vote for any party except for United Russia also objectively work in favor of the KPRF. Thus, the Communists are today becoming the major beneficiaries of the growing opposition mood not because of their own ability to attract voters, but due to the fact that the other parties, either obviously or more subtly, are Kremlin tools while the KPRF at least partially preserves its organizational and ideological autonomy from the presidential administration. The current position of the Communists as a “niche” opposition party at least in part satisfies the Kremlin (since it does not present a serious challenge to the government and serves as a channel to calm the rising popular dis-

content about political and economic developments in the country) as do the leaders of the party. Accordingly, they have no problem allowing them to maintain their monopoly in the narrow legal opposition segment of the Russian political market.

Overall, during the 2000s, when Russia established a system of electoral authoritarianism, the KPRF succeeded in surviving as a legitimate small, but not marginal, party merely because the Communists did not make any efforts to achieve their political goals beyond just preserving their current status.

Do the Communists have a future and, if so, what is it? If the electoral authoritarianism in Russia remains unchanged after the 2011–12 election cycle, then the level of public support for the party among Russians will remain approximately the same and perhaps even grow due to the lack of other competitors. In this case, there is no reason to expect the KPRF to change its political strategy, perhaps until there is a change of generations among the leadership of the party. It is more difficult to predict what will happen with the KPRF if and when a democratization of the country’s political system takes place. Although voter support for the Communist slogans of social justice, equality and state regulation of the economy in Russia is relatively high, it is rather unlikely that the current leadership of the KPRF could meet such interests. Probably, one can expect that the Russian Communists will share the fate of their Ukrainian comrades: they will continue to survive in the political arena, but play a secondary role. The experience of several East European countries shows that former ruling Communist parties can successfully turn into major actors in post-Communist democracies only if they transform themselves in a timely manner and adjust to the new rules of the game. The Russian Communists, who missed their chance in the 1990s and refused to change in the 2000s, now find themselves in a dead end of political development, exploiting the myths of the past while not offering the country an adequate agenda for the future.

#### *About the Author*

Vladimir Gel'man is a Professor in the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology of the European University in St. Petersburg.



## ANALYSIS

## Vladimir Zhirinovsky and the LDPR

By Anton Shekhovtsov, Northampton, England, and Andreas Umland, Kyiv, Ukraine

### Abstract

Zhirinovsky's so-called Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) may, in the upcoming elections, reconstitute itself as Russia's "third force". The party has a well-established profile as being outspokenly nationalist, and could benefit from the rising nationalist sentiment in Russia. Although the LDPR has been part of official politics for almost 20 years now, it has had continuous links to Russia's lunatic fringe, including some openly neo-Nazi activists. While the party is outspokenly anti-Western and places considerable concern on what Zhirinovsky calls "the South", its main focus today is on "the Russian Question."

### An Expected Winner

In the December 2011 State Duma elections, three to four parties will pass the 7-per-cent electoral threshold, according to polls by the Levada Center and VTsIOM. The anticipated winners are: United Russia (leader: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (Gennady Zyuganov), the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (Vladimir Zhirinovsky), and Just Russia (Nikolay Levichev).

Should the election results correspond to these opinion polls, the LDPR could receive more than 10 per cent of the votes. This may return the party to its previous status of being Russia's "third force"—a political image that Zhirinovsky had, with some success, already promoted in the 1990s. The flamboyant party leader recently claimed that the LDPR would gain 25 or even 30 per cent of the vote in December, on the condition that the elections are free and fair. Whether the upcoming parliamentary elections in Russia will meet democratic standards is indeed unclear. Among others, the previous, 2007 State Duma elections were classified as unfair by the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Nevertheless, Zhirinovsky's optimistic assessment of his party's electoral potential is unrealistic, and repeats his pre-electoral boasting during earlier campaigns for the State Duma.

The LDPR's base of electoral support is located in small- and medium-sized towns throughout Russia's provinces, not least, in the Far East. It consists above all of young and middle-aged men with secondary education and lower to lower-middle class background. The party's ideological "winning formula" has been a mixture of extremely populist rhetoric, increasingly open criticism of the "party of power" (i.e. Putin's United Russia), rabid anti-Americanism, inflammatory hate-speech, anti-Southern racism, and Russian nationalism.

### An Unusual Party

Many see the LDPR as merely a "party of clowns", in view of the eccentric behaviour of Zhirinovsky. The "clowns" label also refers to the LDPR's ambivalent oppo-

sitional stance vis-a-vis the "party of power" and the Russian president—be it Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin or Dmitry Medvedev. The party appears often as an instrument of the Kremlin, rather than as an independent political phenomenon. No matter how condemnatory and fervent party speeches have been, rarely has the LDPR opposed major legislative proposals drafted by the "party of power."

Zhirinovsky's party is also an unusual organization in as far as its name is misleading, the leadership composition is unstable, and true membership numbers remain unclear. The curious name "Liberal-Democratic" is a remnant of the organization's initial role as a Kremlin-inspired "political technology" project during the early 1990s. The then pseudo-party had apparently been set up by the Soviet authorities to discredit and confuse the emerging really liberal-democratic movements of the USSR.

Today, only a few of the party's initial leaders and organizers of the 1990s—except for Zhirinovsky and his family members—are still to be found in the LDPR's leadership. Rather, the organization seems to go through regular purges during which most of the top posts are refilled with formerly unknown figures. Seemingly, the upper positions on the party's parliamentary elections list are often simply sold to the highest bidder.

The number of members belonging to the LDPR provided by the Russian Ministry of Justice's website for 2010 was 185,573. That may, however, include many "dead souls," i.e. names of people who are only de jure, but not in fact members of the party. The LDPR, already in the 1990s, regularly overstated its membership numbers, and may have collected signatures from politically inactive persons in order to secure registration as a party, in compliance with the restrictive rules for parties' participation in elections introduced during Putin's presidency.

### Party Platform

Zhirinovsky claims that the LDPR would implement some political and economic changes immediately if it

were to take power. The party would limit the tenure of governors, bureaucrats and party leaders to ten years or two terms. The national republics would be abolished. Instead, Zhirinovsky proposes to create a unitary state that consists of 10–12 large guberniyas. Russia would seek closer economic and political integration within the “Slavic world,” in particular, with Ukraine and Belarus, and integrate all former Soviet republics on the basis of a renewed economic and political union. The LDPR proposes the expulsion of the USA from the United Nations Security Council and to establish, within the UN, an international commission providing control over the emission of US Dollars by the Federal Reserve System.

Nevertheless, the LDPR’s anti-Westernism is only of secondary importance. At least, opposition to the West is not at the core of Zhirinovsky’s own world-view which is, instead, focused on “the South,” and “the Southerners” (iuzhane)—the area of his expertise in Turkish studies. The LDPR leader sees the Russian nation as a part and parcel of the world’s northern hemisphere, rather than in principal opposition to the West. At times, he has even argued for a Russian–Western–Japanese alliance that would re-divide the world into designated spheres of influence.

The LDPR, to be sure, has been highly critical of NATO’s “aggressive move to the East,” and in particular, of the idea of post-Soviet countries joining the Alliance. Moreover, the party has frequently undertaken provocative actions toward the West. For instance, in the 2007 State Duma elections, the LDPR offered the second place in its electoral list to Andrey Lugovoy, a former KGB officer suspected by the British police of having murdered Aleksandr Litvinenko, another former KGB and FSB officer who had received political asylum in the UK in the 1990s. Zhirinovsky commented on the deadly polonium-210 poisoning of Litvinenko by noting that “any traitor must be eliminated using any methods.” The Russian authorities refused to extradite Lugovoy. Today the British police has even less hope of interrogating him, as he is now a member of the State Duma, and enjoys immunity from prosecution. For the upcoming elections, Lugovoy has been put on the top position of the LDPR’s Irkutsk regional elections list. While this placement is a demotion, as the businessman is no longer included in the party’s federal list, it still means an almost secure seat in the State Duma, and should guarantee Lugovoy’s continued immunity.

In spite of these and other similar actions, the LDPR is less fundamentally anti-Western than other Russian ultra-nationalist groups, and supports the idea of Russia’s rapprochement with the EU. In his most important 1993 political pamphlet *The Last Dash to the South*, Zhirinovsky instead identified “the South” as Russia’s

major problem. In order to prevent instability spreading from Southern countries to Russia, he not only proposed to restore the Russian/Soviet empire. He also explicitly argued for an inclusion, in the new Russian state, of Turkey, Afghanistan and Iran. This would, such was Zhirinovsky’s argument in the 1990s, once and for all solve the issue of Russia’s centuries-old subversion by the “the Southerners,” and lastingly “soothe” the Euro-Asian continent.

### The Russian Question

While there have been indications that Zhirinovsky is still obsessed with “the South,” he has since reformulated his public political agenda, in more traditionally nationalist terms. The party’s slogans for the upcoming elections are “LDPR—For the Russians!” and “Tougher Look, Russians!” The latter is also the title of a short pamphlet published in August 2011 and debunking a presumed Western myth that Russians are “idlers and dipsomaniacs who obey various rascals without a grumble or incite senseless and bloody riots.” Quite the opposite, the pamphlet argues, the Russians “have created a great state, great science and culture.” In general, the so-called “Russian question” has become the main focus of the LDPR’s electoral campaign. Although the party states that it defends the rights and interests of all the peoples of the Federation, the Russians are elevated as the state-forming nation. The LDPR’s main task is “the defence of the Russian people”, because “if they get up off their knees, it will be good for everyone, as the Russians will help all other peoples in the country, because the Russians are the kindest nation.”

In spite of Zhirinovsky’s half-Jewish family background, the LDPR is also aiming to attract anti-Semitic voters. Following the terrorist attacks in Norway in July 2011, an article published by the analytical department of the party on its web-site unequivocally suggested that the confessed terrorist Anders Breivik “belonged to a new creed of nationalists cultivated in the laboratories of Mossad”—Israel’s national intelligence agency. The motivation behind Breivik’s actions, according to the LDPR, were the allegedly pro-Palestinian attitudes of those whom he had killed.

Recently, the LDPR’s years of Russocentric propaganda have reduced its years-long isolation within the Russian ultra-nationalist spectrum, and led to a rapprochement with the extraparlimentary extreme right. In May 2011, for instance, the party organised a round-table that addressed “the Russian question” and was held in the LDPR’s office in the State Duma. A number of well-known leaders of Russian ultra-nationalist groups were invited to this round-table. Among them were: Georgiy Borovikov of the anti-Semitic “Pamyat”

group; Dmitry Demushkin of the now banned Slavic Union—National Socialist Movement; Aleksandr Belov (alias Potkin), the founder and former leader of the also banned Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI); and Aleksandr Sevastyanov, co-founder and former leader of the National Sovereignty Party of Russia.

The list for the upcoming parliamentary elections includes, among many unknown personalities, two candidates highly respected, in the Russian ultra-nationalist scene: Valery Budanov, son of the recently murdered, notorious Colonel Yuri Budanov, and Maksim Korotkov-Guliaev, Evgeniya Khasis's former defense lawyer. In May 2011, Khasis was convicted to 18 years in prison, in connection with assisting her husband, Nikita Tikhonov, in their 2009 murder of the human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova.

The LDPR's interactions with the lunatic fringe has, at times, even included direct cooperation with openly neo-fascist individuals. For example, since 2004, Dmitry Rumyantsev, founder of the National Socialist Society, has been an assistant of Sergey Ivanov, an LDPR member of the State Duma. Rumyantsev is a convicted

racist. In 2008, he was given a one-year suspended sentence for hate speech while six members of his former organisation were recently sentenced to life imprisonment for killing 28 "non-Russian" people.

For almost twenty years now, the LDPR has kept its status as the strongest ultra-nationalist party in Russia. It is thus well-positioned to garner the support of nationalist voters. In spite of the many oddities and contradictions in the LDPR's political history and public behaviour, Zhirinovskiy and Co. may—in view of the recent growth of nationalist sentiment in Russia—turn out to be among the winners of the next parliamentary elections. The party may be able to avoid suffering heavily from possible manipulations of the election results in as far as current Central Electoral Commission Chairman Vladimir Churov had once entered the State Duma on the LDPR ticket (without being a member of the party). Zhirinovskiy's years in Russian high politics has defied the expectations of many observers who assumed that his rise would be temporary. The ultra-nationalist firebrand may still be good for new surprises.

#### *About the Authors*

Anton Shekhovtsov, Cand. Sc. Pol., is European Fellow of the Radicalism and New Media Research Group at the University of Northampton, England, and general editor of the book series "Explorations of the Far Right" (ibidem-Verlag). <http://northampton.academia.edu/AntonShekhovtsov>

Andreas Umland, Ph. D., is DAAD Associate Professor of Political Science at the National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy," Ukraine, and general editor of the book series "Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society" (ibidem-Verlag). <http://ku-eichstaett.academia.edu/AndreasUmland>

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## ANALYSIS

## Russian Liberalism in an Election Year: Still in Crisis

By David White, Birmingham

### Abstract

Russia's liberal opposition is in tatters. Right Cause is reeling from the ejection of its oligarch leader Mikhail Prokhorov. Despite the return of Grigory Yavlinsky, Yabloko lacks the resources to contest the election effectively. Finally, the Justice Ministry refused to register the People's Freedom Party, led by Boris Nemtsov and his colleagues. With no real opposition, Russia will continue to suffer under an authoritarian model of politics.

### Requiem for a Movement

Following elections to the Russian State Duma in December 2003, Vladislav Surkov, then Deputy Chief of Staff of the President's Executive Office and architect of United Russia's successful campaign, claimed that the defeat of the liberal parties, Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces (SPS), marked the end of an era. "The historic mission of the liberal parties in Russia" declared Surkov was over. Similarly, most post-election analyses suggested that the two parties would, to paraphrase Trotsky, be confined to the dustbin of post-Soviet history. Once the electoral dust had settled, a further obituary for Russia's liberals came from a more unexpected source, the former sponsor of the main liberal parties. In March 2004, awaiting trial on charges of tax evasion and fraud, former Yukos CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published "The Crisis of Liberalism in Russia", a withering critique of Yabloko and SPS in which he accused the liberals of misleading the people about the economic reforms of the 1990s and ignoring those who had suffered hardship as a result of such reforms. As a result, liberalism in Russia has been thoroughly discredited.

Subsequently, the decline of the liberal parties continued apace. In 2008, facing massive debts to the state for unpaid electoral broadcast fees, the Kremlin persuaded SPS to disband (in return for writing off its debts) and to merge into a new "Kremlin-friendly" liberal party, Right Cause. Yabloko meanwhile continues to plough its lonely social-liberal furrow, barely registering on opinion polls. The replacement of Grigory Yavlinsky with Sergei Mitrokhin as party chairman did nothing to halt the party's decline. Rejecting electoral politics altogether, disaffected members of Yabloko and SPS joined the Solidarity movement, an organisation focusing primarily on street protests and blogging activities.

Ahead of December's parliamentary elections it seems highly unlikely that liberal parties are capable of resurgence. Opinion polls suggest that no party of a liberal-democratic hue will be returned to the State Duma. Two registered parties, Yabloko and Right Cause, have campaigning mountains to climb if they are to reach the notoriously high electoral threshold of seven per cent, whilst the People's Freedom Party,

founded less than a year ago, was denied registration by the Justice Ministry.

Each of these parties can be seen as occupying distinct positions on the "opposition continuum". At one end we find the quasi or semi-opposition, those parties or individuals outside the ruling elite who aim to join government but not necessarily with the intention of enacting major policy changes and who do not seek to be overly critical of the regime for fear of exclusion or in the hope of preferable treatment. At the opposite end are situated what the celebrated political scientist, Otto Kirchheimer, referred to as the "principal" opposition, political actors seeking power precisely because they want to change the way the political system operates. During Putin's first term, parties tended to move along the continuum with a degree of fluidity. However, since 2004 Russia's party system has stabilised and it is possible to categorise parties in relation to their opposition credentials (see Table 1).

### The Kremlin-Loyal Opposition: Right Cause

Created in 2008 as a merger between two insignificant pro-Kremlin liberal parties (Civil Force and the Democratic Party of Russia) together with the remnants of the disbanded Union of Right Forces, Right Cause remained in the margins of Russian politics until the spring of 2011 when the billionaire oligarch, Mikhail Prokhorov, took control of the party. President Medvedev openly expressed his support for the rejuvenated party, leading to speculation that Right Cause may become a vehicle for the president. Prokhorov was quick to position the party, announcing that, it would become an alternative to United Russia but was not in opposition. The word "opposition", associated with "fringe groups that have lost the sense of reality" was to be expunged from the party's vocabulary, stated Prokhorov. Initially there was little to suggest that Right Cause would be anything other than a Kremlin-friendly "pseudo-opposition" party, a supposition reinforced by Prokhorov's regular meetings with the president and Medvedev's warm words of support. Moreover, during the summer of 2011 the party's opinion poll ratings improved to the point



that by September it was no longer inconceivable that the party might be capable of reaching the seven per cent cut-off in the elections. A high profile election campaign was expected after it was revealed that Prokhorov was prepared to spend up to \$100 million of his own wealth on electioneering.

However, by the end of the summer there were signs that Prokhorov was beginning to take a more independent line. The party's manifesto, published at the end of August, stated that authoritarian rule had returned to Russia and the country was becoming a "farce and a parody of the Soviet Union", stifled by bureaucracy. Prokhorov also claimed that United Russia's political monopoly was unhealthy and proposed a 226-seat limit for any one party in the State Duma. Although Medvedev promised to look at Prokhorov's "exotic plan", the proposal drew the wrath of Vladislav Surkov, now First Deputy Head of the presidential administration, who dismissed the idea out of hand as undemocratic. As long as Right Cause occupied the "right-liberal" niche it was safe from the machinations of the Kremlin. By turning his fire on the party of power, Prokhorov was taking a major risk.

It was still a shock however when, on 15th September, Prokhorov was ousted as leader at the party's congress. Prokhorov was quick to claim this was a Kremlin-engineered coup, the architect of which was likely to be the "grey cardinal", Surkov. Prokhorov urged his supporters to leave the party, now no more than a "Kremlin puppet party". Without Prokhorov's charismatic leadership and, more importantly, without his vast wealth it is unlikely that Right Cause will be able to fight an effective campaign unless it is allowed access to the regime's "administrative resources". At the time of writing the full reasons for Prokhorov's ouster were unclear and, given the murky nature of Russian politics they are likely to remain so. However, it seemed as though Prokhorov was paying the price, just as previously the Rodina (Motherland) party and Sergei Mironov's A Just Russia had, of straying too far from the Kremlin's notion of "constructive opposition".

### **The Kremlin--Sanctioned, Semi-Opposition: Yabloko**

Ever present on the party political scene since the first elections to the State Duma in 1993 and perennial oppositionists during both the Yeltsin and Putin presidencies, it is tempting to see Yabloko as the archetype Russian "principal" opposition party. However, since losing Khodorkovsky's funding in 2003 and having failed to reach the threshold for parliamentary representation in two consecutive Duma elections, the party's relationship with the Kremlin is ambiguous. Under Sergei

Mitrokhin's leadership, Yabloko continues to be critical of government policies but is wary of attacking the president or prime minister outright. In return the party is allowed access to limited funding, sufficient to maintain its Moscow headquarters but not to fight effective electoral campaigns. Yabloko now operates less like a national political party and more like a social organisation concentrating on local issues such as campaigning against unpopular development projects.

Former party chairman, Grigory Yavlinsky, has been seen in the past as both Yabloko's greatest asset and liability. He has been criticised for turning down the offer of governmental posts and refusing to cooperate with parties representing the economic liberal strand such as the Union of Right Forces. Nevertheless, he remains a nationally well-known political figure. Recognising the need for a leader with a higher profile, the party has agreed that Yavlinsky will head the Yabloko party list in December. Such a move will not result in any divisions within the party. Mitrokhin has always made it plain that although he was party chairman, Yabloko's leader would always be Yavlinsky.

The party faces a gargantuan task to achieve the required seven percent of the votes. Since losing its parliamentary representation in 2003 Yabloko has rarely polled more than a single percent in opinion surveys. Nevertheless, with the implosion of Right Cause and the refusal of the Justice Ministry to register the Party of People's Freedom (detailed below), it has been presented with an opportunity. Whether Yabloko has either the operational capacity or the necessary financial support to take full advantage of this opportunity is another matter.

### **The Non-Systemic, Principal Opposition: The People's Freedom Party (PARNAS)**

The People's Freedom Party, known in Russia by its acronym, PARNAS, was founded in December 2010 by Boris Nemtsov of the Solidarity movement and the leaders of three other existing political movements: Mikhail Kasyanov of the Russian People's Democratic Union; Vladimir Ryzhkov of the Republican Party of Russia; and Vladimir Milov of Democratic Choice. Like Nemtsov, the three leaders, although clearly aligned to the democratic opposition, have experience of working in, or close to, government.

The failure of parties within the broad liberal-democratic movement to form effective electoral coalitions or create a single united party has been a persistent phenomenon of post-Soviet Russian politics. Speculation over the possible creation of a unified liberal bloc was rife in the run-up to the 2003 parliamentary elections and the failure to form an effective electoral coalition was identified by some as being at the root of the subse-



quent elimination of liberal parties from the State Duma for the first time. The creation of PARNAS therefore, and the Solidarity movement which helped to spawn it, can be seen as a major achievement for Russia's liberals, bringing together representatives of the hitherto previously fractious liberal strands. Social liberals such as former leader of the Yabloko youth movement, Ilya Yashin, are content for the time being to co-exist alongside economic liberals such as Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov.

Few in the new party believed that it would be allowed to register for the parliamentary elections. Moreover, many Solidarity activists viewed any attempt to do so (involving the accumulation of 45,000 members in half of Russia's regions, the minimum requirement for registration) as being a drain on valuable resources. Nevertheless the party went ahead with the project in the fairly certain knowledge that registration would be denied. In an interview with the author, Ilya Yashin stated:

"When we don't take part in elections our opponents say 'why do you criticise when you didn't even try to take part in this election'. So we will do everything to register the party and I am sure they will refuse us and after this we will have the moral right to criticise the system."

As expected, in June 2011 the Justice Ministry refused to register PARNAS, citing alleged discrepancies with the party's statutes and the membership list submitted. The ministry also claimed to have received communications from former members who had given up their membership after the list was compiled (although no such former members were identified). A second alleged violation related to the party rules, which, the ministry claimed, did not include a provision for the mandatory rotation of party leaders. The party refuted the charges, pointing out that possible discrepancies related to only 79 members out of a total of 46,000 (one thousand more than required for registration by the Law on Political Parties). Moreover, lawyers for the party insisted that the charter did have a mechanism for the rotation of party leaders. Most analysts believed PARNAS had been subject to far greater scrutiny by the Justice Ministry than was strictly necessary.

At the time of the Justice Ministry's ruling, PARNAS was achieving opinion poll ratings of around three per cent – hardly spectacular but actually quite promising for an unregistered party that had only existed for lit-

tle over six months and which had received very little publicity.

Following the Justice Ministry's decision, divisions emerged over what choice of strategy to follow. Some argued for a campaign of street protest to highlight the failings of an electoral system which prevented the opposition from participating, many from this camp also support a campaign aimed at persuading voters to spoil their ballot papers. Others, such as Vladimir Milov and the political and social activist and serial blogger, Alexei Navalny (not a member of either Solidarity or PARNAS) have called for a campaign against United Russia. Rather than spoil their ballot papers (the suspicion being that such papers are more than likely to find their way into United Russia's pot) voters should vote for any party other than the "party of thieves and swindlers" (Navalny's depiction of United Russia and now a term used regularly amongst opposition activists).

### Electoral Prospects

With Right Cause seemingly torn asunder, Yabloko unlikely to be able to mount an effective challenge and PARNAS prevented from standing, the prospects of seeing any liberal opposition of whatever hue in the next State Duma remain bleak. Whilst the liberal parties have in the past made strategic errors (the failure of Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces to cooperate in any meaningful sense in 2003 being a prime example) it is the nature of the political system under the Putin-Medvedev tandem rather than the actions of the parties which explains this state of affairs. The Russian political system can best be described, to use Andreas Schedler's term as "electoral authoritarian", a model associated with the Peruvian political system during the years of Fujimori's presidency when political opposition was severely restricted. An electoral authoritarian regime "plays the game of multiparty elections" but ensures that effective opposition is shackled, essentially making elections instruments of authoritarian rule. As the renowned political scientist, Robert Dahl, reminds us, the presence of organised opposition is as central to the overall concept of liberal democracy as is the existence of free and fair elections. The glaring lack of organised opposition, liberal or otherwise, in the elections to the State Duma in December suggests that Russia will remain wedded to the electoral authoritarian model for the foreseeable future.

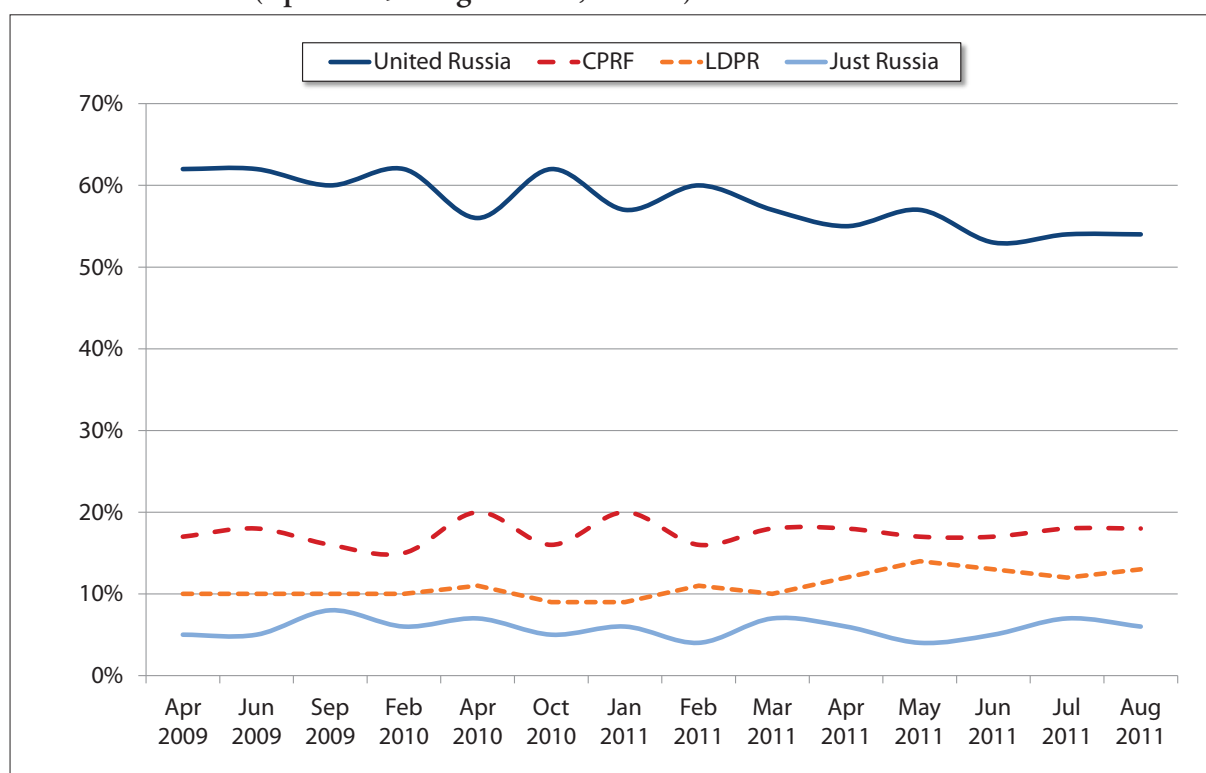
### About the Author

David White is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Birmingham. He is the author of *The Russian Democratic Party Yabloko: Opposition in a Managed Democracy* (Ashgate Press, 2006) and a number of articles on party politics and the role of opposition in Russia.

**Table 1: Conceptual Map of Russian Political Opposition, 2011**

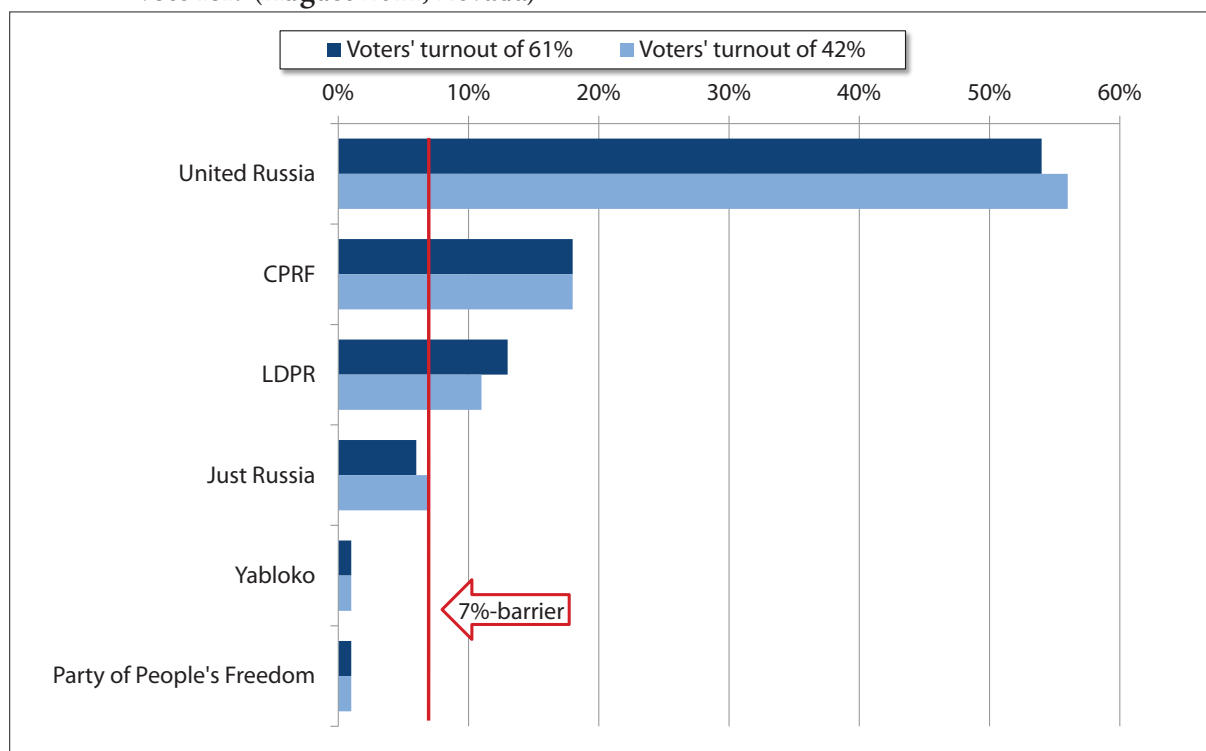
Kremlin-loyal “opposition”	Kremlin-sanctioned “semi opposition”	Non-systemic “principal opposition”
A Just Russia	Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)	Party of People’s Freedom ( <i>Partiya Narodnoi Svobody</i> or PARNAS)
Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)	Yabloko	Solidarity
Right Cause		The Other Russia ( <i>Drugaya Rossiya</i> )

## OPINION POLL

**Election Forecasts****Figure 1: If elections to the State Duma were to take place next Sunday, which party would you vote for? (April 2009–August 2011, Levada)**

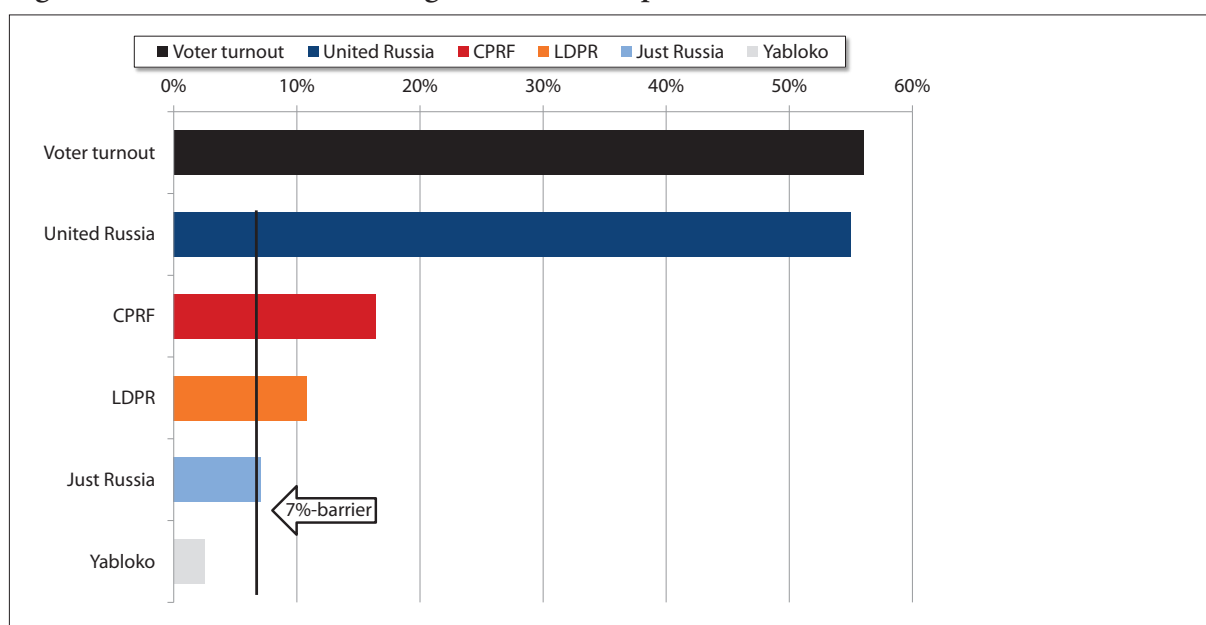
Source: Representative opinion polls by Levada Center from Apr. 2009 to 19–23 August 2011,  
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2011082505.html>

Figure 2: If elections to the State Duma were to take place next Sunday, which party would you vote for? (August 2011, Levada)



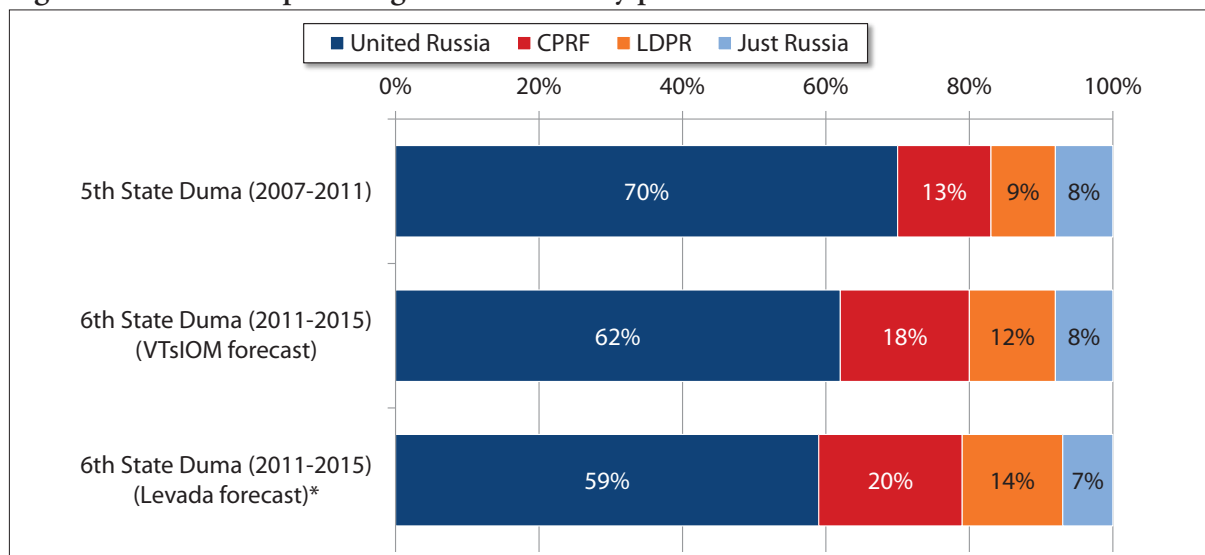
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, August 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011082505.html>

Figure 3: Election forecast taking into account expert assessments (VTsIOM)



Source: representative opinion polls by VTsIOM, August 2011, <http://vybory.wciom.ru/index.php?id=566&uid=111908>

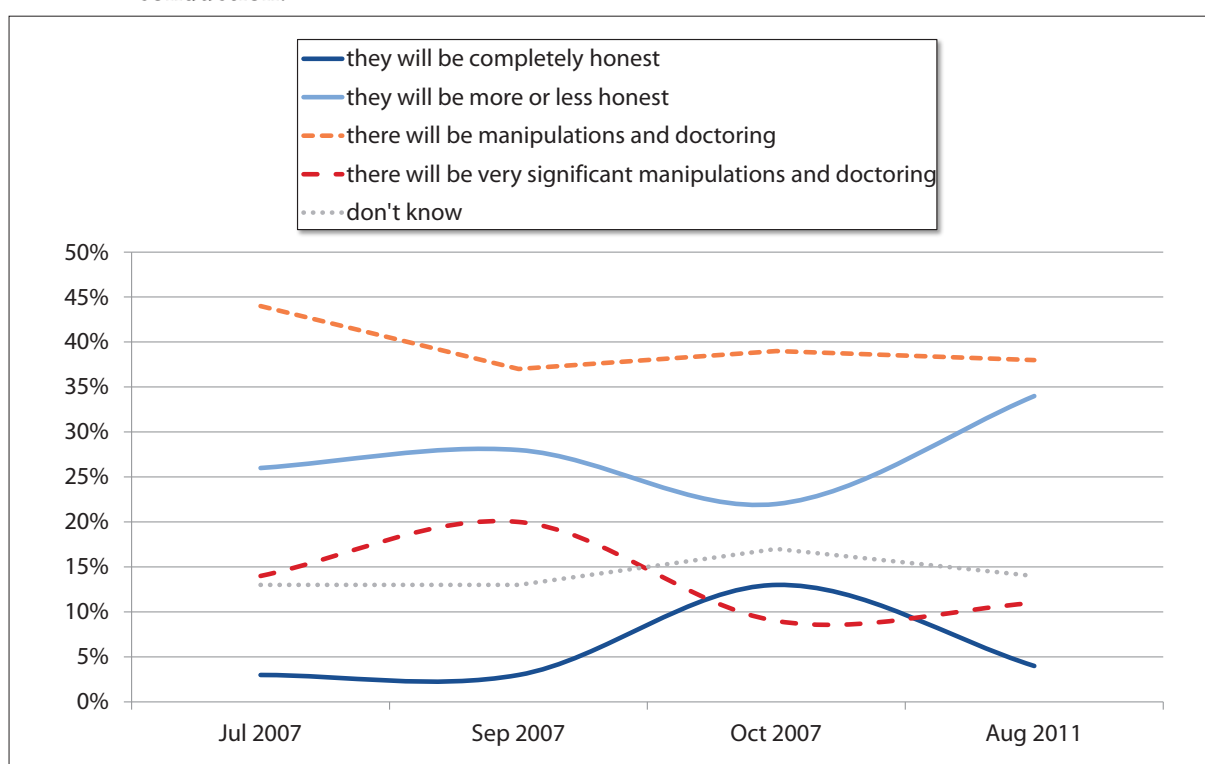
Figure 4: Forecast of percentages of seats held by parties in the Duma



\* If Just Russia breaks the 7%-barrier.

Source: <http://vybory.wciom.ru/index.php?id=566&uid=111908>, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011082505.html>

Figure 5: Will the Duma elections scheduled for the end of this year be conducted honestly, or will there be manipulations and doctoring of results during their preparation and conduction?



Source: Representative opinion polls by Levada Center from July 2007 to 19–23 August 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011082505.html>

## ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen ([www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de](http://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de)), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Basel (<http://hist.sem.unibas.ch/seminar/>) and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University. It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen ([www.laender-analysen.de/russland](http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland)), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia ([www.res.ethz.ch](http://www.res.ethz.ch)), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Publications Department • Klagenfurter Str. 3 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: [fsopr@uni-bremen.de](mailto:fsopr@uni-bremen.de) • Internet: [www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad](http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad)