

Victory expected for United Russia in the Russia General Elections

de **Corinne Deloy****ANALYSIS**1 month before
the poll

The date of the next Russian elections (4th December) was announced on 30th August last by the President of the Russian Federation, Dmitri Medvedev. Seven political parties will run to renew the Duma, the lower chamber of Parliament, i.e. -4 in comparison with the election on 2nd December 2007.

1,813,522 Russians living abroad have registered to fulfil their civic duty. 300 polling stations will be open for them in 140 countries. In the last general elections on 2nd December 2007 18.1% of them voted.

On the same day as the general elections Russians are also being asked to appoint the 1,210 representatives in the 27 regional parliaments. More than 2,500 local elections will also take place on 4th December. In all, around 50,000 people will be running in these elections.

Over the last four years Russian political life has been focused on one question only: who will the next President of the Republic be? Will Vladimir Putin (United Russia, ER), presently Prime Minister and former Head of State (2000-2008), stand for the supreme office? The head of government answered that question on 24th September. He will stand for the presidency, which will take place on 4th March next. After his planned victory he will exchange places with the present head of State, Dmitri Medvedev, who will then become Prime Minister again. So the suspense is over – everything has been decided. If in democracies we wait until we have the election results to discover the name of the next leader – in Russia it is the other way round.

Announced victory for United Russia

On 24th September last, 11,000 United Russia sympathisers gathered at the Sports Stadium of Lujniki in Moscow to listen to the speeches delivered by Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev. Vladimir Putin said he wanted Dmitri Medvedev to lead the United Russia list in the general elections on 4th December next, and then D. Medvedev proposed that V. Putin run for president on 4th March 2012; finally V. Putin promised to give the post of Prime Minister that he presently occupies to Dmitri Medvedev when he is re-elected as Head of State. This is a perfect, well planned scenario that will enable Vladimir Putin, if he is re-elected in 2018, to rule until 2024, i.e. nearly a quarter of a century in all. The general elections on 4th

December next are therefore, a vote in support of Vladimir Putin. "I want to say that we agreed on what we would do several years ago," declared the outgoing Prime Minister. "Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin does not mean a return to the past but something else: it is a way of rising to the challenges that we have set ourselves," indicated Russian President Dmitri Medvedev on 15th October last – he did however speak in support of a wider government, which in the future, "would leave some room for those who are not totally in agreement with us." "We have not seen strategies like this since Stalin and his personality cult" declared political expert Gleb Pavlovsky. "Never have the elections been turned into such a joke as now," says Stanislav Belkovsky, founder and director of the National Strategy Institute and of the communication company Politech. "Thirty years ago it was easy to blame the Communist Party as the only one responsible for the situation. Right now, because of our apathy, we alone are responsible for our sad fate," stresses Andrey Erofeev, art historian and specialist of the Russian avant-garde movement of the beginning of the 21st century and former dissident.

Although Vladimir Putin wants to become head of State again and retain power, it is out of the question however for him to copy the "president" of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, and renew his mandate as and when he likes. Vladimir Putin, who has transferred most of the presidential prerogatives over to the chair of the Council of Ministers which he has held since 2008, (which is not in line with the Russian Constitution) and retained the

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control of the secret services, the legal system, the civil service and defence, as well as a monopoly of raw materials, claims however to respect these institutions.

Dmitri Medvedev enjoys the image of a young, liberal man, who carries high the banner of his country's modernisation, such as the primacy of law for example – and this pleases the Western public. The present Russian president has accepted many thankless tasks (such as dismissing the former Mayor of Moscow, Yuri Lujkov) and taking the blame for the country's problems, so that Vladimir Putin could maintain his image as the country's saviour and as the only one able to resolve any crises.

However, D. Medvedev has been heard criticising the corruption that riddles the country, likewise the poor results produced by Russian civil servants and businesses.

On 17th March 2011 the outgoing president did not oppose NATO establishing a military coalition to protect the civilian populations with air strikes in Libya, an all time first for Russia in the last 20 years. On 30th March last D. Medvedev criticised the conflicts of interest that the presence of government members on the executive boards of the biggest national companies represents (Gazprom, Aeroflot, Rosneft and the VTB bank). He was notably targeting Igor Sechin, Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of Rosneft, Alexey Kudrin, Finance Minister and Chairman of the VTB bank and member of the board of the mining company Alrosa and also Igor Levitin, Transport Minister and Chairman of the airline Aeroflot. On July 1st the outgoing president again asked Vladimir Putin to put an end to this kind of accumulation of power.

The election campaign is a farce, whose only goal is to prevent the emergence of any alternative political force. Vladimir Putin's decision to place a tight hold on the general and presidential elections can be explained by the country's economic and social situation, which is a cause of concern mid-term. Although it limits the risks run by those in office (an electoral campaign is always an invitation to debate and encourages battles for influence), the outgoing Prime Minister's announcement removes all matter of interest from the election which may lead to a high rate of voter abstention.

One consequence of the announced inversion of the roles is that on 26th September Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin resigned, since undoubtedly he had hoped to become Prime Minister, saying that he refused to serve in a government led by Dmitri Medvedev. The Finance Minister was replaced by his deputy Anton Siluanov.

Vladimir Putin wants to turn Russia, at present the world's 10th biggest economy, into the one of the fifth first. He hopes to bring the GDP/capita up to 26,000€

(10,500€ at present) in 10 years. The outgoing Prime Minister created the Strategic Initiatives Agency, alongside the Committee for Modernisation founded by Dmitri Medvedev, whose aim it is to promote the country's young talent. "Russia needs calm, stable development that is void of disruption and rash experiments based on unjustified liberalism and social demagoguery," declared the head of government.

In an article published by the daily Izvestia on 4th October, Vladimir Putin suggested the creation of a Eurasian Union with the former Soviet Republics. "We are suggesting a powerful, supranational unification model, close integration according to new political and economic values so that we can become one of the focal points of the modern world," he wrote.

The outgoing Prime Minister created the All Russia People's Front last May with the aim of "coordinating all of those who are not indifferent to the fate of Russia." The organisation brings together "the vital forces" in Russian society: individuals, associations and also companies, unions, war veterans from Afghanistan, youth movement leaders, etc. 40,000 employees of the Siberian industrial holding, Sibirski Devoloy Soyuz have joined the Front, likewise railway and postal employees. The Front is allowed to cooperate with foreign political parties, for example with the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU), led by Natalia Vitrenko. In 1937 the Bolshevik Party created a bloc like this so that citizens' associations and workers committees would support the regime.

"Vladimir Putin is no longer confident in his party. The latter can no longer guarantee that it will retain its 2/3 constitutional majority except if it stages infringements that the outgoing Prime Minister, who wants to protect his international reputation, refuses to do. This is why he decided to create the All Russia People's Front," indicates Alexey Mukin, director of the Political Information Centre. Vladimir Putin has also demanded the systematic organisation of primaries (praïmeriz) for the selection of United Russia candidates standing in the general elections. The organisation of primaries was made obligatory at the 11th United Russia congress in November 2009. These took place between 21st July and 25th August last. They rallied 226,000 voters for 4,700 candidates (700 during the primaries organised for the general elections on 2nd December 2007) 58% of whom were members of NGO's (2,000 are affiliated to the All Russia People's Front), 36% members of United Russia and 6% of independents. A minimum of 150-600 places on the United Russia list in the general election was reserved for the representatives of the All Russia People's Front.

The outgoing Prime Minister said that thanks to the primaries he saw how the most effective representatives could be selected and therefore how the ruling power could be more effective. In reality United Russia is losing ground, the party is described by one third of Russians (34%) as "a party of civil servants and scoundrels" according to a poll by Levada. Hence the care invested in the candidate selection process, to the modification in the means of recruitment and the emphasis placed on the way competition has been established. However many political observers believe that the latter was biased due to the centralisation of the candidate selection process. Vladimir Putin has suggested that the primaries should be obligatory for all parties in all elections (national, regional and local) in order to "develop political life". "In my opinion it is interference in the internal affairs of political life. Every party defines the means, methods and criteria for the appointment of its candidates in an election," answered Igor Lebedev, leader of the Parliamentary group of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR). United Russia has set itself the goal of winning the constitutional 2/3 majority in the Duma on 4th December next.

The other parties in the race

There are two main nationalist parties in Russia: the Communist Party (KPRF), led by Guennady Zyuganov and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) led by Vladimir Jirinovski. The latter started a tour of Russia, promising fiscal returns and facilities. His party has chosen the motto "For the Russians" and says that it is fighting so that "Russians do not have to suffer discrimination in their own country." V. Jirinovski has promised to build an "ethnic State" for the "heroic people, which the Russian are." The Liberal Democratic Party proves to be very useful in channelling nationalist feeling that is rising in Russia. According to the institute Levada, 46% of Russians say they are xenophobic (41% in 2009). Moreover 45% say they are against the country's other ethnic groups (38%, two years ago). The Liberal Democratic Party hopes to become the second most important party in the Duma with 25% of the vote.

The Communist Party defends the nationalisation of companies owned by the oligarchs and the introduction of progressive taxation. It is however careful about the criticism it makes of the ruling party. Its leader Guennady Zyuganov will lead the communist list. Amongst the candidates we find Viktor Cherkesov, former director of the federal drugs surveillance service (FSKN), Zhores Alforyov, Nobel Physics Prize winner in 2000 and cosmonaut Svetlana Savitskaya. The communists have set themselves a high target in the general elections on 4th December next, since they hope to win 20% of the vote. A Just Russia (SR), the social democratic party, has been

marginalised. Its former leader Serguey Mironov, was removed from his post as chair of the Council of the Federation and the party has lost many members (Duma spokesperson Alexander Babakov joined United Russia). In 2007, Serguey Mironov suggested a merger between his party and the communist party to create a unified socialist movement. The proposal was rejected by Guennady Zyuganov who qualified A Just Russia's position as a "total farce". The party's new leader, Nikolay Levichev, repeated the proposal so that the left alliance could win a majority in the general elections on 4th December next. In his opinion this union is "logical because the main lines of the communist party programme have been almost the same as those put forward by A Just Russia for several years."

The party has suggested a 300% increase in the fines set in the event infringements made against the labour law, progressive taxation rates, new anti-corruption laws and an increase in retirement pensions. It hopes to win 15% of the vote in the election.

Just Cause (PD) lies to the centre right of the political scale and was created in 2008 after the merger of three liberal movements (Civilian Force, the Democratic Party and the Union of Rightwing Forces). On 25th June last billionaire and businessman Mikhail Prokhorov (believed by some to be the richest man in Russia; his fortune is estimated at 9.3 billion €), who heads the investment company Onexim, was elected unanimously as the party's leader at a congress that was broadcast on TV, undeniable proof that Just Cause is close to the Kremlin. "I suggest that we exclude the word opposition from my vocabulary" declared Mikhail Prokhorov, who has however been dismissed since and banned from taking part in the elections on 4th December next. He was replaced by Andrey Duanayev on 20th September.

The Russian Political System

The Federal Assembly of the Federation of Russia comprises two Houses: the Federation Council, the Upper House, comprising 178 members and the State Duma, the Lower House, comprising 450 MPs elected for four years. As of the election on 4th December they will be elected every 5 years.

MPs are elected by integral proportional representation based on federal lists that can comprise up to 600 names each, in one single electoral constituency. A minimum of 7% of the votes cast is required to be represented in the Duma. This threshold does vary however; indeed parties that win between 5% and 7% of the vote on 4th December will have one or two seats. The reduction of the minimum to 5% of the votes cast to be represented in the Duma will officially be applied as of January 2013. The Russian Constitution stipulates that at least two par-

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ties have to be represented in the Duma. As a result if only one party achieves a result over 7% of the vote, the party that comes second enters the Duma, whatever the percentage of votes it has won. Finally parties that win more than 4% of the vote are reimbursed their campaign fees.

To take part in the general elections a party has to have 50,000 members or a minimum of 500 members in at least 44 of the country's 46 regions. Also the parties which are represented in the present Duma have to pay a deposit of 60 million roubles (1.3 million €) or have 200,000 voters' signatures; no more than 10,000 of them can come from the same region nor can they be Russians living abroad. Finally the electoral law allows candidates to stand both in the general and regional elections, which take place on the same day.

4 political parties are represented in the present Duma:

- United Russia, holds the majority in parliament, led since 2007 by outgoing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Founded in December 2001 after the merger of two parties Unity and Fatherland-All Russia, it has 315 MPs;
- the Communist Party (KPRF), the country's leading opposition party, founded in 1993 by Guennady Zyuganov, it has 180,000 members and 57 seats;
- the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), an ultra nationalist, populist party founded in 1989 and led by Vladimir Jirinovski; it comprises 40 MPs;
- A Just Russia (SR), created in 2006 after the merger of Rodina (Fatherland), the Russian Life Party and the Russian Pensioners' Party – led by Nikolay Levichev with 38 seats.

The Council of the Federation comprises 166 members i.e. 2 representatives of the legislative and executive power of each of the 83 entities that comprise the Federation of Russia (21 republics, 9 administrative territories, 46 regions, 1 autonomous region, 4 autonomous district and 2 federal cities). The duration of the mandate varies depending on the republic or the region. Russia is divided into 7 federal constituencies (Centre, North West, South, the Volga Basin, Urals, Siberia and the Far East), each led by a plenipotentiary representative of the president.

The President of the Russian Federation is elected by universal suffrage every four years. Dmitri Medvedev was elected on 2nd March 2008 in the first round of the election winning 70.28% of the vote. Turn out totalled

63.78%. The present head of State passed a law in 2008 which increases the duration of the mandate to six years. In spite of the image of strength that Russia's leaders would like to give, the country is at a crossroads. Russia wonders about its position in the world. "No, Russia has not yet chosen its path and I am not sure that it can do so in the near future. The question "does Russia belong to the West" has not been decided but has been made more complicated by the crisis ongoing in Europe. It has become very difficult for the country to be European mentally and look increasingly towards Asia from an economic point of view. Moscow is intellectually confused about its future. It has no model to follow and is unable to produce one of its own," stresses Fyodor Lukyanov, chief editor in Moscow of Russia in Global Affairs.

The ratings agency Standard&Poor's announced that it was maintaining its BBB rating. It did however say that the almost guaranteed return of Vladimir Putin as Head of State could be a long term obstacle to Russia's growth. "We think that the role switch and people could complicate the country's task in facing challenges, such as improving the business climate, competition and manufacturing infrastructures and the maintenance of long term growth." The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts GDP growth of 4.8% this year and 4.5% in 2012. The international organisation has said that Moscow will certainly have problems in attracting foreign capital because of political uncertainty, the weakness of the banking system and the dangerous climate that reigns over the country.

According to Valery Federov, director of VTsIOM, only four parties – United Russia, the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party and a Just Russia – will enter the next Duma. Finally, according to a poll by Levada, more than half of the Russians (53%) believe that the general elections are a sham and one person in two (49%) is expecting that results will be tampered with.

According to the latest poll by FOM at the end of October; United Russia is due to win 40%, the Communist Party, 12%, the Liberal Democratic Party 10% and a Just Russia 5%.

Disappointed by their political leaders, the Russians mostly show total indifference with regard to the election on 4th December next. A decline in their material situation and dark economic prospects may however change the situation. According to Levada, 41% of Russians look on Vladimir Putin's return to power with indifference.

Reminder of the General Election Results on 2nd December 2007 in Russia

Turnout: 63.71%

Political Parties	No./votes won	% votes won	No. of seats
United Russia (ER)	44 714 241	64,30	315
Communist Party (KPRF)	8 046 886	11,57	57
Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR)	5 660 823	8,14	40
A Just Russia (SR)	5 383 639	7,74	38
Others	5 731 476	8,25	0

Source : Internet Site of the Russian Electoral Commission

(http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100021960186&vrn=100100021960181®ion=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&prnetvd=null&vibid=100100021960186&type=242)

No suspense with regard to the general elections in Russia

On 4th December 110 million Russians will be voting to select the 450 members of the Duma, the lower chamber of Parliament. Early voting started on 18th November. In this election 376 polling stations will be open in 146 countries; early voting will be possible in 60 of them. During the presidential election on 2nd March 2008, 20.3% of Russians living abroad fulfilled their civic duty. On 4th December the polling stations will be open in 65 stations (in 43 regions) and 27 airports (in 24 regions). In the last general elections on 2nd December 2007, 15,500 people voted in these stations. The electoral campaign started on 5th November and will end in the evening of 2nd December. The 3rd December, the eve of the election, is called "the day of silence".

On 24th November the Council of the Federation, the upper chamber of Parliament, decided, 142 in favour that the next presidential election would take place on 4th March in Russia. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has been a candidate in this election since 24th September, the date on which the President of the Republic Dmitri Medvedev put his name forward to lead the State, whilst the head of government said that he wanted Dmitri Medvedev to lead the list of United Russia (ER) in these general elections. Vladimir Putin promised to grant the post of Prime Minister to Dmitri Medvedev when he is re-elected as President of the Republic. More increasingly, this general election seems to be a general rehearsal for the one taking place on 4th March next.

United Russia, the party in office, is putting 597 candidates forward (including 117 women) 172 of whom are outgoing MPs. Around half of the MPs will therefore be re-elected. 415 candidates are

party members. Each of United Russia's regional lists includes among the first three members at least one member of the All Russia People's Front (ONF), an organisation founded by Vladimir Putin,

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which brings together “the driving forces” of Russian society. Eight regional governors, i.e. fewer than usual, are leading United Russia’s list in their region: Igor Shuvalov (Primorye), former Prime Minister (2007-2008) Viktor Zubkov (Volgograd), Igor Sechin (Stavropol), Viacheslav Volodin (Saratov), Alexander Zuckov (Kaliningrad), the Deputy Minister for Regional Development, Dmitri Kozak (Saint Petersburg), Natural Resources and Ecology Minister, Yuri Trutnev (Perm), and the Emergency Situations Minister, Serguey Shoigu (Krasnoïarsk). The party of outgoing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (ER) has been losing ground in the polls. According to the Levada institute it is due to win 51% of the vote, i.e. -11 points less than in November 2010. Certain to win on 4th December, the party is aware however that it will not repeat its 2007 result (64.30% of the vote and 315 MPs) and that it will lose its 2/3 majority in the Duma.

According to the Levada institute 61% of Russians say they are satisfied with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, i.e. -20 points in comparison with a year ago – the weakest result since August 2000, the time when the submarine Kursk sank. President Dmitri Medvedev achieves a 57% satisfaction rate. *“United Russia will really need to be reorganised. The party needs new leadership to implement reforms and modernise the country’s economy,”* declared Vladimir Putin. *“When I came to power in 2000 Russia faced civil war in the Caucasus, the economy was about to collapse. We have re-established the Constitution and social standards in ten years; citizens’ revenues have risen sharply and poverty levels have declined. This trend will continue in spite of some difficulties”* he declared.

United Russia’s programme is focused on 8 principles including the modernisation of the economy via an increase of productivity, the improvement of the business climate, the strengthening of the fight against corruption, the increase in salaries and retirement pensions and the improvement of inter-ethnic relations.

The party is promising to make Russia the 5th most important economy in the world by creating 25 million jobs in industry and the public sector. It says that at the end of 2014 salaries will have been mul-

tiplied by 1.5, that at least 1,000 schools will have been built and that parents will no longer have to wait to enrol their children for nursery places.

For its part the All Russia People’s Front has made the modernisation of the economy, the reduction of inflation, regional development, the improvement of living conditions; the fight against corruption, the improvement of the political system and the modification of the penal code, its priorities. It has asked MPs to write a yearly report about the work they have done. Many political observers wonder about the role it will play after this election.

The Communist Party, which is the leading opposition movement (KPRF) led by Guenady Zyuganov, is using the international economic crisis to criticise capitalism. It is suggesting an increase in education spending to a total of 10% of the GDP, to nationalise several companies and to introduce free healthcare. *“We shall give you back what has been taken from you”* says the communist leader, who likes to show that he has moved on and that his party has adapted to the 21st century, regularly taking China as an example.

Fair Russia (SR), led by Nikolay Levichev, is standing as the party of social equality and wants to be the *“path to individual freedom via collective action.”* On 15th November last, during a television debate, its former leader, Serguey Mironov, who was removed from his position as leader of the Council of the Federation suggested to Vladimir Jirionovski (Democratic Liberal Party LDPR) that they form a tripartite coalition with the Communist Party in the Duma. The ultra-nationalist, populist leader of the Democratic Liberal Party refused saying that his party was going to win the election on 4th December. He said that to do this he would demand that Fair Russia commit to pleading the cause of “original Russians” and to withdraw from the Socialist Internationale. In the eyes of the party in office Vladimir Jirionovski is one of its best opponents because of his ability to win protest votes. Yabloko, a liberal party led by Alexey Mitrokin (who will be second on the party’s list after its founder Grigori Yavlinski) stands as the legatee of the Democratic Constitutional Party created in 1905. It is putting forward a programme entitled “Russia

needs change", based on three principles: the creation of a modern, efficient State, the implementation of an efficient economy – i.e. diversified and truly competitive in which private property would be inviolable – and the development of human potential. The party is promising to counter the merger of the business world and that of political power in Moscow. "In Russia, it is called the oligarchy; in Europe it is called the mafia," repeats Grigori Yavlinski. He hopes to throw new light on the country's history, which is "vital to be able to move forwards", highlighting the "illegal change-over of power in 1917" and he says he wants "Stalinian and Bolshevik repression" to be acknowledged. The party, which lost its representation in the Duma in the last general elections on 2nd December 2007, is confident. "If turnout is over 60% then Yablokov will win around 10% of the vote," declared Grigori Yavlinski, who indeed believes that high turnout will make infringements more difficult.

According to the latest poll by FOM, published on 19th and 20th November last, United Russia is

due to come out ahead with 39% of the vote. The Communist Party led by Guenady Zyuganov is due to win 12%, the Democratic Liberal Party led by Vladimir Jirinovski 10%, Fair Russia, led by Alexey Mitrokin, 9%. Yabloko, Patriots of Russia, the Nationalist Left Party led by Guenady Semigin and Just Cause (PD), a party led since 20th September last by Andrey Dunayev, are due to win 1% of the vote each and therefore will not be in a position to take seats in the Duma.

According to Levada, most Russians say they are certain that United Russia will win on 4th December and the electoral apathy this situation leads to is beneficial to Vladimir Putin. According to a poll 18% of those who say they do not want to vote in the election say that the ruling party will win anyway and 8% say that the election will be rigged.

Finally Nashi (Ours), a youth movement which says it is anti-fascist and which supports Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, will meet in a forum in Moscow on 4th 6th December next.

The Ruling Party, United Russia, wins the general elections but is clearly in decline

The ruling party, United Russia (ER) won the general elections on 4th December in Russia. The party led by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin won 49.54% of the vote and 238 seats in the Duma, the lower chamber of Parliament (-77 in comparison with the previous election on 2nd December 2007). United Russia maintains the absolute majority but has lost its 2/3 majority, which made it possible to modify the constitution without having to convince the other parties in Parliament.

It beat the Communist Party (KPRF), the leading opposition party, led by Guenady Zyuganov, which won 19.2% of the vote (92 seats, + 35), Fair Russia (SR) led by Nikolay Levichev, 13.20% of the vote (64 seats, + 26) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), led by Vladimir Jirinovski, 11.40% of the vote (56 seats, + 16).

As forecast by the polls only four parties will be represented in the new Duma.

The liberal party, Yabloko led by Alexey Mitrokhin did however win the majority of votes cast by Russian citizens living in the west. It came out ahead in the USA, France and the UK and second (behind United Russia) in Italy.

Turnout was slightly below that recorded in the last general elections on 2nd December 2007 and lay at 60.2% i.e. -3.51 points.

RESULTS

"This is an optimal result that reflects the real situation in the country. Using this result as a base we can guarantee stable development," said Vladimir Putin happily. *"This is democracy in motion. It was said that the party would and retain its dominant position by using ploys but it has been proven that it has the moral right to continue on the path we have chosen. United Russia will be obliged to govern in coalition with the other parties on certain issues and this is quite normal, this is parliamentarianism and democracy,"* maintained Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. *"We hope that we shall win a majority in the Duma,"* stressed the leader of the Duma, Boris Gryzlov (ER).

The Communist Party rejected the offer of a coalition issued by United Russia whereas Fair Russia has not ruled this out if the communists take part. The Liberal Democratic Party also accepted, on condition that it would take part on an equal footing with United Russia.

Communist MP Serguey Obukov said: *"Russia now has a new political reality even if they re-write everything."* *"These general elections are unprecedented because they took place to the back drop of a decline in confidence in Vladimir Putin, Dmitri Medvedev and the ruling party"* indicates liberal Vladimir Rijkov who added, *"I think that the presidential election in March next will lead to a major political crisis because of the disappointment, frustration and disenchantment of the people – it will lead to an even greater protest vote."*

According to political expert, Kirill Rogov, *"the weak support for United Russia is an undeniable fact, which, moreover, is simply intensifying."* *"We have a totally personalised political system. The regime draws all of its legitimacy from Vladimir Putin's popularity. As a result this electoral decline is a serious threat to the stability of the system"* declared Lev Gudkov, director of the pollster Levada, just days before the election.

United Russia's decline was expected but its extent surprised political observers. The emerging Russian middle class seems increasingly doubtful about the tandem, comprising Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev and its ability to modernise the country. As for the poorest Russians they are disappointed and are suffering the economic crisis more and more. Some of them did not hesitate to turn to the Communist Party which promised *"to give them back what has been stolen"* and suggested an increase in education spending, to nationalise several companies and to introduce free healthcare.

The election was marred by multiple incidents of fraud and the arrest of many opponents. Infringements were witnessed on election day, likewise during time leading up to it. At least five independent internet sites – those of radio Echo of Moscow, the site www.slou.ru, the daily Kommersant, the

weekly New Times and the NGO Golos – fell victim to cyber-attacks and were inaccessible on the day of the vote. *"It is clear that this attack on our site on the day of voting is part of an attempt to prevent the publication of information about voting infringements,"* declared the editor in chief of the Echo of Moscow, Alexey Venediktov.

The director of Golos, Lilia Chibanova was detained in customs at the airport of Cheremetievo in Moscow for 12 hours and had her computer confiscated. Golos is also under investigation on suspicion of "spreading rumours". Golos was sentenced on December 1st to pay a fine of 30,000 roubles (700€) for having infringed the law that prohibited the publication of polls during the five days prior to the general elections. The organisation denies having infringed this rule. The USA has expressed its concern about the "harassment" that seemed to prevent Golos from monitoring the elections. The Russian general elections were marked by frequent infringements as the votes were counted; there was notably ballot box stuffing – read the press release the day after the vote written by electoral observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). *"Voting was well organised but the quality of the process deteriorated considerably as the votes were counted; this was typified by frequent infringements to the procedure, notably with serious signs of ballot box stuffing,"* continued the organisation which indicated that *"political competition was limited and unfair during the campaign,"* and stresses *"the lack of independence on the part of the electoral authorities and the media"*.

"Infringements were widespread and systematic," accuses the Communist Party. Serguey Mitrokin, the chair of Yabloko said that in Moscow all of his party's observers were forced to leave the polling stations before the voting slips were counted. *"It is an outrage, a reason to cancel the elections,"* he wrote on Twitter.

According to police forces more than 170 opponents were arrested as they tried to demonstrate against the way the elections had been run in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. More than 51,000 policemen were deployed in the capital on the day of the vote.

The Russian election result bears witness to a decline in outgoing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's popularity, who was booed by the crowd last week as he came to watch a boxing match at the Olympic Stadium in Moscow. The election also marks the first time that Russians have taken a step back from those in power.

In Russia, as elsewhere, the advent of internet and social networks has released information that the Kremlin had managed to have a monopoly over until now. In 2011 50 million Russians had access to the net; the country has experienced

the biggest rise in the number of internet users in Europe. "There are two Russia, one urban, hungry for knowledge, connected to internet. It is uncertain about its choices but resolutely tired of the "Putin Consensus". This is the future middle class. The other Russia is that of the retired, the civil servants, army officers who hope to gain an extra monthly 1000 roubles from the pro-Putin forces. Above all they are reticent about any kind of change," stresses editor Konstantin von Eggert of the Moscow News.

Political expert Boris Mejouev believes that "the election in fact turned into a referendum against United Russia." "These are the most scandalous elections in Russian history. Of course there will be no revolution. But all of

this will lead to a loss of legitimacy on the part of those in power," indicated political expert, Dmitri Oreshkin.

Moscow did not experience revolution in this general election but many analysts believe that there will be a "before" and "after" 4th December 2011 in Russia. If the economic situation continues to decline, Russians may very well show their discontent and turn away from the Russian leader in the presidential election on 4th March next. This is an election for which Vladimir Putin was unanimously appointed as United Russia's candidate by the 614 representatives of the party who were present on 27th November – and he is still running favourite.

General Election Results on 4th December 2011 in Russia

Turnout: 60.20%

Political Parties	% of votes won	No of seats won
United Russia (ER)	49.54	238
Communist Party (KPRF)	19.20	92
Fair Russia (SR)	13.20	64
Democratic Liberal Party (LDPR)	11.40	56
Others	6.66	0

Source : Agence France Presse

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