# Russian parliamentary elections highlight growing popular discontent

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United Russia, the ruling party of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, suffered major losses in parliamentary elections on December 4. Initial vote counts show that United Russia received 49.54 percent, almost 15 points less than it received in the 2007 elections to the State Duma, the lower house of parliament.

By any measure, this is a stunning rebuke to the ruling tandem of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, especially since the latter had just announced on November 27 at his party conference that he would be running for President in elections on March 4, 2012.

Three other parties benefited from the falling support for United Russia. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), led by Gennady Ziuganov, received 19.16 percent of the votes, almost double its 2007 showing. "A Just Russia" won 13.22 percent and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), headed by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, garnered 11.66 percent. The liberal "Yabloko" party apparently won less than the 7 percent needed to receive seats in parliament.

Widespread accusations of voter fraud followed the election, prompting demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg. One of the most popular signs at the protests denounced the "Swindlers and Thieves" of the Putin regime.

Accounts of the number of protesters vary widely, ranging from 1,000 to 10,000, but they were met with large contingents of police. There were reports of roughly 200-300 arrests in Moscow at Chistye Prudy.

On Tuesday, another protest was held at Triumfalnaya Ploshchad in Moscow. There, the youth movement of United Russia, "Nashi" [Ours], and another pro-Putin youth group, "Molodaia Gvardiia," were mobilized in the thousands with drums and megaphones to drown out the anti-Putin protesters.

Many protesters called the elections a farce due to the obvious stuffing of ballot boxes. In one instance, an election official in Moscow was filmed filling out stacks of election ballots in favor of United Russia. A video of the incident was posted on the internet and widely viewed (See: http://youtu.be/Hw-5y9fy4zU).

In Chechnya, United Russia received 99.48 percent of the vote, an obvious absurdity given mass hostility to the Kremlin's repeated invasions of Chechnya. In Rostov, when the votes were displayed on television, they totaled 146 percent of the registered electorate.

Others objected to the obvious misuse of "administrative resources"—that is, government funds—to support United Russia in the lead-up to the election.

Then, on election day, the web sites of many opposition groups were mysteriously shut down by hackers through denial of use attacks. These included *Slon.ru*, *Ekho Moskvy*, *PablikPost*, *The New Times*, *Bolshoi gorod* and *LiveJournal*. Lastly, the only unofficial election monitoring group, Golos, was often prevented from monitoring election sites. Its web site was one of the many shut down on Sunday.

United Russia currently holds 315 of the 450 seats in the State Duma. Since Sunday's votes will reduce that number to approximately 238 seats, there is already talk of a possible coalition with one or more of the three "opposition parties."

Two of them, the CPRF and the LDPR, conducted ultra-nationalist and chauvinistic campaigns in which the CPRF seems to have benefited from the Putin regime's active rehabilitation of Stalin over the last few years. Ethnic tensions were encouraged with a campaign against Tajik nationals in November and calls for ethnically proportional representation of Russians in government, a perpetual demand of ultra-

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right forces.

The third “opposition” party, “A Just Russia,” was created by the Kremlin as a social-democratic safety valve and an attempt to channel support for Medvedev’s failed “modernization” program.

None of the three parties would have any objection to joining a coalition to carry out Putin’s continued attacks on the living standards of the Russian working class. Although full details are not yet available, the 2012-2014 budget that Putin just announced will lead to a huge growth in the military and police apparatus, and savage cuts in social programs. Any party joining with United Russia would be a partner of the ruling coalition dedicated to carrying out that program.

Aside from the corruption, incompetence, and cronyism that are pervasive throughout the ruling elite, the rapid social polarization in Russia is leading to increased misery in the broadest layers of the population, and the untrammeled enrichment of the ruling oligarchs. There are growing attempts to privatize education and medical care, hitting the young and the elderly particularly hard. Pensioners live in abject poverty, and rural areas are being virtually depopulated due to lack of jobs, infrastructure, and even minimal social welfare.

Recent polls suggest rising popular discontent with the reactionary legacy of twenty years of capitalism in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A December 1 editorial on *Gazeta.ru* notes: “Sociologists say that over the last decade the citizens of Russia have practically remained unchanged in their attitude to both big capital and private ownership of the land. According to the Levada Center, just as at the beginning of 2000, about half of those polled believe that all major enterprises ‘should belong to the state.’ If you add those who feel that the state should control ‘the enterprises most important to the nation,’ then the number of those respondents is more than 90 percent.”

The political vacuum in Russia is widely felt. Not a single official party offers a revolutionary socialist program, which is the only alternative to increased social polarization and the impoverishment of millions.

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