

Elena Kropatcheva

Elections in Russia in 2011-2012: Will the Wind of Change Keep Blowing?

Introduction

Russians have long had the reputation of being passive about, uninterested in, and disengaged from politics, and Western observers, in particular, have been puzzled by this passivity. Protests that started in December 2011 as a response to election fraud during the Russian parliamentary elections, labelled in the mass media as the “new Decembrists” movement, “the Russian winter/spring”, the “mink-coat” or “white revolution” and described using other colourful epithets, too, took many observers abroad and in Russia by surprise. These were the biggest protests since the 1990s.

These events raised many questions: Who are these people who have started to protest? What are the reasons for these protests and why did they begin at that specific moment? How stable is Vladimir Putin’s system overall? Will some liberalization of the system as a result of these protests be possible? And many others. Even now, at the time of writing – August 2012 – it is difficult to give clear and definite answers to these questions, and some of them still have to be studied more closely by sociologists.¹

This contribution starts with an overview of the parliamentary and presidential elections (election campaigns, their results and aftermath) that took place in Russia on 4 December 2011 and 4 March 2012, respectively. It then focuses on the protest movement and tries to give some answers to the aforementioned questions. Finally, it presents a survey of developments in Russian domestic policy after the elections in order to find indicators as to whether this wind of change will keep blowing. A great deal of attention is paid throughout the article to opinions from Russia on these developments.

The Parliamentary Elections of 4 December 2011

This section describes the parliamentary election on 4 December 2011: the campaign process, the course of the election per se, and its results. In terms of the form they took and their extent, the violations that occurred in the parliamentary election campaign, the voting process, and the vote count did not differ much from those committed during previous elections, but their out-

¹ See Olga Kryshchanovskaya’s contribution to the Ekho Moskvy radio broadcast *Ishchem vykhod...: Skol’ko prozhivet vlast’?* [Looking for a way out: How long will the authorities stay in power?], 25 July 2012, at: <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/exit/912297-echo>.

come – the mass protests that started in large cities – is an indicator that something was different during the electoral process this time.

As in previous years, the 2011 parliamentary election campaign was ridden with scandals. All of the parties committed violations, but the leader in committing such misdeeds was the ruling pro-presidential United Russia (*Yedinaya Rossiya*, EdRo) party.² Governors in many regions openly or indirectly campaigned for EdRo, promising modernization of infrastructure and an increase in social benefits in exchange for votes. Rallies for representatives of political parties, especially EdRo, took place at schools, during concerts, and at other public events that originally had nothing to do with elections.³

The leading parties that fielded candidates in this election, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (*Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, KPRF), the nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (*Liberal'no-Demokraticheskaya Partiya Rossii*, LDPR), and A Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*, SR), all have their traditional electorates. From the beginning it was clear that the “non-system opposition” liberal Yabloko party would not be given a chance to receive a decisive number of votes. To be fair, it should be also said that its leader, Grigory Yavlinsky, had been politically invisible for various reasons for a long period, so it would have been naive to hope for much support from the liberal electorate. As a result, voters who could not identify strongly with any of the parties or candidates, or who were sceptical about their preferred party’s chances of attracting a significant number of votes, could only cast a negative “protest” vote – against EdRo – by voting for some other party, rather than supporting any party out of conviction.

In general, there were no significant differences between the slogans used by all the contesting parties. Neither the ruling EdRo party nor the opposition parties offered real alternative paths for development. All parties focused on cheap populism: For instance, the KPRF promised the nationalization of resources, the LDPR promised great-power politics, EdRo listed their achievements and focused on maintaining the status quo and stability (rather than modernization),⁴ and the SR promised to take care of pensioners.⁵ EdRo used many methods drawn from Soviet propaganda, including images of workers from factories and agriculture, producers of bread and the like, with Putin and Medvedev themselves shown bringing in the harvest. In short, it would have been difficult to discern differences between the parties from

2 See, for example, the *Nedelya s Mariannoi Maksimovskoi* television broadcast of 19 November 2011, at: http://www.nedelya.ren-tv.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1291:-qq--191111-&catid=4:nedelya-s-mariannoy-maksimovskoy&Itemid=9.

3 For video reports and analysis of the election campaign see, in particular, *ibid*.

4 Modernization was the slogan, coined by Dmitry Medvedev, to accentuate the specific goals of his presidency (2008-2012).

5 For videos of election campaign propaganda, see the *Nedelya s Mariannoi Maksimovskoi* television broadcast of 17 November 2011, at: http://www.nedelya.ren-tv.com/index.php?Itemid=9&id=4&layout=blog&option=com_content&view=category&limitstart=20.

their election campaigns in terms of posters, promises made, and TV election broadcasts.

While there was no monitoring of the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007 and 2008 by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) because of disagreements between Russia and the OSCE/ODIHR about the role and number of monitors, this time OSCE/ODIHR election monitoring did take place. A total of some 325 observers from the OSCE/ODIHR, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) monitored the election.⁶ The OSCE/ODIHR characterized the election campaign, the voting, and the count as follows:

The preparations [...] were technically well-administered [...] but the elections were marked by the convergence of the state and the governing party [author's note: for instance, the posters of the Moscow State Election Committee were almost identical with the posters of EdRo]. [...] The contest was also slanted in favour of the ruling party. This was evidenced by the lack of independence of the election administration, the partiality of most media, and the undue interference of state authorities at different levels. [...] Despite the lack of a level playing field, voters took advantage of their right to express their choice. [...] The quality of the process deteriorated considerably during the count, which was characterized by frequent procedural violations and instances of apparent manipulation, including several serious indications of ballot box stuffing. Result protocols were not publicly displayed in more than one-third of polling stations observed.⁷

I allowed myself this long citation because it aptly summarizes the course of the elections and the vote-counting.

As a consequence, it is not surprising that the largest number of votes was received by EdRo with 49 per cent. EdRo was followed by the KPRF with 19 per cent, the SR with 13 per cent, and the LDPR with twelve per cent. These parties made it into the Duma. Liberal-democratic Yabloko received only around three per cent of the vote.⁸ However, estimates given by independent experts on the basis of exit polls differed significantly from the official results: For example, EdRo would have received just 24 to 30 per cent without manipulation, while Yabloko would probably have made it into

6 Cf. OSCE, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Russian Federation, Elections to the State Duma, 4 December 2011, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, Warsaw, 12 January 2012, p. 3.

7 Ibid., p.1.

8 For the election results, see the website of the Central Election Commission (CEC) at: <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>.

the Duma with five to twelve per cent.⁹ Thus, even though EdRo would have still received the largest number of votes in a fair election, its real support is much lower than official numbers indicate.

While it was no surprise that manipulation would be used to help improve EdRo's standing and that – with or without manipulation – it would have received the largest number of votes and won the election, nonetheless, there was something special about this election. First of all, even before election day, several opinion polls were predicting that EdRo would receive a far lower share of votes than in previous years.¹⁰ Indeed, EdRo received 15 per cent fewer votes than it did in the 2007 Duma elections. As a result, EdRo lost its two-thirds constitutional majority in parliament: Out of 450 seats, EdRo received 238 and the other parties 212. These results were symptomatic. They showed the fatigue and dissatisfaction of the population with the results of government by a party of “thieves and crooks”, a slogan that was coined and popularized by Alexey Navalny, one of the opposition leaders, in his anti-corruption campaign. They also indicated that some sections of the population saw stagnation rather than stabilization in the politics of EdRo and wished for further development and modernization.

One further peculiarity of these elections was that many violations were ascertained by independent Russian observers or active members of local election commissions, who used their own phones and other devices to film and tape violations. As a result, videos and reports about these fraudulent acts stormed the social networks (including *vkontakte*, Facebook, Twitter, and LiveJournal) as well as YouTube and independent mass media (e.g. *Ekho Moskvy*, *Radio Svoboda*, *Golos*, and the TV channel *Dozhd*). This was one of the differences from previous elections that had also been marred by violations of this kind.¹¹ The number of internet users in Russia has been growing.¹² About 60 per cent of protesters learned about the opposition rallies from the internet, while some 35 per cent heard about them from their

9 Cf. Natalia Bubnova, in: *Duma Elections: Expert Analysis by Dmitri Trenin, Maria Lipman, Alexey Malashenko, Sergei Aleksashenko, Natalia Bubnova, Nikolay Petrov. Compilation of commentaries*, 13 December 2011, at: <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=46205>.

10 See, for example, Natalya Raibman, Sotsiologi otdayut “Edinoi Rossii” nemnogim bolshe 50% golosov [Sociologists give United Russia a little more than 50% of the votes], in: *Vedomosti*, 28 November 2011, at: http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/1434720/levadacentr_otdaet_edinoj_rossii_53_golosov_na_vyborah_v#ixzz1f19zk8Oj. See also a diagram that shows the drop in EdRo's estimated share of the vote: Comparison of estimates for EdRo during the parliamentary election campaigns in 2007 and 2011, Levada Center, *Vybory v Gosdumu* [Elections to the State Duma], 25 November 2011, at: <http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/vybory-v-gosdumu>.

11 For more information on how “elections Russian-style” developed, see: Stephen White, Elections Russian-Style, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 4/2011, pp. 531-556; Edwin Bacon, Electoral manipulation and the development of Russia's political system, in: *East European Politics* 2/2012, pp. 105-118. See also Max Bader, Trends and patterns in electoral malpractice in post-Soviet Eurasia, in: *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 3/2012, pp. 49-57.

12 The number of Internet users in Russia to reach 90 mln in 2013, 5 *ITAR-TASS*, 5 January 2012, at: <http://www.itar-tass.com/en/c154/311154.html>.

friends.¹³ This is why there were attempts to prevent the further spread of this information, and many independent websites were temporarily blocked or experienced hacker attacks.¹⁴

The first protests against this electoral fraud, which were held in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the days after the elections, were harshly suppressed by the police, but as early as 12 December the crowds on the streets in many large cities in Russia had grown from dozens to thousands (although the largest protests were again in Moscow and St. Petersburg). It would have been difficult to disperse these demonstrations by violent means while carrying on with the imitation of democracy. The main slogans of the protesters were “We’ve had enough!” and “Our votes were stolen!” They demanded that the head of the Central Election Commission (CEC) should be fired and that new – honest and fair – elections should be held. The songs of legendary Russian rock musician Viktor Tsoi – e.g. “*Peremen – my zhdem peremen*” (“Changes – we are waiting for changes”) – were played. Even the organizers of these gatherings did not expect that they would achieve such momentum.

In summary, these elections were just like the preceding Duma elections in Russia in terms of fraud and falsifications. Even with these violations, however, EdRo only received 49 per cent of votes. Without them, the ruling party’s share would have been even lower. EdRo’s position has significantly weakened. Both the rapid spread of information about the falsifications on the internet and the protests that broke out as a result revealed that civil society has awoken. They also showed the vulnerability of the current political system and of the ruling regime: Both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and members of their staff were initially at a loss, not knowing how to react to these unexpected developments.

The Presidential Election of 4 March 2012

As a consequence of the parliamentary elections, Vladimir Putin had to adjust his presidential election campaign: He no longer used EdRo, but rather tried to distance himself from the ruling party and used instead the newly created All-Russia People’s Front, his own project, as well as other initiatives, to unite his supporters. After the initial panicky reaction to the protests, the authorities started to respond actively by organizing even larger campaign rallies in support of Putin. Furthermore, even opposition protests were used in

13 Cf. Levada Center, *Chto-to pokhozhee na obshchestvo. V chem sotsial’noe znachenie mitingov i kto te lyudi, kotoie v nikh uchastvuyut – Interv’u s B. Dubinym* [Something similar to society. What is the social meaning of the protests and who are their participants – Interview with B. Dubin], 3 February 2012, at: <http://www.levada.ru/print/03-02-2012/chto-pokhozhee-na-obshchestvo-v-chem-sotsialnoe-znachenie-mitingov-i-kto-te-lyudi-kotorye>.

14 For more information, see Aleksandr Kynev, *Kontrollverlust, Manipulation, Protest. Die Dumawahlen 2011 in Russland* [Loss of Control, Manipulation, Protest. The 2011 Duma Elections in Russia], in: *Osteuropa* 1/2012, pp. 25-40.

the presidential campaign: The existence of protests and anti-government meetings were presented by Putin's public supporters as a sign of democracy and pluralism in Russia, as though this had actually been Putin's achievement.

The climax of the campaign was the simultaneous holding of pro- and anti-Putin rallies at *Poklonnaya gora* and *Bolotnaya ploshchad'*, respectively, on 4 February 2012. There was a kind of contest to see who would hold the biggest rally, with both sides overestimating the number of their own participants and underestimating the number of participants on the opposing side, but what is clear is that there were thousands of participants at both events. This was also a contest of slogans and demands, of which some of the most frequently used are shown below:

<i>Slogans/Demands at Poklonnaya</i>	<i>Slogans/Demands at Bolotnaya</i>
Against colour revolutions: "Fair elections – yes, orange – no!"	For fair and honest elections – dismissal of CEC Head Vladimir Churov
"Who else, if not Putin?" – for stability	Against Putin's regime: "The power of the Law, not of the Tsar"
Against foreign enemies of Russia	For modernization and development

At pro-Putin rallies and throughout his whole campaign, negative stereotypes of supposed enemies were propagated. For instance, the US State Department was accused of sponsoring Russian opposition protests and of interfering in Russian domestic matters, of organizing "colour revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, and the "abroad" in general was presently negatively (the pejorative Russian term for abroad "*bugor*" was used). The slogans used during pro-Putin rallies were in line with the propaganda of the last ten-to-twelve years, whose central idea has been the necessity to unite around the national leader (Putin) and to fight against this (foreign) threat.¹⁵ In general, the images of internal others (opposition) and external others (the West) were used widely during the election campaign by Vladimir Putin and his supporters.¹⁶

The participants in the opposition rallies tried to stress that they were also against foreign influence on their country and pro-Russia, but against the current regime. In the words of Boris Dubin, this was "non-violent, civic

15 Cf. Ekho Moskvy radio broadcast in 2012.

16 For a detailed analysis of the images used, see: Olga Malinova, *Simvolicheskoe edinstvo natsii? Representatsiya makropoliticheskogo soobshchestva v predvybornoy ritorike Vladimira Putina* [Symbolic unity of the nation? Representation of the macropolitical community in the pre-election rhetoric of Vladimir Putin], in: *Pro et Contra*, May-June 2012, pp. 76-93.

protest against the current social-political order, against the regime”.¹⁷ Olga Kryshtanovskaya also notes that the opposition will not be satisfied by the introduction of isolated liberal laws; they are fighting against the authoritarian state for the sake of liberal democracy.¹⁸ Konstantin von Eggert writes: “The slogan ‘Russia without Putin’ is not so much about Putin’s personality. It rather reflects the desire to see the country without ‘*Basman*’ judiciary, censorship, the omnipotence of siloviki and state corporations, and all-powerful ‘administrative resources’.”¹⁹

The two sides accused each other of having been paid either from state resources (the pro-Putin rally) or by the US State Department (opposition supporters). Although there were many reports and videos showing pro-Putin supporters being paid by organizers, or people complaining after being compelled to participate in pro-Putin rallies by their employers, to say that Putin had no genuine supporters among the participants at *Poklonnaya* would be an oversimplification. As Vladimir Pozner explains, aside from the propaganda and unfair conditions, “never before in their entire history have the Russian people enjoyed the standard of living they enjoy today: more money, more cars, more homes, more food, more goods”.²⁰ There are those who are afraid of changes in the status quo either because they could lose their own profitable position or because they have a general fear of chaos and the redistribution of benefits, money, and property among the elites if Putin were to depart. Besides, Lev Gudkov notes that the interests and beliefs of the “pre-modern” and “anti-modern” majority of the population are interlinked with the current political system and the system of power distribution, which acts to prevent change.²¹

In addition to large-scale campaigning via television and the internet, Vladimir Putin published seven articles in leading Russian newspapers which addressed different topics, from nationalities and economic policy to foreign relations. In his earlier election campaigns, print mass media was not used on such a scale. Most of his articles were quite contradictory, as he tried to address and win over different segments of the population – from nationalists to liberals – promising modernization and stabilization at the same time, send-

17 Levada Center, Interview with Boris Dubin, cited above (Note 13; this and all following quotes from foreign-language sources translated by the author).

18 Cf. Kryshtanovskaya, cited above (Note 1).

19 Konstantin Eggert, cited in: “Khochetsya ponyat’, pochemu iz vsekh ostal’nykh Prokhorov vyglyadit samym neaktivno boryushchimsya za vlast” [It would be good to understand why out of all others Prokhorov looks like the least actively fighting for power], in: *Kommersant’ FM*, 23 January 2012, at: www.kommersant.ru/doc/1856953. “Basman judiciary” is a reference to Basman district court, which has become notorious for its controversial decisions in conspicuous cases (e.g. rulings on the cases of Mikhail Khodorkovsky). It has become a common expression in Russian to denote unfair and corrupt judiciary controlled from above.

20 Vladimir Pozner, This Time, Putin May Get the Message, in: *The New York Times*, 13 March 2012, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/14/opinion/this-time-putin-may-get-the-message.html>.

21 Cf. Lev Gudkov, Sotsialnyi kapital i ideologicheskie orientatsii [Social capital and ideological orientations], in: *Pro et Contra*, cited above (Note 16), pp. 6-31, here: p. 28.

ing signals to the poor and the rich. He also criticized the status quo on most of these issues, as if he himself had nothing to do with it. In the words of Andrei Kolesnikov, Putin's election programme is "a programme of father-the-Tsar, who gives everything to everybody"²² instead of developing reliable institutions and accepting responsibility for his own failures.

Vladimir Putin rejected the idea of taking part in public debates, in which all other candidates participated. Instead, he sent his representatives, including hundreds of famous public figures – artists, singers, film stars and producers, and others.²³ Some of them participated out of genuine support, but others were afraid that the state would reduce financial support for their films, theatres, and projects. Besides the official election campaign website, many unofficial videos in support of Vladimir Putin also circulated on the internet, on platforms such as YouTube. Among the most prominent were the song "VVP" [Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin] by a Tajik singer, praising Putin and presenting him as a kind Tsar and powerful Superman who "has saved the country" and "is helping" everyone, and a disaster movie called "2012" which showed a horrible scenario of what might happen if Putin were not re-elected – right up to the state collapsing and fascists taking over. There were also reports of alleged plans to assassinate Putin, according to which the plans were made but the act was prevented just in time – during the election campaign (in February).²⁴

Five candidates stood for election: Vladimir Putin, SR leader Sergei Mironov, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (LDPR), Gennady Zyuganov (KPRF), and the new self-nominated (non-party) candidate, the oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov. The registration of Grigory Yavlinsky (Yabloko) as a candidate was rejected. There was some puzzlement about whether Prokhorov was a genuine candidate or the Kremlin's puppet, whose purpose was to attract liberal voters so that the liberal electorate would participate in the election, thus increasing the appearance of legitimacy. His relative success in elections compared with his general invisibility after them indicates the latter. Again, the liberal community faced a dilemma: Should it take part in the unfair elections or boycott them altogether? Those who did take part in the election voted not "for" somebody, but against Putin. Dmitry Oreshkin, for instance, gave the following advice: "Treat elections as a game with a trouble-maker, who keeps breaking the rules shamelessly [...] This is why voting has to be also in this sense like a game: one should not hope to win, but to present the

22 Andrei Kolesnikov, *Ruchnaya programma, ili "Ob lyudyakh nado dumat!"* [Manual Programme or "the need to think about people!"], in: *novaya gazeta*, 12 January 2012, at: <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/comments/50401.html?print=1>.

23 As explained below, the new urban "middle class" is also a creative class, a class of *intelligentsia*. So in order to counter this *intelligentsia*, Putin had to demonstrate that the *intelligentsia* that supports him is larger and more famous.

24 See commentary by Anton Orekh, *Putin. Spasibo, chto zhivoi* [Putin. Thanks that you are alive], on the Ekho Moskvy radio station, 27 February 2012, at: <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/oreh/863102-echo/>.

opponent as a fool and to make the cardsharp's life more difficult."²⁵ Neither the so-called "system opposition" nor the "non-system opposition" was able to offer independent alternative programmes. Their own campaigning was reactionary: concentrating on and criticizing what Putin did or what Putin said, but without offering alternative visions.²⁶

The results of the elections were as follows: Vladimir Putin received about 64 per cent of votes, Zyuganov 17 per cent, Prokhorov eight per cent, Zhirinovskiy six per cent, and Mironov four per cent. However, there were some peculiarities about Putin's victory this time: He attracted far fewer votes in large cities. In Moscow, for instance, he received less than 50 per cent of the vote, while Mikhail Prokhorov came second with 20 per cent.²⁷ This reflects the protest mood and the emergence of the dissatisfied middle class in the large cities.

The OSCE/ODIHR assessed the election campaign, voting and the count of votes as follows:

Although all contestants were able to campaign unhindered, the conditions for the campaign were found to be skewed in favour of one candidate. While all candidates had access to media, one candidate, the then Prime Minister, was given clear advantage in the coverage. State resources were also mobilized in his support. On election day, observers assessed voting positively, overall; however, the process deteriorated during the count due to procedural irregularities.²⁸

Many liberal Russian observers refused to refer to what had happened as "elections", preferring "so-called elections", because there was no real possibility to "choose" the leader of the country from among the various candidates.²⁹ Videos and other reports of blatant and shameless violations recorded by independent Russian observers – this time approximately 28,000 volunteers³⁰ – flooded the internet.

Independent observers ("*Golos*", "*Grazhdanin nablyudatel*", "*Liga izbirateley*") admit that Putin received a majority in these elections and had already won in the first round. He would have won without the fraud, as most opinion polls before the elections showed, although this was also a conse-

25 Dmitry Oreshkin, *Vybirat' ne prikhoditsya* [No chance to choose], in: *Esquire*, 1 December 2011, at: <http://esquire.ru/elections>.

26 Cf. Aleksandra Samarina, *Bezotvetnye konkurenty Vladimira Putina* [Vladimir Putin's competitors without answers], in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 22 February 2012, at: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-02-22/1_putin.html.

27 Cf. Pozner, cited above (Note 20).

28 OSCE, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Russian Federation, Presidential Election, 4 March 2012, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, p. 1.

29 "[...] Putin has won, but not in elections ... It was a different event ...", Yuliya Latynina, in the "*Kod dostupa*" radio programme, *Ekho Moskvy*, 10 March 2012, at: <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/code/866934-echo>.

30 Cf. *ibid.*

quence of unfair pre-election conditions and the propaganda campaign by state-controlled mass media. However, it was unclear whether Putin would be able to win in the first round, or whether a second round would be necessary.

Putin's victory rally on *Manezhnaya ploshad'* on 5 March attracted about 110,000 of his supporters, who gathered *no lens volens*, but it hardly reflected a joyful victory: With tears in his eyes, he spoke as though he had won a battle against foreign occupiers at the very least: "We have won in an open and fair struggle [...] But this was more than just a presidential election [...] We have demonstrated that nobody can impose anything on us [...]"³¹ On the previous day, it had indeed looked as if Moscow were occupied and not just an election but a *coup d'état* was taking place: Military forces, special forces (OMON), and armoured vehicles flooded the city to prevent any "colour revolutions".³² On inauguration day, the streets along which Putin travelled were cleared of any opposition protests and people in general. Hence, he went to the inauguration through completely empty streets, which is strikingly strange for Moscow.³³

In conclusion, both parliamentary and presidential elections demonstrate that Putin's support among the population has dropped in comparison to previous election years. In fact, both the parliamentary and presidential elections demonstrated that Putin's "Teflon coating has visibly cracked".³⁴ There were signs that the political elites behind Putin were no longer united and that certain groups no longer supported him. This is why it was so important for him to use all the means at his disposal to ensure his victory in the first round of elections. At the same time, he received the majority of votes and he would have won in any case, even without fraud. This indicates the artificially created absence of alternative candidates (no mass media access), but also reveals that those who protest against fraud and Putin's regime are still a minority. The majority of the population, while dissatisfied with EdRo's performance – "the boyars are bad" – are convinced, as Russian history teaches us, that "the Tsar is good" and that there is no one better. The lack of an alternative is one of the main motives for the majority of Russians in deciding to vote for him.³⁵ In both parliamentary and presidential elections,

31 Vladimir Putin on Russia Today, 4 March 2012, at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M42pAzm9iIc>.

32 Cf. Vladimir Varfolomeev, *Vybory ili perevorot?* [Elections or coup d'état?], Ekho Moskvyy radio broadcast, 4 March 2012, at: <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/varfolomeev/865174-echo>.

33 See report on TV channel *Dozhd'*, 7 May 2012, at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUt6CZ_1044.

34 Dmitri Trenin, in: *Duma Elections: Expert Analysis*, cited above (Note 9).

35 There was a discussion about whether Putin and Medvedev could run for president as opposing candidates or maybe that even Dmitry Medvedev would run for his second term alone. However, at the EdRo party congress in September it became clear that Medvedev gave up his claim to power for the sake of Putin.

the outcome was known in advance, so this was “virtual politics”³⁶ or an imitation of elections rather than real elections with unpredictable results.

Who Are the Protesters?

This section explains who the protesters are, what the main features of the protests were, and why they emerged. To start with the first issue, sociologists have claimed that about 15-25 per cent of the population do not accept Putin’s system.³⁷ This includes a range of people – from liberals to nationalists, intelligentsia, and glamorous stars, of different ages and different professions. They do not have common symbols or common leaders.³⁸ Thus, there is no united opposition.

Nonetheless, the core protesters are well-educated (some 70 per cent), relatively young (around 40 per cent are 25-39 years old; around 20 per cent are aged 40-54), financially secure people (about 80 per cent, though not necessarily rich), who have achieved much thanks to their work and active lifestyle and are therefore not used to passive acceptance.³⁹ Their explanation of why they participate in protests sounds familiar: They have created safe and comfortable surroundings for themselves and their families in their apartments, houses, and apartment blocks, and now they want order on their streets, in their cities, and in the country as a whole. They have been isolated from the instruments of power, and their interests are not represented by state institutions. Thus, one speaks of the emergence of a “new urban” active middle class.

Vladimir Putin himself has contributed to the formation of this middle class. According to Victor Kremeniuk, Putin pursued the objective of developing the middle class during his presidency in order to use it as a source of power and legitimacy. Thanks partly to his own efforts and partly to high energy prices, he created conditions in which this group could thrive and prosper financially. There was one condition, however: The middle class was not to interfere in politics. However, it is these people who today want more opportunities to influence politics.⁴⁰ As well as having liberal aspirations, the middle class aspired to greater development opportunities. In Dmitry Danilov’s words, “the system started to eat itself up: While stabilization was reached by the mid-2000s and was important, it has not moved forward since then. We are marking time. Decision-making has reached an impasse, and the society seems to feel that there are not enough impulses for further develop-

36 Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven 2005.

37 Cf. Interview with Boris Dubin, cited above (Note 13).

38 Cf. *ibid.*

39 Cf. *ibid.*

40 Source: author’s interview with Victor Kremeniuk, Moscow, July 2012.

ment, in spite the authorities' attempts to convince it of the effectiveness of its modernization strategy and reforms."⁴¹

Most protests have taken place in the largest Russian cities. As Gudkov explains, the provinces differ from large cities in their way of life and mentality: There are fewer material and educational resources and fewer academic and professional opportunities. Under the dominance of state-controlled mass media, which reproduces collective myths and is, to a great extent, a legacy of the Soviet past, a more paternalistic view of the president is being created. Those who accept such views are the people who are afraid of change.⁴² In fact, the country is divided, into at least three or four "Russias", some of which are characterized by pre-modern, even anti-modern, ways of life.⁴³

As Gudkov further writes, Moscow in particular serves as an example of a zone or enclave of modernity, as, in its characteristics and level of Europeanization, it is more similar to European societies. Due to various factors (high level of education, highly-paid jobs, concentration of the population, and group diversity), new forms of social order are emerging there, which differ from those common in the rest of paternalistic Russia. Muscovites need more pluralism, more liberalization, and a market economy, and as a result, a more liberal – "modern" European – class of people emerges. This is why, in Moscow – in spite of the general framework of the authoritarian state – there are preconditions for the formation of liberalism.⁴⁴

One more feature of protest activity that needs to be mentioned is its creativity. Many public figures were among those who participated in and helped to organize the protests: critical journalists, writers, singers, and representatives of other arts. The main platform for their campaigning is the internet. Many artistic and creative interventions sought to draw the attention of the general public to the elections and to inform the population about the meaning and importance of the protests: songs on YouTube ("*Nash durdom gosluet za Putina*" [Our crazy house is voting for Putin]; "*VDV protiv Putina*" [Military-naval force is against Putin], the notorious Pussy Riot), poetry (project "*Grazhdanin poet*" [Poet Citizen]), and others, all of which added up to a major new phenomenon. This is why another term for the participants in the protest movement is "creative class".

Turning to the question of why the protests have ignited, unfair, falsified elections were their main trigger, rather than their underlying cause. Besides a general, growing dissatisfaction with the current regime and its characteristics, one more important factor which played the part of a trigger with

41 Author's interview with Dmitry Danilov in Moscow, July 2012.

42 Cf. Gudkov, cited above (Note 21), p. 12.

43 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 7; see also Richard Rose, *Uses of Social Capital in Russia: Modern, Pre-Modern, and Anti-Modern*, in: *Post-Soviet Affairs* 1/2000, pp. 33-57; Natalya Zubarevich, *Perspektiva: Chetyre Rossii* [Prospect: four Russias], in: *Vedomosti*, 30 December 2011, at: http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article/273777/cetyre_rossii.

44 Cf. Gudkov, cited above (Note 21), pp. 10-11.

delayed action for the protests was the Putin-Medvedev job swap. In September 2011, at the EdRo Party Congress, then prime minister Vladimir Putin and then president Dmitry Medvedev announced that they would simply exchange jobs. Thus, Medvedev, as a relatively young president who had not made any grave mistakes, simply decided not to seek re-election. Before that, the puzzle had been whether Medvedev would turn into an independent president, whether he had any real power in the country, or whether he would aspire to power and make his declared modernization and liberalization course a real one rather than pure rhetoric. Jadwiga Rogoza assumes that when Putin chose his successor for one term, he realized that there was a demand for more liberalization: By then the middle class had begun “to call for a new social contract with the government”.⁴⁵ This is why he chose Medvedev, who had an image of being more liberal than the other main candidate for the role of successor at that time, hardliner Sergei Ivanov. Many representatives of liberal opinion had hoped that liberalization of the country would happen during Medvedev’s presidency, that he represented a different elite group and interest groups from Vladimir Putin. His rhetoric about freedom being better than non-freedom helped to generate these aspirations. Thus, as a result, this liberal class was disillusioned. The lack of liberal reforms was in stark contrast to Medvedev’s rhetoric. In the words of Lilia Shevtsova, “there was a sharp difference between Medvedev’s empty rhetoric and the reality [...] He himself brought the December protest on”.⁴⁶ Furthermore, this job swap was generally taken very negatively by the politically active population and those who watched the political processes in the country – they were, in effect, shut off from politics. It also became clear that Putin would continue to have the final word on all decisions during the rest of Medvedev’s presidency. The websites dedicated to finding jobs abroad and acquiring foreign citizenship became the most popular in Russia following the job swap.⁴⁷

While protests continued in March after the presidential election, they then started to cool down. There is a great deal of disunity, mistrust, and competition among opposition leaders. Many of the protesters who go to these rallies do not have their own preferred choice of leader: They dislike those opposition leaders that are available, such as Boris Nemtsov, Mikhail Kasyanov, Ksenia Sobchak, and the radical Sergei Udaltsov. In private interviews, experts and participants in opposition rallies explained to me that they themselves did not see any alternatives to Putin among the current crop of opposition leaders, and were even afraid of any of them coming to power, because they also followed their selfish motives rather than thinking of the

45 Jadwiga Rogoza, *In Putin’s Shadow, Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency*, Punkt Widzenia, Centre for Eastern Studies, November 2011, p. 6; see also *ibid.*, pp. 9-12.

46 *Vremya gostey* radio broadcast, with Liliya Shevtsova, 29 December 2011, available at: <http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/transcript/24436982.html>.

47 Cf. Itogi 2011 goda [The results of 2011], in: *The New Times*, 26 December 2011, at: <http://newtimes.ru/articles/print/48149>.

country. In their view, a new regime with any of these leaders in power could become even more authoritarian.

The agenda of the opposition leaders remains negative: Their criticism is not so much about the substance of Putin's politics, but rather about how bad, corrupt, and authoritarian Putin himself is. They are not able to offer a positive agenda with substance, i.e. to say what they can or will do better. Furthermore, they have not found an idea that is capable of uniting more people and attracting a wider range of societal groups and support from a broader range of regions.

All in all, the opposition movement has had a number of faces, causes, and triggers. The "angry middle class" is still a minority. Nevertheless, this is a significant minority. These are independent thinkers who aspire to more political rights and participatory democracy out of conviction or because of how they work or live. While experts and politicians in the West often asked rhetorical questions about how to make Russians more engaged in politics and to encourage them to take responsibility and initiative, events around the 2011 and 2012 elections have demonstrated that Russians themselves have started to do this. Social and political engagement has increased.

The Post-Election Situation and Outlook

Following the elections, the government introduced a very small number of liberal legal initiatives as a response to the first protests in December, bringing back direct elections of governors, for instance, and making it easier to register political parties. As if to counterbalance these liberalization initiatives, however, a far greater number of suppressive and even repressive measures were introduced as well, including stricter regulation of the internet, an NGO law on "foreign agents", a "libel" law, and bigger fines for the organization of and participation in unauthorized rallies. As a result, the fines for election fraud are much lower than those for protesting against such fraud. The signal that is sent to subservient high officials and regional and local authorities is a policy of continuity: that it is all right to falsify election results, while steps are being taken to suppress protests. It should be stressed once again that these measures are directed against and are of concern to the "angry class" minority. The majority of the population, however, supports such restrictive measures.⁴⁸

As a consequence, the parliament is often called "a crazy printer", because initiatives are passed quickly without much discussion or deliberation. In spite of the hopes that EdRo would weaken after the elections in the Duma, it still remains the leading force in parliament. It is able to push

48 Cf. Levada Center, *Otnoshenie k zakonodatel'nym initsiativam poslednego vremeni* [Attitudes towards legal initiatives in recent times], 1 August 2012, at: <http://www.levada.ru/print/01-08-2012/otnoshenie-k-zakonodatelnym-initsiativam-poslednego-vremeni>.

through any legislative initiative it needs, just as it did before the elections. The “system opposition” parties do not act as a real counterbalance. The most important Duma committees are controlled by EdRo. Thus, while many expected that the Duma would become a real forum for discussion,⁴⁹ this has not happened.

Besides repressive laws, the ruling authorities have undertaken other measures to intimidate opposition leaders and the general public and thereby prevent further protests. Examples include the conviction of the punk group “Pussy Riot” after their protest action in Moscow’s cathedral and their song “The Godmother, send Putin away”; the judicial persecution of Aleksei Navalny; and the closure of businesses of those who participated actively in protests (for instance, father and son Gudkov from the SR, who were actively involved in election monitoring and opposition). Some opposition rallies were dispersed by violent means, as occurred on 6 May, and numerous cases of legal prosecution and court investigations have commenced. Apartments and offices of opposition leaders have been searched, the main aim being to harass, embarrass, and intimidate them. Many personal details and conversations were leaked to the mass media after these searches in order to discredit the opposition. All in all, in the words of Gudkov, the government is trying to “freeze” the development of civil society and make social and political life more primitive, while relying on the support from groups that provide “passive tolerance”.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, the post-election situation remains “unfrozen” and unstable. The approval ratings of Putin and the government are falling in large cities.⁵¹ Putin’s government faces challenges on many fronts: socio-economic developments (a new hypothetical global or European financial crisis), the dependence of public finances on energy (oil price), new natural or man-made catastrophes, the situation in the North Caucasus, and social discontent (if the economic situation worsens). The elite behind Putin no longer supports him strongly: “A part of the elite has started to drift away to save its own status [...]”⁵² Because of all these factors, many analysts have declared that the Putin regime is already dead and that he is unlikely to survive through the whole term. On this point I tend to agree with Andrew Monaghan that “it is too early to assert the end of the Putin era”.⁵³ He remains the most popular political figure in the country and has capacity to mobilize support. In spite of decreasing trust in the president and state institutions, 49 per cent of Russians still think that the Russian president is trustworthy, and only 13 per cent think

49 Cf. Nikolay Petrov, in: *Duma Elections: Expert Analysis*, cited above (Note 9).

50 Gudkov, cited above (Note 21), p. 21.

51 Levada Center, *Vladimir Putin teryaet Moskvu* [Vladimir Putin is losing Moscow], 20 July 2012, at: <http://www.levada.ru/20-07-2012/vladimir-putin-teryaet-moskvu-svidetelstvuyut-dannye-sotsoprosa>.

52 Kryshchanovskaya, cited above (Note 1).

53 Andrew C. Monaghan, *The End of the Putin Era?* Carnegie Paper, July 2012, p. 3. See also the pro and contra arguments presented in Ekho Moskvy’s broadcast *Ishchem vyhod...: Skolko prozhivet vlast’*, cited above (Note 1).

that he is not trustworthy at all.⁵⁴ In addition, high oil prices have often helped Putin in the past.

In the foreign-policy field, the regime will continue to use enemy stereotypes as a political tactic, especially as there continue to be many areas of disagreement with the West, including US/NATO missile defence, Syria, and the “Arab spring” in general. Nonetheless, the Russian government, which has its bank accounts in the West, whose children study in the most prestigious Western universities, and whose members prefer Western countries for their investments and vacations, will not quarrel with the West. How should the West react to this? Dmitri Trenin writes in this context: “European leaders need to look beyond the usual stereotypes of Russia and realize that it is not neo-Soviet and neo-imperial [...] Europe would be wise to make use of its strongest soft power tool: liberalization and a gradual phasing out of the visa regime between the Schengen countries and Russia. Political change in Russia, however, will be domestically driven. While Europeans are free to offer value judgments and comment [...], they would be wise to stay away from Russian politics.”⁵⁵ In fact, efforts to promote democracy from abroad have not been successful in many countries.⁵⁶

The opposition will face important challenges: how to unite and find common slogans and an agenda that would also reflect the concerns of “pre-modern” Russia. There are still no strong leaders who would be capable of uniting various opposition groups, and it will be impossible to unite some of them, for example liberals and radical nationalists. The most important task for the opposition is to find a positive agenda.

There are multiple scenarios for Russia’s future development: from stabilization (and stagnation) and protests right down to “revolution” along Libyan lines.⁵⁷ Some sociologists and experts say that the situation in Russia is pre-revolutionary.⁵⁸ “We now live like on a volcano” and it is not yet clear whether there will be an eruption.⁵⁹ Most of those who predict a revolution

54 Cf. Levada Center, *Instituty vlasti teryayut doverie grazhdan* [Institutions of government are losing the trust of citizens], 26 June 2012, at: <http://www.levada.ru/26-06-2012/instituty-vlasti-teryayut-doverie-grazhdan>.

55 Dmitri Trenin, in: Dmitri Trenin/Maria Lipman/Alexey Malashenko/Nikolay Petrov, *Russia on the Move*, Policy Outlook, June 2012, p. 1, at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/01/russia-on-move/b14p>.

56 Cf. Yury V. Bosin, Supporting Democracy in the Former Soviet Union: Why the Impact of US Assistance has been below expectations, in: *International Studies Quarterly* 2/2012, pp. 405-412; see also Frank Schimmelfennig/Hanno Scholtz, EU Democracy Promotion in the European Neighbourhood. Political Conditionality, Economic Development and Transnational Exchange, in: *European Union Politics* 2/2008, pp. 187-215.

57 Cf. Chetyre stsenariya dlya Rossii [Four Scenarios for Russia], Vypusk 25 May 2012 rassylku “Komsomolskaya Pravda”, doklad ekspertov Tsentra strategicheskikh razrabotok o krizise v strane, at: <http://digest.subscribe.ru/business/school/n839193281.html>.

58 See, for example, Olga Kryshanskaya in an interview broadcast on Ekho Moskvy: “Polny Albats”, *Den’ inaguratsii: s raznykh storon barrikad* [The day of inauguration: from different sides of the barricade]; Vladimir Pastukhov, Gosudarstvo diktatury lyumpen-proletariata [The state of dictatorship of lumpen-proletariat], in: *novaya gazeta*, 13 August 2012, at: <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/53942.html>.

59 Kryshanskaya, cited above (Note 1).

also point out that this would not be good for Russia. Others disagree and argue that the number of these “new” people is still small, a fact which makes a revolution impossible.⁶⁰ All in all, in the words of Konstantin Remchukov: “In 2011 politics returned to Russia. 2012 promises even more politics in Russia, at all levels and in all dimensions.”⁶¹ Lilia Shevtsova says that elections have finished the period of “Putin’s stability” and the “period of Putin’s turbulence” has begun.⁶² In an editorial, Evgeniya Albats wrote: “It will not be boring.”⁶³ Thus, in spite of seeming stability, there is potential for change.

Concluding Remarks

Even though the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011 and 2012 were reminiscent of many previous elections in terms of unfair campaigns, violations, and manipulation, there were some features that made these elections different. In this article, I have tried to elucidate some of these features as well as to explain who the protesters were and why the protests emerged, though I did not have the ambition to present an exhaustive list of explanations. Sociologists and political analysts are still trying to understand what exactly has happened and why, and, especially, to predict whether an intensification of protests is possible in the future – whether, for instance, it is possible that political protest will be strengthened by joining with social protest.

The most important feature of these elections is the revelation that a large and significant part – although still a minority – of Russian society has awoken. While the ruling elite is taking the country down a more authoritarian path, a significant part of society aspires to democratization. As a result, Vladimir Putin’s third term as president will be different and more difficult for him.

While there were some hopes after the elections that the state would take the protests and opposition movement more seriously, and that some liberal steps to pacify “the angry class” would be made, developments demonstrate that, while the state did indeed take these events seriously, its response has been to take exactly the opposite path: to try to suppress the opposition movement via various repressive laws and formal and informal intimidation mechanisms. The authorities are not ready to take a step forward to meet the requests of the opposition and the liberal “modern” class; instead they are

60 Cf. Konstantin Remchukov, *Gospodstvuyushim klassnom v Rossii yavlyetsya silovaya burokratiya* [The ruling class in Russia is strongmen bureaucracy], in: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 28 August 2012, at: <http://www.ng.ru/printed/272458>.

61 Konstantin Remchukov, Editorial “Results of the Year”, in: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 30 December 2011.

62 Liliya Shvetsova, “Rossiiskie vlasti absolyutno ne chyvstbuyut draiva i dukha novoi epokhi” [“The Russian government absolutely does not feel the drive and the spirit of the new epoch”], in: *Den’*, 6 March 2012, at: <http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=47456>.

63 Evgeniya Al’bats, in: *Itogi 2011 goda*, cited above (Note 47).

trying to shut them out from political life. Taken together, the various repressive laws and measures that have been passed indicate that this is just the beginning of a more repressive course of action. This, however, is a sign of the weakness rather than strength of the current political regime. Potential for both positive and negative changes remains.