



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

Charity Registration Number: 208223

## Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme

# The Parliament, the Presidency and Elections in Russia

This event was organised in conjunction with the Centre for East  
European Language-Based Area Studies (CEELBAS)

20 October 2011

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

## Session 1: The Duma Elections and Party Politics

*Vladimir Gelman*

The elections are still meaningful but the choice is heavily restricted and the result is decided in advance. Russia has been experiencing electoral authoritarianism since 2002-2004. Russian citizens do not want to do away with elected choice. Elections play an important role in legitimizing the political system in the eyes of the citizens. Parliamentary elections are less important than presidential elections.

In 2007, United Russia achieved a spectacular victory and this set the target for the next election. Any result below 64 percent would be considered a poor performance. Political opportunities are diminishing; fraud is widespread in many areas of Russian electoral politics. More than 40 percent of Russians support the presidential administration. The picture is positive for United Russia, but there is a shift in the pattern of support from big cities to small towns and rural areas. Urban citizens are critical; United Russia is supported by elderly and young voters, but no longer by the middle class.

United Russia is not heading for major problems in the short term. Its current level of support is high enough for them to get at least a simple majority. However, a constitutional majority is necessary in order to pass certain laws, which is why United Russia needs extra votes. Various forms of fraud may help them gain an additional 10 percent. The fact that electoral commissions are routinely involved in fraud has not yet led to the delegitimization of elections; most voters remain indifferent. The 65 percent target will probably be met.

Outside Russia, there are parties similar to United Russia in that they act as a legislative arm under the ruler. Mubarak's National Democratic Party was to be an official partner of United Russia before the events of the Arab Spring. The main weakness of United Russia results from its institutional design. Party officials play no role in key policy-making decisions; 'guidelines' are sent from the Kremlin. Top government officials are recruited through personal links, not because of their UR membership. It is, however, unfair to make parallels with the Communist Party. The Soviet Union was a party state, whereas United Russia is a state party.

Many have tried to articulate the party's central ideology, but its only ideology is to preserve the status quo. The party may face problems if there is a demand for changes in the future. The majority of the educated urban middle class will not appear at the polling stations at all; they feel alienated from the

political system. This has not yet developed into active protest and it does not pose a major threat to the political system in the near future. The best strategy for the upcoming parliamentary elections is to vote for any party but UR.

*Luke March*

The parliamentary elections are no longer as important in the run-up to the presidential elections as they used to be, but the Duma elections still matter in terms of changing the climate. There is more scope for pluralism than last time. UR leads the ratings, but the Communists are up from 12 to 17 percent, Liberal Democrats are up from 8 to 12 percent. Other parties, such as A Just Russia may not make it into the Duma. This means that after the December election, UR is likely to be the most liberal party in the Duma.

The party could be modernised by more pluralism. It is not a done deal that Medvedev will become Prime Minister after he has stepped down as President; his future role will depend on UR's results in the Duma elections. Since the last parliamentary elections, there have been a few legislative changes with relation to registration, and a 7 percent threshold for entry to the Duma has been introduced. As the presidential term has been extended to six years, the next Duma election will take place two years ahead of the presidential election. There is more tendency toward protest sentiment in the society. Putin's manipulation of the Right Cause and A Just Russia was very open. The political system is one of electoral authoritarianism. The Kremlin is very astute in minimising potential sources of power. It is increasingly apparent that there are informal routes in the party system.

The systemic opposition are given a relatively free reign to organise their electoral campaigns. Non-parliamentary parties have to register. The opposition has no independent, non-vetted sources of funding. It is self-limiting; parties call for change but say that the President and PM are to decide how it should be executed. Non-parliamentary systemic opposition is dormant but can be reactivated when needed. However, non-systemic opposition parties are prevented from registering for the elections.

The Communist Party may benefit from being the only 'opposition' party in the parliament; it still has a regional network and some support from the private sector. Zhirinovsky is by far the angriest of the opposition leaders in terms of rhetoric. A Just Russia is a failed project; it was aimed at tackling the Communists and stealing their electorate. There is now some scope for social democratic opposition. It would be difficult for a figure from the 1990s to gain

significant support. If electoral sentiments translate into election results, it may influence the choice of Prime Minister. A lower result for United Russia would signal increased pluralism in the system; if Yabloko or Right Cause are absent from the Duma, it will indicate the opposite.

#### *Questions and discussion*

A participant asked what would happen if Putin suddenly disappeared from the political scene. One of the speakers replied that it would create a massive crisis of leadership, but it would also give the country a chance to refurbish its political system less painfully than if it happened later.

Since Putin has made clear his intention to be president again, there is no more room for illusions. Russian leaders cannot afford to do away with elections, which is why they are likely to stick to electoral authoritarianism. The Russian model is somewhere between Mexico under the Revolutionary Institutional Party and Egypt under Mubarak. Russia is a highly corrupt country, but the term 'mafia state' is not a useful way of describing the entire state.

The switch from Medvedev to Putin is unlikely to affect pre-election development. Government machinery is the main tool of manipulation and will be used to achieve the desired result. The switch is an additional incentive for heads of local party offices to perform well in the parliamentary elections - otherwise they could be removed from office. The introduction of electronic voting will not bring significant change, as all protocols, paper and electronic, are filled in by the electoral commissions.

The Popular Front may re-emerge as Putin's election vehicle. Rogozin may also be coming back. A Just Russia and Right Cause both belong to the 'Putin periphery.' Right Cause is an ineffective party designed by Medvedev. Prokhorov was removed from it because he could cause trouble; he was used to more freedom and was clearly prepared to oppose the government. However, his removal has not harmed his economic interests. If Prokhorov does not persist in disobedience, his capital will be safe. The number of independent financiers on party lists has declined, which has weakened the Duma. It has little influence on policy-making.

The United Russia regional party list was important as a way of giving the disaffected elite a home and ensuring long-term stability. Disenchantment at the local level is a sore point for the Kremlin. 60 percent of the regional elite say the system is too centralised. Real opposition within the system is difficult

to spot, but it is hinted at from time to time. Disenchantment among the elite and the general public will increase. The new wave of political leaders is likely come from outside of the government circle. There has been an increase in pluralism since 2007, but this is unlikely to be felt in the December election.

The government is heavily dependent on the public mood - painful reforms are dangerous. In the Brezhnev era, the leadership realised they could either introduce dynamic reforms that might shake their own position or opt for stagnation. Putin is faced with the same problem, reflected in Kudrin's resignation. Putin does not want to be the new Brezhnev but it is the best way for him to preserve his power. The oil price is probably more important for political developments than any other factor, but on its own it will not be enough to shape Russian politics over the next few months. There will be fewer incentives for reform after 2012. The imperative to modernise has gone. It is not clear whether the government has made a connection between the socio-economic crisis and the need for pluralism. It prefers to incorporate the nationalist agenda in the United Russia programme, instead of creating a pluralist environment.

## Session 2: The Presidency and its Powers

*Richard Sakwa*

Putin's regime is characterised by the appearance of a dual state, subsuming two distinctive political orders: a *constitutional state* and an *administrative regime*. Putin has been careful not to fall outside the bounds of the formal letter of the constitution. He stepped down from Presidential position when his term finished, a positive sign distinguishing Russia from Belarus and Central Asian republics. Nevertheless, recent developments constitute a form of a coup because they seek to create an exclusive political system where organised political challenges are systematically subverted. The dominant United Russia (UR) Party props up the presidential system; it has no ideological autonomy, it acts as the system's instrument for popular mobilisation, and pushes other groups into the margins. Political challenge to the regime is greatly discouraged. Russia is a 'managed democracy' and institutions are subject to presidential leadership. The recent change to the constitution extends the Presidential term to six years, theoretically allowing Putin to stay in power for the next twelve years. The concentration of power in the hands of the president has been achieved over a number of stages. One of them was linked with the Beslan school siege. In response to the tragedy,

Putin announced measures that mostly consolidated his power and undermined the independence of the regions. Only one of them was directly aimed at dealing with the security problems exposed by the siege. Such consolidation of power is underpinned by statist arguments, which are a common trope of Russian political discourse and present a strong state as a prerequisite of democracy.

The administrative regime is embedded in para-constitutional institutions and para-political bodies, which often subvert constitutional mechanisms. One of such bodies is the Russian Popular Front (RPF) formed recently and designed to stifle creativity within the ranks of UR, introduce new paths for career advancement outside UR, and counter the recent bad publicity surrounding UR. Others are the State Council (undermining the work of the upper chamber, the Federal Council) and the Public Chamber (undermining the State Duma). Institutions have gradually been hollowed out. Elite factionalism prevails in the regime – the regime is personalistic, and the boundary between politics and the market is fluid. Big business is incorporated as a partner and small business is at the mercy of the bureaucracy.

The constitutional state and the administrative regime are joined together by the deep state, a concept used by Whitmore to describe Italian politics, which is a non-transparent nexus of bureaucratic power, the security services and criminal organisations. Two facets of corruption are endemic to it: venality, that is bribe giving and bribe taking, and meta-corruption, where the political system is placed at the service of criminal and factional interests, undermining its independence. Factions transcend the rules and constraints of the constitutional state, and they have no independent legal or institutional status. As such, they pose a threat to constitutionalism. Russia at the moment finds itself in a stalemate. The formal procedures of the constitutional state are balanced by the shadowy structures of the administrative regime, populated by factions, exemplified by often corrupt practices and criminal behaviour.

Putin's announcement brings to summation processes that have been going on for a decade. Medvedev's term, although in many ways important, has not introduced real changes. Medvedev did not repudiate the embedded elements of factionalism, but gently sought to impose small checks against them. He decreased the electoral threshold from seven to five per cent, stressed the importance of decentralisation, weakened the authoritarian tone and replaced it with a more inclusive liberal rhetoric, and promised to intensify the struggle against corruption. But it is not clear whether all these limited

measures were only creating a smokescreen for 'managed democracy' (or 'managed pluralism'). For example, although the threshold was decreased, the minimum number of members required to qualify for party registration was only reduced from 50,000 to 45,000 in 2009, still far off the original minimum quota of 10,000. On 22 June 2011 the Ministry of Justice turned down the application from the Party of People's Freedom (Parnas) to register as a political party, quoting the law on NGOs rather than parties. However, the recent Prokhorov affair represented a political debacle for Kremlin, and brought its competency in managing political matters into question. In June 2011, Mikhail Prokhorov, Russia's third richest man according to Forbes, became the leader of the newly revived Right Cause Party. Prokhorov received an initial approval from Medvedev. Indeed, the media even considered him as potentially the next leader of the party alongside Prokhorov. However, his leadership soon proved highly compromising for the Kremlin - Prokhorov started criticising the government and intended to include Evgeny Roizman, who had a criminal past, on Right Cause's candidate list for the elections. It is rumoured that the putsch led by Andrei Bogdanov against Prokhorov at the Right Cause party conference in September was orchestrated by Vladislav Surkov. But the fact that it took the Kremlin so long to stifle Prokhorov's belligerence revealed signs of Kremlin's vulnerability.

Russia still falls short of the modernisation goals Putin set upon his first election in 2000 - the country is still not well integrated into the international system and the international economy, its institutions are not participatory, and the economy is neither competitive nor diversified. Medvedev's modernisation goals, although impressive, were rarely carried through. Putin is likely to offer a top-down modernisation programme, which will be doomed to failure. True development can only be achieved by encouraging innovation and enterprise. The question is whether the Putinite state could be reformed by Putin himself. By announcing his intention to be president again, Putin has backed himself into a corner and blocked off sources of political renewal. The key moment comes when the intelligentsia turns away from the state - that would throw the state into a deep crisis.

From the perspective of the dual state, the coming elections represent less of a turning point than a continuation. Putin's coming to power is likely to delay the moment in which the constitutional institutions finally take control over para-political factionalism and para-constitutional practices. At the same time, the person who takes over power in March 2012 will enjoy an extended six year term, and the significance of that is difficult to predict. Upon the announcement of Putin's presidential bid, it has become clear that the

election has two facets - the open campaign and a subterranean struggle. Putin's power lies in his skilful management of the factions. He has also created a cadre of loyal staff - something that Medvedev lacks. However, Putin's strengths may in fact be his weaknesses: he has started to see himself as indispensable, an attitude that is reinforced by personalised rule. In addition, Medvedev alienated large sections of the elite by driving through (even if not entirely effectively) a series of anti-corruption measures. Medvedev's appeal lies outside factional intrigues. Medvedev's supporters argue that Putin is tired, the West would not like to see him in the post again, and his return would give a sense of regress rather than progress.

It is often suggested that Putin would be different in his third term from his first. - He would be more willing to resist the influence of interest groups and lead a programme of 'authoritarian modernisation'. Medvedev certainly lacked the authority to lead such a programme from above. But it is likely that such a new system would still fail to transcend the top-down political logic. Medvedev's departure from the presidency is a missed opportunity to an extent - in his second term Medvedev would be (theoretically) less concerned about re-election and therefore ready to push through liberal measures. At least on a rhetorical level, Medvedev was committed to narrowing the gap between laws and their enforcement, the reduction of state interference in the media, lifting the burden of state regulation on NGOs, and addressing the problem of excessive bureaucracy. However, Medvedev's term in office has not resolved any of the fundamental structural and economic issues. The economy is in a dire state and the standard of living is declining. Putin's ideas on the economy lack credibility.

At the same time, it is difficult not to see Putin and Medvedev as a tandem, which cooperates for the sake of mutual survival, despite occasional internal divisions, e.g. over Libya. The tandem has allowed a rise in corruption and presided over a general sense of stagnation with a declining confidence in the future. Putin may be willing to modify his approach to power in his third term, but it is unlikely that his instincts and prejudices will change. Neither will the social reality in which his rule is embedded. The presence of Medvedev as prime minister was designed to reassure liberals within the country and foreign observers that the reforms associated with the Medvedev presidency would be continued. In this sense, Medvedev will help maintain the balance within the regime. The tandem is likely to continue in some form, but the regime is not immune to the laws of political contingency. The regime will find itself in a new place after the elections, especially because of the economic



situation. The presidency will become weaker. Ultimately, there is not much alternative to reform.