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CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN RUSSIA'S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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ANALYSIS

Russian Protesters: Not Optimistic But Here to Stay

By Graeme Robertson, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Abstract

The Russian protest movement that exploded into public consciousness in December 2011 has been gathering strength slowly over time. Therefore, an increase in repression is not likely to make it go away any time soon. Few protesters expected their actions to produce immediate political change, so there is no reason to think that they are now disappointed and will forsake active political participation.

An Evolving Society

For many foreign and domestic observers, the wave of protest that Russia has experienced since the Duma elections in 2011 was a dramatic revelation. On December 10th, celebrated Russian journalist Yegenia Albats, told the New York Times, “Today we just proved that civil society does exist in Russia, that the middle class does exist and that this country is not lost.” Russia had woken up. Or at least, its middle classes had woken up. Appropriately for winter in Russia, however, civil society’s day in the sun turned out to be short. December’s dreams turned into May’s reality: The inauguration of the new-old president in a deserted Moscow and the president’s press-secretary calling for protesters’ lives to be “smeared on the asphalt.”¹

This at least is one common narrative of Russia’s “snow revolution”—it arrived unexpectedly and melted quickly with the spring. However, as appealing as this narrative is, it is wrong in both respects. First, neither Russia nor its middle class were really asleep and they certainly did not “just wake up.” Societies or classes don’t wake up suddenly as if from a deep sleep. Instead, changes usually occur gradually, often below the surface, or away from the attention of the media. And this has clearly been the case in Russia. In fact, Russian society has been slowly but steadily changing since the mid-2000s. As a result, by the time the electoral farce of 2011 came along, the organizational and cultural apparatus for large scale protests was already in place. Second, while it is true that some of the flightier hopes of December and January have faded and some disappointment has set in, Russian protesters and their sympathizers are impressively hard-headed about what they might expect to achieve. A few optimistic placards notwithstanding, the protest wave was never likely to end up with Putin staring out from the defendant’s cage of the Basmannyi Court. However, the basic political cleavage, the organizational capacity, and the protest culture that produced the wave have, if anything, been deepened by the winter’s events and are not going away any time soon.

From Hunger Strikes to Political Rallies

In the 1990s, Russian society was in the kind of disarray rarely seen in peacetime. Social bonds had been falling apart for a decade. Organizational sources of solidarity among people beyond immediate family relationships were almost destroyed. Hierarchical, often repressive, forms of political organization had become dominant as power and wealth had grown enormously concentrated. Resistance to the brutal post-Soviet order was not absent, but it was isolated both in space and time. Small groups of people were able to organize to resist the suppression of their rights, but creating broader movements to fight systemic problems rather than particular abuses was almost impossible and few succeeded. Resistance, where it did occur, very often consisted of direct actions like blocking railroads or highways or occupying buildings. Forms of protest frequently associated with prisoners or others with no expectation of political voice, such as self-harm and, especially, hunger strikes became an almost daily occurrence. The demands made at these protests were overwhelmingly local and material in nature—most frequently demands for unpaid wages. Furthermore, acts of protest were generally isolated too in the sense of being far from the centers of power, frequent in the struggling provinces and rare in the far more prosperous capital.

Nevertheless, the 2000s—the first Putin decade—saw slow, but immensely significant changes taking place in Russian society in general, and in its capacity for—and propensity to—protest in particular. The end of more than a decade of crisis, a measure of prosperity and the return of the notion that the state should be an active player in Russian politics began to reverse the process of disintegration and to create new possibilities for organized solidarity. The first expression of this came from opposite ends of the age spectrum—with militant pensioners and youth groups like the National Bolshevik Party, *Oborona*, the Avantguard of Left Youth and myriad other anarchists and leftists uniting first to fight the monetization of social benefits and then to protest explicitly against the Putin regime. These organizations and others came together to create proto-opposition fronts like the United Civic Front (OGF), the Other

1 <http://pik.tv/en/news/story/37165-presidential-spokesman-we-should-smash-protesters-livers>

Russia Movement and the Petersburg Civic Opposition (PGS), as activists solved the problem of working together across huge ideological divides by focusing on shared antipathy to the Putin regime and a flexible set of issues that arose from below.

While the Moscow protests of December 2011 were the first to attract major attention from the mainstream Russian media and the international community, they were far from being the first large scale protests of the Putin era. In March 2006, for example, an estimated 125,000 demonstrators gathered in more than 360 cities and towns to protest increases in utility prices and rents. In February of the same year, thousands of motorists in 22 cities rallied to protest the jailing of a railway worker who failed to get out of the way of a speeding Mercedes carrying the governor of Altai Krai.² In early 2007, activists across Russia organized a series of high-profile demonstrations, called Dissenters' Marches, in Nizhnyi Novgorod, St. Petersburg and Moscow. In fact, as data gathered by the Institute of Collective Action (IKD) show, these events were only a few of thousands taking place across Russia during the latter half of the 2000s.³

Using the IKD data and contrasting it with data from the 1990s, we can see that between 2000 and 2011, the character of protest in Russia changed completely.⁴ Direct action and hunger strikes were no longer major parts of the protest repertoire. Instead, more "democratic" styles of symbolic expression like marches, gatherings and rallies had come to dominate the ways in which people protested. New, creative and highly provocative forms of street theater and performance art too joined the arsenal of anti-regime techniques. Well before Web 2.0, Russian protesters had become expert at using cell phones to organize flash mobs, at raising phallic bridges to insult Prime Minister Putin, and at giving kisses to destabilize the authority of the Moscow militia.⁵ Protest demands too had changed. Gone was the overwhelming economic crisis and emerging were pains associated with burgeoning growth—environmental preservation and disputes over increasingly valuable real estate—as well as demands for the upholding of laws and the curbing of corruption. Finally, protest was on the move spatially—no longer was it largely confined to Russia's vast provinces, but now the capital

(as in most democracies) had become a dominant location for protests to be organized.

By showing that the transformation of protest in Russia did not begin in December 2011, this brief account highlights that many of the features of the December–March protests—the creativity, the large presence in the capital and the claims made in the name of laws and rights rather than particular interests—had become well established before the latest election cycle. Moreover, much of the organizational apparatus of the December protests, and many of the key organizers were far from new to protest. The post-election protests drew heavily on people who had participated in and organized previous events through Strategy-31, Solidarity, Other Russia, the Left Front, the Russian Social Forum and many other organizations and campaigns. The issue of size aside, everything else about the December–May protest cycle from repertoire, to demands, to location and the people involved represent continuity not change with long-term trends in Russian politics and society.

The Upside of Low Expectations

The second mistake that is commonly made about the protest cycle of recent months in Russia is to think that Vladimir Putin's relatively dominant performance in the presidential election (even taking into account the non-trivial amount of fraud), the ease with which the Duma was seated and began considering more repressive legislation against protests, and the toughening of the prosecutorial line against demonstrators has led to disillusion and a return to the supposed apathy of the pre-election period. There are many reasons to believe that this is not so, and that the organizational capacity and disposition to protest that we have seen in recent months is not going away anytime soon.

First, if it is true, as I have argued above, that the protests were not simply a flash in the pan but rather a very visible manifestation of long-term processes in Russia, then there is no reason to expect that either the maintenance of the incumbent regime or a moderate increase in repression will do much to alter the secular trend.

Second, there does not seem to be much evidence of disappointment or disillusionment among those sections of the population most opposed to the Putin regime. Or at least there is not much evidence of an outbreak of optimism followed by a profound disillusionment—there was not much optimism, and so not much disillusion either. In a survey of 1,800 internet-using, highly educated, upper income Russians living in cities of over 1 million—in other words precisely Vladislav Surkov's "angry urbanites"—conducted two weeks *before* the presidential elections, 59 percent of respondents agreed that "Russia will not change much after the presidential elec-

2 The governor's Mercedes crashed into a tree, killing the governor, his bodyguard and the driver. RFE/RL described both protests on March 7, 2006.

3 www.ikd.ru

4 Data from the 1990s are from Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

5 <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/brown/voina4-29-11.asp>



"Angry urbanites": The "Second March of Millions" in Moscow, 12 June 2012.

Photo: Christoph Laug

tions in March". Only 11 percent disagreed.⁶ One month after the elections, there was a little more resignation—now 69 percent agreed and 8 percent disagreed (Figure 1 on p. 5). On the other hand, the proportion who agreed that "there is more possibility for change now than I had thought possible until recently" barely budged over the period—from 34 percent before the elections to 32 percent one month after (Figure 2 on p. 5).

In other words, even the "angry urbanites" were never that optimistic that short-term change would be achieved in the first place. Asked two weeks before the presidential election who they thought would win the presidential election, an overwhelming 92 percent of those who expressed an opinion said Vladimir Putin (Figure 4 on p. 6). More than 41 percent agreed that "nothing will ever change as a result of the street protests" and only 25 percent disagreed (Figure 3 on p. 6). Almost no one saw either the Arab Spring (4 percent) or even Ukraine's Orange Revolution (5 percent) as positive examples for Russia to follow (Figure 6 on p. 7).

Despite the low expectations, many respondents saw real if limited results from the protests. While only 31 percent felt the protesters had achieved little or nothing,

28 percent attributed increases in the numbers of election observers to the protests, 28 percent thought the protests had "woken Russian society up," 21 percent felt the demonstrators had "initiated a process of dialogue between the authorities and society," 19 percent felt the protests had forced the reintroduction of direct elections for regional governors, and 17 percent thought the protests had made the presidential elections cleaner than they would otherwise have been (Figure 5 on p. 7). Not exactly earth-shattering, but certainly more than might have been expected before December.

Third, it seems clear that the cleavage that has opened up between richer, better educated urbanites and, more specifically, between residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg and the rest of the country is deep and here to stay. National surveys have shown that university-educated and middle and upper income Russians are much more concerned with issues like corruption, moral decline and the loss of civil rights. Working class and less educated Russians, by contrast, care more about economics—prices, poverty, unemployment and the like. Moreover, independent of socioeconomic characteristics, Muscovites and Piterburgers care more about corruption and inequality. Moreover, the differences can't easily be placed on a single liberal/authoritarian dimension—residents of the two "capitals" are also much more exercised about immigration and immigrants than people elsewhere.⁷

In other words, the disillusionment story is at best weakly grounded in reality and the cleavages along lines of class and geography that the protests highlighted are deep, and likely to be quite enduring. This means that the populist rhetoric that Vladimir Putin has long been a master of is unlikely to give way to a kinder, gentler attitude to the urban intelligentsia any time soon. The politics of Uralvagonzavod are here to stay, and so are the angry urbanites.⁸

About the Author

Graeme Robertson is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His latest book is *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶ The surveys were sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development.

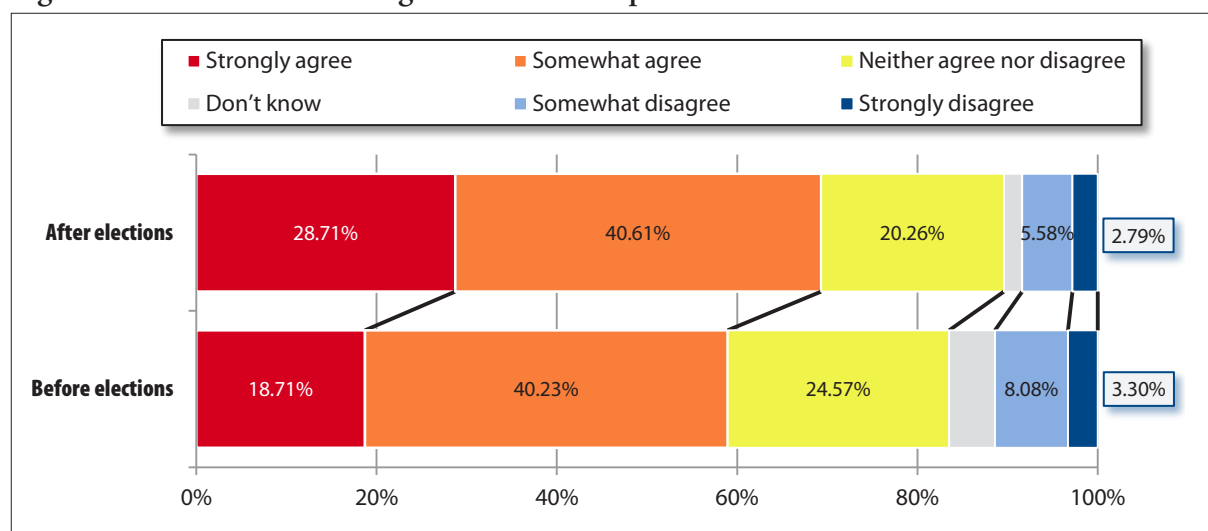
⁷ Based on national surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development.

⁸ Uralvagonzavod makes railway cars, tanks and other vehicles in Nizhny Tagil. Workers there were associated with a pro-Putin organization and one who offered live on a presidential phone-in to bring some friends to deal with Moscow protesters was appointed Presidential Representative to the Urals Federal Region. <http://www.itar-tass.com/en/c142/425908.html>

OPINION POLL

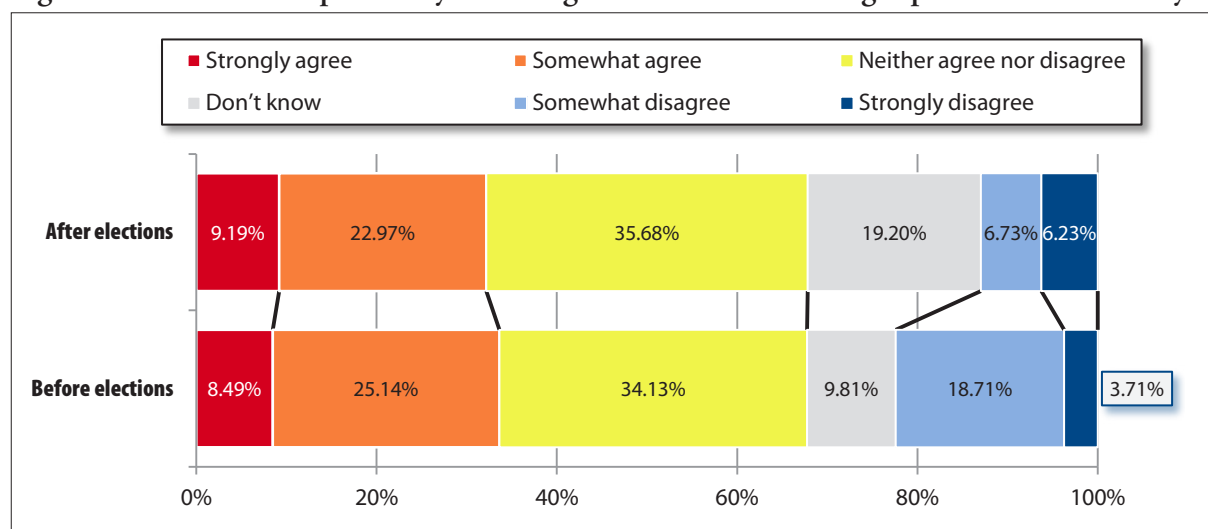
Protest and Resignation

Figure 1: Russia will not change much after the presidential elections in March.



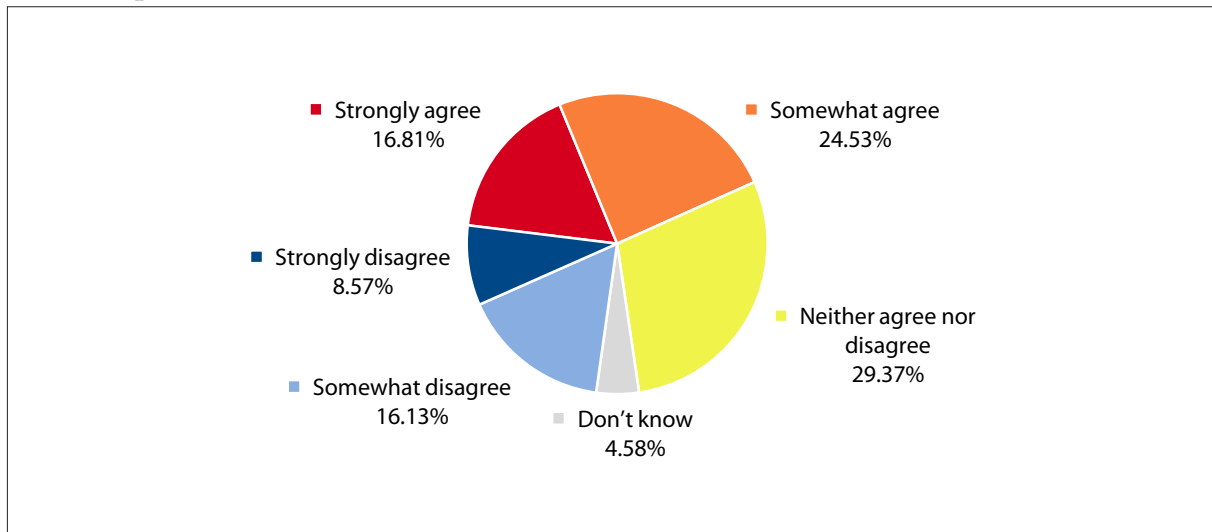
Source: surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development

Figure 2: There is more possibility for change now than I had thought possible until recently.



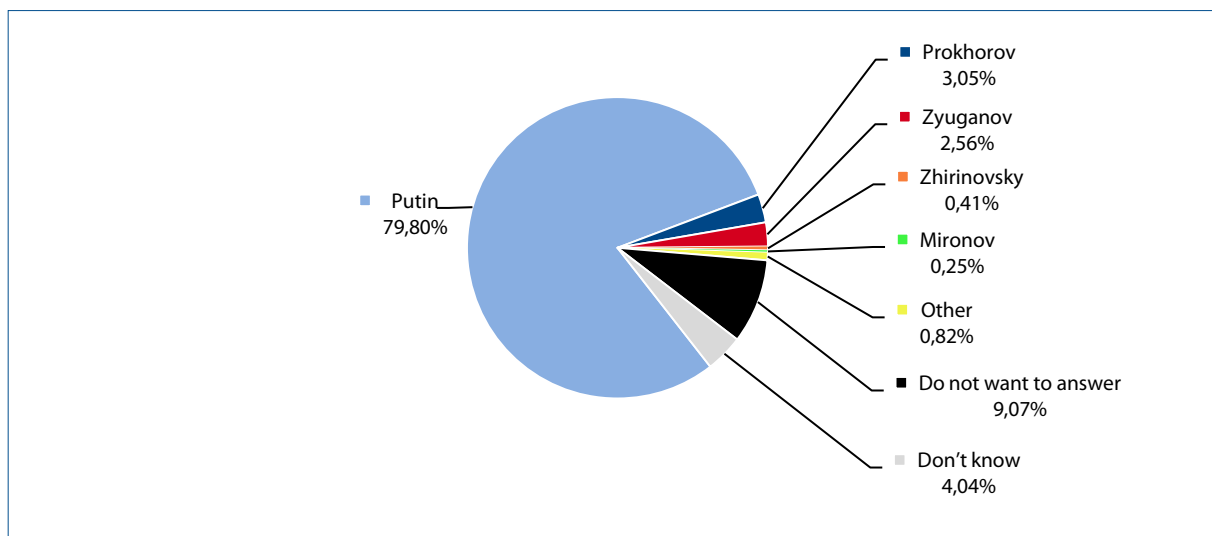
Source: surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development

Figure 3: The protestors are wasting their time: nothing will ever change as a result of the street protests.



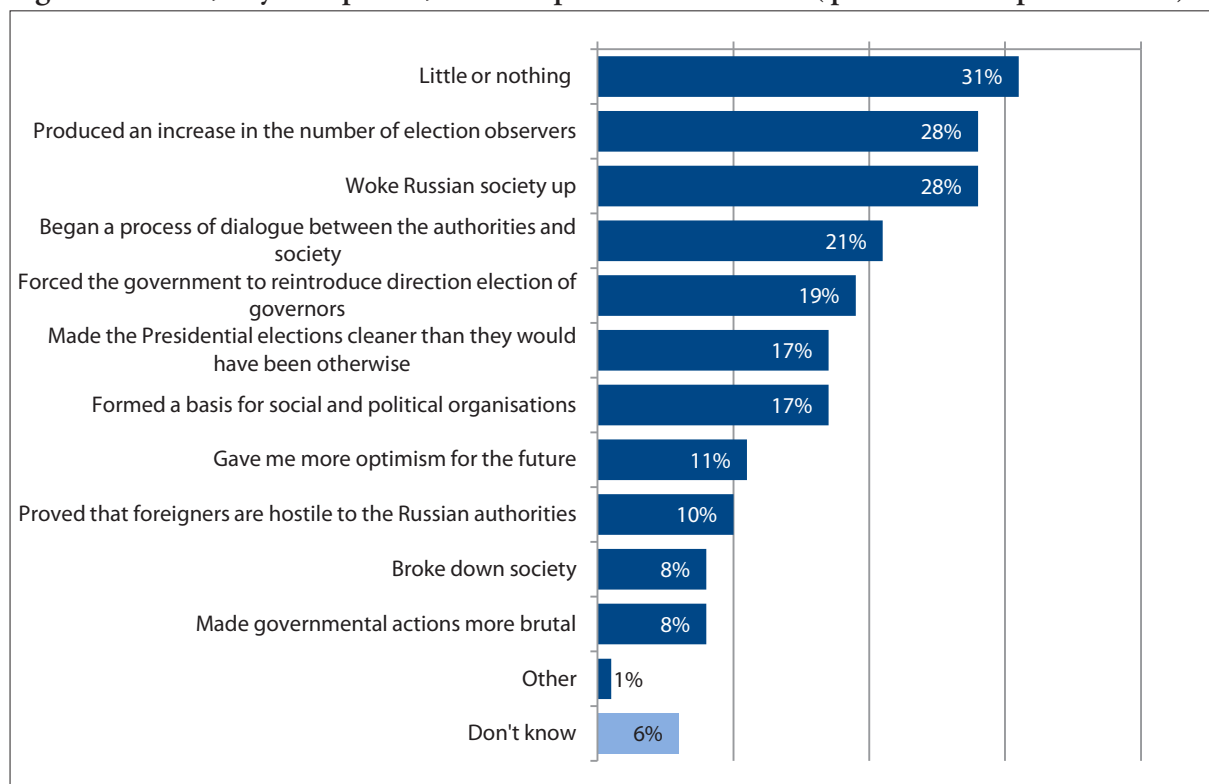
Source: surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development

Figure 4: Regardless of who you plan to vote for, who do you think will win the Presidential Elections?



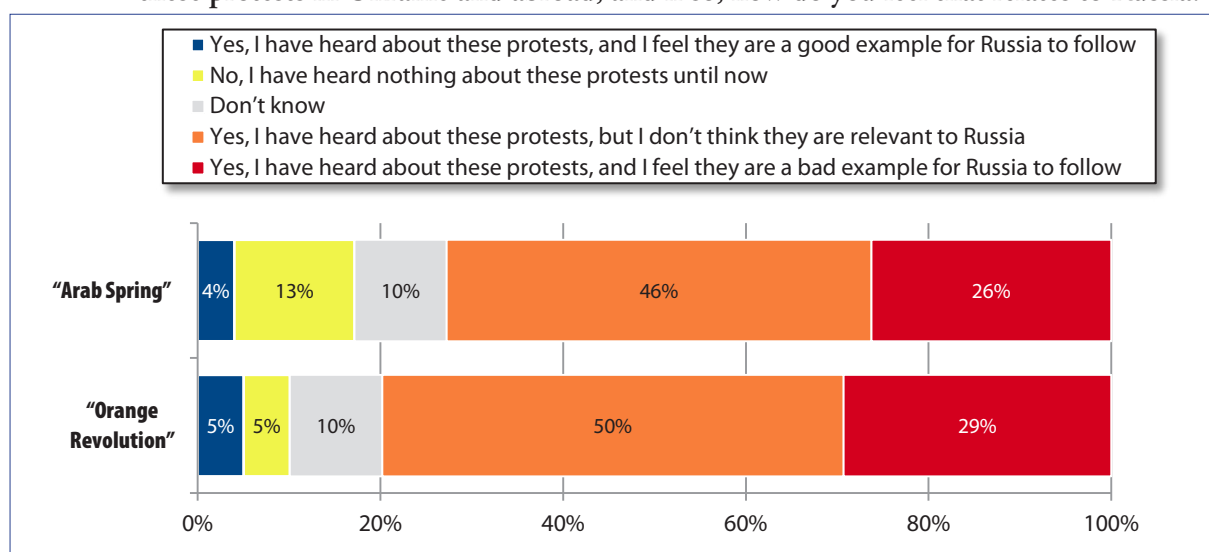
Source: surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development

Figure 5: What, in your opinion, have the protestors achieved? (question asked post-election)



Source: surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development

Figure 6: Some people have compared the recent protests in Moscow and elsewhere to protests in Ukraine's so-called "Orange Revolution" protests of 2004 and the recent "Arab Spring" protests in Egypt and Tunisia that led to new leaders taking office. Have you heard about these protests in Ukraine and abroad, and if so, how do you feel that relates to Russia?



Source: surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development

ANALYSIS

Dmitry Medvedev's Party Reform

By Grigorii Golosov, St. Petersburg

Abstract

The reform of Russia's political party system is the only protest demand that the Russian authorities have granted. But, while the opportunity to form new political parties is a real accomplishment in the battle for Russian democracy, the authorities designed the new law to strengthen their own hand in the political field.

Only Party Reform Survives

Then-President Dmitry Medvedev proposed several political reforms in his annual presidential address to the Federal Assembly delivered on December 22, 2011. In addition to reinstating direct governors' elections and reforming the electoral system, Medvedev proposed to ease significantly the conditions for registering parties and regulating their participation in elections. It is a widely held view that the entire package of reforms was the authorities' response to the demands of the protest movement that greatly expanded following the publication of the December 4 State Duma election results. In fact, the first demonstration, which took place on Bolotnaya Square on December 10, 2011, called for the registration of opposition parties. Now, it is clear that this demand was the only one that the authorities carried out in a relatively complete form. This article will evaluate the motivations for the reform and its likely consequences.

The Russian authorities deny any connection between the political reforms and the demands of the protest movement. While contradicting the facts, this assertion is characteristic for Vladimir Putin, who seeks to show that he never makes a decision under pressure from other political actors, and especially the opposition. Several of Medvedev's proposals underwent significant modification in the course of becoming legislation: the proposal about reforming the electoral system was changed to the point where it became meaningless, while the law on the governors' elections was adopted in a completely emasculated form.

But these problems did not affect the party reform. The key passage of this reform—reducing the demand for the number of members from 50,000 to 500 in order for a party to register—became part of the new law “On political parties.” Also adopted was Medvedev's idea that registered parties could participate in elections without collecting signatures. During the course of the Duma debate, members of the existing parliamentary parties, including the pro-Kremlin United Russia and the three opposition parties, advocated raising the minimum number of members required for registration. However, the Kremlin held firm and pushed through the reform in its initial form. This consistency demonstrates that the authorities had a serious interest in making sure that the reform was adopted in the way that they had proposed it.

A History of Russian Parties

In order to evaluate the Kremlin's motivations, it is necessary to examine the history of post-Soviet Russian party building. In the 1990s, all public organizations whose charters expressed a desire to participate in the elections had the right to do so. Although there were some attempts to limit the number of parties, they did not meet with success. The country's electoral arena was overloaded with numerous political vehicles, designed to service the ambitions of one or another politician, but with no hope of survival. Although there were many reasons for the extreme fragmentation and instability of the Russian party system, conventional wisdom held that one of these reasons was the ease of setting up a party. Therefore, it was not surprising that all parties represented in the Duma supported the adoption of the 2001 law “On political parties,” and many analysts approved it.

The 2001 law defined a legal concept that declared the political party to be an organizational type that was different from all other forms of non-commercial associations. The law required 10,000 members for a party to register and stipulated that there had to be regional organizations of a legally-defined size in at least half of the Russian regions. Additionally, the law included a detailed description of the registration procedure for political parties and included several requirements for their organizational structure and program positions (including forbidding the creation of parties on the basis of ethnic, class, professional, and religious bases as well as parties that could be considered “extremist.”)

More than 40 parties were created in accordance with this law. Even then some parties were refused registration, but in general the application of the law did not limit party registration. The situation changed radically in 2005, when a new version of the law was adopted. According to the new requirements, parties had to have a minimum of 50,000 members. Even the previous barrier of 10,000 members would have been impossibly high for the majority of parties if the registering bodies had monitored party membership. However, until 2005, such monitoring did not take place. The adoption of the new law was accompanied by a cardinal change in implementation practice: by the end of 2006 the registering body had to carry out a thorough check of party

membership in accordance with the provisions of the law. As a result, the number of parties began to shrink rapidly. By January 2006, it fell to 35; after the completion of the audit, it fell by an additional 50 percent. And by 2009, there were only seven parties. Among the remaining parties was a new entrant “Right Cause,” though it was created on the base of three parties that had existed earlier. During that period, practice showed that creating a new party in Russia was impossible.

The 2007–2011 Party System

The linchpin of the party system in Russia from 2007 to 2011 was the “party of power” United Russia, which served as an electoral and legislative instrument for the executive branch. Typically, this party won 55–65 percent of the vote in elections and took 65–75 percent of the seats in regional legislative elections. The remaining seats were divided among the opposition parties—the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and Just Russia. The remaining three parties—Yabloko, Patriots of Russia, and Right Cause—participated in the elections episodically and generally did not win any seats. The main reason for the weakness of the opposition parties was that their electoral bases were extremely narrow and they were not able to appeal to a wider electorate.

The archaic Communist rhetoric of the KPRF and the eccentric personal style of LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy were sufficient to mobilize the electoral bases of these parties, but did not attract a majority of the voters. Additionally, the actual opposition character of both of these parties was doubtful and such concerns about political independence cast a particular shadow over Just Russia, whose leader Sergei Mironov remained loyal to Putin. The institutional framework in which the opposition parties existed undermined their ability to conduct effective electoral campaigns. In conditions in which each of these parties could be removed from participating in the elections, and simply disbanded, their leaders had to behave with extreme caution. Such considerations made the opposition electoral campaigns timid, lacking in content, and deprived of any links to the voters’ real interests.

Decline of the Old System

The first signs that this party system had stopped fulfilling its purposes began to appear in the regional elections of spring 2010. United Russia’s vote share gradually began to fall, though it rarely dropped below 50 percent. In general, the authorities ignored these alarm bells. The only attempt to react took place in summer 2011 when billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov received permission to head the Right Cause party. The Kremlin incumbents assumed that under Prokhorov’s leadership this party would attract

support from well-off urban residents who were alienated from United Russia’s official ideology without creating a serious threat to the electoral chances of the party of power. However, when Prokhorov demonstrated some independence in choosing the names on his party list, the authorities removed him from the party leadership.

As a result, the 2011 campaign proceeded similarly to the regional campaigns: there was no debate between the parties that could interest the critically-minded voter and a surfeit of positive information about the activities of United Russia and its leaders, intended not so much to win voter support for United Russia, but to convince the voters of the inevitability of its victory. Apparently, the authorities assumed that many voters who were inclined to support the opposition would simply stay home and others, convinced that they had no alternative, would vote for United Russia. However, events turned out differently.

United Russia’s relatively poor showing in the 2011 Duma elections was in part the consequence of Alexei Navalny’s Internet activities: first popularizing the slogan “United Russia is the party of swindlers and thieves,” and then calling on voters to support any party but United Russia. This appeal traveled far beyond the Internet and heavily influenced the behavior of voters. As a result, United Russia won 49.5 percent of the official vote count. Moreover, the numerous falsifications in the elections stimulated the beginning of a massive protest movement, which caused some confusion among the authorities.

Ultimately the main lesson they drew was that they could no longer count on United Russia to win a simple majority of the votes. Even falsifications could not achieve this outcome and, in any case, such abuses aroused considerable anger among some parts of the citizenry. However, they also concluded that it was possible to maintain a majority in Russia’s federal and regional legislatures, including the Duma, by changing the electoral rules, and particularly the electoral system.

Securing Victory in the Future

One possible solution to the problem was replacing the pure party list elections by restoring the mixed electoral system that had existed in Russia until 2007. Already in 2010–2011, United Russia had managed to maintain a majority in the legislatures of several regions with the support of legislators elected in single-mandate districts. However, such a move, which Medvedev had discussed even before the December elections, threatened to undermine the party discipline of the United Russia faction in the parliament. Indeed, legislators elected from single-member districts—even if they had been nominated by United Russia—won their own electoral base upon their election and therefore earned some degree of autonomy from the party, which could serve as a basis for indepen-

dent behavior in the legislature. Thus, even though it might maintain a legislative majority with the restoration of a mixed system, United Russia would no longer serve as a reliable legislative support for the executive branch.

Medvedev's address to the Federal Assembly also proposed the adoption of Augusto Pinochet's Chilean "binomial model" in which the two top finishers in each of the two-member districts are elected to the parliament if the first-runner's share of the vote is less than two times larger than the second-runner's. If the margin of the top-runner's victory is greater than this, he takes both seats. According to my count, a Russian version of the binomial system would have allowed United Russia to maintain a significant majority in the Duma even with limited voter support. However, the distribution of seats would differ so greatly from the vote spread that it would create political tensions in and of itself. Therefore, in the bill on electoral reform, which has already been approved in its first reading in the Duma, the previous electoral system remains in place—fully proportional with closed party lists in one national district and a 5 percent threshold for entry into the Duma. Despite the promised reforms, the authorities could only make small cosmetic changes in the system, such as proposing to lower the threshold for entering the Duma from 7 to 5 percent.

Of course, the electoral system can still be changed in the course of further amendments to the bill and no one can block additional changes closer to the next Duma elections, which are scheduled for 2016. However, this institutional choice is important for understanding the logic of the authorities in conducting the party reform. Under such a system, United Russia could receive a simple majority of seats with the support of a relative majority of the voters (say 35%) if other parties that cross the threshold receive even fewer votes, say 34%, and the remaining votes are "wasted" on parties that received less than 5%. Understandably, there should be many such votes (31% in the present example) and that means that there should be a significant number of weak parties in the electoral arena. It therefore does not make sense to block their creation.

The new system does not require the authorities to register genuine opposition organizations headed by popular leaders. Even though it reduced the minimum membership requirement to 500, the law "On political parties" in its new form preserved numerous opportunities for removing parties that present a potential threat to the incumbent authorities. Formally, these tools are of a technical character. The registering body can find that the founding congress of the party took place in violation of the legally-defined procedures, that the regional branches do not exist in the proper form, or that the program or

charter documents do not meet the law's requirements. And since Russian legal practice has demonstrated that it is possible to find such violations with any party, it is easy to see that the new law opens opportunities to register mainly the parties that the authorities want to register.

In the 1990s and in the beginning of the past decade, registering parties was one of quickest growing branches of the Russian political consulting business. A significant number of the parties registered were so-called "spoilers," that is parties that participated in the elections not to win, but to take a small share of votes from other parties. Now this industry is reviving. As of May 18, 2012, Russians had created 167 organizational committees for various parties. The best evidence that many of these parties are being created on a commercial basis is the fact that eight of them are headed by the same shadowy individual, Oleg Balakirev.

It is clear, however, that not all of the new parties are spoilers. The registration of the Republican Party of Russia, led by Vladimir Ryzhkov, has been restored and this party can serve as a base for launching the legal activity of one of the many extra-systemic parties, the Party of Popular Freedom (PARNAS). One former PARNAS leader, Vladimir Milov, has set up his own party, Democratic Choice. The moderate nationalists plan to found the National Democratic Party, and several leftist politicians are working to set up the Russian United Labor Front. There likely will be several other serious attempts to establish new parties. The main danger is that many politicians may inadvertently overestimate their ability to win votes and, through their party-building initiatives, involuntarily support the authorities, who are betting on increased fragmentation in the party system.

The restoration of free political associations, even in a partial and inconsistent form, is a significant achievement in the battle for democracy in Russia. But it is necessary to understand that by itself this reform is driven by a desire among the authorities to create a more effective shell for Russian authoritarianism, and is not aimed at dismantling it. Moreover, an important part of the authorities' strategy is a desire to coopt up and coming opposition politicians, especially among the younger generation, and ensnare them in the system of authoritarian institutions, thereby distracting them from joining the protest movement. In doing so, the authorities have preserved a wide range of possibilities for isolating and marginalizing those politicians who are not prepared to compromise on issues of principle. Thus, Medvedev's party reform opens new opportunities for the opposition, but simultaneously is fraught with new and serious challenges for it.

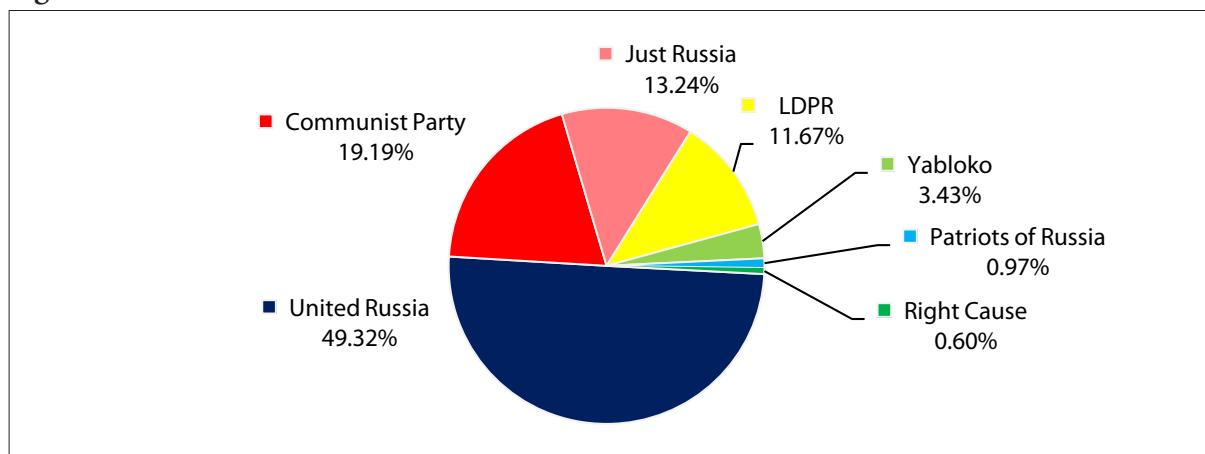
About the Author:

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DOCUMENTATION

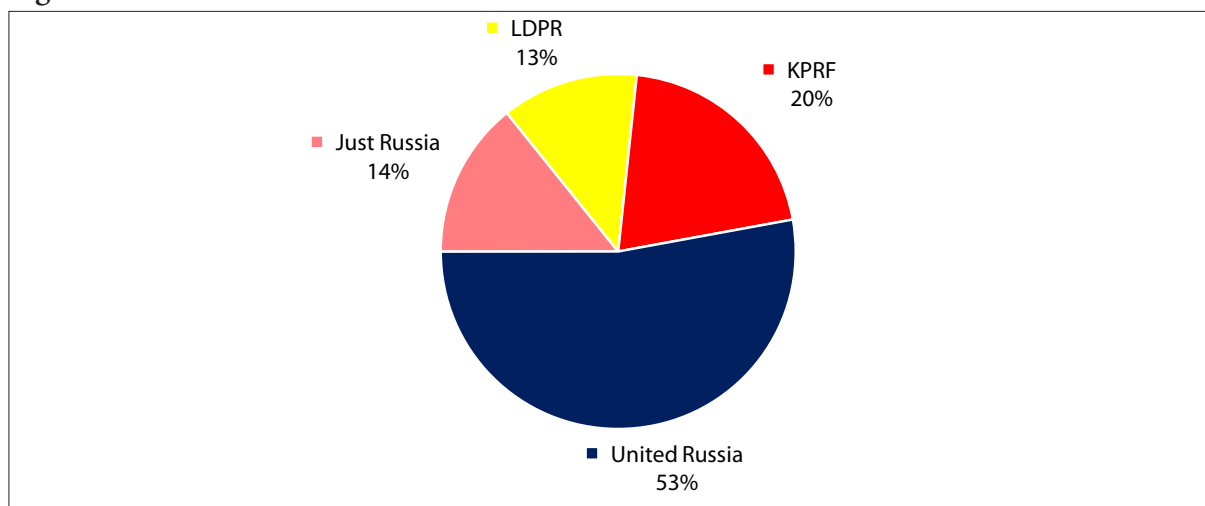
The Result of the Duma Elections, December 2011

Figure 1: Final Result of the Duma Elections, 4 December 2011



Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100028713304&vrn=100100028713299®ion=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vibid=100100028713304&type=242

Figure 2: Allocation of Seats in the Duma After the Elections of December 2011

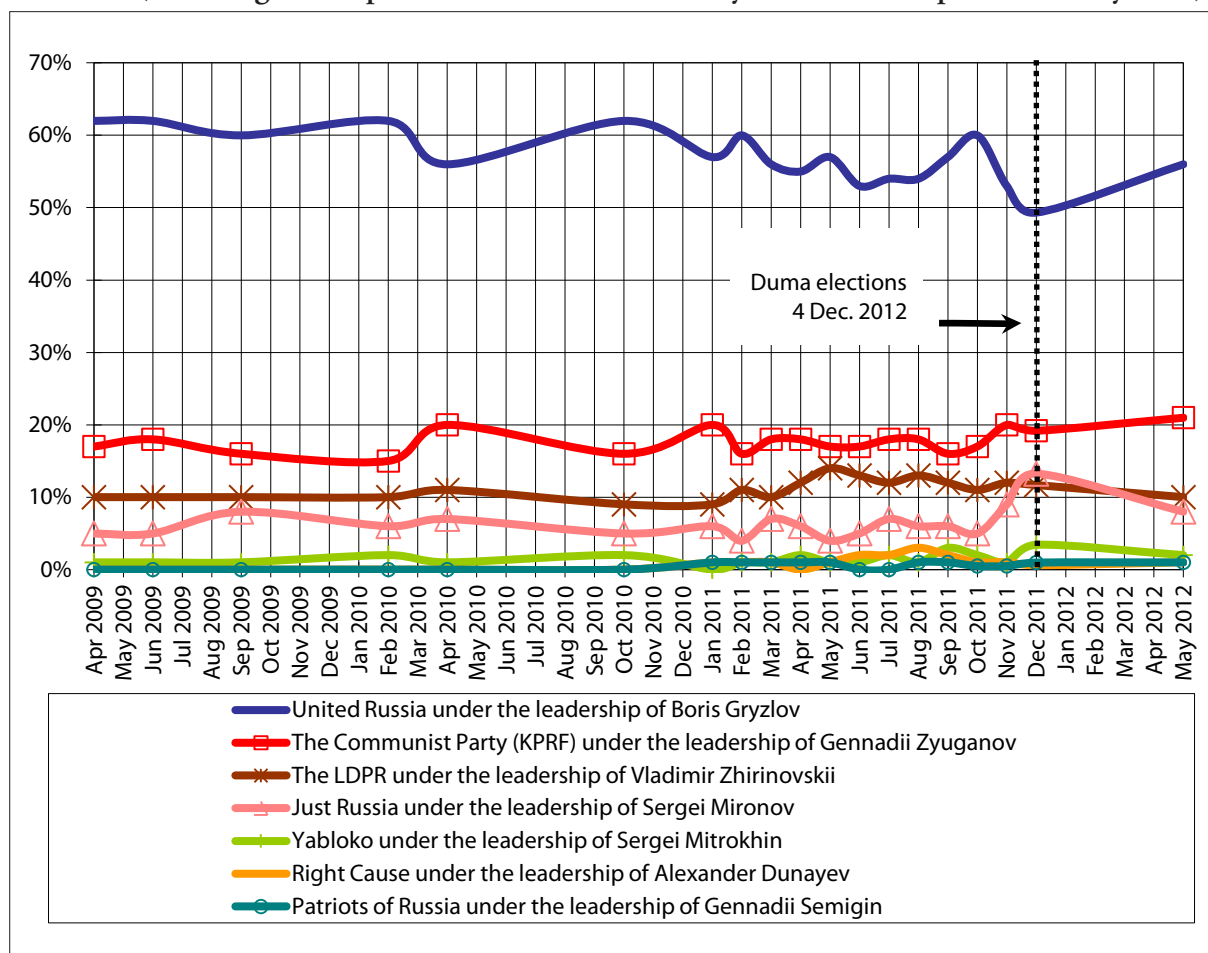


Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, Rossiiskaia gazeta, 10 December 2011, <http://www.rg.ru/printable/2011/12/10/duma-itogi-dok.html>

OPINION POLL

Voter Polls

Figure 1: For Which Party Would You Vote If Duma Elections Were To Take Place Next Sunday? (Percentage of Respondents Who Indicated They Would Vote, April 2009–May 2012)



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, 2009–2011, last polls conducted on 25–29 May 2012, <http://www.levada.ru/31-05-2012/maiskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-polozheniya-del-v-strane-elektoralnye-reitingi>; election results: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100028713304&vrn=100100028713299®ion=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vibid=100100028713304&type=242

INTERVIEW

The Decriminalization of Primorsky Krai—Mission Impossible?

Abstract

The following interview with Vitaly Nomokonov, an expert on organized crime and corruption in Vladivostok, examines the removal of Governor Sergei Dar'kin during the heat of the presidential election campaign and the appointment of a new governor in his place, Vladimir Miklushevsky. Nomokonov points out that huge amounts of money are now flowing into Vladivostok and the Kremlin wanted a loyal figure to manage these money flows and direct as much of this money as possible to Moscow. The replacement of the governor will not change the corrupt and criminalized system in the region, just replace one group of beneficiaries with another.

Interview with Vitaly Nomokonov, doctor of law and head of the Center for the Study of Organized Crime (TraCCC) in Vladivostok, conducted by Marina Loboda.

"Decriminalization of the region is the most important task, according to Dmitry Medvedev," Primorsky Krai Governor Vladimir Miklushevsky announced after a personal meeting with the then president in the Kremlin. Miklushevsky took up the responsibilities of Primorsky Krai governor on March 16, 2012. "This is a battle against corruption [and for] maximum transparency in the regional administration, and the participation of civil society and the people in decision-making," Miklushevsky explained to journalists immediately after Medvedev had appointed him, but before the krai parliament had approved this decision.

Subsequently, however, the governor's rhetoric became more guarded. In his programmatic speech to the krai parliament, Miklushevsky listed social services, attracting investment, and developing a strategy as the most important tasks. From the tribunal, he said nothing about decriminalization. Why is that? To gain a better understanding of the situation, we interviewed Dr. Nomokonov.

Vitaly Anatol'evich, how seriously should we take this dramatic announcement, "decriminalization of the region"?

Undoubtedly, Moscow ordered Miklushevsky to carry out this task. However, this is little more than a ritual. The Kremlin's interest in this theme heats up regularly and, as a rule, before elections—then it starts to quiet down. One month before the parliamentary elections in 2007 Oleg Safonov was named presidential envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District. Safonov was the former deputy minister of internal affairs who oversaw "criminal issues" in the government. Then Putin gave him the same goal in the same manner: decriminalize the region. How did it all end? The mission was not fulfilled because the system prevented it.

You are suggesting that the most recent order to deal with corruption was simply an empty campaign gesture?

Obviously! The theme was reintroduced in the heat of the election campaign. First, Putin harshly criticized our "criminal" situation in a meeting with the heads of the his local offices for receiving constituent complaints, then the "businessman" Andrei Goldobin asked Putin about the issue of corruption in a nationally televised call-in show broadcast in December¹ and finally, one week before the presidential elections, they removed the governor [Sergey Dar'kin].

Firing the governor is no proof that they are moving from slogans to action?

The retirement of Dar'kin is anything but a battle against criminality; rather, this is the beginning of a significant "redistribution" of property. Indeed, the Kremlin knew from the very beginning "who is who," but in spite of numerous corruption scandals [during Dar'kin's tenure as governor], they did not do anything... Yet now that enormous amounts of money have been invested in the region and many projects are under way, when many big businesses have come to the region (Gazprom, Rosneft, and others), when there is hope that the APEC forum [in September 2012] will stimulate large investments from abroad—the question arises as to who will manage these money flows? Could it really be someone like Dar'kin? This explanation of recent events seems the most likely to me.

That is, the "criminal theme" is made up?

Not necessarily. No one belittles the record of the ex-governor — just the opposite: headway has been made with the stalemated, scandalous case of Igor Meshcheriakov [the former head of the region's branch of the property ministry accused of fraud]. Finally, the "unidentified person" has been identified. Ex-Deputy Governor Nikolai Korolev

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZYaaRzQ3b4>

revealed the entire corrupt scheme in court: not a single object of state property was privatized without the permission of Sergei Dar'kin, who personally oversaw dozens of real estate deals, including the famous building at 47 Svetlanskaia Street which now belongs to the Primor'ye Bank (the owner of which is known to all [Dar'kin's wife owns most of the shares].) But scandalous privatization is only one episode. There is also the Kroks affair in the forest sphere, Gel'tser case involving the misuse of state purchases in the realm of health care, the Bel'tiukov affair, involving bribes in order to obtain licenses to engage in retail alcohol sales, the Khimichuk case regarding the use of natural resources—criminal schemes have pervaded the entire region. Korolev has stated, “the typical relationships with businessmen were in the ratio of 75:25 in favor of the governor.” This is the criminalization of power indeed.

So, it's our problem alone?

This occurs throughout Russia, but in Primorsky Krai it has gone to an extreme when everyone knows everything but is afraid to talk about it, much less do something about it, without the support of a larger team. Now a team is in place and the nature of this team is proof that nothing of substance will be done about crime—rather it will focus on concrete business interests.

In this context, how serious are the intentions of the new governor?

Here there are two possibilities—good and bad. Good: It is fully possible that a relatively young, ambitious person can decide to prove himself by proclaiming his first Herculean task to be decriminalization of the region. But, in order to influence the process, one must understand the real situation and this is not simple since we live in a hall of mirrors. Official statistics show that the crime rate is dropping; but according to citizen complaints, it is growing. The number of corruption violations in the region has fallen, according to all measures, but in fact, they fired the governor and the region is the most criminalized in Russia (despite police reports about various successes).

What can be done?

First of all, we need professional monitoring of the situation in order to understand what is really happening and on that basis develop a comprehensive set of measures. Large-scale sociological research is needed to identify problem areas, establish tasks, and determine goals. Only then can we understand what to do. I have no confidence that that will happen. I say this based on my judgment of the strategy for developing the Far Eastern Federal University. It was prepared primarily by Moscow specialists, and as is typical in such cases “is far removed from the people.” As a result, I fear, they prepared a strategy that does not account for our realities, and has little chance of actually being implemented.

And about the team?

Absolutely. It's clear that in Moscow there are many intelligent people, but it is not possible to see everything from the capital. First, they need to rely on local experts who are independent, and not involved in criminal schemes. Fortunately, we have many smart, experienced, and competent people who are able to work in the areas of confronting crime and in economics, health care, and international cooperation; we must attract them. The authorities must explain their recent announcement that they will seek outside managers to run the krai. I am alarmed by the possibility that the governor's inner circle will include members of Chubais' team.

Will the governor really rely on the old “decriminalizers”—procurators, judges, and security forces—to cleanse the region?

Logically, it would make sense to “refurbish” the security forces because many current officers were involved in the corruption. By the way, this will be one of the tests to determine how serious they are about decriminalization. Moreover, we need to develop an economic program that will reduce the role of the shadow economy in the region, and prepare security systems to protect businesses from criminal threats (including from bureaucrats).

What about transparency of government?

Absolutely. Power must be transparent and open (and I don't mean just a few revelations about abuses on TV). I am struck by Governor Miklushevsky's effort to operate on the basis of public opinion and his active “informal” efforts to speak with citizens in person as well as on the internet. Allowing society to hold the authorities accountable is the right way to go, but it is also important that the energy of the masses not be wasted on populist campaigns. Also, in seeing the “trees,” we must not forget the “forest.” The crux of the issue is not in fixing a few problems, but in overhauling a flawed system of government.

How realistic is this in one region [of a larger, corrupt country]?

This is the most important question. To make one region into a showcase within the context of a country riddled with corruption is impossible, just as it is impossible to build communism in one country. It is clear that Dar'kin alone did not create these schemes; rather that's how the entire government system operates. All megaprojects in

Primorsky Krai, Sochi, and Moscow are nothing but “mega-kickbacks” and “mega-corruption.” Everyone here plows his own plot: federal officials take their share, and regional actors, theirs.

Then what is the sense of removing one governor who is simply part of the larger system?

Business interests. This is the second explanation of Miklushevsky's mission, which seems to me to be the most probable. I repeat: in recent years, a serious “capitalization” of the krai took place...many big businesses working with large sums of money have come here. It is clear that they want to control ALL local money flows for themselves so that none will escape their grasp.

They are working by the “one window” principle?

Basically. In this sense Miklushevsky is only the agent of Moscow structures. His main mission is to organize and redirect the money flows. Decriminalization is of little interest to the main players; their main interest is in getting their share. The process of redirecting wealth into the “correct hands” has already begun. According to information in the newspaper *Vedomosti*, the Dar'kin-controlled BAMR firm will be acquired by the Russian Sea company, which was founded and is co-owned by the oligarch Gennady Timchenko, who is close to Vladimir Putin. Although the initial asking price was \$500 million dollars, it has come down to \$280 million and I don't think that Dar'kin will protest.

What other “hot spots” will appear in the course of the property redistribution?

There will be issues in all lucrative businesses—land, forestry, natural resources, and real estate. I am simply convinced that the upcoming privatization of the soon-to-be vacated Far Eastern Federal University buildings, nearly 50 locations in downtown Vladivostok, will pour “oil on the fire” of bureaucratic corruption [the university will be moved to Russky Island after the September 2012 APEC conference, see RAD 82 July 12, 2010, <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=118673>]. There may also be some battles with criminal groups over the scraps left over in this process. I am even convinced that they will try to impose order in the areas that most affect ordinary citizens: municipal services and the regulatory agencies that oversee the provision of prescription drugs and carry out technical inspections. In other words, cut back all local abuses so that they are not stealing small amounts. The main criminal “vertical” by which money flows to Moscow will be strengthened; this is what it means to impose order on the locals.

How realistic is such a scenario?

Completely. This is Miklushevsky's specialty. He is not an expert in “metals and alloys” as some think, but finances. As far as I know, he was in charge of finances at his previous place of employment, the Moscow Institute of Metal and Alloys, and as the deputy minister in the Ministry of Education, he was in charge of the budget process. Regarding Far Eastern Federal University, one of his main orders was the maximal commercialization of the educational process. Thus, he is well prepared to work with the money flows. As for decriminalization, when he was rector of the university, he came to get acquainted with the law school. During his visit, we explained about our center and how we study organized crime and corruption, but he did not express any interest in the topic. Despite outside grants of millions, the university did not find one ruble for our research. That shows where their priorities are.

This interview originally appeared in Dal'nevostochnie vedomosti, March 21, 2012, <http://www.dvvedomosti.ru/news/people/?id=3808>. It also was reproduced on the site of a local television station in Vladivostok: <http://ptr-vlad.ru/news/politics/59755-dekriminalizaciya-primorya-missi-ya-nevypolnima.html> and was widely discussed.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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