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Russia's December 2007 Legislative Election: Outcome and Implications

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Abstract. This report discusses the campaign and results of Russia's December 2, 2007, election to the State Duma (the lower legislative chamber), and implications for Russia and U.S. interests. Many observers viewed the election as a setback to democratization. Unprecedented for modern Russia, President Vladimir Putin placed himself at the head of the ticket of the United Russia Party. This party won a majority of Duma seats, and Putin was widely viewed as gaining popular endorsement for a possible role in politics even after his constitutionally-limited second term in office ends in early 2008.

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Russia's December 2007 Legislative Election: Outcome and Implications

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Summary

This report discusses the campaign and results of Russia's December 2, 2007, election to the State Duma (the lower legislative chamber), and implications for Russia and U.S. interests. Many observers viewed the election as a setback to democratization. Unprecedented for modern Russia, President Vladimir Putin placed himself at the head of the ticket of the United Russia Party. This party won a majority of Duma seats, and Putin was widely viewed as gaining popular endorsement for a possible role in politics even after his constitutionally-limited second term in office ends in early 2008. This report may be updated. Related reports include CRS Report RL33407, *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*, by Stuart Goldman.

Background

Most analysts agree that Russia's democratic progress was uneven at best during the 1990s, and that the previous two cycles of legislative and presidential elections held under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin (those in 1999-2000 and 2003-2004) demonstrated further setbacks for democratization.¹ After the pro-Putin United Russia Party gained enough seats and allies to dominate the State Duma (the lower legislative house of the Federal Assembly; the upper house is not directly elected) after the 2003 election, the Kremlin moved to make it more difficult for smaller parties to win seats in the future, including by raising the hurdle of minimum votes needed to win seats from 5% to 7%. Also, the election of 50% of Duma deputies in constituency races — where independent candidates and those from small opposition parties usually won some seats — was abolished, with all Duma members to be elected via party lists. Changes in campaign and media laws also made it more difficult for small parties and opposition groups to gain publicity in the run-up to the December 2, 2007, Duma election.

¹ In early 2000, Putin was acting president and then a candidate for the presidency. For background, see CRS Report RL32662, *Democracy in Russia: Trends and Implications for U.S. Interests*, by Jim Nichol.

The Campaign

Out of 16 registered political parties, eleven succeeded in submitting the required paperwork by late October and were approved by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) to run in the December 2007 Duma election. The most prominent of the approved parties were United Russia, A Fair Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, the Communist Party, Union of Right Forces, and Yabloko. The latter three parties are opposition parties, and the latter two are liberal democratic parties. A Fair Russia is widely viewed as a creation of the Putin administration and considers itself a centrist party. The ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party usually supports Putin's initiatives in the Duma. Other Russia, an opposition bloc of movements and unregistered parties co-chaired by former international chess champion Garry Kasparov, called on the CEC to permit it to field candidates, but the CEC denied their request, saying it could not rewrite a new law that permits only single registered parties to participate in the election.

Perhaps the most significant event in the run-up to the 2007 Duma election was President Putin's October 1, 2007, announcement at the convention of the United Russia Party that he would "accept" its invitation to head its list of candidates, although he declined to join the party. The parties long have relied on the prestige of prominent persons at the top of their lists, and the voters are often aware that these people will pass on taking their seats in the Duma if the party wins. In his acceptance speech, Putin stated that a suggestion by a previous speaker that he become the prime minister after his second term as president ends "is entirely realistic, but it is too soon to talk about this at the moment because at least two conditions would first need to be met. First, United Russia would have to win the State Duma election on December 2, and second, our voters would have to elect a decent, effective and modern-thinking president."²

A short campaign season was permitted by law to begin on November 3 and end on November 30. On November 16, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) informed the Russian CEC that it could not send its electoral observers, stating that "despite repeated attempts to attain entry visas into the Russian Federation for ODIHR experts and observers, entry visas have continuously been denied."³ CEC head Vladimir Churov claimed that the visas had been issued. President Putin stated that "we have information that ... this [ODIHR decision] was made on the recommendation of the U.S. State Department," and asserted that "actions such as these cannot wreck the elections," by making them appear illegitimate (these allegations were denied by the U.S. State Department and White House; see below).⁴ Despite the inability of ODIHR to organize an electoral mission, over one hundred observers came from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the Nordic Council.

² Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), October 2, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950110.

³ OSCE ODIHR. *Press Release: ODIHR Unable to Observe Russian Duma Elections*, November 16, 2007.

⁴ Oleg Shchedrov, *Reuters*, November 26, 2007.

United Russia declined to participate in any broadcast political debates, but on October 1 approved a platform that pledged to continue Putin's policy course.⁵ All the parties were provided with some free television and print access, and on-air candidate debates at times appeared informative. The United Russia Party and the Putin administration-supported Nashi youth group stressed Russian nationalism and an anti-Western image, absorbing and amplifying the themes of the former Motherland Party (which was allegedly created and later abolished by the Putin administration). These themes appeared to at least partly reflect real fears by some part of the Putin administration that small domestic groups funded by "enemy" Western countries might try to launch democratic "color revolutions," like those that took place in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, to re-install the so-called oligarchs and divvy up Russia's oil and gas resources. A flyer attributed to Nashi called for rallies on December 3-6 to prevent the United States from using "traitors and thieves" such as Kasparov to launch a "color revolution." Some observers have warned that although United Russia might have gained some electoral support by using such themes, associated dangers include fueling ethnic and religious hate crimes and calls for a belligerent and isolationist foreign policy.⁶

Reflecting these themes, Putin explained in a major speech to his supporters on November 21 that he had agreed to head the United Russia party list in order to prevent the Duma from becoming "a collection of populists paralyzed by corruption and demagoguery," as in the past. He warned his supporters that Russia's stability and peace were still threatened by three groups, which he seemed to conflate: the supporters of Soviet-era politicians, the supporters of former Russian president Boris Yeltsin, and "those who scavenge outside foreign embassies, foreign diplomatic missions, [and] rely on support from foreign foundations and governments." These groups, he asserted, want "a weak and sick state," and a "disorganized and disoriented society ... in order to wheel and deal behind its back; in order to receive their piece of pie at our expense." He warned that some members of these groups are campaigning for seats in the Duma and staging demonstrations as taught by Western advisors in the hope of "restoring the oligarchs' regime based on corruption and lies."⁷

Results and Assessments

According to the final results reported by the CEC, four parties won enough votes to pass the 7% hurdle and win seats in the Duma (see **Table 1**). United Russia increased the number of seats over those it won in 2003, but the real effect may be minor, since many deputies in that Duma later aligned with United Russia, giving it the two-thirds majority needed to approve changes to the constitution. The losing parties altogether garnered about 7% of the vote (another 1% of votes were deemed invalid). The relatively high turnout (63.7% of 109 million voters), compared to 2003 (56%), won plaudits for the CEC, although the main contribution appeared to be Putin's active role. Some regions vied to report high voter turnouts and numbers for United Russia, with the North Caucasus republics hailing improbable turnouts nearing 100% with correspondingly high percentages of votes for United Russia.

⁵ United Russia has termed the corpus of President Putin's annual speeches to the Federal Assembly the "Putin Plan" for Russia's development.

⁶ Open Source Center. *Open Source Center Feature*, November 30, 2007.

⁷ *CEDR*, November 21, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950351.

Table 1. Parties that Won Seats in the State Duma

Party	Percentage of Vote	Seats
United Russia	64.3	315
Communist	11.57	57
RLDP	8.14	40
Fair Russia	7.74	38
Total	91.75	450

Notes: The other 7 parties running — Patriots of Russia, Yabloko, Union of Right Forces, Democratic Party, Civil Force, Agrarian, and Party of Social Justice — all received less than the 7% necessary to win seats. RLDP - Russian Liberal Democratic Party.

Source: Russian Central Electoral Commission, December 6, 2007 (preliminary results).

Observers from the Russian non-governmental organization Golos assessed the election as not free and fair. The observers from the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the Nordic Council issued a press statement on December 3 that the election was more efficiently run than past races, but “there was not a level political playing field.”⁸ They criticized the placement of most governors, as well of the president, on the United Russia list as “an abuse of power,” the use of government resources to support United Russia, and “widespread reports of harassment of opposition parties.” The active role of the president, they stated, turned the election “into a referendum on the president.” They stated that it was difficult for voters to make informed choices because “state-funded media failed in their public mandate to offer balanced and objective coverage.” One Russian CEC official dismissed this assessment as reflecting only a small group of the observers and dictated “from overseas” (presumably from the United States). Observers from regional organizations Russia belongs to — the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization — assessed the election as democratic.

Implications for Russia and Putin

The 2007 Duma election appears very similar to the previous 2003 election as a mandate on Putin’s rule, according to many observers. In the 2007 election, however, Putin did not just endorse the United Russia Party but placed his name at the head of its list, and many observers viewed the election results as more a popular endorsement of Putin than an endorsement of United Russia. In this view, the voters were indicating that they wanted Putin to remain in a leadership position even after his presidential term ends.

On December 3, Putin announced that he would use his power as president to convene the new Duma within a few days, so that it could start working with the government. He argued that since more citizens than in past elections had turned out and voted for parties that ended up with legislative seats, this incoming Duma would be more legitimate (some critics suggested that by this definition, voting during the Soviet era for the sole communist party would have been the most perfect “legitimacy”). Putin also praised voters for rejecting “a destructive shift in the development of the country,” presumably as had occurred in Ukraine and Georgia.⁹ He lamented that “tired voters” would soon (March 2, 2008) be faced with a presidential election and suggested that the

⁸ Council of Europe. *Press Release: Russian Duma Elections ‘Not Held on a Level Playing Field’, Say Parliamentary Observers*, No. 867, December 3, 2007.

⁹ *CEDR*, December 3, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950278.

new Duma examine means of “spreading apart these two election campaigns in the future.” Some observers interpreted this as a possible plan to delay the presidential race and stretch out Putin’s second term in office, as Uzbek President Islam Karimov did in 2002 to lengthen his term in office.¹⁰

Since United Russia strengthened its dominance of the Duma, the party leader and outgoing Duma Speaker, Boris Gryzlov, stressed on December 3 that the party would not fundamentally change its already nonpareil record in passing legislation to implement Putin’s development plans and budgets. Similarly, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandr Zhukov suggested that there would be few if any changes in the government. Although the Communist Party is now the sole opposition in the Duma, the dominance of United Russia over legislative offices and committees will permit the communists little leeway for influencing legislation. Also, the Communist Party in the last Duma appeared to play the role of a “constructive opposition” by seeking to work with United Russia on many legislative issues, including agreement on such foreign policy issues as sanctions against Georgia and condemnation of NATO enlargement and U.S. missile defense plans.

United Russia planned to hold a convention on December 17 to choose its candidate for president. This “choice” is likely to be Putin’s preferred successor, according to many observers. There is speculation that the candidate could be first deputy prime ministers Dmitriy Medvedev or Sergey Ivanov, or sitting Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov. According to one scenario, such an official would be elected in March 2008 and serve as a “placeholder” president, and might even resign after a short period in office, permitting Putin to constitutionally run in a presidential by-election. Under this scenario, Putin might serve as prime minister. According to some indicators, intra-elite conflicts are increasing as pro-Putin groups maneuver to protect their interests in the run-up to the supposed Putin succession. One security chief in October 2007 warned that these conflicts threatened Russia’s stability.¹¹

Most opposition party leaders criticized the election as marking the further whittling away of democratic freedoms. Putin’s former economic advisor, Andrey Illarionov, now in opposition, denounced the newly elected Duma as illegitimate and predicted on December 3 that Putin will have to stay in office to violently suppress rising dissension against the authoritarian political system. A co-leader of the Union of Right Forces, Boris Nadezhdin, asserted on December 2 that Putin was planning to use United Russia to rule, similar to single-party rule during the Soviet era. Another Union of Right Forces co-leader, Boris Nemtsov, called for opposition parties and groups to join in backing a single presidential candidate to run against the Kremlin’s candidate.¹² Under the law, parties that gained only 2-4% or less of the vote face heavy financial penalties that threaten their existence, including losing their state subsidies, forfeiting their relatively large election deposits, and paying for the “free” airtime they had been allotted. The result could be a political system with fewer parties and choices for voters, according to some observers.

¹⁰ *CEDR*, December 3, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950266.

¹¹ *CEDR*, October 25, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-379002.

¹² *CEDR*, December 3, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950271; Doc. No. CEP-950188; Robert Coalson, *RFE/RL News Analysis*, December 3, 2007.

Implications for U.S. Interests

The Bush Administration has expressed increasing concerns about anti-democratic trends and human rights problems in Russia. Most recently, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that U.S.-Russia cooperation remained good on global terrorism, nuclear threats, North Korea, and even addressing Iranian nuclear proliferation, but that there was less cooperation in relations with Central Europe and Soviet successor states, and difficulty in seeing eye-to-eye on democratization in Russia. She envisaged that while the United States would probably be able to continue to negotiate with Russia on such issues as ballistic missile defense and Iranian nuclear proliferation, it might prove harder for the United States to convince Russia to democratize or not use its energy for international political leverage.¹³ The White House and the State Department on November 25-26 raised concerns about the detention of Garry Kasparov during a demonstration and other Russian government actions that limited freedom of speech and assembly. White House spokeswoman Dana Perino reportedly adopted a cautious tone after the Duma election, stating on December 3 that the United States would reserve judgment for the time being about the legitimacy of the election, and urging Russian authorities to address alleged electoral irregularities.¹⁴

Congress has had growing concerns about democratization and human rights progress in Russia, as reflected in calls in yearly foreign operations appropriations bills for added Administration attention to Russian democratization, as well as in other legislation, in hearings, and visits. Among recent Member attention, the Co-Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission), Repr. Alcee Hastings, stated on December 3, 2007, that it was “regrettable” that the Duma election “was fraught with numerous violations of widely accepted democratic standards ... true democracies, and Russia claims to be one, do not make a mockery of elections.”¹⁵ Senator Barack Obama on December 3, 2007, likewise criticized the Russian government for restricting media coverage except for United Russia, breaking up opposition party rallies, and being implicated in many vote-counting irregularities. He and other U.S. observers, while criticizing voting irregularities, also have stressed that the United States should continue to cooperate with Russia on counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, non-proliferation, and other issues. The anti-U.S. rhetoric of the Duma election campaign, however, may signal that such cooperation will be harder to achieve, according to some observers. The international private investment research firm Moody’s has suggested that the victory of United Russia in the election signifies a stable economic climate and the likelihood that Russia will maintain progressive macroeconomic policies.¹⁶

¹³ The Department of State. State Department Briefing. *Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice Interview with the Dallas Morning News Editorial Board*, November 9, 2007.

¹⁴ The White House. Office of the Press Secretary. *Statement by the President on Russia*, November 26, 2007; The Department of State. *Daily Press Briefing*, November 26, 2007; *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 2007; *Agence France Presse*, December 3, 2007.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Helsinki Commission Co-chairmen: Russia Shouldn’t Become ‘Belarus Writ Large,’ Regret Elections were Not Free and Fair for the Russian People*, December 3, 2007.

¹⁶ *Congressional Record*, December 3, 2007, p. S14697; *International Herald Tribune*, December 5, 2007.