Following the last Duma elections (December 4th) Moscow has witnessed some of the largest protests against the Kremlin in years, with thousands of citizens with different political affiliations and backgrounds taking to the streets. While the cause of free and fair elections ensured the opposition movement had an effective “glue” capable of smoothing out fracture lines, its capacity to seize the opportunity to structure and consolidate a real alternative to Putin’s rule appears quite defective. More particularly, some problems have emerged in reaching a consensus regarding drawing the boundaries of its participation.

The aim of this analysis is two-fold: firstly, it seeks to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian opposition movement, with a special focus on the strategies used during the electoral campaign for the 2011 Duma elections. Secondly, it discusses to what extent the opposition forces in Russia have sought to take advantage of the political opportunities currently available to undermine the ruling power. In this regard, some institutional constraints come into evidence with regard to the Russian case, notably the room for manoeuvre available to opposition forces in a regime of limited pluralism that circumscribes social diversity and constricts the expression of political dissent.

The demonstrations in Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Avenue in Moscow, following denouncements of ballot-stuffing and fraud by Mr. Putin’s party United Russia during the Duma elections, were rather unexpected events. Over the months preceding the electoral campaign, Russian opposition forces were unable to mobilise dissatisfied citizens in mass protests and initiatives. Up until December only a few hundred participants attended the biggest rallies organised in the capital and other major cities, showing the opposition groups’ inability not only to consolidate supporters but also to interact with each other. This was especially true for those youth movements, from both the left and right wing of the political spectrum, which in recent years have proven to be relevant actors in the extra-parliamentary oppo-

Laura Petrone

The Russian Opposition and the 2011 Duma Elections. Potential and Problems of a Multifaceted Movement(*)

No. 215 - MARCH 2012

Abstract

The Russian opposition is increasingly in the spotlight after the December mass protests. The scale of the demonstrations was such that they received high resonance in the media. Even State-controlled news outlets, which usually omit coverage of political dissent, thoroughly reported on the opposition’s rallies and slogans. This movement has significant implications for the next presidential elections, strengthening the idea in society of unfair elections as well as casting doubts on the Duma’s legitimacy. Many challenges still lie ahead arising from both external and internal constraints to the movement itself.

On the one hand the opposition encounters serious institutional constraints to the participation in the political arena; on the other it suffers from profound divisions and divergent positions concerning strategic issues. Thus it risks to become even more detached from the population. On the eve of the presidential elections the incumbents are responding with a pretty effective strategy of containment of dissent centered on the mobilisation of pro-Kremlin supporters in mass counter-protests.

Laura Petrone, ISPI Associate Researcher.

(*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.
position. Interestingly, during that time the anti-government initiative that managed to bring most people onto the streets was the “Russian March” which took place on November 4th, the day of National Unity, and was promoted by different nationalist organisations.

Considering this fact, what does the sudden resurgence of Russian opposition initiatives and the wider support among the population soon after 2011 Duma elections explain? What is the opposition’s potential to mobilise citizens in mass protests after these events? What are the problems of coalition building related to common programmes and policies for these movements?

The multiple faces of opposition

The distinction between systemic and non-systemic (sistemnaya-vnesistemnaya) opposition constitutes the primary criterion characterising Russian opposition forces. These are terms coined mostly by the media to distinguish between those opposition parties which are registered, and thus recognised by the State, and those which have been refused formal recognition. Hence, while the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Just Russia are systemic opposition parties, Parnas (the People’s Freedom Party) was denied registration in the 2011 Duma elections, and Yabloko was cut off from the political arena with the introduction of the 7% electoral threshold in the 2007 parliamentary elections. The party or movement’s political orientation represents a further criterion: we can place the United Civil Front, PARNAS and Yabloko within the liberal-democratic landscape, while the Left Front (Levy Front) encompasses a range of left and ultra-left political organisations such as the CPRF, the Vanguard of Red Youth, the Revolutionary Communist Youth League (Bolshevik) and the Russian Communist Workers Party Revolutionary - Party of Communists (RCWP-RPC). Despite the ideological distance, starting from 2006 some representatives from the leftist movements, such as the National Bolshevik Party leader Eduard Limonov and Sergei Udaltsov of the Vanguard of Red Youth, have gathered with some right-wing as well as mainstream liberal representatives (Garri Kasparov and human activist Lyudmila Alexeyeva) in an umbrella coalition called “The Other Russia”. What is worth noting here is that this coalition constituted the most relevant attempt ever accomplished in post-Soviet Russia to bring together different forces of the opposition universe. The coalition succeeded in organising several joint protest actions such as the “March of the Discontented” in December 2006, and during the latest elections signed a declaration pleading to boycott the 2011 Duma elections due to their illegitimacy.

In addition, when we analyse willingness to take part in institutionalised political efforts, strong differences arise among these political groupings: apart from the established opposition parties (CPRF, Yabloko, Just Russia and the LDP) the others are mostly grass-roots movements refusing to participate in official politics. The only exception is Parnas, which has sought political recognition in vain. The People’s Freedom Party was founded in 2010 by Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov, four experienced figures and former high-ranking government officials, with the declared intention to participate in the 2011 Duma elections. Nevertheless, the Party was denied registration with the justification that it had not provided for rotation of leadership on its platform and that the information contained in the documents presented for registration did not comply with the procedures envisaged by the Russian Law on Political Parties.

The systemic and non-systemic distinction proves to be especially useful when examining the opposition’s protests during the last Duma elections. Deep divisions emerged firstly over the strategies to be adopted at the ballot boxes, with Parnas’s prominent leader Boris Nemtsov inviting voters to...

1 http://www.theotherrussia.org/2011/10/05/russian-oppositionists-unite-to-boycott-duma-elections/, S. UDALTSOV, Boycot kak sposob
spoil their ballots\textsuperscript{3}. The aim was to reach the 7\% threshold for the elections to be annulled and rerun, but at the cost of taking votes away from CPRF and Just Russia, the principal opposition parties challenging UR’s monopoly in the Duma.

Significantly, during the electoral campaign the debate on whether and how to vote appeared to have its privileged locus more on the web than in party congresses and press conferences. In particular, a strong resonance was received for the initiative “How to vote properly so they won’t steal your vote” from a group of anonymous bloggers who advised people not to skip the elections and to vote for any party except United Russia\textsuperscript{4}. In fact the huge investment on the Internet both by incumbents and opposition forces was one of the most remarkable phenomena in the last election campaign. While parties’ websites received little public attention and media coverage, the social networks, blogs and fora played a leading role in the public debate. On the one hand the party in power, United Russia, has been regularly portrayed by bloggers and critics as the party of bureaucrats responsible for rampant corruption and weak political and social rights in Russia; on the other hand, Internet bloggers and opposition parties have been reported to suffer continuous attacks from the authorities. *LiveJournal*, considered the platform most suited to opposition initiatives, was the target of a heavy hacker attack last April which bloggers claimed could not have been possible without the full endorsement of the authorities. The alleged aim was to leave Russian bloggers without a single, stable arena and disperse them to social networks where it is easier to fight individual users\textsuperscript{5}.

### The “Navalny effect”

One of the symbols of the Russian protest movement is the blogger Aleksey Navalny, who was arrested together with 300 activists on 5\textsuperscript{th} December when some 6,000 people gathered in Moscow to protest about the election fraud. Navalny, who had lived in exile in Germany, gained broad popularity by coining the expression “Party of Swindlers and Thieves” to describe the party in power. A lawyer by profession, he is not affiliated with any political organisation. His activism has been primarily oriented at denouncing theft in state-run corporations and United Russia’s failures and broken promises: on his web page he published confidential documents about “the numerous economic crimes committed by Transneft, its subsidiaries and contractors during the construction of the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline”, for which he argued that the State was damaged to the extent of no less than US$4 billion\textsuperscript{6}. He also created the Internet project "RosPil", a system of monitoring abuse in government requests for tender, which is entirely funded by voluntary donations from citizens. By the time the project became active a number of state agencies had removed the most dubious tender dates and contract tables from their websites\textsuperscript{7}.

Nevertheless, Navalny also espouses nationalist sympathies that often come at odds with his supporters, who are largely liberals. As a “national democrat”, as he defines himself, he has attended the Russian March since it began in 2006. He was a co-organiser of the last march in November 2011 and appeared as a speaker alongside neo-Nazis and skinheads, who chanted slogans like “Russia for Russians” and “enough feeding the Caucasus”\textsuperscript{8}.

In reality Navalny appears to address two different, apparently antithetical forces of the opposition movement: the urban, educated middle class, and Russians with nationalist sympathies. Whether he will succeed in solving this ambiguity and appealing to both groups in the long run is difficult to predict. Navalny tried to clarify his position better on the eve of the November march, claiming that he hoped to change the annual Russian

\textsuperscript{3}In his popular slogan “Nach-nach, golosuy protiv vsech” Nemtsov suggested voting against everybody. To be true, Russian voters were previously able to vote “against all”, but that option was removed from ballots in 2006.

\textsuperscript{4}http://ru-cprf.livejournal.com/1076882.html.

\textsuperscript{5}A. ODYNOVA, State Blamed in LiveJournal Attack, in «The Moscow Times», 6 April 2011.


\textsuperscript{7}http://rospl.info/about.

\textsuperscript{8}A. GORBACHEV, Po Moskve proshlis’ “Russkim Marshem”, in «Nezavisimaya Gazeta», 5 November 2011.
March and the nationalist movement that drives it, into a moderate force that could one day be transformed into a political organisation. Yet as Aleksei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Technologies, has noted, Navalny will have little luck because the radical nationalists will not fully accept his moderate stance.9

The Rise of the Nationalist Movement

The other massive opposition event was the Russian March on 4th November, which gathered 10,000 sympathisers. What it is worth noting here is that this event acquired tremendous relevance, more than ever before, for two main reasons. Firstly, according to Levada Center data, on the eve of the Duma elections a third of Russians supported the slogans of radical nationalism: 62% of respondents questioned between 18-28th November 2011 definitely or probably supported the slogan “Enough feeding the Caucasus”10. Secondly, the nationalist attitude to the upcoming elections became the major theme of the March, with the leaders urging people to vote for any party other than United Russia11. This meant that the movement turned out to be a real threat for the presidential administration, with the parliamentary elections approaching.

The last two years have seen the ultra-right movement attempting to gain attention in the public sphere, in particular by holding various public events and protests. The clashes in Manezh Square in Moscow on 11th December 2010 and similar more recent events (e.g. the protest actions following the murder of former colonel Yuri Budanov in June 2011) demonstrated the high topicality of the nationalist issue in Russia and the leadership’s difficulty in controlling it. While the level of racist violence has significantly decreased starting from 2009, dangerous propagators who regularly spread propaganda and call for violence remain outside the attention of the law enforcement agencies, as documented by the Sova Center.12 The Kremlin has appeared ambiguous in addressing migration-related issues, and especially in handling the anger voiced against migrant workers from North Caucasus and Central Asia, as the country’s oil-fuelled economic boom has given way to the hardship of the global financial crisis. Putin’s recent article Russia: the Ethnicity Issue seems to be an attempt to remedy religious and ethnic intolerance as a serious threat to the State and social cohesion, with reference to nationalists’ popular slogans: «When they start shouting, “Stop feeding the Caucasus” tomorrow their rallying cry will be “Stop feeding Siberia, the Far East, the Urals, the Volga region or the Moscow area. […] The self-determination of the Russian people consists in a multiethnic civilisation with the Russian culture at its core. The Russian people have confirmed their choice time and again – and not through plebiscites or referendums, but with their blood, during all of their thousand-year history»13.

After the December 2011 events. What’s Next?

Following December’s mass demonstrations, the opposition appears divided with regard to the means to be used in protest actions. After an initial period of common stance in denouncing fraud in the elections, the systemic opposition started distancing itself from the “street opposition”. The leader of the CPRF Gennadii Zyuganov has recently accused the non-systemic parties (Parnas and Yabloko) of using popular wrath to their advantage. Furthermore, earlier in December representatives of the CPRF condemned the European Parliament resolution against the Duma election, which urged Moscow to hold new, free and fair elections after registering all opposition par-

---

ties, as interference in Russian domestic affairs. Yet within the non-systemic opposition spectrum there have been some considerable efforts to act as a unified movement, especially in view of the upcoming presidential elections. The most visible example is the establishment of a “Civic Movement” (grazhdanskoе dvizhenie) on January 17th, with the aim, as stated in the founding document, to protect people’s right to free expression, civil liberties and social justice. The new movement brings together politicians, human rights activists, ordinary citizens and opposition groups, against election fraud, corruption, and arbitrariness of State officials. The initiative group includes both parliamentary opposition members such as Just Russia members, and members of the “non-systemic” opposition (Parnas, Left Front and nationalist organisations). The movement has managed to preserve its unity with the broad anti-Putin cause so far, putting aside any issue which could raise relevant disagreement. As a result the February 4th demonstration evidenced protesters from various party and non-party affiliations – democrats, nationalists and communists – marching side-by-side to demand democratic reform, release of the country’s political prisoners and free and fair elections.

The “glue” of the December and February protests that managed to bond together diverse expressions of the Russian opposition was the election results, which were marked by a decrease in votes for the UR party and fraudulent electoral activity. Russian voters appeared to be sorely disappointed with Putin’s decision to run for a third term as President, and in general by his determination to stay in power for the next twelve years, considering the extension of the presidential term from 4 to 6 years ensured by a law passed in 2008. So far, however, the opposition has not shown the ability or the will to structure and consolidate a real alternative to Putin’s rule, due to elements which are both internal and external to the movement itself.

First and foremost, institutional constraints represent a decisive factor. The non-systemic opposition has been shut out of the electoral process for a decade as result of the incumbents’ interventions in the arena of political competition aimed at curbing dissent and pluralism. The legislative measures adopted since 2001 reveal the intention to achieve simplification of the party landscape through mechanisms favouring the disappearance or marginalisation of the minor political forces. This is the direction behind both the strict regulations envisioned for registration of new political parties and the raising of the electoral threshold from 5 to 7% for access to proportional distribution of seats in the lower house. At the same time Russian leaders have invested a great deal in the “party in power”. As a result, over the last decade the party landscape has emerged as one strongly tilted in favour of one political party, namely UR, which has strongly benefitted from State resources. As commentators have pointed out, since 2003 the ruling party has exercised a monopoly of power to the extent that all three different party configurations (CPFR, Just Russia, Liberal Democratic Party) even when taken together, have failed to provide a significant alternative.

Alongside these structural conditions, the Russian opposition’s profound divisions and poor strategy should be stressed. The economic crisis in Russia represented a fundamental problem for the authorities as it threatened the very legitimacy of a regime that had been to a significant extent based on satisfaction with the perceived economic achievements of its leadership over the previous decade. Research and social surveys show that attitudes to protest in Russia have been increasing over recent years, notably under the harsh conditions of the economic crisis. But whether or not this has brought about greater legitimacy for the opposition forces...
inside and outside Parliament is another issue. The above paragraphs have briefly depicted the main forces encompassing what is known as the Russian opposition universe. In reality these forces have a weak national presence, and it remains to be seen whether they will be capable of sustaining a movement against the current leadership in the long run. Most importantly, they are yet to come together and decide to run a single candidate who could challenge Putin in the next presidential elections.

According to some estimates, the “non-official” opposition is not credible to the majority of Russians (58%). In particular, the level of trust that citizens give to the representatives of this opposition is strikingly low: 3% of respondents trust Boris Nemtsov of Parnas, with the other co-chairs Vladimir Ryzhkov and Mikhail Kasyanov scoring 3% and 2% respectively. 2% of respondents trust the leader of the “United Civil Front”, Garry Kasparov, while only 1% trust Aleksey Navalny.

The principal reasons for this attitude can be found in two surveys by the Levada Centre, the first conducted on a nationwide representative sample of the urban and rural population, and the second solely within the city of Moscow: 49% of respondents surveyed on a national scale think that the opposition criticises the authorities without having a coherent programme for the country’s development, while only 22% of respondents recognise that the opposition does have such a programme. Although the numbers of sympathisers with leaders of the non-systemic opposition slightly increases among Muscovites, the main reasons for not supporting the opposition’s cause seem to be the same e.g. their inadequacy in addressing concrete problems, and their inability to represent people’s interests and to provide positive ideas.

However it should be noted that this opposition has managed to spread among the public the idea that UR is a “party of crooks and thieves”, which became the main theme of the electoral campaign. Mr. Udaltsov, arrested at an unsanctioned protest on the Election Day on December 4th, has recently invoked the Occupy Wall Street movement, calling the protesters “the 99 percent” and saying that Russia was led by a corrupt 1% of bureaucrats and oligarchs. In these times of widespread dissatisfaction and distrust of politics in Western democracies, establishing a parallel between the Russian opposition and the Occupy Wall Street movement, calling the protesters “the 99 percent” and saying that Russia was led by a corrupt 1% of bureaucrats and oligarchs. Nevertheless it is likely to overshadow the peculiar character of the Russian protest initiatives: social themes were overall absent from the December 24th protests, whose demands had mainly political and civic orientations. Indeed, the holding of new elections for the State Duma and removal of the chair of the Central Electoral Commission have been the unifying, main claim of the protest movement so far.

In addition, a significant element of the recent mass demonstration held in Moscow on February 4th was the attendance of the rival rally “against the orange revolution” organized by pro-Putin activists and public personalities (including the leader of the international “Eurasian Movement“, Aleksandr Dugin) with the participation of 138,000 people according to some estimates. In their speeches the organizers publicly condemned the anti-government protests as an attempt to change the regime in Russia with the blessing of the West. Although it is quite difficult to ascertain the spontaneity of such mobilization – also considering that the United Russia party was its main sponsor – this massive participation at the pro-government rally indicates that Putin still has the support of a large part of Russian citizens. But at the same time it proves that the incumbents are seriously concerned about the “orange threat” and are seeking to mobilize their supporters ahead of the next presidential elections.
Final remarks

The protests following the Duma elections have significant implications for the next presidential campaign, strengthening the idea within Russian society of unfair elections, as well as casting doubts on the Duma’s legitimacy. This widespread discontent is expressed to a large extent by the new urban middle class of professionals and entrepreneurs concentrated in the big cities. These people are increasingly aware of their rights and expect the authorities to respect them. Thus the protests are seen by the Russian leadership as a fairly serious challenge to their power, precisely because they are engaging the highly skilled part of the population, that same part which should provide the greatest support in carrying out the modernisation plan.

So far the Kremlin’s strategy has not envisaged any form of repression or intimidation; instead the incumbents give the impression that they are listening to the protesters by establishing an inquiry into reports of electoral fraud and blaming lower functionaries for sporadic rigging of the elections. The policy proposals recently announced by President Medvedev, just as those reinstating the direct election of governors and easing registration of political parties, move in that direction as well. This proves that interplay between the State and society is extremely important in Russia: in this context reliance on authoritarian methods is insufficient and staying in power requires responding creatively to a changing society.