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A Kremlin Autumn?

Russian voters delivered a strong rebuke to their country's ruling elite in last Sunday's elections to the State Duma, shaking to its foundations the authoritarian political system, sometimes misnamed "managed democracy," that Vladimir Putin constructed over the past decade. Though Russia is still far from a democracy, voters turned out to be far less managed than most people had expected. With a strong 60 percent turnout, the ruling United Russia (ER) party, a Putin creation uniting most public functionaries, fell just short of an electoral majority, down from more than 60 percent four years ago. The Communist Party (about 19 percent), the social democratic Just Russia Party (13 percent), and the Liberal Democratic Party (12 percent) polled enough votes to enter the Duma. The results are especially damaging because the drop in support for United Russia came despite widespread irregularities: the exclusion from the ballot of parties that could mount a serious challenge to the regime; ballot stuffing; harassment (including by cyberattack) of Russia's only independent election monitoring organization and slavish media coverage of the governing United Russia party. The regime can only cheat so much, however, without destroying completely any claim the elections might have to legitimacy.

The embarrassment inflicted on United Russia showed that Russia's implicit social contract between regime and ruled – economic growth in return for giving up political power – is starting to fray. Russians are worried about the state of the economy, pervasive corruption, and the prospects for their own future. ER's performance also demonstrates Putin's job switch with Medvedev struck many Russian elites as a cynical ploy to perpetuate the rule of leaders more interested in power than in coping with Russia's problems. Putin's own popularity rating has thus slipped in recent months independently from that of United Russia, making it more likely that an increasingly disgruntled electorate would question the election's fairness (In Ukraine in 2004, a patently fabricated electoral outcome turned voters out onto the streets and brought down the government).

In order to form a workable majority, United Russia will now have to form a coalition government. (Several the other parties winning seats in the Duma are largely government creations, so that task should be relatively easy). Kremlin political strategist Vladislav Surkov has suggested that the government create a popular liberal party, comprised of “annoyed city communities” to soak up the discontent. While Surkov’s proposal could introduce greater pluralism into Russian legislative politics, the Duma is largely a rubber-stamp for the regime. Attention now shifts, therefore, to the much more important presidential elections next March.

Putin’s election on March 4 has not been jeopardized in light of last Sunday’s voting, but he now must take steps to reinvigorate his popular support. There have been widespread reports that the the government will be reshuffled. Putin has distanced himself from Unified Russia in recent weeks. The long loyal Dmitry Medvedev, whose political star has been fading quickly since the exchange with Putin was announced, could serve as a convenient scapegoat. A crisis could be manufactured designed to strengthen public support by showing Putin is still in charge -- a small military campaign, politically useful employment of kompromat, or a well publicized stepping in to untangle a nasty political knot. The Kremlin could run a false challenger against Putin to make the presidential contest seem like a real race or orchestrate a runoff. In the meantime, Putin warned on December 7 that he would take a hard line against protestors who have taken to the streets alleging election rigging.

The next Putin presidency is therefore likely to be marked by tension between maintaining popular legitimacy as society awakens from its lethargic, apathetic state, on the one hand, and preserving the power of the current elites on the other. Putin could make an about face and begin much needed political and economic reforms. But that would require an assault on the entrenched interests on which he has long relied and balanced in order to govern and which have profited handsomely from the his rule. A transformation from above, therefore, does not seem likely when Putin returns next March, but a transformation from below may be in the works.