

## ELECTION DUMA THOUGHTS

By Donald Jensen

The election results are a rebuke to Russia's ruling elite by an electorate worried about the economy, angered by pervasive corruption, pessimistic about their own future and unenthused by the prospect of twelve more years of Vladimir Putin's rule. They are even more damaging because the drop in support for United Russia came despite the exclusion from the ballot of parties that could mount a serious challenge to the regime, widespread falsification, harassment 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. (In Ukraine in 2004, a patently fabricated electoral outcome turned voters out onto the streets and brought down the government).

With approximately 50 per cent of the vote, United Russia may seek to form a coalition government, according to President Medvedev (Several of the other parties winning seats in the Duma are largely government creations, so that task should be relatively easy). That would be a prudent move, since many observers believe that in reality United Russia polled significantly less than the total announced today. While a coalition could introduce a greater and welcome, pluralism into Russian legislative politics, the Duma is largely a rubber-stamp for the regime. Attention now shifts, therefore, to the much more critical presidential elections next March.

Vladimir Putin's popularity has been slipping in recent months -- analysis of polling data suggests that his decline is independent of the drop in support for United Russia. In addition to popular fatigue with Putin's leadership, his 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. In light of yesterday's voting, Putin now must take steps to reinvigorate his popular support. There have been widespread reports that the the government will be reshuffled, but he would do well to distance himself as well from the long loyal Medvedev, a convenient scapegoat, whose political star has been fading quickly since the exchange with Putin was announced (The widely respected Aleksei Kudrin, former Finance and Deputy Prime Minister is waiting in the wings). A manufactured crisis to regain public support by showing Putin is still the strong man in charge -- a small military campaign, politically useful employment of kompromat, or a well publicized stepping in to untangle a nasty political knot of some sort -- is not out of the question. A much less likely alternative for Putin would be to make an about face and begin much needed political and economic reforms. That would require an assault on the entrenched interests on which Putin has long depended to govern and who have profited handsomely from his rule.

It has become a cliché since Putin announced his return to the Kremlin in September that he would be on the scene for the next 12 years. This still may well be the case, but overnight Russia's pervasive blogosphere has been aflame with chatter blasting his leadership. Russia's genuine opposition is still poorly organized and operating on the margins, but it will be interesting to watch how the country's once and future president manages the next twelve months.