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‘Reflexive transitionology’ and the ‘end of Putin’

The inevitability of Russia’s change?

The protest demonstrations in December 2011 and early 2012 have become a watershed event in the Western discussion of Russia, and the backdrop for much subsequent comment and analysis – including, as noted above, as part of the undercurrent of the war in Ukraine. At the time, they were seen by many in the West to reflect the emergence (finally) of the urban middle class as a revitalising force in Russian political life after the ‘de-democratisation’ of Vladimir Putin’s second term as president and the disappointments of Dmitri Medvedev’s term. The almost unanimous enthusiasm the protests generated in the mainstream Western discussion led to the emergence of an expert orthodoxy that they represented the beginning of the end of the Putin era, that Russia was, at last, moving on.

Observers suggested that the ‘amazing’ mass protest gatherings were a ‘new phenomena’, and emphasised that they ‘rattled’ the Russian authorities – even that the regime was insecure, ‘on the defensive’ and had ‘lost its nerve’ and was in ‘inexorable decline’, and then, if making mention of some electoral ‘concessions’, focused on the more ‘ruthless’ repressive measures implemented by the Putin leadership in response. Thus, the ‘democracy embattled’ narrative was emphasised, illustrated through the metaphor used by some of progressive democratic spring to regressive authoritarian winter. Subsequently, the events have been roughly hewn down to an abridged story of public frustration with corruption and (especially) the cynical power swap in September 2011 between Medvedev and Putin, the fraudulent parliamentary elections in December 2011, reflecting the (surprise) decline of the United Russia (UR) party, the party of power associated with and led by Vladimir Putin (and, since May 2012, Dmitri Medvedev), followed by the eruption of liberal ‘white ribbon’ middle class protest, pressure on Putin and,
instead of adjusting to the new realities, his revival of authoritarian repression in response – not a sign of strength but an indication of weakness, a futile attempt to dam inevitable societal and political change. As with all such frameworks, there are elements of truth to each of these parts of the story: there is considerable public frustration with corruption and the leadership, both in terms of UR and the Putin–Medvedev power swap. The elections were flawed, and the opposition has been put under pressure since Putin’s return to the Kremlin: both ‘non-systemic’ opposition leaders and protesters have been jailed.

But it is also a major abridgment, shaving off much of what makes these events important for understanding the evolution of Russian politics: the broad-brush strokes glossing over Russian history, blotting out political complexities and important nuances, and rendering a simplistic picture of Putin against the dissidents. As one Western journalist correctly suggested, the response to the demonstrations was a ‘knee-jerk approval of the opposition, an instinctive keenness for my enemy’s enemy’, but without a real understanding of the nature of the protest groups, and, he might have added, ignoring many salient features of the political landscape that did not fit the abridged story. Indeed, in many ways, this mainstream orthodoxy was an automatic response to the stimulus of seeing protests as precipitating democratic upheaval and the end of Putin, a reflexive return to ‘transitionology’ and the hope for democratic change in Russia.

In the excitement, the protest demonstrations, often hailed as ‘unprecedented’, were removed from their Russian context, both in terms of previous post-Soviet era Russian protests, but also that election year which lasted not from the announcement of the power swap in September, and then from the parliamentary elections in December 2011 to the presidential ones in March 2012, but from the regional elections held in March 2011 through to spring 2012. The protests were also exaggerated both in their scale and in their liberalism. Many were seduced by the claims of the leaders of the opposition, particularly those who appeared to be new, such as Alexei Navalny, who were seen to be ‘democracy campaigners’, even ‘Western’, in the way they conducted their campaign using social media. As discussed in Chapter 1, commentators often simply reiterated the estimates of the protest organisers, the scale of the protests ballooning accordingly. At the same time, the emphasis was placed on the pro-democracy and liberal nature of the protesters – the university educated, creative elements of society, the urban
middle class represented by the white ribbon. Removed from their Russian context, they were placed instead in the contexts of the Arab Spring and the collapse of the USSR, in effect a second round of the ‘end of history’.

The mainstream Western discussion about the protests and the actions of the authorities thus became saturated with the repetition of old themes. This was both explicit – repetition of simplified images of Kremlin ‘puppet masters’ and ‘crackdowns’ on the opposition, which had been the main theme of debate since 2004; and apparently unconscious, in that they repeated almost verbatim the debate that had taken place about the possibility of a Colour Revolution in Russia and Putin being forced from power in 2005.6

Taken together, therefore, the mainstream debate about Russian domestic politics has often complemented the view about Russia being a member of the Western family of nations discussed in Chapter 2: initial optimism about Russia voluntarily joining the West was replaced by hope that external factors such as the economic crisis in 2008 would undermine resistance, even oblige it to join the West. Domestically, hopes that first Putin, then Medvedev would lead liberal change that would underpin partnership with the West gave way to hope of internal change in which a new, post-Soviet and more Western-oriented generation would emerge to replace them and lead change. This has remained strong, re-emerging in 2014 as observers hoped to see the sanctions leading to the Russian population exerting pressure on Putin to change his policies towards Ukraine, and even pointing to the possibility of protest-led regime change in Russia.

This chapter attempts to see if there is more to wring out of this year of elections and protests in terms of understanding Russian politics. This may provide not just a more rounded and nuanced picture of these important developments, but also perhaps some material for learning lessons from the episode in the run up to the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2016 and presidential elections scheduled for 2018.

It explores the year in three related parts. The first explores the results of the December elections, contextualising the decline of UR. The second part turns to reflect on the protest demonstrations, comparing them to previous protests, then exploring their size, make-up and sustainability, before turning to the presidential elections and Putin’s victory. The third part changes focus to look at the political ‘reset’ that the leadership has attempted to implement.
United Russia’s third election blues and the rise of the political left

UR has been the dominant political party in Russia for much of the Putin era. Formed in 2001 with the merging of the Unity and Fatherland-All Russia parties, the party won 37 per cent and 225 seats in parliament in 2003. In 2007, in a climate of strong economic growth, it won a landslide 64.3 per cent, and 315 seats – full control of parliament and a ‘super-majority’ that meant that enabled it to change the constitution, and also command of the parliamentary committees. In 2011, support fell to an official tally of 49 per cent, retaining 238 seats in parliament.

For many in the West, this apparently precipitous decline in the party’s fortunes (as one prominent Western observer suggested, ‘in summer 2011, it had been widely believed that come December 2011, UR would obtain the super-majority it had achieved in 2007’), combined with the flaws in the election process were the main points. Flaws in the process included the context of blurred lines between the government and UR, and the use of government/administrative resources slanting the campaign in the party’s favour, a ‘cleansed’ electoral field on which there were no credible alternatives, and the denial of registration to several political parties narrowing competition. At election time, numerous criticisms emerged, particularly regarding large-scale falsifications of the results, with attention focusing on procedural violations such as ballot-box stuffing and an attempt to limit the role of Golos, an independent election monitoring and civil society organisation, as well as cyber attacks on a number of politically more liberal organisations. The newspaper *Vedomosti* ran a front-page article trying to work out how a party that appeared to have won 25 per cent ended up with 45 per cent. Even despite these flaws in the election process, therefore, UR registered a loss of 15 per cent and 77 seats, a (surprise) result deemed by many to be a disaster for the party, particularly its loss of the super-majority. And it certainly reflected a decline in wider public support for the party, known to many in liberal Russian and Western circles – as a result of Alexei Navalniy’s anti-corruption campaign – as the ‘Party of Crooks and Thieves’.

Some context helps to parse this decline. If the job switch between Putin and Medvedev in September was a cause for protest, this built on a longer-term dissatisfaction born out of pervasive corruption and the prolonged and deep impact of the 2008 economic crisis. Together, this combined to emphasise a sense of
‘third election/fourth term’ syndrome of frustration, widespread voter fatigue and increasing opposition to UR. Indeed, support for UR had already been in decline since 2009. This was reflected in the March 2011 regional elections and then pre-election polls that autumn. Although UR had won the March elections, in seven of the 12 regions in which elections were held it gained 45 per cent or less of the vote. In October 2011, polls held across Russia published by Russian media suggested that UR would win some 41 per cent of the vote. The polling organisation VtsIOM thought it likely that the party would go on to win some 50 per cent in December, though noted that it would struggle in Moscow (where it had polled 29 per cent in October), and St Petersburg (where it had polled 31 per cent in October).

UR’s results in December were not, therefore, so much the precipitous collapse of support but the illustration of longer-term decline: as one Russian commentator suggested, the March regional elections had shown the relative weakening of UR and the rise in the protest mood. Others suggested that it was a ‘serious warning for the party, illustrating an increasing mood to protest in the regions’, and that it reflected the decreasing effectiveness of UR’s ‘time-honed electioneering strategies’ – ‘administrative resources, pressure on state employees to go to the polls to “vote the right way”, and most important, capitalising on the popularity of party leader and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’. Officials too, noted the decline: in November 2010 Vladislav Surkov, then first deputy head of the presidential administration and responsible for domestic politics, had already suggested that the party would find it much more complicated to achieve the same results as it had in 2007 and that important (constitutional) decisions would have to be taken in coalition.

If the spotlight lit up UR’s losses, though, it is important to note the other side of this coin – all of the parliamentary opposition parties, known as the ‘systemic opposition’, gained. Although there was no substantial shift in power, there was a shift in balance in the parliament as the other parties gained representation not just in seats but in parliamentary committees: UR lost control of nearly half of the parliamentary committees. UR deputies now chair 15 of the 29 committees. While opposition parties mainly lead second-tier committees, it is noteworthy that Vladimir Komoedov, a Communist Party deputy, chairs the Defence Committee, and Leonid Slutsky, an Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) deputy, chairs the Committee for the Commonwealth of Independent States.
A shift to the left?

Of particular note was the success of the political left. The Communist Party (KPRF) gained most, winning 19 per cent of the vote and 92 seats, an increase of 35 seats. The KPRF has long been the main systemic party of opposition in Russian politics across the country, a point again illustrated in the March 2011 regional elections, in which it had come second in nine of the 12 regions. December’s results exceeded expectations, however, and enabled the KPRF to bargain for leadership of six parliamentary committees. Despite such gains, the KPRF was not close to winning power, nor is it widely popular beyond a core vote. But support for the party remained stable in 2011: in the regional elections in March, the party polled 18–25 per cent, similar to its results in both the parliamentary and presidential elections, and two interesting points emerged.

First, the KPRF led some opposition in parliament: it generated a petition to dismiss Medvedev’s government – and gained over 100,000 signatures. As one Russian journalist noted, the government would not fall because the KPRF wanted it to, but the scale of the petition meant that it had to be heard in parliament and would cause concern in the government. Putin himself observed that he gave ‘credit to the legal opposition, and the [KPRF] one of its strongest components, for reacting to what the authorities do. This is the opposition’s constitutional right … it’s knowing there’s a pike in the river that keeps the carp alert. I therefore give credit to the KPRF for its persistence … but if you’re asking me, would I vote for the government’s resignation, my answer would be “no”’.

Second, what was perhaps more surprising in the December elections was the level of support for the KPRF in Moscow. With St Petersburg, Moscow is usually considered to be the best ground for the liberal opposition parties. Instead, in December 2011, it was the KPRF that offered the main opposition in the capital. An initial report by Vedomosti on 6 December based on exit polls suggested that UR had won 27.5 per cent of the vote, while the KPRF had won many areas in Moscow and 25.5 per cent of the overall vote in the city, with the liberal Yabloko party in only fourth place with 15.7 per cent. The paper reported that in the Gagarin region, for instance, UR won 23.7 per cent, while the KPRF won 26.35 per cent.

Outside Moscow, the KPRF won in numerous regions including Vladivostok, Ryazan, Orel, Voronezh, Irkutsk, Bratsk, Angarsk,
Ekaterinburg, Omsk and Novosibirsk. The close-run result in Moscow was deemed illegitimate and challenged by Communist Party activists who argued that victory had been stolen from them, and some of those demonstrating at Bolotnaya Square on 10 December were communists calling to be ‘given back their city’. This re-emerged in 2013, with a study that suggested that the KPRF had even defeated UR in December 2011.

The other aspect of this shift to the political left were the results of the centre-left Just Russia (JR) party. Created in 2006 as a coalition of three parties, some suggest that it was created by the Kremlin authorities as a means of drawing off support from the KPRF. The party was largely written off before the election, but won 13 per cent and 64 seats – a gain of 26 seats, nearly doubling its representation in parliament.

The protest demonstrations: context, size and make-up

If the increase in support for the systemic opposition parties suggested wider frustration and protest, the most visible indications of public frustration and stagnation in the country, were, of course, the large public protests that began in the wake of the parliamentary elections in December. Although initially small, the demonstrations grew appreciably in size, and, as noted above, were hailed by many in the West to be an ‘unprecedented’ sign of both disaffection being directed against Putin and his system, and an energised ‘real’ opposition movement. Yet the protests made for a complex canvas that requires careful consideration about their historical and political context, size and make-up.

A brief history of Russian protest

The protest demonstrations in 2011–2012 were unusual in Russian political and social life. They do, however, fit into a longer context of Russian protest that has included other mass events. As one Western observer noted, they were ‘neither a radical break with the past, nor a flicker of unrest, but a continuation of longer-term trends on the Russian protest scene’. ‘Rather than the Russian people suddenly waking up, the protests are the result of a longer, slow stirring that is evident in thousands of protest events over recent years’, he continued. There have been other sizeable post-Soviet protest demonstrations, including against shock therapy in 1992–1993 and the
collapse of industry in the late 1990s. In 1997, more than 250,000 demonstrators took part in marches in Vladivostok, Nakhodka, Arseniev and other cities in the Russian Far East to protest wage arrears, and an end to economic reforms that they claimed forced 80 per cent of the region’s population below the poverty line. These protests continued and grew in 1998 and 1999.20

While such protests undoubtedly decreased in scale and purpose during the Putin era, they have continued. In some cities, particularly in Moscow and St Petersburg, in December 2006 and March 2007, there was a series of protests (the so-called ‘Dissenters’ Marches’), which called for Putin to go, dismissals of other officials, and criticised corruption and falsification of elections.21 In Vladivostok in late 2008, several hundred protesters demonstrated against the government’s plans to raise tariffs on imported cars. The size of that demonstration of course does not compare to those that took place in Moscow in December 2011 – but it was larger than the December 2011 protests in Vladivostok.

In Kaliningrad in January 2010, demonstrators gathered to protest a 25–30 per cent tax increase in housing, electricity, water and transport costs and demand the resignation of the regional governor, Georgy Boos.22 The demonstrations involved KPRF, LDPR and other parties, and resulted both in a partial reduction of transport taxes and the dismissal of Boos later in the year. Again, it is worth noting that these protests were larger than the subsequent demonstrations in Kaliningrad in December 2011.

Internet protest was also growing. In March 2010, 44,387 citizens signed an online ‘Putin must go manifesto’, criticising the leadership for being a kleptocracy, corruption, and the lack of freedom, a ‘vivid demonstration’, according to one observer, that nowadays quite a few Russians are prepared openly to oppose a government that prioritised growth over democracy.23 And in July and August that year protests began against the building of a motorway between Moscow and St Petersburg which would have incurred significant deforestation in the Khimki region near Moscow.

Nevertheless, the large and sustained demonstrations that took place in 2005 protesting the attempt by Putin’s government to introduce a series of social reforms, including the monetarisation of pensions, remain the most substantial protests against Putin’s leadership. Their scale is not easy to verify. Some left-wing sources suggest 300,000 protesters took part across Russia, which would dwarf the 2011 protests. Others, perhaps more realistically, suggest
some 100,000 across Russia in 2005, roughly comparable in size to those of 2011.

These ‘pensioner protests’ were the first, and remain the most important, socio-political challenge to Putin, not least since they came in the context of the ‘Colour Revolutions’, particularly the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine. Indeed, what was especially important about these protests was not only their size but also their outcome: the sustained protests in 2005 both forced the government into a policy reversal and seemed to make Putin more cautious in his approach to subsequent reforms. Often forgotten in the West, they have not been forgotten by the leadership: even eight years later, Putin reminded Alexei Kudrin about his role in the reforms that led to the protests. It is worth quoting Putin at length, since it is also perhaps an indication of why Putin has not yet appointed Kudrin prime minister. During an exchange in Putin’s annual ‘Direct Line’ conversation in 2013, Putin stated that Kudrin was recognised as the ‘best finance minister, but not the best minister of social protection’. He continued:

some time ago, Mr Kudrin and other officials who are now sitting on huge money in banks, were the initiators of introducing cash payments instead of benefits. We debated it for a long time, and I told him, ‘Mr Kudrin, you will not be able to do it right, it won’t work’. He said, ‘yes, we will’. We all know what happened in the end. We had to pour money to cover up the problems at a great social and political cost. Frankly, I thought that was how it would end up from the start … why am I telling you this? Because tough economic measures without regard for the consequences in the social sphere are not always justified, especially in our country where incomes are still very modest.24

The rise and decline of the December protest movement

The scale of the protests has proven to be a source of considerable debate. As noted in Chapter 1, understandably disinclined to accept official estimates, which tended to be low, commentators have instead often tended towards adopting the much higher estimates given by opposition leaders and protest organisers, which led to considerable inflation. Over time, this has often settled into rather vague assertions – ‘tens of thousands’ or, occasionally, ‘tens, and then hundreds of thousands’.25 It is worth attempting greater precision.
The first protests began in the wake of the results, and on 5 and 6 December some 5,000–7,000 took to the streets in Moscow. The demonstrations grew significantly, however, on 10 December, particularly in Moscow but also in many other cities across Russia. Police reports estimate some 25,000 protesters – unsurprisingly since the officially sanctioned scale of the demonstrations was 30,000. The estimates of organisers grew during the day, first to 80,000–85,000 at 4 p.m. and then at 4:40 p.m. to 100,000–150,000. Russian media sources at the time were much more conservative, from lenta.ru’s estimate of 30,000, through gazeta.ru’s 40,000 to Kommersant’s 50,000.26 This 30,000–50,000 range is the most accurate for 10 December: still a notably large protest, and rare for Moscow, but some distance from the figures proposed by some Western commentators, let alone the organisers’ estimates. Russian media reports suggested that in St Petersburg, some 7,000 turned out, in Novosibirsk 8,000, in Tomsk 3,000 and in Ufa 1,000. In Vladivostok, there were up to 500, in Kaliningrad, 200–300.

Mass protests took place again on 24 December in Moscow and in some 90 other cities across Russia. Those in Moscow were approximately twice the size of the demonstrations on 10 December: if the police estimated 30,000, and the organisers some 120,000, independent witnesses suggested 60,000–90,000.27 The next largest demonstrations were in St Petersburg and Krasnoyarsk. All told, perhaps up to some 100,000 people across Russia turned out to protest that day. At the same time, if in some cities, including Rostov-on-Don, Tambov and Krasnodar, the scale of the demonstrations was larger on 24 December than on 10 December, in many others, including St Petersburg (3,000), Novosibirsk (2,000), Tomsk (1,500), Ufa (200), Vladivostock (150) and Kaliningrad (100), the demonstrations were substantially smaller.

Although more protests took place in Moscow in the run up to the elections in early February and March 2012, and again for Putin’s inauguration in May, that of 24 December reflected the peak size across Russia. They began to evolve in approach – into ‘controlled strolls’, ‘the people’s walks’, and what some of the organisers named as ‘Marches of Millions’. But if the organisers themselves continued considerably to inflate the numbers,28 the size of the demonstrations was clearly in decline. Protests in other cities across Russia were otherwise measured in hundreds, rather than thousands. Apart from a small surge in numbers at the time of the inauguration, the protests became limited to core activists and appeared
more as reflections of public frustration than a swelling opposition movement, a shaking of the fist at the regime rather than a serious political alternative.

A wide range of people turned out to protest. To a degree, the major protests in December and early February were enhanced by those who might be called the more liberal urban middle class. But at the core of all the events were the activists of groups of unregistered, small political parties and coalitions, such as the Pirates Party of Russia and the Left Front, as well as the liberal ones such as Yabloko and Solidarity parties and PARNAS coalition. As with the scale of the protests, precision in terms of the mix and balance of protest demonstrations from December 2011 is difficult, not least because it evolved as the protests themselves did. Nevertheless, the diversity of the protesters deserves attention since the protests were not uniformly ‘liberal’, and contained significant portions of nationalists and particularly leftists from various communist factions such as the Left Front. Although united in their decrying of the elections, therefore, they were often at odds beyond that basic foundation. As one Russian observer put it, therefore, there was ‘no unifying idea beyond that of being against the enemy’. Indeed, given the diversity of the group, it is not surprising that the protesters were divided over political and economic issues: the incompatibility of the liberal ‘white ribbon’ agenda with that of the communist hammer and sickle meant that few, if any, of the speakers at the rallies were roundly cheered.

The protest leaders themselves illustrated these problems. Few of the leaders or organisers of the protests were ‘new’ political figures – all of the leaders of the liberal movement, for instance, have been in politics for years. As a result, one observer noted the ‘wide gulf’ between the protest leaders, ‘with their lined faces and oft-heard views’, and the ‘younger, more vital’ elements of the crowd, quoting the frustrations of restless demonstrators with speakers who were ‘just old farts’. Even Alexei Navalny and Sergei Udaltsov, though certainly of a younger generation and less well known, had been building political careers during the previous decade. These leaders were unable to offer a unified front and often appeared at odds with each other, even within factions – as revealed by the publication of private phone conversations between leading liberal figures. Not only were the disagreements over policies – there were also differences over the approach the opposition movement should take, as some proposed more proactive and combative demonstrations, while others refused such an approach.
Although the leadership formed the Coordination Council (CC) after the elections to address these fractures and try to sustain the movement, these splits over agenda and approach became more obvious. After the elections, the CC, already riven by internal factions, ceased to exist, as insufficient numbers gathered to create a quorum and Alexei Navalny, among others, stated that he would not participate in a new CC. The splits in the opposition continued. In 2012 PARNAS was dissolved and re-named RPR-PARNAS, and then in February 2014 split amid mutual recriminations: Vladimir Ryzhkov, leader of the RPR, withdrew, accusing Nemtsov and Kasyanov of being ‘banal raiders’ and seeking to take complete control of the party themselves, and Nemtsov and Kasyanov accused Ryzhkov of conspiring with the Kremlin to wreck the party.

Nor did the protests manage to stimulate wider public support, and the ‘million man marches’ summoned by Navalny and Ryzhkov failed to materialise. This reflected the inability of the opposition leadership to generate wider public support. Polls conducted by the respected Levada Centre indicated that Kasyanov, Nemtsov, Ryzhkov and Navalny did not find favour with the population: in January 2012 just 15 per cent sympathised with the non-systemic opposition, while 66 per cent did not.

Other polls in December 2011 suggested that although 45 per cent of respondents thought the elections were not very honest or completely dishonest, only 25 per cent of respondents expressed a willingness to support the demand for the invalidation of the results, and 55 per cent disagreed with the demand. Although a quarter of respondents agreed that Vladimir Churov, Chairman of the Central Election Committee, should resign, 47 per cent did not want him removed. Although two-thirds thought that violations were committed, only 14 per cent said that such falsifications were so sizeable that they changed the election results significantly, and 40 per cent said that the falsifications corresponded to their actual preferences. In the end, 51 per cent were satisfied with the result to some extent (15 per cent completely, 36 per cent partly), and 20 per cent believed that violations would be reduced for the presidential election. Thus gazeta.ru reporters suggested at the end of December 2011 that the parliamentary elections may have been dishonest, but that was irrelevant. By March 2012, Levada polls suggested that just 8 per cent were willing to march in a demonstration, only 32 per cent supported them and 52 per cent opposed them. Mickiewicz thus points out that, although the youth may cheer Navalny for exposing corruption, they would still vote for UR, and placed a higher
value on their careers than on joining the mass protests that they did not consider a means of affecting policy.\textsuperscript{38}

The protests did, however, spur much discussion about whether Putin could win in the first round of the elections, or whether he would be forced into a second round run off, or even whether he could win legitimately at all. But a combination of the limited wider public support for the protests and Putin’s own campaign meant that in the run up to the presidential election in March, the polls began to show that Putin would win comfortably. Polls by the Levada Centre suggested both that Putin would win 66 per cent and that the number of those who thought the December elections to have been fair or more fair than not rose from 35 per cent in December to 43 per cent in January.

In the end, official figures gave Putin 64 per cent of a 65 per cent turnout. Even opposition or independent sources accepted that he had won the election with some 54 per cent. The closest challenger was Gennadiy Zyuganov, with 17 per cent. Some 110,000 Putin supporters gathered to celebrate victory, and on 5 March Putin met three of the other candidates (Mikhail Prokhorov, Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Sergei Mironov attended, while Zyuganov refused to recognise the legitimacy of the result and declined to attend), and stated that combat operations were now over – and the atmosphere was of the victor meeting the defeated at the signing of a peace treaty.

‘Resetting’ Russian domestic politics?

If the elections and protest demonstrations naturally were the focus of mainstream Western attention, an often overlooked but nevertheless important aspect was how the leadership team understood and responded to the political situation in Russia during that cycle. First, it is important to acknowledge that the authorities introduced a series of more punitive measures which provide the basis for the accusations for a more repressive response to the protest demonstration.\textsuperscript{39}

These measures included the trials (on charges of rioting and violence) and subsequent imprisonment of protesters and some of the more prominent protest organisers, including Sergei Udaltsov, the leader of the Left Front, and Alexei Navalny. They also include legislation to restrict freedom of public assembly, curb the freedom of media outlets such as lenta.ru, Dozhd television, and affecting NGOs, such as the foreign agent law, which requires NGOs to register as foreign agents with the Ministry of Justice if they received
foreign funding and engaged in political activity. Thus Swedish analysts have described such measures as having created an atmosphere where ‘freedom of speech is at peril, and reflecting an increasingly authoritarian system’.40

In part, this reflected the often stated concerns that the Russian authorities have about foreign (particularly US) interference in Russia’s domestic politics, and their view of mass public movements as sources of instability. In the wake of the election and protests, and in the context of the Orange Revolution and ‘Arab Spring’, senior Russian figures have accused the USA of interference and financial support for the opposition.

But the authorities’ responses were more complex, and can be framed in two interconnected groups. In the wake of the elections and as the protest demonstrations emerged, the leadership adopted a further series of responses. First, within the system, the authorities responded by dismissing some officials and indicating that there would be a more serious ‘rotation’ of personnel after the presidential election. After the December elections, and during the winter, a number of regional governors and city mayors resigned or were fired following poor results for UR in their regions,41 and others, including senior figures such as Boris Gromov, governor of Moscow region, indicated that they would retire.

Boris Gryzlov, a long-term Putin ally, the highest ranking member of UR (except Putin) and Speaker of Russian Parliament, resigned in the wake of the elections. Sergei Naryshkin, head of the presidential administration, replaced Gryzlov, and, in turn, was replaced as head of the presidential administration by Sergei Ivanov. Other important changes included the appointment in December of Vyacheslav Volodin, deputy chairman of United Russia, a senior figure in the All-Russian Popular Front (ONF), and chief of staff of the government, as first deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration, replacing Vladislav Surkov. This rotation of personnel was continued after the election, culminating in the confirmation of a new cabinet in May 2012. These personnel moves, however, were not a ‘reshuffle’ – they were tantamount to an adjustment of the system to broaden and strengthen it, rather than sweeping change.

At the same time, the authorities responded more specifically to the electoral aspects of the protest demonstrations. The major response was Putin’s own campaign. In the past, Putin had stated both that he does not like campaigning and yet that the leadership is always campaigning. In fact, Putin’s 2011–2012 campaign – in which Putin himself, public campaign manager
Stanislav Govorukhin and political manager Vyacheslav Volodin, all participated – was unusual for Putin, who had not previously campaigned in that way, and centred on advocating his own ‘stability’ agenda, of steady development without upheavals. The campaign consisted of holding meetings with senior figures in the media, campaign visits around Russia’s regions, and launching a website (www.putin2012.ru).

The platform was built around a series of articles written by Putin and published in leading newspapers. The first article asserted the stability that his team had brought to Russia, and the subsequent ones sketched out a manifesto for taking this forward, echoing his speeches as prime minister and elaborating on the six programmatic lines set out on the website. If steady development without upheaval was the message, the campaign emphasised the attempt to give Russia a form of social and political immunity from upheaval, in the process underscoring social guarantees. It thus could be considered a form of conservative modernisation – a slogan of UR during the economic crisis and the 2009–2010 debates about modernisation. The articles received mixed reviews from other political figures and in the media – Dmitri Rogozin was effusively supportive of Putin’s article on defence, while Gennadiy Zyuganov dismissed the article on the economy as ‘the same old liberal mush’. Novaya Gazeta, an opposition newspaper, pointed out that the articles were little more than repetitions of promises Putin had repeatedly made in the past.

Though Putin played a central part, of course, the role of his campaign team was important: members of his team, for instance, stood in for Putin in the presidential debates. Members of the campaign team were drawn not from UR, which hardly featured in the campaign, but more specifically from a group called the ONF, which Putin had established in May 2011 in the expectation that UR’s electoral fortunes could decline. Putin himself ran as a non-partisan candidate rather than UR’s nominee.

The campaign also evolved to mirror the opposition to absorb or negate elements of it. Although the opposition leadership argued that it represented the ‘creative’ elements of society, Putin sought to echo this by referring to classics of Russian literature in his speeches and incorporating numerous big names from the arts, film and music industries into the team. While scandals emerged about some of these personalities being pressured into joining the team, many cultural figures are genuine subscribers to Putin’s campaign: an obvious example being Govorukhin, the prominent and popular film director.
Similarly, the Putin team sought to echo the opposition protest demonstrations, mounting their own, which were cast specifically as ‘anti-Orange’, rather than ‘pro-Putin’ events – one campaign symbol was an orange snake gripped in a black fist. These grew in scale in February, and although scandals emerged about participants being paid or pressured to participate, the result was that the campaign was able to mobilise support, and the largest of the anti-Orange demonstrations exceeded the size of the largest opposition protests. The anti-Orange demonstrations became the largest public demonstrations since the collapse of the USSR.

Putin’s campaign also co-opted some of the main features of the opposition’s agenda and addressed explicit problems. The campaign team sought to emphasise the need for fair and monitored elections: the campaign highlighted, for instance, that it was Putin’s idea to have polling booths monitored by closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras. The idea to place CCTV in over 90,000 polling booths was popular with the public (though it was less popular with those who had to implement it, who noted the difficulty of finding sufficient numbers of cameras and the cost of over half a million dollars). Putin’s team also said that it would cooperate with the League of Voters, a movement established in mid-January by prominent cultural figures of more liberal persuasion to monitor the presidential elections. Putin additionally offered a monitoring role to observers from the Yabloko part – an unusual move since parties unregistered to participate in the election ordinarily do not play such a role.

But the authorities’ political activity did not begin purely as a response the demonstrations in December 2011. Indeed, we must now turn back to well before the December elections to understand the range of measures the leadership had begun to introduce to attempt to address UR’s decline and soak up opposition, beginning in spring in response to the party’s poor results in the March regional elections, and becoming what the leadership called a ‘reset of the political system’.43

This ‘reset’ consisted of three parts. The first part related to the attempt to reinvigorate UR in preparation for the December elections. In spring and during the summer of 2011, the leadership dispatched ‘federal locomotives’ to head the party lists in the most troubled regions and to address local problems, positioning them as replacements for those regional governors who were unpopular or difficult for the Kremlin.44 These were some of the most senior, experienced and influential figures in the Russian political system,
including Sergei Shoigu, Dmitri Kozak, Sergei Naryshkin, Igor Shuvalov, Yuri Trutnev, Viktor Zubkov and Igor Sechin, and some of those who might best be described as ‘up-and-coming’, such as Vyacheslav Volodin, Andrei Vorobyov and Andrei Bocharov. Some of these figures were already well established in the public eye: Shoigu has long been a party figure and one of the most popular ministers, likewise Trutnev was an elected mayor and governor in Perm the 1990s and Volodin an elected representative in Saratov, but others, particularly Sechin, who led the party list in Stavropol, had not previously taken such prominent public political roles in the past.

The results, however, were not universally successful. In the majority of regions in which the vice premiers headed the lists, UR won less than 40 per cent. In Perm and Krasnoyarsk, where Trutnev and Shoigu headed the lists, the party’s results were 36 and 37 per cent respectively, a significant drop from the party’s results in 2007 and less than the overall result across the country. Similarly in Leningradskaya oblast, led by Naryshkin, and Volgogradskaya oblast, led by Zubkov, the party won just 24 and 36 per cent. Indeed, of this list of ‘federal locomotives’, only in Stavropol and Saratov regions, led by Sechin and Volodin respectively, were the party’s results notably better, with an increase respectively to 49 and 64 per cent. This was better than expected in Stavropol, which had posed problems for the party, not least because of the unpopularity of the regional governor, Valeri Gaevsky.

The second feature of this contextual shift was the attempt to adjust the wider political context. One element of this, though somewhat confused and enshrouded in rumour, was the search for a leader for the systemic opposition and an attempt to build the Pravoe Delo party into a more substantial organisation that could soak up more liberal voters. This episode became more prominent later in the summer, but appears to have begun in March after the regional elections: in late March, the party’s political council suggested that the party sought a federal level political figure to lead it into the December elections, and sought to attract active sectors of society, particularly in business and youth, and so increase its share of the vote from 1 to 15 per cent in the Duma elections to become the second party in a more multi-party parliament. Alexei Kudrin and Arkadi Dvorkovich were rumoured to be possible candidates, and Igor Shuvalov was reported to have given preliminary agreement to head the party and the presidential administration and government had given their consent. These plans failed to
materialise, however, apparently because to have accepted the party leadership would have meant Shuvalov resigning his position in the government. Only in mid May was a leader confirmed: businessman Mikhail Prokhorov, who promised to develop a party that represented the middle class, with a reformist, pro-business and more liberal socio-economic agenda. Reports suggested that his candidacy had the support of both Putin and Medvedev, though Prokhorov himself denied this.

This attempt to build up a more liberal party as part of the systemic opposition failed. Prokhorov’s tenure was short-lived: elected by the party on 25 June at the party’s congress, he was dismissed that September amid mutual recriminations at the party congress. Prokhorov himself claimed that the presidential administration, particularly Vladislav Surkov, had conspired to control Pravoe Delo and have him dismissed. But this was not the whole story: Prokhorov had alienated many of the party’s senior figures by parachuting his own people into the party ahead of those who had formed it, and advocating a political line that departed from the party’s more traditional liberal agenda. If Surkov had sought his dismissal, therefore, he found many willing executors in the party – the vote was 75–0 against Prokhorov, with two abstentions. The result, as one Western observer phrased it, represented a ‘debacle of the first order’ for the Kremlin’s effort to build a more liberal systemic opposition. The party won less than 1 per cent in the December elections.

The other part of this adjustment of the political environment included the establishment of a number of ‘para-institutional’ organisations, two of which, the Agency for Strategic Initiatives (ASI) and the ONF, have come to play increasingly important roles in Russian politics, attempting to provide a direct link between the leadership and business (ASI) and the leadership and society (ONF). These organisations offer young professionals a way into the political world, a form of social and political mobility that co-opts them into the system in an effort to consolidate society and the elite.

Putin proposed setting up the ASI at a regional meeting of UR in May 2011 to involve young specialists in the regions. Its tasks were to include support for new business, the organisation of start-ups and overseeing the adaptation of promising companies to the market and the better coordination of businesses and bureaucracy. This latter task included monitoring the implementation of projects and addressing obstacles, such as resistance from the bureaucracy or legal problems. The ASI was also intended as a springboard for young
and energetic people to move up the career ladder. In the wake of the elections and protest demonstrations, its task evolved to play a role in ensuring that business did not become part of the opposition, providing a channel between business and the leadership.

Similarly, as noted above, the ONF was formed in May 2011 to attempt to consolidate social consensus beyond UR. With the decline in support for UR, the ONF, open to both individuals and organisations, provided a platform for Putin during the presidential elections and served as a means of co-opting different elements of the political landscape under a broader, more inclusive umbrella than UR could provide. The agenda is indeed a broad one: love of the Fatherland, strengthening the state, and enhancing social welfare and justice. As a result, it has drawn members from UR and the KPRF, the Patriots of Russia party, and also from business. These have included figures such as Alexander Shokhin, head of the Russian Industrialists Association and a critic of the government, and Igor Yurgens, a critic of Putin’s economic policies, who was invited to join the ONF in June 2013, apparently to ‘diversify the debate within the movement and show expanding support for the president, including on the part of liberals’.

The ONF’s tasks have evolved since it was established in 2011, and it has become a more active, ‘supra-party’ movement with the intention of uniting people with different views around the president. As one Russian observer phrased it, Putin’s popularity is some 80 per cent, while UR’s is approximately 50 per cent – and the ONF’s task is to absorb that 30 per cent difference. Following a founding congress in June 2013, it established its own bureaucracy with offices across Russia, and took on roles such as an anti-corruption campaign (‘for fair procurement’), absorbing other political parties and opposition factions, monitoring regional governors and searching for new cadres.

The ‘reset’ of the Russian political system continued after Putin’s election, given what Volodin called the ‘necessity for further corrections’ to the system. These included legislation banning senior officials and politicians from having foreign bank accounts, and another counter-corruption campaign: on 6 March 2012 Igor Sechin submitted the first results of an investigation into state companies to Putin, providing more than 200 instances where top managers faced conflicts of interest, for whom Putin promised criminal proceedings.

This ‘reset’ also included a series of political reforms, which Putin and other senior officials suggested amounted to a ‘liberalisation’
of political activity. This included a return to the mixed electoral system, and direct election of regional governors. This represented a reversal of the policy introduced in 2004 of presidential appointment of governors – and the leadership team had not long previously indicated that it would not seek to alter the system in this way. The move gained a majority of popular support in polling, but, though it was subsequently implemented, it was diluted, and the president retains considerable influence over appointments.

Another reform (re-)introduced the easing of regulations for registering political parties. On 23 March the parliament unanimously passed legislation announcing that political parties need only 500 signatures to register (a reduction from 45,000), and that reduces the level of electoral support for a party to enter parliament from 7 to 5 per cent. Interestingly, this reform did not initially gain popular support: polls suggested that a majority thought that there were too many parties already, and only a minority supported the move. There was also concern among small opposition parties, especially non-systemic ones, that the new legislation would facilitate the further fragmentation of the opposition, particularly the more liberal ones. This concern had some justification: by 2013, 54 parties had been established, and by 2014 there were 69. Nevertheless, it is intended to reflect a transition to limited competition in regional and local elections, and opposition candidates have been elected – Yevgeniy Roizman, for instance, was elected mayor of Yekaterinburg, defeating UR’s representative Iakov Silin.

It is important to note, however, that this ‘opening up’ of the system means evolutionary change within the system, the drawing in and co-option of opposition elements into the system to attempt to strengthen itself, rather than fundamentally reforming it or creating any alternative to it: according to one senior official, opposition candidates would have to start at the municipal level and work their way up the electoral ladder, rather than attempt to set out posing as an immediate alternative at the highest level. Putin has also made reference to the ‘legal opposition’ – making a clear delineation between those who are in the system and those who are not. Furthermore, opportunities for opposition figures remain limited to positions that are not influential, and despite the lowered barriers for registering parties, small parties across the political spectrum find that administrative obstacles remain. Problems are emerging with respect to registering – many parties have not nominated candidates, and most elections for regional governors have simply
confirmed the power of incumbent governors, who, with only two exceptions, are UR members.

Moreover, this ‘reset’ is not without problems: as some Russian observers have pointed out, although the authorities have sought to emphasise the legitimacy of wins in the yearly election days, it has remained hard to generate popular enthusiasm for voting. Despite the ‘reset’, widespread disillusionment remains strong and voter turnout is in decline. Although the authorities suggested that a 32.3 per cent turnout for the Moscow mayoral elections was standard for such elections,\(^6\) the turnout for the Moscow city council a year later declined further to approximately 20 per cent.\(^6\) As one Russian observer suggested, therefore, for the leadership it has become less a question of stuffing ballots to ensure victory for the party of power, and more of a question of stuffing ballots for all parties to inflate turnout in the attempt to raise the legitimacy of the elections.\(^6\)

Towards a consolidation of power?

The premature ‘end of Putin’ orthodoxy that emerged in late 2011 was a reflexive assessment based on wishful thinking. Putin has remained the most popular political figure in the country – in other words, the politician with the greatest capacity to mobilise support. His popularity rose substantially after the election in 2012, reaching highs of some 85 per cent during the war in Ukraine in 2014 and into 2015. Indeed, despite the protests, there was little direct or sustained political challenge to Putin in the electoral period 2011–2012, partly because few substantive figures have been able to forge careers in opposition to Putin’s leadership team, partly because the opposition itself, particularly the ‘non-systemic’ liberal elements of it, has long been both divided among themselves and unpopular, and partly because of the responsive measures that the authorities have implemented that have limited it.

Two important points emerge from this discussion about the leadership and the opposition. The first returns us to the question of ‘surprise’, discussed in Chapter 1, and the question of timing in understanding Russia. The fall in support for UR in December and its election results were roughly in line with the results of earlier regional elections and polling: the weakening of its near monopoly on power gained in 2007 had begun even in 2009, and was clear by the March 2011 elections. That the leadership had noted the decline in support was visible from their responses.
The new politics of Russia

The elections, protests and responses by the authorities are best understood, therefore, not in terms of a ‘September, then December to May’ timeline, but a ‘March 2011 to May 2012’ timeline – in other words as part of a year-long election season, from the regional elections in March 2011 to Putin’s inauguration in May 2012. Doing so throws into better relief the decline of popular support for UR, as well as the range of responses by the leadership and how the system evolved. These went beyond the purely punitive post-demonstration responses, and included the use of ‘federal locomotives’ to attempt to reinvigorate UR and the attempt to develop a party (Pravoe Delo) that could soak up the more liberal vote in the election. These did not work as planned. Prokhorov’s subsequent political efforts have also not worked – in March 2015, he resigned from his Civil Platform party citing a schism in the party. Like other political parties, it had been split by the war in Ukraine, and some party members, including Rifat Shaikhutdinov, a senior figure in the party, had attended the ‘anti-Maidan’ demonstration.

But the slow ‘reset’ of Russian politics that the leadership began to implement in 2011 is important. While there has been a longer-term migration of support away from UR, it has retained its dominance of the systemic political landscape in the yearly regional elections – but winning majorities from low turnouts. Nevertheless, Russian observers suggest that the shift to a mixed electoral system may help UR, noting that if the December 2011 elections had been held on a mixed system, UR would probably have won another overwhelming majority. Perhaps more important is the emergence and growing roles of ‘para-institutional’ organisations such as the ASI and ONF. The ONF may well support candidates in regions and districts where UR is likely to do badly. The result is a small but important shift in the landscape of Russian ‘systemic’ politics, one that will lead to the likely shift in the structure of parliamentary politics and the emergence of new figures in regional and municipal positions. Over time, these younger figures will be tried and tested and emerge onto the political scene for 2018 and 2024.

Putin undoubtedly faces opposition. If there is limited opposition in terms of popular leadership or coherent agenda, social protest remains a visible feature of the Russian political landscape, whether in the form of anti-war protests in 2014, or against healthcare reform: in November 2014, there were demonstrations in cities across Russia protesting potential cuts in medical staff numbers and hospital closures. Though the latter were not of a scale comparable to the December 2011/2012 demonstrations, the anti-war
demonstration was sizeable. More recently, in late 2015 long-haul lorry drivers began a protest against new road taxes, creating disruption on federal highways, threatening blockades and using social media to avoid countermeasures. Increasing economic hardship as a result of the prolonged the economic slowdown since late 2011 may increase the likelihood of social protest in the regions.

There is also the passive opposition of the bureaucratic system: despite the Putin team’s dominance of Russia’s political heights, the leadership faces numerous practical difficulties in having its agenda implemented because the vertical of power does not work. Orders remain unfulfilled, projects incompletely implemented and responses to crises slow and inefficient. Even so, Putin remained the dominant candidate: in one telling pre-election poll, when presented with all candidates and questioned about who could deal with the problems Russia faces, Putin was the only candidate to enter double digits. He received 14 per cent, defeated only by ‘nobody can’ with 32 per cent.69

But echoing the problems that the authorities face in generating support despite the resources at their disposal, the opposition faces difficulties in motivating support despite the evident wider popular socio-economic frustration and fatigue with the current establishment. Although the KPRF came second in the parliamentary elections, and its leader Gennadiy Zyuganov came second in the presidential elections, this does not mean that the communists posed a serious challenge to power, or offered a serious, competitive alternative to Putin. Although the KPRF led some nominal opposition to UR and to the Medvedev government, and even drew closer to some of the left-wing ‘non-systemic’ opposition such as the Left Front, it does not offer a substantial challenge. Furthermore, it suffers from internal dissent – fractions from within the communist party have formed the Communists of Russia party, and other left-wing parties including the Left Front and United Communist Party are attempting to register.70 Nevertheless, the KPRF remains the largest systemic opposition party across Russia, and it, not the more liberal opposition, has been the main beneficiary of the protest vote, and its gains in the December elections reflected an important surge in support for the political left in Russia: Levada Center polls suggest that 40 per cent of Russians support socialist principles, and 20 per cent support communist principles.71

While there may have been a migration of public support away from UR, one that may lead towards a two-party system or even a more ‘multi-party’ parliament over time, as some of the leadership team
have indicated, the opposition, both ‘systemic’ and ‘non-systemic’, was heavily defeated in 2012. Despite their gains in the parliamentary elections in 2011, all the ‘systemic’ opposition party leaders were well beaten in the subsequent presidential elections. Nor did the parties fare well in the subsequent regional elections in 2013 and 2014: Ivan Melnikov, the KPRF candidate in the Moscow mayoral election, won just 10.7 per cent. And, partly because of the incarceration of its leaders, partly because it is at odds with itself – as illustrated by the failure of the CC and split in RPR-PARNAS – the ‘non-systemic’ opposition leadership has remained marginalised and unable to gain wider support. Indeed, they have become further marginalised as a result of the war in Ukraine. Though they have participated in elections, and won victories, such as Roizman’s, or ‘close calls’ such as Navalnyi winning 27 per cent of the vote in the Moscow mayoral election in 2013, they do not appear to be either a concern for the leadership, or unexpected: prior to the mayoral vote, Volodin pointed out, for instance, that even if Navalnyi won up to 25 per cent it would ‘not be a concern’.72

In March 2015 the non-systemic opposition was still unable to gain sympathy with the wider population, still with only 15 per cent – indeed, those who did not sympathise with them grew slightly in number to 68 per cent.73 As one Russian commentator noted, only 50,000–60,000 turned out to demonstrate on 1 March 2015, despite the war in Ukraine, a deteriorating economy and a major political murder. If such a situation resulted in only 0.5 per cent of the capital’s population turning out, the ‘authorities could do as they pleased’.74 With the exceptions of individual high points such as 24 December 2011, this figure of approximately 50,000 reflects the rough ‘barometer’ figure for street protest demonstrations since 2010 (though the online figure may be slightly higher). The evolution of the protest demonstrations suggests that, to date, they can be described in terms of layers: a hard core of 5,000–10,000 frequent protesters, surrounded by another 20,000–30,000 at more major demonstrations, with an outer layer of a further 60,000 of very occasional protesters. The maximum scale we have seen so far, therefore, is approximately 100,000 across Russia. Partly, this is because, as one Russian political figure noted, the authorities speak to the socio-economic concerns of the population, while the non-systemic opposition asserts the need for freedom of expression and the release of political prisoners – an agenda that, although it chimes with foreign observers, does not resound with the wider population.
Indeed, given these results, the 2011–2012 election season appears in retrospect to have been less the end of the Putin era, and more of a watershed for the opposition. The liberal opposition has been completely marginalised, the political opposition that remains is left-leaning and protest is mostly social rather than political. Looking ahead to the parliamentary elections in 2016 and the presidential elections in 2018, opposition leaders may face internal politicking as a younger generation attempts to replace them and lay the groundwork for the next presidential elections. This is not only the case for the main systemic parties, the KPRF and LDPR, whose leaders will be over 70 by the time of the next election and may be thinking of retirement, but also for the more liberal parties, and well-established figures such as Grigory Yavlinsky, who will be 66, may be among those in the liberal camp who find themselves under pressure from within their own party groups for not offering an electable agenda – and may even be replaced.

Furthermore, the opposition parties, ‘systemic’ and ‘non-systemic’, face internal divisions. If Prokhorov’s Civic Platform party has split, as noted above, the KPRF faces competition from the Communists of Russia party, while fractions also appear to be breaking away from JR. In March 2015, Oksana Dmitrieva, a vice-chair of JR and a potential presidential candidate for the party, resigned from it (taking several deputies with her), and subsequently established a business-oriented ‘Professionals Party’ to participate in the Duma elections in 2016.

Notes

1 Putin accepted the invitation to become leader of the party in 2008. Though they have both led the party, neither Putin nor Medvedev are party members.

the polar positioning of the exhausted Putin regime with the energetic Navalniy-led opposition. Putin’s response, Weiss (and many others) suggested was a return to Soviet-style values, ‘bringing an end to the period of relative openness and social mobility under Medvedev’.

3 That is, coalitions, parties and individual politicians not represented in the parliament.


5 Navalniy was widely lionised in many hagiographical Western reports as a ‘blogger and anti-corruption crusader’, a new leader figure and ‘democracy campaigner’, able to unite a fragmented opposition – and thus be a ‘thorn in Putin’s side’. A. Arutunyan, The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia’s Power Cult (Newbold: Skyscraper Publications, 2014), pp. 287, 289.


7 Zimmerman, Ruling Russia, p. 274.


9 Polls reported 46.1 per cent support for UR in local government elections in October 2009 (compared to the 66.2 per cent of the vote assigned to the party). S. Malle, ‘The policy challenges of Russia’s post crisis economy’, Post-Soviet Affairs, 28:1 (2012), pp. 68–69.


13 ‘Surkov obyasnil, za kakoi novyi mirovoi porядok boretsa Rossiia’ [Surkov explained what kind of world order Russia is fighting for], Newsru.com (18 November 2010), www.newsru.com/russia/18nov2010/surkov.html.

14 The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) – a nationalist party – won 12 per cent and 56 seats.

15 ‘Zachem zapadu pokazali Sergeya Ivanova’ [Why Sergei Ivanov was shown to the West], Nezavisimaya Gazeta (9 September 2013); ‘Transcript of the Seliger 2013 youth forum’ (2 August 2013), http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/5812.

16 ‘Rebrending sistemy’ [Rebranding the system], Vedomosti (6 December 2011).

17 ‘Experty: na vuiborakh v gosdumu pobedila KPRF’ [Experts: the KPRF won at the parliamentary elections], RBK Daily (12 March 2013),
www.rbcdaily.ru/politics/562949986181345. The study was published by an organisation led by Vladimir Yakunin, considered to be a close confidant of Vladimir Putin, and suggested that the KPRF had won 25–30 per cent compared to UR’s 20–25 per cent.

18 The focus here is on non-systemic protest – and does not include discussion of the parliamentary ‘bunt’, when the KPRF, LDPR and JR staged a walkout from parliament in 2009, the first time they had done so in a decade.


20 G. Robertson, The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), offers an excellent overview of protest in Russia, albeit one that was largely overlooked in the mainstream discussion about the December protests.

21 A ‘Dissenter’s march’ in March 2007 in St Petersburg was estimated to have been some 15,000 strong.


26 For an interesting timeline of the day, http://lenta.ru/chronicles/protest/; ‘Govorit ne s kem’ [Nobody to talk to], Vedomosti (12 December 2011).

27 ‘Protest bez partii’ [Protest without a party], Vedomosti (26 December 2011).

28 Sergei Udaltsov estimated 100,000 and Ilya Ponomarev asserted that 200,000 turned out on 12 June 2012. See http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/activism/m.198332.html. The police were, of course, much more conservative, estimating some 18,000.

29 PARNAS, or the People’s Freedom Party ‘for a Russia without Lawlessness and Corruption’ was established in 2010 as a merger of the Democratic Choice, Solidarity, Republican Party of Russia and Russian People’s Democratic Union parties, bringing together the leaders of these parties, respectively Vladimir Milov, Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Mikhail Kasyanov.

30 In interview, a prominent figure in the opposition estimated that the balance was 50 per cent liberal, 35 per cent leftists and 15 per cent nationalists. Interview with the author, September 2013.


33 The opposition Coordination Council was initiated in June 2012 and elections to the council were held in October. 82,000 voted in the election, just under half the number that had registered. None of the more established liberal figures polled successfully: Navalny won 43,723, writer Dmitry Bykov came second with 38,520, and Garry Kasparov third with 33,849.

34 One observer describes the internal factions of the CC as a ‘manifestation of personal egos’. Mickiewicz, *No Illusions*, p. 203. The Other Russia, a previous opposition coalition established in 2006, had also fallen apart in 2010 as a result of the members’ disparate views, and mutual criticism.

35 ‘Vladimir Ryzhkov: Nemtsov i Kasyanov – banalnye reidery’ [Vladimir Ryzhkov: Nemtsov and Kasyanov are banal raiders], *Moskovsky Komsomolet* (10 February 2014), www.mk.ru/politics/russia/interview/2014/02/10/982747-vladimir-ryzhkov-nemtsov-i-kasyanov-banalnyie-reideryi.html. In July 2015, Mikhail Kasyanov, the only candidate nominated for the position, was elected to lead the renamed Parnas Party.


37 Mickiewicz, *No Illusions*, pp. 48, 147.

38 Mickiewicz, *No Illusions*, p. 147.

39 While this is true, the responses of the police to the demonstrations were more nuanced – and were not the more simplistically violent responses of some authoritarian, let alone totalitarian regimes. How the police responded and what lessons they learnt from the demonstrations is a subject that requires more work.


41 Governors were fired in Arkhangel, Vologda, Volgodgrad and Stavropol.

42 Some reports suggested, for instance, that actress Chulpan Khamatova was pressured into supporting the campaign with a video on why she would vote for Putin.

43 ‘Kreml’ prodolzhit perezagruzku vnutrennei politiki’ [Kremlin will continue the reset of internal politics], *Kommersant* (10 July 2013). Much of this ‘reset’ has escaped attention in the Western discussion of Russia. One exception is R. Sakwa, *Putin Redux: Power and Contradiction in Contemporary Russia* (London: Routledge, 2014).
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44 ‘Bei svoikh, ili proigraesh’ [Beat up your own, or lose], Vedomosti (1 December 2011).
45 ‘Rebranding sistemy’ [Rebranding the system], Vedomosti (6 December 2011).
47 N. Protsenko, ‘The rise and fall of a Russian energy baron’, Transitions Online (19 July 2012), www.tol.org/client/article/23264-kaitov-energy-russia.html. Sechin relinquished his mandate as a deputy but retained an interest in the region, installing measures to ensure the implementation of instructions and regularly visiting the region. Sechin publicly berated Gaevsky for failing to fulfil projects in September 2011. Gaevsky was dismissed by Medvedev on 2 May 2012.
48 ‘V poiskakh statusnykh pravykh’ [In search of reputable rightists], Nezavisimaya Gazeta (24 March 2011), www.ng.ru/politics/2011-03-24/1_liberals.html. Pravoe Delo had been formed in late 2008/early 2009 with the merger of the Union of Right Forces, the Democratic Power of Russia and Civilian Power parties, all of which were losing support as individual parties.
53 For a detailed examination of the ASI, see L. Freinkman and A. Yakovlev, Agentstvo strategicheskikh iniciativ kak novyi dlya Rossii ‘institut razvitia’: pervye resultaty deyatelnosti, faktori uspekha i vozmozhnye riski v kontekste mezhdunarodnovo opuita [The Agency of Strategic Initiatives as a New Development Institute for Russia: First
Results of Activity, Factors of Success and Possible Risks in the Context of International Experience] (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2014).

55 One Western observer has suggested that the idea was already circulating in early 2010 that a new structure would be needed. Malle, ‘Policy challenges’, p. 69. Malle, who is one of the few Western observers to have explored the ONF in depth, gives a fine overview of its establishment.


57 Shokhin also has a prominent place in the ASI. Malle, ‘Policy challenges’, p. 68; ‘Igoru Yurgensu nashlos mesto vo “Fronte”’ [Igor Yurgens has been found a place in the Front], *Kommersant* (10 June 2013).

58 Correspondence with the author, December 2014.

59 ‘Kreml’ prodolzhit perezagruzku vnтреннеи политики’ [The Kremlin will continue the reset of internal politics], *Kommersant* (10 July 2013).

59 The ban applies to a wide range of public servants at federal and regional levels, military and law enforcement personnel, and those running for elected public office. For more details, see http://rbth.co.uk/politics/2013/05/06/new_russian_law_bans_foreign_bank_accounts_for_officials_25745.html.

60 ‘S novym srokom! Zachistka: Pervoe delo budushchevo presidenta Rossii’ [Happy new term! Clean up: the first business of the future Russian president], *Vedomosti* (6 March 2012). As discussed above, Sechin was a ‘federal locomotive’ to the Stavropol region during the summer, and one of his tasks appears to have been to address corruption in the energy sector there. Protsenko, ‘The rise and fall of a Russian energy baron’.

62 ‘Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club’ (19 September 2013), http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6007. In the sense that more candidates will be able to compete – though this is in a wider context of opposition candidates being imprisoned, and restrictions on the activities of NGOs and some media.

63 Roizman won 33.3 per cent, Silin won 29.7 per cent.

64 Interview with the author, September 2013.

65 In 1991, 1996 and 1999, turnout for the Moscow mayoral election was over 60 per cent, in 2003 it was over 55 per cent.

66 In the elections, 28 UR candidates were elected, ten independents, five from the KPRF (including the grandson of KPRF Gennadiy Zyuganov, Leonid Andreevich Zyuganov [b.1988]) and one each from Rodina and LDPR. http://duma.mos.ru/ru/168/duma. Other regions enjoyed a slightly higher turnout, but the wider problem of low turnout was acknowledged by Medvedev himself after the elections. http://rt.com/politics/187752-russia-hold-record-elections/. In 2005, turnout in the Moscow City Parliament elections was 35 per cent, in 2009 36 per cent.

67 In conversation with the author, February 2015.
‘Reflexive transitionology’ and the ‘end of Putin’


69 See Levada Polls carried out in late January and published on 1 February 2012, www.levada.ru/01-02-2012/78-naseleniya-ozhidayut-pobedy-v-putina-na-prezidentskikh-vyborakh. Of the other candidates, Zhirinovsky and Zyuganov both polled 5 per cent, Prokhorov and Mironov both polled 3 per cent, Yavlinsky polled 1 per cent. 37 per cent did not answer. At that time, 78 per cent thought that Putin would be elected, and 3 per cent thought that Zyuganov would be.

70 The Communists of Russia were established in 2009 as a result of the merger of the Communist Youth Union of Russia and the All-Russia Communist Party of the Future, and registered in 2012. The party makes a point of being the youthful face of Russian communism. http://komros.info.


72 ‘Snimat zapreshchено’ [Can’t be removed], Vedomosti (26 August 2013).


74 A. Minkin, ‘Zabud pro Demokratiu’ [Forget about democracy], Ekho Moskvy (2 March 2015), http://echo.msk.ru/blog/minkin/1503686-echo/. Minkin also noted the ‘microscopic’ turnout in support of Yabloko and the even smaller turnout in the anti-Maidan march.

75 Zyuganov and Zhirinovsky will both be in their seventies at the time of the 2016 election.