

## Russia united -- for the time being

Written by Eric Walberg

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The Duma elections held no surprises, but the election turmoil can't obscure the kind of politics that will continue to characterise Russia over the coming decade thanks to United Russia and its *eminence grise*, predicts Eric Walberg

With a 60 per cent turnout, United Russia's solid 49.5 per cent plurality in the 4 December Duma elections, giving it 238 of the 450 seats, is the envy of any Western political party. But it is nonetheless a disappointment after its 2007 sweep, where it gained over two-thirds of the seats. Very, very few parties ever approach the magic two-thirds that lets them ignore the opposition and change the constitution, and Prime Minister and president-virtually-elect Vladimir Putin even put a positive spin on the results: "This is an optimal result which reflects the real situation in the country," Putin, 59, said coolly. "Based on this result we can guarantee stable development of our country." (He will be recrowned president in *pro forma* elections 4 March.)

Post-Soviet Russian politics over the past two decades has been a rollercoaster. Until the founding of United Russia in 2001, a short decade ago, the Russian Communist Party was the largest political force in the country. By uniting the Westernisers and soft nationalists around his charismatic leadership, Putin was able to push the Communists aside and capture 1/2 the seats in 2003, UR's debut. Within a few weeks an additional 78 MPs climbed on the bandwagon, giving UR the magic two-thirds. With this election, the Communists have now recovered, almost doubling their vote to 20 per cent, an



underestimate of their real support, given who has the money and who controls media and election procedures. "The Communists are the only real party out there," admitted one Western banker in Moscow, and are now attracting even liberals disillusioned with UR.

In his first two terms as president, Putin transformed Russia, with UR his political figleaf, restoring state power in the economy, centralizing political control, guaranteeing a piece of the pie for almost all, while hiding the many deep social and political problems – corruption, violence, gangs, mafia, drugs, despair, and on and on. Relying on Soviet-era prestige and Russia's vast material resources, UR has been the vehicle for creating a crude but powerful national force that keeps chugging along, even as the West descends into financial chaos and self-inflicts wounds in pursuing will-o-the-wisp imperial wars around the world.

Of course, the Duma is not much more than a prestigious sandbox, an expensive talk shop which can't take any real initiative without a nod from above. The whole electoral process is heavily in UR's favour, with a brutal 7 per cent popular vote necessary for initiation into the club, and persistent rumours that the also-ran Communists, Liberal Democrats and Fair Russia quietly cut deals to divvy up the seats in less than transparent proportional elections. UR is able to mobilise the vast administrative apparatus, the fortunes of oligarchs, the private and public airwaves. It is for all intents and purposes invincible. The elections, however, are still an

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important barometre of public mood, and the almost daily opinion polls make too blatant vote-rigging a risk, given the Russian elite's proclaimed insistence that Russia is "democratically" governed.

The general outlines of post-Soviet Russia as shaped by UR-Putin have now become clear: Russia will not join the West as a subservient "postmodern state", the neocon version of Kant's world order, where nations give up their sovereignty to a "higher" organisation in the interests of world peace. (Kant envisioned a neutral United Nations, as opposed to the unipolar imperial order established with the collapse of the Soviet Union.) The early post-Soviet Yelstin crowd seemed willing to join the US-led imperial order, but there were enough savvy patriots who were not duped by US professed intentions and who raised the alarm and put the breaks on this process in time.

It will do whatever is necessary for its security and national/ federal sovereignty (Chechnya and Georgian wars, missile defence), and work with others to lessen dependency on the US order (Latin America, India, China, gas/ oil deals with Europe). To pursue this, it is developing new international structures especially in Eurasia (SCO, CSTO, the new regional customs union and proposed Eurasian Economic Community) to counterbalance US-controlled structures and prepare for the inevitable collapse of US empire.

But at the same time, the new Russian political-economic elite is still very much a part of the US-led economic order, based on the dollar and the Bretton Woods financial institutions, with billions of dollars stashed abroad, and children attending elite foreign schools both in Europe and now in the heart of capitalist Russia. But US hopes to wipe Russia as a major force off the political map were dashed, and even the most Atlantophile Russians balk at becoming the latest Latvia.

In contrast to old Soviet-era policies, this Russian strategy is manageable in the face of hostile powers. It accepts the international framework the US established after WWII and even new additions like the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto Protocols which the US rejects, and thus does not face the anticommunist reaction of Soviet years by Western liberals and conservatives. It no longer threatens the interests of the ruling elites of other countries, making Russia an attractive partner for many countries who seek to remain free from US imperial control. These policies enjoy a broad consensus inside Russia, ensuring UR-Putin's continued domination of Russian politics for the time being.

For an objective outside observer, the Russia fashioned by Putin and UR plays a positive force in world politics and economics, though it is not above playing its own games; for instance, in Belarus, possibly in Kyrgyzstan, using its transit route to Afghanistan as a bargaining chip with the US, regardless of the justness of the NATO occupation of Afghanistan. It let down longtime ally Gaddafi in Libya, has jilted Iran on nuclear power and weapons sales in the interests of placating the US, not done much for the Serbs, especially in Kosovo (yet). If NATO pushes hard, Russia will back down, unless its direct and vital interests are threatened. The best Russia can do for countries threatened by US empire is support their appeals to international law and wield its veto at the UN Security Council.

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It should no longer be “empire vs Communism”, the zero-sum game which the US fashioned in the 20th century to counter the “Soviet threat”, though just what the game adds up to now is entirely the responsibility of the empire to determine, rather than the non-empire independents like Russia, all of whom are trying to survive in the face of pressures to accept a subservient role as “postmodern states”. Russia has forfeited claims to be the gravedigger of capitalism and by extension imperialism, and just wants a fair shake in a fairer world order. At the same time, leaders in the Kremlin are under no illusion about the reality of US empire. They realise that, despite all the smiles, US leaders see Russia (along with China) as the enemy, and that “Western policies always aim at the eventual dismemberment and demise of Russia,” writes *vin eyardsaker.blogspot*

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“They just don’t believe that the Soviet way to oppose the US was the correct one,” the Russian-American analyst continues. Rather than being an active midwife of a new world order opposed to imperialism (Soviet policy), Russia is playing a waiting game -- the age-old policy of retreat used against the Mongols, the French and the Nazis. “Americans play Monopoly, Russians chess,” quips Spengler at *Asia Times*. Afghanistan looms large as another Vietnam, and the US is busily adding Libya, Syria, Iran, who-knows-where next to its overfull plate of indigestible goodies. At times, it is wise to sit back and wait for the straw that breaks the ogre’s (excuse me, camel’s) back. A fool’s mate comes about when your opponent is bankrupt, and it certainly looks like this is how the current game is shaping up.

UR will no doubt continue its slide, and even Putin himself come 4 March may find himself in a runoff with some dark-horse challenger, as it is also clear that UR-Putin are unable to face down the corrupt administrative minions who keep “the party of crooks and thieves” in power. However, the cautious, patriotic policies of the 2000s as sketched above have been set for the near future. Perhaps the world financial crisis will turn Russians back to their tried and at-least-partially true socialist heritage to make sure the country survives. But its domestic and foreign policies will not be too much different from the ones UR has put its (rubber) stamp on, policies which are effectively the work of Putin as Mr UR.