

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Elections in Russia: Polling and Perspectives

“Despite international interest in the upcoming parliamentary (State Duma) and presidential elections scheduled to occur in Russia in December 2011 and March 2012, respectively, Russian citizens evince “little interest in the upcoming elections,” according to Denis Volkov of the Yuri Levada Center. Mr. Volkov, who spoke at a Harriman Institute event on September 15, 2011, moderated by Harriman Institute Director, Timothy Frye, presented polling data on diverse topics, including the mood of the electorate in the run up to the Duma and presidential elections, citizens’ perceptions of the candidates and parties, and voter confidence in the system of “managed democracy” that has been established over the last decade.

The data presented by the speaker suggests that the majority of the Russian citizens polled hold a variety of reservations regarding the efficaciousness of the Duma. For instance, 70% of those surveyed believe that the Duma deputies are not fulfilling their obligation to voters and 64% of the respondents disapprove of the work of the Duma. Nevertheless, 54% of those polled expressed little or no interest in the upcoming Duma election, a finding which is perhaps related to another figure presented by Volkov. Namely, 53% of respondents, surveyed in July 2011, held that the upcoming election to the state Duma will be characterized by an “imitation of competitiveness, seats will be distributed according to the authorities’ desires,” while only 35% believed there will be “real competition for power and seats.” Despite the marked dissatisfaction of Russian voters with the current parliamentarians suggested by the polling data (64% would like to see either a “significant turnover” or a “complete turnover” in the Duma), 54% of

respondents, surveyed in August 2011, indicated their preference for candidates of United Russia, the party currently dominant in the Duma, if the ballot had been held in August.

Similar contradictions in the attitudes of Russian citizens to the upcoming presidential election were evident in the data presented by Mr. Volkov. While 42% of respondents endorse a joint Medvedev-Putin ticket in 2012, a sizable minority of those polled believe that Putin should not put forth his candidacy for the Russian presidency next year, and 75% of respondents further feel that they cannot influence the issue. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, coupled with expectations of electoral fraud in the parliamentary and presidential elections in favor of United Russia candidates, unequal access to the media for the opposition parties, and other irregularities, significant portions of those surveyed expressed hope that the upcoming elections would result in improvements in their lives or in the trajectory of the country.

Although discontent with the current political reality in Russia was expressed by many of those polled, and Mr. Volkov contended that “the majority of Russians think there should be opposition,” he also enumerated several reasons for the relative ineffectiveness of the existing opposition parties. Chief among these are overt pressure from the Kremlin, internal weaknesses, such as being perceived as official “puppets,” an absence of concrete policy proposals or achievements, and not being representative of large sectors of voters. The difficulties encountered by the opposition parties in recruiting, retaining, and expanding its constituencies, the speaker argued, are further exacerbated by the prevalence of official

pronouncements on state-controlled television --the preferred source of news for over 80% of the Russian population --coupled with “the exaggerated role of the Internet audience” in opposition movements.

The findings presented by Mr. Volkov suggest that, buoyed by relative stability in living standards, a lack of viable political alternatives, and a limited public sphere, most Russians have decided to accept what they concede will likely be the outcomes of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. As the speaker demonstrated, this segment of respondents would probably not participate in mass protests or otherwise destabilize the managed democracy system.

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