

**Event Report**

**BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE**

**Duma Election 2011: Review and First Conclusions<sup>1</sup>**

*The Duma election in December 2007 was deemed „neither fair nor free“ by the OSCE. In the meantime things did not get better and the election in December 2011 hardly lives up to its name either. Even though some superficial amendments to electoral and party legislation have been made since 2007; the registration of parties, their admittance to the election, television as the most important mass medium, the election itself and the vote count are still largely controlled by the executive authority.*

*So why all the effort if the election is extensively manipulated and controlled by those in power and the results are basically known beforehand? Why do between one half and two-thirds of the eligible voters still bother to go to the polls and ballot for one of the two parties put forward by the authorities? What are they trying to say? Why does the remaining half or third not go to the ballot box at all or spoil their ballots? And last but not least: what does the foreseeable majority for 'United Russia' mean for a renewed presidency of Vladimir Putin?*

*Together with 'Russland-Analysen', 'European Exchange' and Russian NGO GOLOS, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung has –in the past months– published analyses of and background reports on the election process. Now it is time to draw a first conclusion together with our partners.*

As had been foreseen, this year's Duma election on 4 December included just as much (or maybe even more) fraud and falsification as in 2007. But this time a new phenomenon could be observed –people were openly fed up with Putin and his party United Russia (UR) and went out into the streets to protest against it. The demonstrations were neither huge nor outrageous, there were just a couple of thousand people, but it is still a sign of a change of mentality in Russia's population. Whereas otherwise people in Russia were known for their political apathy, this time there was a stir of resistance. When people around the world were surprised by the election's comparatively weak turnout for UR, what surprised observers even more was how the government's efforts to manipulate the election was met by the refusal of the people on the street to accept it any longer. Some say, Putin just overdid it when he started to attack GOLOS, the only neutral NGO in Russia to follow up on the election. Others would argue that he simply showed too much recklessness when he announced his renewed presidency candidature on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2011, leaving Medvedev to live on the crumbs he threw him. Of course, there will never be the one simple answer as to what caused the change in mindset in Russian society but looking into the subject and trying to identify some of the factors that contributed to it might be a rewarding and revealing activity nonetheless.

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<sup>1</sup> **Guest speakers** were: **Dr. Nicola Schelling**, head Landesvertretung Baden-Württemberg; **Werner Schulz**, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA); **Masha Lipman**, editor-in-chief of the journal Pro et Contra, Carnegie Moscow Center; **Arkadi Lyubarev**, associate director, GOLOS Association. The meeting was moderated by **Claude Weinber**, Director of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union. The event was held under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

### **The election and where the EU comes in**

Approximately one month before the election on 4<sup>th</sup> December, many Russians, especially the young, started to show an interest in politics again, despite all the backlashes and set-backs that Democracy in Russia had to suffer over the past two decades. The renewed interest didn't materialise so much as an interest in NGOs like GOLOS but rather people themselves got involved personally. For instance, a private group called Citizen Observer organised training seminars for people to become election observers. This more or less private movement managed to train over 600 persons to observe the election in a decentralised fashion and report any frauds found via internet or other media. Of course, traditional NGOs also had their part, GOLOS for instance tried to evade government influence by simply using older technology that wouldn't be as easily controlled as the internet (hot lines etc). Unsurprisingly, both types of observation missions documented fraud and misuse, some even corruption and threats. In some regions, administrative authorities were threatened to find an early end to their political career should they not force their subordinates to vote for the ruling UR. There were cases where state-funding for specific purposes (e.g. pensions or unemployment insurance) was directly linked to the turn-out of the election. Some workers even had to come to work on Sunday so that their voting behaviour could be controlled more easily.

The good news is that despite all these efforts by the administration and the government, the election results aren't as comforting as UR might have hoped them to be. In fact, it left the party 0.5 % short of the absolute majority in the Duma, which was a surprise to most observers. In addition, UR got less than 40% of the vote in 32 regions which is quite something, considering the pressure that was exerted on the average voter. In some regions, on the other hand, turnout for UR was more than 90% which seems very unlikely in any democracy. Other measures contributed to the results, too: Many political parties simply were denied participation in the election, thereby marginalising them to oblivion. The ones that were allowed to participate still had to take the hurdle that they had to get at least 7% of the vote to enter the Duma. No one knows how many votes were lost to small parties like Jabloka only because people didn't believe they would ever cross the 7% threshold.

One of the many interpretations why Putin's party actually lost that many votes (it held a 64.3% majority last term) is that it was Putin's own achievement because he had stirred public unrest just days before the election by publicly attacking GOLOS, the only neutral election observer NGO left in Russia. It looks like people actually trusted GOLOS and many seemed to be quite upset with the way that the NGO was treated by the authorities. A day after Putin had held his first hate speech against GOLOS, three deputies from the state Duma called the prosecutor's office to bring a charge against the NGO. The premises of the organisation were subsequently searched under the pretence that it had conspired against the governing party. Liliya Shibanova, one of the directors of the organisation who had wanted to come to Brussels to report about uncovered frauds, was detained at Sheremetyevo airport after returning from a trip abroad on the eve of the election and her laptop was confiscated – all because she was accused by the government to have been meddling with the election. Days before and after the election, GOLOS's website was attacked and later shut down. These actions were perceived by the population as harassment by the state and it contributed to the annoyance of the population with UR.

So what would be a proper reaction to the results? For the population in Russia there isn't much to do in terms of official complaints. The higher courts are too entangled with the government to allow for any firm accusations of fraud or the like. But resentment in the population is growing and this year's election might be

remembered as the beginning of the end of the Putin era. A development anything like the Arab Spring seems very unlikely to happen in Russia any time soon. The people in Russia are much too heterogeneous and far-spread to provide a basis for any such movement and other factors like high unemployment and a very young and eager population that pushed the revolution in Northern Africa simply do not exist in modern Russia. But if people are starting to get fed up with the situation and get involved, a new consciousness might establish itself in the population and provide some drive for change. The EU and other external actors now have to take action and stop supporting the fraudulent activities of the government. The EU must not acknowledge the results of the election and it has to express its reservations vis-à-vis the Duma. Furthermore, it will have to insist that the accusations of fraud and falsification are prosecuted by the Russian authorities and that political prisoners from the demonstrations following the election are set free again.

### **Putin**

Vladimir Putin obviously had a special role in the election. After having ceded the presidency to Medvedev in 2008, the two politicians now declared that it had been their agreement from the very beginning that Putin would once again run for president in the election to come. After one legislative period of absence from presidency, Putin is now again eligible to two consecutive legislative periods. Additionally, the duration of one legislative period as president has been extended to six years during Medvedev's time in office. So people in Russia realise that it is likely Putin will be President for another 12 years. The point of contention isn't so much that fact itself but rather the ruthlessness with which the renewed candidacy was declared. No one in Russia (and, as a matter of fact, the rest of the world) was surprised that Putin would run again but the cold-bloodedness with which he executed his move got people thinking again: He did not ask the people what they thought of this, he and Medvedev simply confronted them with the bare facts.

It seems like Putin's popularity is going South and he himself doesn't know how to stop it. The number of people who are willing to vote for anyone *but* Putin has dramatically increased over the past weeks and his party UR is widely perceived as a 'party of crooks and thieves'. But why is he still that powerful? The problem seems to be that there is just a very vague conception in the public sphere of how politics in Russia work: There is a very distinct 'them', meaning the politicians and bureaucrats, but only an insufficient definition of 'us'. There isn't really any alternative to Putin, no one that has got the power or the charisma to challenge his position. The people in Russia are of course aware of the fact that the elections were fraudulent and that UR 'stole' many votes – they just don't know whom they stole them from. The opposition in the Duma, on the other hand, is systemic, meaning that while they do exist as opposition, they merely serve to resemble some sort of resistance so that the ruling party isn't portrayed as a sole ruler.

That being said, Vladimir Putin still remains to be the most powerful and influential politician in Russia today. He has got the big companies, the law enforcers, the resources and the budget but his ratings are declining. And while this might be a good sign in terms of him being replaced by someone more liberal and democratic, it also bears the threat of putting him in the defence. Because Putin has to stop his downward trend at any cost until the presidential elections next year, he now basically has to choose between two options: Either he makes concessions and liberalises Russia at large scale, which would bring his close circle of trustees up against him because it is them who profit from the system as it is the most. Or he could crack down on any resistance and lead Russia to an ever more autocratic style. Unfortunately, the second alternative seems much more likely at the moment and Putin has already started to go for a much more nationalistic style and blamed

foreign countries (especially the USA) for meddling with the election. This radicalisation is much feared in the rest of the world as it fuels a discourse of hatred and blame-shifting as one weakened ruler is struggling for a power monopoly in the face of his defeat.

### **Opposing the government**

In the new Duma, Putin will be faced with an opposition that will try to push him to adopt a much more right-wing policy than he already used to have. The election has augmented their bargaining power and they will use it to push him to a populist, hardliner course that isn't really met by any opposing ideas or concepts in the Parliament because all the liberal, left-wing parties have been forbidden. This populist approach not only promises to isolate Russia much further on the international political scene, but it will also make it much harder for the country to raise new money for all its expenditures. In times of the financial crisis it is hard enough already to come by any money at all so a political atmosphere that literally chases investors out of the country won't do this any good. Russia needs reforms and, like most other countries in this world, it needs to cut its expenditures to provide for a sustainable development. This will be hard to do if the country is going to develop toward a more right-wing policy, make concessions to its own population but discriminate against foreign subjects.

But these are the problems the parties *in* the Duma have to face. For most of the opposition, though, the much greater problem was that they weren't admitted to participate in the election in the first place. All the parties that seriously contradict UR's position were barred from participation and so the people only had the choice between different degrees of one political spectrum. The opposition is innocuous to the government and the voters mainly cast their votes not *for* them but *against* UR. This is why the few protestors we have in Russia today don't have a natural leader or a party to vote for. There is one glimpse of hope though and that is the entering of the Jabloko party into the local Parliament in St. Petersburg, elections to which were on the same day as the Duma election. Here, the liberal, left-wing party will hopefully be able to raise some public attention and get people to notice them as an alternative to UR. If they could just manage to raise awareness for subjects usually left out of the political context as none of the 'normal' parties address them, then that would already bring Russia a big step forward.

### **Conclusion**

The election in Russia was obviously marked by fraud and corruption, as documented by various private persons or NGOs and so in this respect, nothing seems to have changed since the last election in 2007. Still, there seems to be new motion in the scene, as the people in Russia seem to wake up from their lethargy to find themselves locked between a rock and a hard place. The government, and especially Vladimir Putin, are still in power and any protests against them are yet way too feeble to spark any public upheaval. But still, the mood in the public opinion seems to be changing as more and more people become annoyed by Putin's authoritarian style and the lack of any alternative. The European Union will have to take a stand and insist on an investigation into the accusations of fraud, bribery, etc. It cannot simply act as if everything had gone well and accept the election results as they are. The fact that Putin has gone a long way to modernise Russia and has reduced the poverty level in Russia significantly during his rule does not legitimise him to manipulate the election to his favour and bypass the procedures and principles of democracy. If UR continues on this path, the people's resentment with politics might soon turn into apathy and then rage and that would surely be in nobody's interest.