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‘It’s the Economy, Comrade!’ Parties and Voters in the 2007 Russian *Duma* Election

IAN MCALLISTER & STEPHEN WHITE

ELECTIONS HAVE TAKEN PLACE AT REGULAR INTERVALS to the lower house of the Russian parliament, the State *Duma*. Successive changes in the electoral law have, however, allowed the central authorities to establish an increasing degree of influence over the outcome. The success of the United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*) party in December 2007, on the evidence of a national post-election survey, is largely to be explained by its association with President Putin, and his own association with a rapid rate of economic advance. In turn, this suggests that the future of the party and of the dominant position it has been able to establish are heavily dependent on the continuing success of the Kremlin in maintaining a rate of economic advance that ordinary Russians find satisfactory.

Elections with a limited choice of candidate had already begun to take place in the last years of the USSR. But the first multiparty as well as multicandidate elections were held in 1993, to a newly established Federal Assembly; and since then elections have regularly taken place on the same basis to the lower house of the new Assembly, the State *Duma* (the upper house, the Federation Council, was directly elected the same year but has since then been formed in other ways). These first fully competitive elections established a parliament that was to hold office for just two years, to 1995; from this time onwards elections have been held every four years, in accordance with the provisions of the 1993 constitution. The *Duma*’s predecessor, the Russian Supreme Soviet, had been strongly oppositional, and a breakdown in relations with the Kremlin led directly to its suspension and then suppression in September–October 1993, followed by the adoption of a constitution in which the powers of the president were considerably enhanced. Initially, oppositional and independent candidates had considerable success in elections to the new parliament; but a Kremlin-sponsored party, Unity (*Edinstvo*), came a close second in the party-list vote in 1999, and in 2003 its direct successor, United Russia, won so comprehensively that it was able to establish a ‘constitutional’ or two-thirds majority.

Formally speaking, competitive elections to a national legislature are one of the distinguishing features of a democracy, and international observers were initially very positive about the way in which procedures of this kind had become established in a former communist country within a relatively short period of time. The OSCE’s report

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on the 1999 *Duma* election was perhaps the high point of this relentless optimism; it hailed the election as further evidence of ‘progress in consolidating representative democracy’, with parties and blocs that were allowed to compete on an ‘equal basis’ within a legal framework that was ‘consistent with commonly recognised democratic principles’. Its report on the 2003 *Duma* election was much more critical, complaining that it had ‘failed to meet a number of OSCE commitments for democratic elections’ including a clear separation between the competing parties and the state itself, and equal treatment in the media.¹ International observers were rarely concerned about the casting of ballot papers on polling day; but they were much less satisfied by the way in which the media gave a disproportionate share of their attention to the parties and candidates that were favoured by the Kremlin, and by the way in which ‘administrative resource’ or the power of office was used to give them an additional advantage. Criticisms of this kind made the presence of international monitors of any kind a matter of some controversy during the period that led up to the election of December 2007, and in the end the OSCE decided it would be inappropriate to send a mission on the terms that had been offered.

All kinds of other issues came under sharp focus during the campaign. There was no doubt, according to the polls, that United Russia would win an overwhelming majority. But in order to establish its authority, a respectable turnout was essential, and certainly higher than the 56% that had voted in December 2003. Beyond this, the result would have direct implications for the presidential contest that was due to take place the following spring. United Russia had associated itself directly with ‘Putin’s Plan’, and the Russian President, though not a party member, had agreed to head its list of candidates. If there was a strong vote ‘for Putin’, or otherwise, it would have considerable significance for the presidential succession, with Putin himself unable to stand for a further term. In particular, it was important to the Kremlin that his favoured candidate—as it turned out, Dmitri Medvedev—should be able to acquire the kind of authority that would be represented by a heavy vote for the presidential party. Beyond this again, these were the first elections under a new electoral system that ended the single-member constituencies that had returned half the candidates in earlier contests, leaving all the seats to be allocated on the basis of a national party-list vote. How would Russia’s voters behave within this different and highly structured environment, while at the same time responding to the range of factors that shape electoral choices in other countries?

The electoral environment

Formally speaking, Russian elections are governed by a ‘framework law’ that covers elections at all levels of the system and also the conduct of referendums. The law that currently prevails was adopted in 2002, and had been amended 20 times by the time

¹ The OSCE’s monitoring missions are organised by its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, based in Warsaw; its reports on Russian and other elections may be consulted at www.osce.org/odihr (last accessed 19 April 2008). Other monitoring organisations, such as the European Institute for the Media, had begun to take a sceptical view much earlier than this (its reports may be consulted at www.eim.org, last accessed 19 April 2008); one of the present authors was a member of their monitoring team in December 1999 and again at the presidential election the following March.

of the December 2007 election.² In addition, *Duma* elections are governed by a more specific law ‘on the election of deputies to the State *Duma* of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation’, of which an entirely new version has been adopted at each election since 1995. The current version of the law was adopted in May 2005 in a context that had been defined by the president’s reaction to a hostage-taking crisis at Beslan, in the northern Caucasus, the previous September. Putin called for government structures to be strengthened in the face of this new threat: one response was to end the direct election of Russia’s governors, another was to introduce a fully proportional system of elections to the *Duma*.³ Putin promised a bill that would establish a system of this kind in the ‘near future’; it was, indeed, already under discussion, and had been openly advocated by the chairman of the Central Electoral Commission.⁴

The 2005 law represented a considerable departure from the *Duma* election laws that had preceded it (O vyborakh 2005). In particular, it allocated all the *Duma*’s 450 seats to the national party-list contest, and abolished the single-member constituency elections that had returned half the deputies in all previous *Duma* elections. This meant that there would no longer be independents, who had normally taken the largest or, in 2003, second-largest share of the seats available; indeed even party-sponsored candidates in the single-member constituencies had been obliged to give their main attention to local circumstances if they were to compete successfully for the support they needed.⁵ In future, only registered political parties would be permitted to nominate candidates (art. 7:2), and parties themselves found it more difficult to register as the 2001 law on political parties was amended in December 2004 so as to increase the minimum number of members that was necessary to do so. (It had originally been 10,000; the amended law required no fewer than 50,000 members, distributed nationwide.)⁶ Nor could smaller parties any longer form ‘blocs’ with other groupings and in this way secure the right to put forward candidates of their own.

The new law changed the electoral system in other ways that also advantaged the political parties in general, and the larger (mostly pro-Kremlin) parties in particular. Under the new law, parties that were represented in the outgoing *Duma* would have the right to nominate a list of candidates without further formalities (art. 39:2). Other parties would be obliged to collect the signatures of at least 200,000 electors in order to do so (art. 39:3), or else pay an electoral deposit (art. 39:5), which was set at 15% of a party’s maximum permitted expenditure (art. 66:3); this was defined elsewhere in the law as 400 million rubles (art. 64:3), which meant that the deposit was 60 million

² *Sobranie zakonodatel’sstva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 24, item 2253, 12 June 2002. This and other items of electoral legislation may be consulted in their current form on the Central Electoral Commission website www.cikrf.ru (last accessed 19 April 2008). Several Russian-language studies provide helpful context: see for instance Gasanov and Prudnikov (2007), Golovin (2007), Sanaev (2007), Skosarenko (2007), Ivanchenko and Lyubarev (2007), and Aranovsky et al. (2007).

³ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 14 September 2004, pp. 1, 3.

⁴ *Kommersant*, 12 August 2006, p. 1.

⁵ Our 2005 survey, fielded in March and April (n=2,000), found that public opinion was broadly in favour of a fully proportional system (39%), but 27% were against it and a substantial 35% undecided. However, more or less the opposite was true when respondents were asked which system gave them greater influence over the conduct of government: 24% thought it was the party-list system, but 33% thought it was the single-member constituencies. A survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation found a still stronger preference for single-member constituencies when it came to ‘upholding citizens’ interests’: 46% preferred them in such circumstances, as against just 7% who favoured party lists (*Izvestiya*, 1 September 2004, p. 3).

⁶ *Sobranie zakonodatel’sstva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, no. 52, item 5272, 20 December 2004.

rubles (about \$2.5 million). If more than 5% of the signatures were declared invalid (previously 25%), or if the number of signatures fell below the minimum once invalid ones had been excluded, the party would not be registered (art. 43:19, 20). The deposit itself would not be returned if a party failed to achieve at least 4% (previously 3%) of the vote (art. 66:9, 10), and parties that failed to achieve at least 3% (previously 2%) of the vote would be required to return the value of the free broadcasting and press coverage they had received (art. 69:3)—a further disincentive for smaller and less well-supported contenders.

Other changes were similarly designed to strengthen the position of the larger parties, which were generally those that could most easily be controlled by the federal authorities. One of these changes was an increase in the threshold, from 5% to 7% (this was a change for which provision had already been made in the previous election law, adopted in December 2002). The election would, however, be invalid if no single list of candidates reached 7% of the vote, or if only a single list of candidates did so, or if all the lists of candidates together accounted for no more than 60% of the total (art. 82:4, 7). Equally, if the party lists that reached the threshold accounted among them for no more than 60% of the vote, less successful parties would be included in the allocation of seats until this total was attained; and if a single party won more than 60% of the vote and no other party reached the threshold, the next most successful party would be included in the allocation of seats (art. 82:8, 9). Seats themselves were to be allocated by the Hare method, according to provisions that are set out in detail in article 83 of the law.

The 2005 law had been amended eight times by the time the *Duma* election took place, on Sunday 2 December 2007. In almost every case the changes were designed to strengthen still further the advantages that were already enjoyed by the Kremlin and the larger parties. One of the first of these amendments, in July 2006,⁷ removed the right that Russians had enjoyed since before the 1993 election to vote ‘against all’ candidates and parties, and at all elections including local and presidential ones. This had been an increasingly popular option, accounting for 4.7% of the party-list and 12.9% of the constituency vote in the 2003 election (indeed it ‘won’ three of the individual seats), and there was considerable public opposition to its removal,⁸ although international monitors had criticised this somewhat unusual practice and it arguably took votes away that might otherwise have allowed smaller parties to reach the threshold.⁹

Then in December 2006 an amendment to the framework law removed the minimum turnout requirement, which had been set at 20% with a higher requirement permissible for elections at the national and regional level.¹⁰ The *Duma* election law had specified a modest 25% in 2005 and all its previous versions. But the presidential election law had specified 50%, and there was clearly some possibility that the selection of an unpopular or little-known candidate in place of Vladimir Putin would depress turnout to such an extent in the March 2008 election, in which he would no longer be able to stand, that the whole exercise would be invalidated (turnout at the

⁷ *Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, no. 29, item 3125, 12 July 2006.

⁸ According to a Levada Centre poll, for instance, 60% opposed the change before it took place, and only 18% supported it; subsequently, 65% supported the restoration of the facility and only 25% were opposed (‘Vybory 2007’, based on a survey of 1,600, fieldwork 13–16 April 2007, available at: www.levada.ru/press/2007050801.print.html, accessed 19 April 2008; similarly Fedorov 2007, pp. 235–36; *Izvestiya*, 6 September 2007, p. 3).

⁹ For a review see McAllister and White (2008).

¹⁰ *Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, no. 50, item 5303, 5 December 2006.

previous election, in March 2004, had been just over 64%). In the spring of 2007 a further amendment to the *Duma* election law carried this change into practical effect when it removed the minimum turnout requirement entirely, and made the same change in the presidential election law.¹¹ Again, this was a change that reflected international practice, but it had the effect of withdrawing yet another ‘weapon of the weak’—in this case, the ability to invalidate the election itself by abstaining in sufficiently large numbers.

In spite of this series of changes, Russian elections retained a number of distinctive features. First of all, candidates on the various party lists were not obliged to be members of that party (art. 7:3 of the *Duma* law), although they could not be a member of another party and the proportion that were not party members could not exceed 50% of the total (art. 36:6). In previous elections, candidates elected on a particular party list had not even been obliged to take a seat in the corresponding party fraction in the new *Duma*; in December 2003, for instance, United Russia had won 223 seats, but it had already accumulated 300 by the time the new *Duma* held its first meeting as independents and members of other party lists were persuaded to transfer their loyalties in what amounted to an extended auction.¹² This practice was ended when the law on the status of the deputy was amended on 21 July 2005, obliging all the deputies elected on a particular list of candidates to take their place within that party’s *Duma* fraction and providing for their expulsion from the *Duma* altogether if they chose to withdraw from it.¹³ This approximated to the system known elsewhere as the ‘imperative mandate’, and placed even more powers in the hands of party leaders who could in turn be more readily influenced by the Kremlin.

Nor did successful candidates have to take their seats in the legislature. Under the law, they had five days to indicate their preference following the official announcement of the result, failing which their seat would be transferred to another candidate from the same party (art. 85:1, 2). In the event, all the parties lost deputies: three in the case of the Liberal Democrats (*Liberal’no-demokraticheskaya partiya Rossii*), four in the case of the Communists (KPRF, *Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), and nine in the case of Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*). United Russia, however, had a dramatic outflow of 113, which was more than a third of the seats it had been awarded, including the Russian President himself as well as all but one of the governors that had lent their authority to its list of candidates.¹⁴ In practice, this meant that a series of ministers and governors took their place at the head of the various candidate lists of the ‘party of power’, then systematically declined to take up their seats after they had exercised their influence on its behalf. Understandably, they became known as ‘locomotives’. An amendment to the law in April 2007 introduced an even more advantageous arrangement by which successful candidates who declined their seats could take them up at a later stage under appropriate circumstances—in effect, a ‘sleeping mandate’ (art. 89).

¹¹ *Sobranie zakonodatel’sтва Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, no. 18, item 2118, 26 April 2007.

¹² *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 30 December 2003, p. 1.

¹³ *Sobranie zakonodatel’sтва Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, no. 30, item 3104, 21 July 2005.

¹⁴ *Vestnik Tsentral’noi izbiratel’noi komissii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 19, 2007, pp. 28-38. Three of the newly promoted deputies had themselves been replaced a week later (*Vestnik Tsentral’noi izbiratel’noi komissii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 19, 2007, pp. 38-39, 51, 53). The governor, Anatolii Lisitsyn of Yaroslavl’ region, was the first who had ever chosen to become a deputy rather than disavow his seat; the Kremlin was thought to have made him an offer he was unable to refuse (*Izvestiya*, 14 December 2007, p. 2).

The entire electoral exercise is regulated by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), and its counterparts at lower levels. As originally constituted under the 2002 framework law, the CEC was nominated on an equal basis by the *Duma*, the Federation Council and the president, and each of its 15 members was required to have a law degree (art. 21:4, 5). In January 2007, however, this requirement was amended so that each of its members would in future be required to have no more than a 'higher professional education'.¹⁵ Two months later the long-serving CEC chairman Alexander Veshnyakov was obliged to resign,¹⁶ and shortly afterwards he was replaced by Vladimir Churov, a bearded atmospheric physicist who was the nominee of the Liberal Democratic Party but more to the point, a long-standing friend of the Russian President.¹⁷ The election was presided over by Vladislav Surkov, deputy head of the presidential administration, who offered the retiring Veshnyakov the Order for Services to the Fatherland (Second Class). Churov, it emerged, had not been a member of the Liberal Democrats for some years, and was merely a member of Zhirinovskiy's faction in the *Duma*. Commentators saw his appointment as 'just another service rendered to the Kremlin by the Liberal Democrats. Naming a member of United Russia to head the CEC would have been going too far'.¹⁸

The contenders

Under the terms of the *Duma* law, a new election is called by the president between 90 and 110 days in advance of the date on which it is due, and takes place on the first Sunday of the month in which the powers of the outgoing *Duma* expire (art. 6:2). Putin signed a decree on 2 September calling the election for the following 2 December 2007, and the formal process of nomination began. Under the law, parties are required to hold conferences within 30 days of the announcement of an election to approve their lists of candidates, which may consist of no more than 600 individuals, divided wholly or partly into regional groups; each of these must in turn correspond to a region, or group of regions, or part of a region with between 650,000 and three million electors, and they must collectively encompass the entire national territory (art. 36:1, 3, 9, 10, 19). The list of candidates is then presented, together with the signatures or deposit that may be necessary for its support, to the Central Electoral Commission not more than 75 or less than 45 days before the election is due to take place (art. 42:4). The CEC in its turn has 10 days to check the documentation and decide whether or not to register the list of candidates (art. 44:1).

The Central Electoral Commission completed its deliberations on 28 October. Of the 14 parties that had sought registration, three were entitled to do so without further formality as they were represented in the outgoing *Duma* and had the right, under the election law (art. 37:2), to put forward a list of candidates without presenting either signatures or a deposit: United Russia, the Communist Party, and the Liberal Democratic Party (*Rodina* had also been represented in the outgoing *Duma*, but it was not a party and was not in any case contesting the new election under its own auspices). Of the remaining parties, the Union of Right Forces (URF), *Yabloko*, Patriots of Russia and Just Russia registered by paying the electoral deposit, and the

¹⁵ *Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 6, item 681, 30 January 2007.

¹⁶ *Izvestiya*, 14 March 2007, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Izvestiya*, 28 March 2007, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Vremya novostei*, 28 March 2007, pp. 1–2.

others sought to do so by collecting signatures. Three were found to have included an excessive number of invalid signatures (the Greens, the People's Union and the Peace and Unity Party), but the Agrarian Party, Civic Force, the Democratic Party of Russia and the Party of Social Justice¹⁹ were able to satisfy the various requirements of the law and were duly included among the 11 parties that eventually appeared on the ballot paper, with a total of 4,684 candidates on their federal and regional lists.²⁰

In principle, the election law provides equal opportunities for all the parties. Elaborate arrangements are made, for instance, for an appropriate distribution of party election broadcasts, and free advertising space in the printed press. Parties are 'guaranteed equal access to the mass media' (art. 10:4), and those who hold office in state or public organisations are not allowed to make use of the advantages that are afforded by the position they occupy, such as the use of office staff, telephones, premises or transport (art. 46:1, 4); if they wish to engage in campaigning themselves they must be temporarily relieved of their duties (art. 46:2). Electoral materials themselves are supposed to be 'objective' and consistent with the 'equality of rights of the political parties' (art. 51:2), and may not impugn the 'honour, dignity or business reputation' of any of the candidates or parties (art. 62:6). A draw takes place to allocate positions on the ballot paper (art. 73:4; the Agrarian Party had the modest advantage of first place). But the campaign was robbed of much of its significance by the refusal of the dominant and most strongly pro-Kremlin party, United Russia, to take part in studio discussions with the other parties, although it did make use of its free broadcasting and newspaper allocations. It could of course rely on the fact that its candidates—including the president himself—were assured of coverage when they acted in their official capacity, and it had the backing of the state machine.

In spite of these provisions, there was evidently some scepticism among the Russian electorate that the vote would be free and fair. Substantial numbers, for instance, expected the results would be falsified by local or regional electoral commissions (39%), and many others thought there would be some bribery of electors by the state authorities (33%) or by those who opposed them (30%). These and similar abuses, it was thought, would have a 'significant or very significant influence' on the outcome (49% agreed, 23% disagreed). And only 40% thought the newly elected *Duma* would 'reflect the wishes of the people of Russia'; 45% took the opposite view.²¹ Interviewed in mid-November by the Levada Centre, almost half thought the election would be 'only an imitation of a contest, as the distribution of seats would be determined not by the results of the voting but by the decisions of the authorities'; rather fewer (34%) thought it would be a genuine election, and another 18% were undecided. But all the same, about two-thirds (63%) intended to vote, somewhat more than had been intending to vote at the same stage four years earlier. The entire electoral process, it appeared, had acquired a 'routine character: the approval of what exists' (Vybory v Gosdumu 2007).

The survey evidence also made clear that United Russia would be the dominant presence in the new *Duma*. United Russia, in the words of party leader Boris Gryzlov,

¹⁹ The party names in Russian are as follows: Union of Right Forces (*Soyuz Pravykh Sil*), Patriots of Russia (*Patrioty Rossii*), the Greens (*Rossiiskaya ekologicheskaya partiya 'Zelenye'*), the People's Union (*Narodnyi soyuz*), the Peace and Unity Party (*Partiya mira i soglasiya*), the Agrarian Party (*Agrarnaya partiya Rossii*), Civic Force (*Grazhdanskaya Sila*), the Democratic Party of Russia (*Demokraticeskaya partiya Rossii*), and the Party of Social Justice (*Partiya sotsial'noi spravedlivosti*).

²⁰ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 29 October 2007, p. 1; *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 30 October 2007, p. 2.

²¹ 'Vybory 2007', see footnote 8.

was the ‘Party of Putin’, and it represented the election as a ‘national referendum in support of Vladimir Putin’.²² Its programme, in turn, was ‘Putin’s Plan’. Only 6%, according to the survey evidence, actually knew what the Plan was, but no less than 65% approved of it.²³ The party itself produced an elaborate compendium of Putin’s eight addresses to the Federal Assembly, with a subject index for the convenience of activists, under the title of ‘President Putin’s Plan’ (Pavlovsky 2007). Speaking to supporters in the summer of 2007, Gryzlov identified five of its key features. The first was the preservation of Russia as a ‘unique and great civilisation’. The second was the ‘building of a competitive economy’, and the third was a ‘new quality of life’. Fourth was the establishment of the ‘institutions of a civil society’, and fifth was the ‘further development of Russia as a sovereign democracy’²⁴—the term, avoided by Putin himself, that party ideologists had developed as their attempt to provide a larger purpose for his historical mission. Putin himself, during the campaign, accepted that United Russia was far from an ‘ideal political structure’, without ‘stable ideological principles’, and with a membership list that was full of careerists.²⁵ But neither did he conceal that he had been the ‘initiator of its establishment’.²⁶

There was accordingly a certain logic when at the first part of its 8th congress the Russian President agreed to head the United Russia party list, although he was not a member of the party itself.²⁷ He also announced that he might consider becoming prime minister if there was a president who was a ‘decent, capable, effective and modern-thinking person with whom it would be possible to work’.²⁸ Given this position at the head of the list of the single dominant party, it was not surprising that Putin’s occasional addresses set the tone of the entire campaign. A rally for his supporters at Luzhniki stadium in Moscow was particularly notable. It was the first speech in which Putin directly called for Russian voters to support United Russia; but it also contained a sharp attack on the integrity of his political opponents, accusing them of ‘slinking around Western embassies’ for their support.²⁹ Here and in other speeches, including an address to the diplomatic corps shortly before the vote, Putin repeatedly insisted that Russia would not allow its political choices to be ‘corrected from outside’,³⁰ and official spokesmen made clear that they had in mind the way in which (in their view) the electoral process in other post-Soviet republics had been used to set off a series of spurious ‘coloured revolutions’ that had actually been intended to convert them into Western clients.

All the registered parties, under the law, are obliged to publish an election manifesto in at least one national newspaper at least 20 days before the election takes place (art. 55:12). United Russia called its manifesto ‘Putin’s Plan: a worthy future for a great country’.³¹ Russia, they claimed, had been following a strategy that was ensuring that it became one of the ‘world centres of political and economic influence, cultural and

²² *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 17 October 2007, p. 1.

²³ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 2007, p. 19.

²⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 2007, pp. 10–11.

²⁵ *Izvestiya*, 14 November 2007, pp. 1–2.

²⁶ *Izvestiya*, 2 October 2007, p. 2.

²⁷ *Izvestiya*, 2 October 2007, p. 1; he was adopted the following day as the single name on the party’s federal list.

²⁸ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 3 October 2007, p. 1.

²⁹ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 22 November 2007, pp. 2–3.

³⁰ *Kommersant*, 29 November 2007, p. 4.

³¹ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 9 November 2007, p. 14.

moral attraction', a strategy that guaranteed a 'new quality of life for all the country's citizens'. This was 'Putin's Plan', and during the coming four years it would mean the 'further development of Russia as a unique civilisation', a more competitive economy, and the full implementation of the 'national projects' that Putin had first set out in a speech to the government in September 2005, and which included health, education, housing and agriculture. There would also be 'significant increases' in pay and pensions, support for the institutions of civil society, and a further strengthening of Russian sovereignty and defensive capacity so that it would have a 'worthy place in a multipolar world'. Putin, personally, was described as Russia's 'national leader', and the party itself as his 'political support'.

Of the other 10 parties that were registered as participants, only two could be regarded as serious competitors although scarcely as an electoral challenge. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, led by Gennadii Zyuganov since its refoundation in 1993, had contested all previous *Duma* elections and won seats in all of them, although it had been conspicuously less successful in 2003 (with just 12.6% of the list vote) than in the earlier contests. The party had traditionally appealed to leftwing opinion, and to those who were nostalgic for the social guarantees of the Soviet era (and were often older than other voters), but it also appealed to a 'national-patriotic' constituency, and in this respect its position did not necessarily differ from that of the regime itself. The list was headed by party leader Zyuganov, Nobel laureate Zhores Alferov, and the party's candidate in the 2004 presidential election, Nikolai Kharitonov. Zyuganov explained that the party would seek to destroy the 'three-way alliance of bureaucrats, oligarchs and bandits' that was running the country and to safeguard the interests of ordinary people through a more 'equitable distribution of the national wealth' and by 'dismantling the vertical chain of command'. The longer-term aim was a new policy of industrialising the country on the basis of twenty-first century technology in which the party would 'continue the fight to regain its image as the chief and only champion of the Russian people'.³²

The party's election manifesto, 'Power for the Working People!', took a gloomy view of the position in which Russia now found itself. But it insisted that a 'breakthrough to the future [was] possible', and that other countries—'socialist China', India, Brazil, 'fraternal Belarus', Cuba and Vietnam, Venezuela, Bolivia and other countries—had shown the way. The crucial element was an independent politics, and a 'refusal to live under the dictate of the imperialists'. The party's 'seven steps to a worthy future' included the nationalisation of natural resources and strategic industries, increases in pay and pensions, and state-led modernisation of industry, agriculture and transport. There would be moves towards 'people's power', including more honest elections and a reduction in the state bureaucracy, and all officials and deputies would be required to make annual declarations of their income and property. There would be a new emphasis on domestic security, including the restoration of the death penalty for especially serious crimes; and in foreign affairs, an emphasis on the restoration of relations among the former Soviet republics, including Ukraine, Belarus 'and possibly Kazakhstan'. In addition to this, there would be a return to free, high-quality education and health care, and a new constitution would be put to a popular vote that would restore power to the soviets of people's deputies.³³

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (*Liberal'no-demokraticheskaya partiya Rossii*) appealed to a rather different constituency, more

³² *Vremya novostei*, 24 September 2007, p. 2.

³³ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 9 November 2007, p. 12.

strongly nationalist and right wing. Its appeal had normally owed a great deal to Zhirinovskiy himself, who had led the party since its foundation in 1990 and was an outspoken, unpredictable but charismatic campaigner. It had been represented in all previous Dumas, but had always enjoyed much less success in the single-member constituencies than in the party-list contest. Its list included Andrei Lugovoi, who was wanted in the United Kingdom in connection with the murder of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko, as well as Zhirinovskiy and his son Igor' Lebedev.³⁴ The LDPR manifesto represented the party as the country's 'constructive opposition'. So far, only officials and oligarchs had gained from 16 years of economic reform. The LDPR called for oil and gas resources to be taken back from the oligarchs, and used to raise living standards. There should be a progressive system of income tax, in which the rich would pay more. The revenue this generated should be invested in better pensions and housing, and all salaries should be 'significantly increased'. Extra help should be given to small businesses, to the armed forces, and to the health service. There should be a seven-hour working day, with Wednesdays an additional day off. The federation itself should be simplified, with just 50 territories. And there should be an 'active multivector foreign policy', with its primary emphasis on Russia's southern neighbours and the possibility of the voluntary reintegration of the former Soviet republics into a new 'Russian Empire'.³⁵

Of the other parties, Just Russia was a combination of *Rodina* (a broadly 'leftpatriotic' party that had fought the previous election as a Kremlin-friendly opposition), together with the Pensioners' Party (*Rossiiskaya partiya pensionerov*) and the Russian Party of Life (*Rossiiskaya partiya zhizni*). Its central values, explained party leader and speaker of the upper house Sergei Mironov, were 'social justice and the wellbeing of citizens'. But social justice could only be achieved in a society that protected the weak as well as allowing the strong their opportunities. This was 'New Socialism', or in other words 'our own, Russian path to a just and united society and a social state'. A socialist perspective for Russia, explained the manifesto, involved a socially oriented economy, a strong state that was under democratic control, and a dynamically developing society. It meant policies that reflected the interests of the majority of the population, a fair distribution of incomes, protection from poverty and official arbitrariness, social security, and accessible health and educational systems. Just Russia also believed that taxation should be more progressive, with special duties on luxuries, and that salaries should be raised for all who worked in the state sector. Not surprisingly, given the party's origins, there was a considerable emphasis on pensions, which should represent at least 65% of previous rates of pay; there was no reference at all to the institutions of government themselves, or to defence and foreign affairs.³⁶

A further constituency was represented by the two parties that most directly represented liberal-democratic values, *Yabloko* and the Union of Right Forces. *Yabloko*, led since its foundation in 1993 by economist Grigorii Yavlinsky, had won no party-list seats in 2003 but took four of the single-member constituencies. Its preelection programme offered 'seven steps to equality of opportunities'. First of all, there would have to be political reforms, including genuinely free elections, a real separation of powers, and independent courts. Government should be separated at the same time from the conduct of business, and priority given to the development of a

³⁴ *Kommersant*, 18 September 2007, p. 3.

³⁵ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 8 November 2007, p. 12.

³⁶ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 14 November 2007, p. 18.

‘stratum of owners’, particularly in smaller and medium-sized enterprises. There should also be a one-off tax on the superprofits that had been earned by a very few during the corrupt auctions of state property during the 1990s, and trade unions should be established that could properly defend the rights of ordinary workers. Monopolies should be more closely regulated, ‘beginning with Gazprom’, and there should be higher levels of investment in education and public health. A distinctive element was *Yabloko*’s emphasis on the environment, based on the principle that ‘the polluter pays’ and organised through a restored ministry of ecology with greater powers.³⁷ The list was headed by Yavlinsky, with former human rights commissioner Sergei Kovalev in second place.³⁸

The Union of Right Forces was more overtly pro-market and pro-Western; it had been founded in 1999, and had won three single-member seats in the election to the outgoing *Duma*. Despite many attempts to do so, the two ‘democratic’ parties had never been able to merge or even agree a common list of parliamentary candidates, and it was not thought likely that the modest levels of support they attracted individually would allow either of them to reach the 7% threshold. The URF list was headed by party leader Nikita Belykh, with former party leader Boris Nemtsov in second place. Its manifesto called for a ‘liberal breakthrough’ instead of a ‘new “stagnation”’.³⁹ In the first place this meant returning to the *Duma* in sufficient numbers to form a party fraction, and then proposing a long-term strategy of reform that would reduce the country’s dependence on the export of energy while at the same time reducing the level of state ownership and distributing assets more widely. There would be legislative changes that would strengthen the rights of individual owners; the rights of the subjects of the federation would be properly respected; there would be equal opportunities for all, and targeted support for those whose circumstances required it; and political reforms. The dissolution of the USSR, in the party’s view, had been positive on balance, and the reforms of the 1990s broadly successful. Notwithstanding Russia’s particular characteristics, there was no realistic alternative to the ‘political and economic institutions and the same social security as in the West’.

Entering the campaign, United Russia had an overwhelmingly dominant position, and its rating in the opinion polls was very close to the share of the votes that were cast on 2 December (Figure 1). The adoption of Putin as the single name on the party’s federal list produced some improvement—6% in a week according to one estimate⁴⁰—but left it well below the president’s own approval rating. It had enormous advantages of other kinds, including its disproportionate access to the mass media (particularly television) and its ability to use the resources of the state itself. According to independent monitors, United Russia received from 57 to 62% of all prime-time political news coverage between 1 October and 22 November, much more than any of its competitors. Another exercise, which counted the number of times parties were mentioned, found that United Russia was twice as likely to be cited as the Communist Party, its nearest competitor.⁴¹ The same tendencies were apparent in other monitoring exercises: United Russia was the most likely to be shown taking the

³⁷ *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, 9 November 2007, p. 14.

³⁸ *Kommersant*, 17 September 2007, p. 3.

³⁹ *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, 9 November 2007, p. 5.

⁴⁰ *Kommersant*, 10 October 2007, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Moscow Times*, 30 November 2007, pp. 1–2.

initiative, it was the most likely to be mentioned in a positive way, and its spokespersons were the most likely to be reported in their own words.⁴²

In spite of the requirements of the law there was no shortage of evidence that the state itself was directly involved in the campaign, advantaging United Russia and disadvantaging its various opponents. In Nizhnii Novgorod, for instance, foremen went round the workforce at the city's massive vehicle factory telling them to vote for

Source: Adapted from www.levada.ru, last accessed 8 April 2008. Figures show the distribution of voting preferences among those who said they intended to vote, in rounded percentages (the November figures are for 23–27 November, beyond which survey forecasts could not be reported), and the vote itself on 2 December. CPRF=Communist Party of the Russian Federation; LDPR=Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia; URF=Union of Right Forces.

FIGURE 1. PARTY PREFERENCES AMONG INTENDING VOTERS, JANUARY–NOVEMBER 2007

Putin's party, and to phone in after they had left the polling station: 'Names would be taken, defiance punished'. Some, leaving nothing to chance, were told to obtain absentee certificates and fill them out in front of their immediate superiors. The factory director, a senior United Russia official, was able to report that nearly 80% of the workforce had voted; one of the factory workers became a deputy himself. Elsewhere in the city, teachers handed out leaflets promoting 'Putin's Plan' and told the children to lobby their parents. Some were 'threatened with bad grades if they failed to attend "children's referendums"'; at other schools, parents were simply 'ordered to attend mandatory meetings with representatives of United Russia'. At university level, students were told that unless they voted for the ruling party they would be evicted from their dorms. Evidently very concerned, they went out and 'voted "like a line of soldiers"' (Levy 2008).

⁴² *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 29 November 2007, p. 3.

Those who tried to assist any of the other parties found it rather more difficult to do so. Volunteers from the Union of Right Forces, for instance, ‘received hundreds of calls at all hours, warning them to stop working for their candidates. Otherwise [they] would be hurt’. And there was ‘black propaganda’, such as the distribution of ‘tens of thousands of leaflets’ suggesting that the URF ‘ardently favoured gay rights and employed canvassers with AIDS’ (neither was true). The leaflets often included the name and phone number of a leader of the party’s regional list of candidates; some had condoms attached, and announced offers to send supporters to a gay pride event in Amsterdam. Businesses cut off donations after threats from government officials, and the party was refused advertising space on everything from billboards to newspapers and local television. When Boris Nemtsov, who had been the regional governor, tried to campaign, nobody would rent him a hall. In November, the party’s headquarters was ransacked and spray-painted with profanities and graffiti that proclaimed it the ‘Party of Gays’. A few weeks before the election, the party’s leading official in the region gave up and renounced the party at a press conference that was heavily covered on state television. ‘You begin to think: you have a family, you have a business, and you may value this significantly more than a political career’, explained one local activist.⁴³

There were similar difficulties when the openly oppositional ‘Other Russia’ coalition sought to communicate its views, or organise in public. The former world chess champion Gary Kasparov was one of dozens to be arrested by riot police when he took part in an anti-Kremlin protest rally in Moscow on 24 November, his speech interrupted by a ‘screeching noise from loudspeakers on top of a nearby building’.⁴⁴ In St Petersburg the following day ‘scores of demonstrators were detained and some beaten . . . as riot police broke up a protest over the Kremlin’s lurch towards authoritarianism’; nearly 200 were arrested, among them Boris Nemtsov.⁴⁵ Opposition leaders, including Kasparov, were repeatedly harassed by pro-Kremlin youth in the run-up to the vote: stalked by activists, their news conferences disrupted, and recordings of loud, maniacal music played at their public meetings. One pro-Kremlin activist handcuffed himself three times to Kasparov’s car; Boris Nemtsov was pelted with condoms.⁴⁶ Kasparov spoiled his ballot paper on 2 December, and urged his supporters to do likewise; in his view it had been the ‘most unfair and dirtiest [election] in the whole history of modern Russia’.⁴⁷

The turnout and the results

In the event, on the evidence of our post-election survey, most Russians thought the election had been reasonably fair.⁴⁸ A substantial 63% thought it had been largely or entirely fair; just 14% said they thought it had been ‘mostly not free and fair’, and only 4% thought it had been ‘not free and fair at all’. Similarly, just over 1% reported that their vote had been influenced by outside pressures, and 7% that attempts had

⁴³ See *Moscow Times*, 30 November 2007, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁴ *Sunday Telegraph*, 26 November 2007, p. 37.

⁴⁵ *Guardian*, 26 November 2007, p. 16.

⁴⁶ *Moscow Times*, 4 December 2007, p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Guardian*, 4 December 2007, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Our survey was conducted under the auspices of Russian Research between 30 January and 27 February 2008 (N=2,000), and is representative of the over-18 population of the Russian Federation.

been made to influence them; but 78% reported no pressure whatsoever. Majorities, although less decisive ones, thought the formatting and counting of the ballot papers had been largely or entirely fair (61% agreed, 25% disagreed), and that television coverage of the election had been largely or entirely fair (59% agreed, 28% disagreed). Predictably, it was a verdict that differed considerably across supporters of the various parties. As many as 27% of those who voted for United Russia, for instance, thought the election had been ‘entirely free and fair’, as compared with 17% across all the parties and just 10% of those who had voted for the Communist Party or Just Russia. Popular perceptions of the fairness of the election, in other words, were at least partly a consequence of whether one’s own preferred party had done well.⁴⁹

Given the choice on offer, which was broadly speaking for or against the Russian president and his ‘plan’, there was a heavy emphasis on raising turnout from the levels of earlier years in order to provide a clear mandate for the winners and an advantageous starting-point for the Kremlin’s favoured candidate in the presidential contest three months later. For this and other reasons, the 2007 election showed a return to the levels of turnout that had been normal in earlier post-communist years (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
RUSSIAN DUMA ELECTIONS, 1993–2007

Date	PL seats ^a	SMC seats	% PL threshold	PL contenders	PL winners	Turnout (%) ^b	
						‘Voted’	‘Took part’
12 Dec 1993	225	225	5	13	8	n.d.	54.81 ^c
17 Dec 1995	225	225	5	43	4	64.38	64.73
19 Dec 1999	225	225	5	26	6	61.69	61.85
7 Dec 2003	225	225	5	23	3	55.67	55.75
2 Dec 2007	450	[none]	7	11	4	63.71	[63.78]

Notes: ^a Although conventionally described as ‘parties’, successive election laws in fact defined those eligible to nominate national lists of candidates as ‘electoral associations’ (including but not limited to parties) and ‘electoral blocs’ (1993), ‘associations’ and ‘blocs’ but without any explicit reference to parties (1995), ‘electoral associations’ including but not limited to parties (1999), and ‘electoral blocs’ as well as ‘political parties’ (2003). The election law that applied in 2007 was the first that gave the exclusive right to nominate a national list of candidates to ‘parties’ and was accordingly the first strictly defined ‘party-list’ election.

^b Turnout shows respectively those who ‘took part in the voting’ as a percentage of the registered electorate, and the percentage who ‘took part in the election’ by receiving ballot papers (which was the formal criterion for establishing the validity of an election until the law was amended in April 2007 and the turnout requirement was removed; thereafter official returns reported only the number who had actually cast ballots). In both cases, until 2007, slightly different numbers took part in the single-member constituency and partylist elections (in 2003, for instance, 55.3% of the registered electorate cast ballots in the single-member constituencies, but 55.7% in the party-list contest); the totals reported are for the party-list contest in every case. In 2007 voting was only by party list so there was no divergence.

^c See Vybory (1996, p. 52).

⁴⁹ A similar question about the fairness of the 2003 election is not directly comparable, as it used a five-point scale. However, in that survey 17% gave the highest level of fairness, 29% the second level, and 34% the intermediate category. The results suggest broadly comparable levels of perceptions about fairness between the 2003 and 2007 surveys (we intend to return to the question of the ‘freeness and fairness’ of Russian elections more systematically in future publications).

PL=party list; SMC=single-member constituency.

Source: Official communiques of the Central Electoral Commission, including subsequent revisions.

The options available in 2007 were less numerous than they had been in earlier elections, with no single-member constituency contests and no opportunity to vote ‘against all’. Up to this point, those who wished to register their protest could do so by voting; in 2007, the only opportunity to do so was by spoiling the ballot paper (just over 1% did so, fewer than in 2003), or not voting at all. In other words, changes in the ballot-paper options should if anything have lowered, rather than increased the turnout. Nor had there been any increase in levels of interest in politics generally (on our evidence, a slight decline); and reported levels of campaign exposure were similar in both elections.⁵⁰ In fact, the rise in turnout appears largely to be explained by the appeal of United Russia to many of those who had abstained or voted ‘against all’ in 2003, and who might otherwise have abstained in 2007.⁵¹

The election itself showed a big swing towards United Russia, allowing party leader Gryzlov to claim that Putin had ‘won on the first round’.⁵² Putin himself expressed satisfaction not simply with the turnout and the confidence that had evidently been placed in his own list of candidates, but with an outcome that would increase the legitimacy of the *Duma* itself in that the parties that had won representation accounted for 90% of the popular vote, rather than the previous 70%.⁵³ According to the final tally (Table 2), United Russia had won almost two of every three votes cast, which meant a very substantial increase in its share of the total ballot and almost twice as many individual votes as it had secured in 2003. Only three other parties exceeded the 7% threshold, and indeed no more would have done so if the threshold had remained at its earlier level. The Communist Party took just under 12%, slightly down on its 2003 support but a result that maintained its position as the most obvious alternative to an otherwise entirely dominant United Russia; the party was also the second largest in the new *Duma*. The Liberal Democrats were down more substantially on their 2003 result, and Just Russia was down on the 9% that its main constituent, *Rodina*, had won four years earlier.

Clearly, then, United Russia was able to persuade many to support it who had previously given their support to other parties. But which parties particularly? Table 3 shows the flow of the vote between the 2003 and 2007 elections, based on a recall question in the survey.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ In 2003, 44% said they were ‘very interested’ or ‘somewhat interested’ in politics, as compared with 38% in 2007. Similarly, in 2003, 82% reported receiving promotional materials from the parties, compared to 77% in 2007; 42% had been canvassed at their home in 2003, and 43% in 2007. Levels of party activity, in other words, were very similar in the two elections.

⁵¹ One other source of the increase in turnout was the greater use of mobile ballot boxes: 4.6 million voted in this way in 2007, compared with 3.4 million in 2003 (these votes were themselves more open to improper influence); and twice as many voted on the basis of absentee certificates (1.2 million, as compared with 572,965 in 2003). Twice as many voted in advance of polling day, but this was still a very small proportion of the total (just 147,966 votes in 2007).

⁵² *Izvestiya*, 3 December 2007, p. 2.

⁵³ *Izvestiya*, 4 December 2007, p. 3.

⁵⁴ There is, of course, a substantial literature showing the perils of vote recall (for a review see Wright 1993), with respondents typically overestimating their support for the winning party. This bias should be borne in mind when interpreting the results in Table 3, although the broad patterns we identify should hold true.

TABLE 2
THE DUMA ELECTION RESULT, 2 DECEMBER 2007

	Share of vote (%)	Change 2003–2007	Number of seats	Change 2003–2007
United Russia	64.30	(+26.74)	315	(+92)
Communist Party of the Russian Federation	11.57	(-1.04)	57	(+5)
Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia	8.14	(-3.31)	40	(+4)
Just Russia: Rodina/ Pensioners/Life [7% threshold]	7.74	-	38	
Agrarian Party of Russia	2.30			
Yabloko	1.59	(-2.71)		(-4)
Civic Force	1.05			
Union of Right Forces	0.96	(-3.01)		(-3)
Patriots of Russia	0.89			
Party of Social Justice	0.22			
Democratic Party of Russia	0.13			
Invalid votes	1.09	(-0.47)		
Total	100		450	

Notes: The registered electorate was 109,145,517, of whom 69,537,065 cast a valid or invalid ballot (63.71%). The share of the vote in 2007 is compared with the 2003 party-list (but not single-member constituency) vote, and the number of seats with the seats won in both the party-list and single-member constituency contests in the earlier election.

Sources: Adapted from the Central Electoral Commission communique published in *Vestnik Tsentral'noi izbiratel'noi komissii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 19, 222, 2007, pp. 5–22, and the corrected results of the 2003 election that appeared in *Vestnik Tsentral'noi izbiratel'noi komissii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 8, 2005, pp. 215–19.

It was clear, first of all, that United Russia had been the most effective of the parties in retaining its core vote: indeed nearly nine of every 10 United Russia voters in 2003 had also voted for the party in 2007. By contrast, the Communist Party and the Liberal Democrats retained just two out of every three of their 2003 supporters, and Just Russia not much more than one out of every three that had supported *Rodina* in the earlier contest. For both the Communists and the Liberal Democrats, 14% of their 2003 supporters defected to United Russia, although a similar number also decided to abstain, suggesting a measure of ambiguity in their preferences. United Russia was also able to attract the support of significant minorities of voters who had either abstained in 2003 or voted 'against all'. In addition, it attracted a disproportionate level of support among new voters: of those doing so for the first time in 2007, 77% voted for United Russia but just 6% for the Communists, 12% for the Liberal Democrats and 2% for Just Russia.

Explaining the results

How do we explain the outcome of the 2007 *Duma* election and, in particular, the high level of support for United Russia? If the comparative literature is any guide, we might expect one of the main reasons to be the strong performance of the economy in the period leading up to the election, and its positive effects on support for the Kremlin and its favoured party. For most of the 1990s the Russian economy

languished, reaching its nadir in the financial crisis of August 1998 when the government defaulted on its ruble bonds and the currency lost much of its exchange value. Since 1999, the economy has grown by a minimum of 5% a year, and in most years the level of growth has been significantly higher than this (in 2007 itself it was more than 8%).

TABLE 3
THE TURNOVER OF THE DUMA VOTE, 2003–2007

	2003 Vote						
	United Russia	CPRF	Lib Dem	Rodina	Other party	Against all	Non-voter
2007 Vote							
United Russia	89	14	14	30	37	40	33
CPRF	<1	64	4	7	9	5	3
Lib Dem	1	3	67	2	2	10	4
Just Russia	3	3	1	37	7	10	3
Other party	1	2	1	17	37	2	2
Non-voter	5	14	13	8	8	33	55
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(511)	(202)	(60)	(60)	(98)	(40)	(433)

Notes: Figures are for all respondents; those too young to vote in 2003 are included under non-voters. The questions were: ‘Tell me, please, for which party you voted in the elections to the State *Duma*’ (showing a card); similarly for ‘the elections to the State *Duma* in December 2003’.

Source: authors’ post-election survey (N=2,000), fielded between 30 January and 27 February 2008.

More recently, there has been a substantial increase in capital investment, particularly in the construction industry. Notwithstanding the problems of insider buyout, weak corporate governance and widespread corruption, these macroeconomic changes have produced considerable prosperity for ordinary Russians, who now enjoy higher levels of disposable income than ever before and the lowest rates of unemployment recorded since the collapse of communism.

The impact of economic conditions on electoral outcomes is one of the most intensively researched areas of political science (Lewis-Beck & Stagmaier 2000). While the findings differ between countries, two conclusions consistently emerge. First, there is a distinction between how voters view their own (egocentric) economic situation, and how they evaluate the country’s (sociotropic) economy. In general, sociotropic evaluations exert more influence on voting than egocentric ones (Kinder & Kiewiet 1979). And secondly, countries that have clear lines of accountability to a single party in government have also been shown to exhibit higher levels of economic voting than countries that have coalition arrangements, where it is more difficult to assign blame or credit for economic performance (Lewis-Beck 1988). This observation is also supported in the post-communist context by Tucker’s comparative study (2006; Colton 1996), which found that the impact of the economy was greatest in countries in which the lines of accountability were clearest.

We set out our evidence of the public view of economic conditions in Figure 2. In 2000, when Putin took office, negative assessments of national economic performance vastly outnumbered positive ones; for example, in January 2000, just 2% thought the Russian economy was performing well compared with 70% who thought it was performing badly, thus producing an index of 768. That negative perception has

Figures show the percentage saying the economy is 'very good' or 'good' minus the percentage saying 'bad' or 'very bad'.

Sources: The figures for January 1995–January 2007 are derived from *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya*, 1,87, January–February 2007, and for January - November 2007 from *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya*, 6, 92, November–December 2007.

FIGURE 2. TRENDS IN PERCEPTIONS OF ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

steadily diminished over the two terms of the Putin presidency, and while by late 2007 more people were still pessimistic than optimistic, the gap had narrowed to just 715 points for the economy as a whole and 718 points for the family economy. For most of the period, the national economy was evaluated more negatively than the family economy, but by 2007 the differences were negligible. The improvement in both indices, moreover, was relatively consistent, apart from 2005, when the government's wage payments to state employees went into arrears because of problems with the budget deficit, and after an attempt to convert social benefits into their monetary equivalent at the start of the year led to open protests across the country, particularly by pensioners.

The clear lines of accountability from the economy to Putin and United Russia, on this basis, coupled with the very significant improvement in public perceptions of economic performance, should have enhanced Putin's own approval ratings and also those of the party that has defined itself by its support for the president and his policies. Table 4 shows that this is indeed the case. Among United Russia voters, for instance, 60% said they believed the country's economy had improved over the previous 12 months; fewer were satisfied with their own personal economic circumstances, but as we have already noted, it is sociotropic rather than egocentric

TABLE 4
THE ECONOMY AND THE VOTE

	2003	2007	2007 Vote			
			United Russia	CPRF	Lib Dem	Just Russia
Country economy past 12 months						
Better	40	47	60	23	36	37
Same	44	34	30	37	41	43
Worse	16	19	10	40	23	20
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,921)	(1,335)	(898)	(161)	(104)	(84)
Satisfaction with things in country						
Satisfied	21	34	45	13	19	21
Neither	33	32	34	24	27	27
Unsatisfied	46	34	21	63	44	52
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,926)	(1,335)	(898)	(161)	(104)	(84)
Family economy past 12 months						
Better	24	31	39	12	22	25
Same	52	42	42	40	43	44
Worse	24	27	19	48	35	41
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,985)	(1,389)	(939)	(167)	(106)	(87)

Notes: Question wordings were: ‘What do you think of the state of the economy in Russia today? Would you say that the condition of the economy is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad or very bad?’; ‘Would you say that the state of the economy in Russia in the past 12 months has improved, stayed the same or deteriorated?’; ‘Tell me please, in the last 12 months has the material position of your family worsened, stayed the same or improved?’

Source: As Table 3.

judgments that are the most pertinent to electoral outcomes. Supporters of the other parties were much less positive about the country’s economy: Communist voters, for example, were much more likely to say that the country’s economy had performed badly over the previous 12 months and nearly half thought their family economy had become worse over the same period. Evidently, positive views about the country’s economic performance and its association with Putin had a very significant impact on the United Russia vote; just how significant we will quantify later.

For Putin himself, the steadily improving economy was obviously a major part of his appeal to voters. But he was also seen as a decisive leader who was prepared to stand up to Western powers, notably over the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He also improved his position among the public by imprisoning or driving into exile several of the oligarchs who had become very rich in the Yel’tsin era. Putin’s approval ratings have been high by any standards, as Figure 3 demonstrates. For most leaders, the only trend in their popular approval once they are elected is down, and the only variable is how rapid that decline in public support is. Putin represents an altogether different phenomenon: in January 2001 his approval rating was 76%, but by December 2007, after nearly seven years in office, his rating had actually improved to 87%, an almost unprecedented situation for a leader in any peacetime democracy. The only slight

Annual figures from January each year.

Source: Adapted from http://www.russiavotes.org/president/putin_performance_trends.php, accessed 19 April 2008.

FIGURE 3. EVALUATIONS OF PUTIN'S PERFORMANCE AS PRESIDENT

decline in his approval rating occurred in 2005 when, as we saw in Figure 2, wage arrears and the monetisation of social benefits produced a temporary dip in the increasing optimism about the national economy. By early 2007 that decline was behind him, and he had returned to the 'Turkmenian' ratings of the early 2000s.

How far did the 'Putin effect' benefit United Russia and, by implication, damage the other parties? Table 5 suggests that the benefits were considerable. Most strikingly of all, no fewer than 96% of United Russia voters approved of Putin's overall performance; but even among the opposition parties a majority approved of him—among Communist voters, almost two-thirds approved of his performance, increasing to 87% among voters for Just Russia. One of Putin's selling points was that he represented the strong leader that many Russians had thought they needed during the painful economic transition of the 1990s, at a time when the country had actually been in the charge of an elderly man of uncertain health and eccentric behaviour. United Russia appears to have drawn no particular benefit from Putin's strong personal authority: Table 5 shows that party differences on the view that a 'strong leader is better than any laws' were marginal, and indeed Communist voters were more likely to endorse this view than their United Russia counterparts. The Putin effect, therefore, would seem to be less closely connected with his leadership style than with the tangible economic achievements with which it was associated. We return to this interpretation below.

The third possible explanation for the strong support for United Russia in the 2007 election was that Western-style democratic principles were at last beginning to gain widespread popular acceptance in Russia. The early post-communist years had been marked by nostalgia for the authoritarian past, particularly during the move towards a market economy by means of 'shock therapy' in which the price of staple foods had

Annual figures from January each year.

TABLE 5
THE 'PUTIN EFFECT' AND THE VOTE

	2003	2007	2007 Vote			
			United Russia	CPRF	Lib Dem	Just Russia
Strong leader better than laws						
Agree	40	37	40	50	43	38
Neither	33	35	35	22	31	35
Disagree	27	28	25	18	26	27
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,857)	(1,882)	(895)	(158)	(102)	(86)
View of Putin						
Approve	90	86	96	63	69	87
Disapprove	10	14	4	37	31	13
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,953)	(1,948)	(932)	(161)	(106)	(87)

Notes: Question wordings were: 'Tell me please, to what extent do you agree with the view that a strong, powerful leader can do more for our country than any laws? [Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, entirely agree]'; 'Tell me please, on the whole do you approve or disapprove of the activity of V. V. Putin as President of Russia? [Completely approve, partially approve, partially disapprove, complete disapprove]'.
Source: As Table 3.

risen dramatically. Putin appeared to represent a successful transition to a stable and deliberately 'Russian' form of democracy that had considerable attraction for ordinary voters after the confusion and lawlessness of the Yel'tsin years. No longer was the state falling apart; taxes were being collected, pensions were being paid and the law was being enforced, sometimes with exemplary severity. At the same time, living standards were steadily rising. While there were concerns about Putin's apparently weak commitment to media freedom and human rights, these were very much minority issues. And his independent foreign policy and willingness to use Russia's energy reserves to improve its international standing further enhanced his appeal (Rose & Munro 2002, pp. 218ff).

To what extent did United Russia benefit from the popular belief that Russia under Putin's leadership had at last become a stable democracy? The 2003 and 2007 surveys both address this question. For instance, respondents were asked several questions about their preferred political system (see Table 6). When asked to choose between four alternative systems, a plurality of respondents in the 2007 survey opted for the 'political system today' as their preferred option, followed by 'the Soviet system but in a different, more democratic form'. No more than one in five wanted a return to the Soviet system, and just one in 10 chose 'democracy in its Western form'. A majority of respondents, accordingly, favoured some form of democracy, although they were divided between the current system and one of a more Soviet kind. However, when we compare these results with those for 2003, there are two significant changes. First, significantly fewer respondents preferred the Soviet system in 2007 than in 2003—20% compared with 35% in 2003. And secondly, there was a large shift in favour of a 'Soviet system but in a different, more democratic form'; just 7% supported this

TABLE 6
POLITICAL SYSTEM PREFERENCES AND THE VOTE

	2003	2007	2007 Vote			
			United Russia	CPRF	Lib Dem	Just Russia
Best political system						
Soviet system	35	20	13	47	26	20
Soviet, more democracy	7	31	28	44	33	44
Political system today	40	36	48	7	18	17
Democracy as in West	18	13	11	2	23	19
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,557)	(1,711)	(932)	(161)	(106)	(87)
Democracy better than alternatives						
Agree	71	76	82	50	33	81
Disagree	29	24	18	50	67	19
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,664)	(1,681)	(819)	(134)	(95)	(79)

Notes: Question wordings were: ‘Which of the following political systems would be the most appropriate for Russia? The Soviet system that we had in our country before perestroika; the Soviet system but in a different, more democratic form; the political system that presently exists; democracy of the Western kind’; ‘Tell me please, do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Democracy may have its faults, but it is better than any other form of government”. Do you agree completely, agree, disagree or completely disagree with this statement?’ The estimates for the latter question in 2003 come from a 2005 survey.

Source: as Table 3.

option in 2003, but 31% did so in 2007. Overall, though the evidence is hardly unequivocal, there has been some movement from a Soviet-type system to one that incorporates at least a number of more democratic features.

United Russia, moreover, has benefited from these changes in public opinion. In 2007, almost half the party’s supporters preferred ‘the political system that exists today’, compared to just 18% of Liberal Democrat voters and only 7% of Communist voters. Communist voters, not surprisingly, were the most likely to support a return to the Soviet system (47%). United Russia voters were also the most supportive of the view that democracy was better than the other alternatives: 82% supported this view, followed by 81% of Just Russia voters and just 33% of Liberal Democrat voters. The evidence, in other words, also offers support for the view that there has not simply been a shift in favour of a more ‘democratic’ system, but also that this shift of opinion has been associated with the rise of United Russia, with a causality that is likely to operate in both directions.

We have, accordingly, three possible explanations for the strong public support for United Russia in the 2007 *Duma* election, each of which receives some level of support in the bivariate analyses presented above: economic performance; positive evaluations of Putin in particular; and a personal commitment to a more democratic political system, with the Soviet system being at one extreme, a Western system at the other.⁵⁵ Which of these explanations is the most persuasive? To make this evaluation we estimate a multinomial logistic regression (MNL) model that compares the voters from each party with one another; the results are shown in Table 7. MNL is appropriate where a dependent variable has more than two categories, and enables a

⁵⁵ The variable is scored on an ordinal scale, with the Soviet system=1, a more democratic Soviet system=2, the political system as it is today=3, and democracy as in West=4. The variable therefore represents the degree of support for democracy.

more complex statistical model to be estimated; it is especially helpful in the analysis of voting in a multiparty system, as in Russia.⁵⁶ For ease of interpretation, the analyses are limited here to the four parties that cleared the threshold and won representation in the 2007 election: United Russia, the Communist Party, the Liberal Democrats and Just Russia.

The results in Table 7 show all the sets of contrasts between voters for the four parties; our interest is in the contrasts involving United Russia voters, which cover the first three equations in the table. These three equations show the strong effect of approval of Putin's performance in distinguishing United Russia voters from voters of the other three parties. By contrast, the notion of a strong leader is not a significant influence in any of the six equations. Next in importance is economic performance, with optimists being more likely to vote for United Russia than either of the other three parties, net of other circumstances. As theories of economic voting predict, it is sociotropic evaluations of economic performance that are more important than egocentric ones; indeed, evaluations of the family economy are not statistically significant in any of the three equations. And third, there is a significant effect for believing that democracy is better than the Soviet system, but only in distinguishing United Russia from Communist voters, not from Liberal Democrat or Just Russia supporters. There is no effect for believing that democracy is a better system than the alternatives, again net of other circumstances.

The findings underline the impact of Putin individually in shaping support for the United Russia party list. However, as already noted, much of this positive view of Putin's performance is related to a positive assessment of the national economy. This hypothesis is supported by the survey data, and when the equations in Table 7 were re-estimated but leaving out approval of Putin's performance, the effect of the economy—via the public's evaluations of the country's economy over the past 12 months—was of considerably greater importance. In other words, much of the impact of Putin on party support is a consequence of strong growth in the economy, and voters' assigning credit for that growth to Putin. It has less to do with Putin's style of leadership, or with his support for representative democracy. This conclusion is underlined by the strong correlation between a positive view of the national economy and approval of Putin ($r=0.379$, $p<0.000$); by contrast, the correlation between approval of Putin and support for a strong leader is not statistically significant ($r=0.025$, $p=0.388$). Putin's popular appeal, in other words, has been substantially based on strong economic performance, and it is that which has underpinned the widespread popular support for the party with which he is identified.

⁵⁶ See Whitten and Palmer (1996). Strictly speaking, multinomial probit is a more appropriate method for analysing voting behaviour, but it is less easy to interpret and calculate and for that reason, MNL is used here.

TABLE 7
PREDICTING THE 2007 PARTY VOTE (MNL ESTIMATES)

	<i>(Parameter estimates and standard errors)</i>					
	<i>United vs CPRF</i>	<i>United vs Lib Dem</i>	<i>United vs Fair</i>	<i>CPRF vs Lib Dem</i>	<i>CPRF vs Fair</i>	<i>Lib Dem vs Fair</i>
Economic performance						
Economy better past 12 months	0.36* (0.17)	0.05 (0.18)	0.41* (0.19)	-0.31 (0.21)	0.06 (0.22)	0.36 (0.23)
Family economy better past 12 months	0.21 (0.16)	0.11 (0.17)	0.14 (0.19)	-0.09 (0.20)	-0.07 (0.22)	0.02 (0.23)
Satisfied with things in country	0.42** (0.13)	0.56** (0.14)	0.50* (0.16)	0.14 (0.17)	0.08 (0.19)	-0.06 (0.19)
The Putin effect						
Strong leader better than laws	-0.06 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.11)	0.02 (0.12)	0.02 (0.13)	0.01 (0.14)
Approve of Putin Political system	1.12** (0.15)	1.03** (0.16)	0.63* (0.18)	-0.09 (0.18)	-0.48** (0.20)	-0.40** (0.21)
Democracy better than Soviet	0.93** (0.16)	0.04 (0.15)	0.07 (0.16)	-0.88** (0.20)	-0.85** (0.21)	0.03 (0.20)
Democracy better than others	-0.07 (0.17)	-1.03 (0.18)	-0.22 (0.21)	0.04 (0.20)	-0.15 (0.23)	-0.19 (0.25)
Constant	-6.31	-3.34	-2.49	2.97	3.82	0.85
Nagelkerke R-Sq (N)	0.35 (1,306)					

Notes: *Statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, two-tailed. Multinomial logistic regression showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting six sets of contrasts between party voters.

Source: As Table 3.

Conclusion

It was in many ways appropriate that a party in whose foundation Putin indicated he had played a very direct role was a party that owed its electoral success to that association. Putin, indeed, had ‘won on the first round’: he led United Russia’s party list, its programme was ‘Putin’s Plan’, it presented the election itself as a ‘referendum’ on the president and his record of government. On our evidence, it was less Putin as an individual or a political leader that had helped United Russia to its victory: it was his association with a rapid improvement in living standards. Putin himself, during the campaign, had indicated his dissatisfaction with the party: as we have seen, he deplored its lack of ideological principle, and the way in which it had

become a vehicle for ambitious officials at all levels. But the Kremlin needed an obedient instrument through which it could control the legislative process, and a result that would provide a launching pad for its chosen presidential contender. It was able to achieve both of these objectives.

All the same, the vote in conjunction with the turnout meant that United Russia had gained the support of not much more than 40% of the entire electorate. In the two capitals, Moscow and St Petersburg, not much more than 50% had taken part and the United Russia list took no more than 54.2 and 50.3% of the vote, respectively; this meant that United Russia had taken not much more than a quarter of the electorate in the president's own home town, or in the nation's capital. In the distant Nenets autonomous district, support for United Russia was lower still, at 48.8%. All of this left the United Russia vote well below the vote that Putin had personally attained in the 2004 presidential contest, and it was—some suggested—the reason he had failed to make a personal appearance at the United Russia headquarters on the night following the vote, an 'unprecedented' absence.⁵⁷ Leading officials in the regions that had reported a below-average turnout, or whose electors had fallen behind others in their support for the Kremlin party, were expected to examine their positions and some were likely to face dismissal.⁵⁸ But it was certainly a result that would be sufficient for the Kremlin's immediate purposes.

In a larger sense, the result had both positive and negative implications for the Russian leadership. On our evidence, there were relatively few who thought the result was other than a genuine reflection of the wishes of the electorate. And there was no reason to be surprised that a strong record of economic performance should have delivered a convincing victory for the party that was associated with its achievement. Or at least, for the party whose leading candidate was associated with its achievement. At the same time, there was little evidence that United Russia had established an identity that would allow it to appeal for popular support whatever the success of the policies with which it was associated; it would be successful as long as the economy continued to advance, but no longer. In this sense, its future was not very different from that of the president and the 'plan' that had just been endorsed by the Russian electorate. If economic growth began to falter, both United Russia and its leading candidate might find they could draw on very shallow reserves of loyalty.

Australian National University
University of Glasgow

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⁵⁷ *Kommersant*, 4 December 2007, p. 2.

⁵⁸ *Kommersant*, 5 December 2007, p. 1.

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