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A coloured revolution in Moscow?

Joshwa Tucker

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Two weeks ago, most Russia observers were approaching the December 3, 2011 Russian parliamentary elections with **a collective yawn**: United Russia (the ruling party, now headed by current Russian president Dmitry Medvedev) would win; Vladimir Putin would be elected to a third (now six-year) term as president in a few months; and little would change.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the coronation of Tsar Vladimir: United Russia, despite maintaining a majority status in the newly elected parliament, had by what all accounts was a **dismal showing** in the election, despite **major accusations of fraud** (fraud that would have inflated the party's vote count), including **concerns voiced by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton**.

Protests - aided by social media (eg, **here** and **here**) - have **broken out in Russia**, culminating in Saturday's unprecedented protests **throughout the country** - but especially **in Moscow** where, according to the BBC, **as many as 50,000 people** may have gathered in the largest protests in Russia since the collapse of communism.

These developments raise some immediate challenges for our understanding of Russian politics. Is a **coloured revolution** - long **dreaded by the Kremlin** - finally coming to Russia? Are the winds of the Arab Spring blowing back to Europe? Might we finally see a true Twitter Revolution (***@stopputin***), growing out of the fact that the Russian state controls TV but not the blogosphere (see Yale University professor Jason Lyall's comments **here**)?

Or is this just a blip along the road to politics as usual in Russia, with Putin on his way back to the Kremlin for six (or 12?) more years of the same iron grip on power?

While undoubtedly both the Kremlin and opposition elites will have a large role to play in determining how Russian politics unfolds in the near future, I want to focus for a moment on the motivations of the masses, about which we know little at the moment - beyond the anecdotal observations of journalists. Political science theory suggests two possible - and not necessarily mutually exclusive - explanations for what is now going on.

First, as I have argued in a 2007 article in ***Perspectives on Politics***, electoral fraud can serve as a valuable "**focal point**" for a society in which many people hold grievances against an abusive regime. Attempts to address these grievances in the course of daily life are likely to entail high costs coupled with very low chances of success in any meaningful sense; consequently, most citizens will choose not to challenge the regime, thus reflecting the now well-known **collective action problem**.

When a regime commits electoral fraud, however, an individual's calculus regarding whether to participate in a protest against the regime can be changed significantly. If everyone chooses to protest simultaneously, then the costs of protest to any one individual can be dramatically lowered. Electoral fraud - when it is publicised - can therefore be a signal to aggrieved citizens that other citizens are going to join in protest *now*. Add social media to the mix, and you suddenly have a situation where lots of citizens who previously wanted to oppose the regime suddenly have a situation where they think they can. Moreover, electoral fraud is especially valuable signal precisely because it increases the potential benefits from protest as well: If you "succeed" in protesting a fraudulent election, you really can "throw the bums out".

Moreover, the 2011 Russian Duma elections may have sent an additional signal as well: that the administration was actually weaker than most people thought it was in the days before the election. The fact that the Putin administration - despite all of the resources at its disposal - was unable to win a majority of the votes *and* it was so easy for citizens to catch it in the act of fraudulent behaviour (see, for example, this **YouTube video** with more than 300,000 views) may have also punctured the veneer of an all-powerful regime, thus again reducing the potential costs to protest. As **NYU political scientist Andrew Little noted:**

> *Protests over fraud may be less about fraud than the fact that the election result revealed the weakness of the regime. Most of the protests seem centred around the regime cheating, but the regime has been cheating for a long time. What has changed is that they did less well in the election, signaling weakness and* ***potentially lowering the costs or increasing the benefits to protest****. So the fact that protesters think fraud was committed matters, but only in the sense that it means for a fixed reported election result, increasing beliefs about how much fraud was committed makes observers thing the regime was weaker or less popular.*

So one possible explanation for what is going on in Russia is that the regime is genuinely unpopular, that citizens now desire a major change, and the result of the 2011 Duma elections has provided an opportunity for these citizens to act together both by providing a focal point for coordinated action and by revealing that the regime may be weaker than thought. However, there

is another possible story at work here. Political scientists have long argued that citizens do not always vote for their most preferred candidate (which we call "sincere voting"), and instead sometimes make a strategic choice to vote for a different candidate (which we call "strategic voting"). In a 2006 ***Journal of Politics*** **article**, Princeton University professor **Adam Meirowitz** and I present a formal theory showing that in some instances it is rational for citizens - when confronting a sequence of two elections where the first election was for a weaker office than the second election - to vote strategically and use their vote in the first election to "send a message" to a candidate running in the second election, by casting their vote in the first election for a less preferred party.

The content of this message is essentially that the candidate running in the second election should shape up and perform better, and thus does not necessarily signal a genuine preference for that candidate in the second election to lose.

How does this apply to the 2011 Russian Duma elections? The Duma is a weak institution in comparison with the position of the President of Russia, for which elections will be held in a few months. Thus, our model suggests that it is possible that many people who voted against Putin's party - United Russia - in the Duma elections did so in order to send a signal to Putin that they wanted him to shape up. This may have meant they wanted less corruption, less of a free rein for the current ruling elite, or more attention paid to the needs of ordinary citizens.

However, it would not necessarily mean they wanted the end of Putinism or for Putin himself to exit the political scene. If this interpretation of the vote is correct, then it would suggest that should Putin spend the next few months "responding" to the signal and showing the voters he has heard their message, it would not be surprising to see many return to Putin's camp in the presidential election. Unfortunately from the point of view of an analyst, such a result - more votes for Putin in the presidential election than United Russia received in the parliamentary elections - would be observationally indistinguishable from a decision by the Kremlin to *increase* the amount of fraud in the presidential election, which is also a distinct possibility in the Russian case.

Only time will tell which - if either - of these interpretations of the 2011 Russian Duma elections and their aftermath is correct, but the implications for Russian politics may be large. In closing, let me suggest the possibility that they both may be correct. It is possible that the protesters - and those that will take to the streets in coming days - do indeed represent aggrieved citizens who have finally found a circumstance in which it is rational to express their grievances. And there may be many, many more of them out there in Russia.

But there may also be a large number of unseen Russian citizens who were not out in the street on Saturday that may have wanted little more than a wake-up call for Putin to do a better job in his next term in office. The long-term goals of these two different groups of citizens may not be the same, and how these differences are resolved may have an important impact on Russia's future.