

# The Complexity that is Current Russian Politics

by Joshua Tucker on December 9, 2011

in [Campaigns and elections](#), [Comparative Politics](#), [Election Reports](#)

Our next election report comes from [Regina Smyth](#) of Indiana University, who is currently spending the year in Moscow, Russia.

Long before polling began in Russia's December parliamentary election, it was clear that the uneventful contest that the Kremlin hoped for was not going as planned. In a rare misstep, the Kremlin's political strategists provoked a backlash against the party of power by announcing that PM Vladimir Putin would run for the presidency in March 2012. While the move quieted rumors of a rift between factions within the Kremlin—ending any hope of elite conflict spilling into public view—it also immediately shifted the focus of political debate. Absent compelling differences among opposition parties' records or viable new political choices, the vibrant sectors of the Russian press—including newspapers, radio, political cartoon and bloggers—focused almost solely on the lack of choice afforded Russian voters. The message took on the characteristics of a social movement. In Moscow, discussion turned to strategies for giving teeth to the no choice movement within the parameters of elections. The puzzle was how to do so without affording the authorities greater opportunities for falsification. Voters weighed their options: spoiling their ballots in an expression of “vote against all,” voting for the tired opposition, what a friend called the buffoon parties, or staying home. Just two weeks or so before the elections, the no choice movement took on a life of its own and fueled by a shared sense of discontent captured in the audacious booing of PM Putin public opinion changed rapidly.

The movement had some bite, demonstrating the limits of vote fraud in electoral democracies. Yet, the long-term implications of the result are less clear. After all, with its seat bonus resulting from the high electoral threshold, EdRo [the Russian ruling party] secured a working majority in parliament. None of the opposition organizations that benefited from the no choice movement brought a fresh new vision in response to voters' discontent; none are prepared to engage in vibrant opposition or mount a reform program to meet the great challenges facing Russia. As a group, the opposition is fractured and is unlikely to be able to cooperate to increase their leverage over policy outcomes. At the same time, there will be pressure on EdRo to revitalize both its organization and its message and to finally put some teeth into anticorruption programs and structural economic reforms long promised by Mr. Putin. Moreover, there will be renewed calls for political modernization, Russian political-speak for increased competition, in future elections. Yet, with few landmarks to suggest where that competition might emerge, it seems far too early to declare the death of EdRo or the rise of any sustained, effective political opposition in the near future.

For analysts working to assess the trajectory of Russian political developments, the audacity of Russia's voters stands cautionary tale against seeing Russian politics through a singular lens of neo-Soviet politics, Kremlinology or a quest for paternalist leadership. Russia and her voters have changed enormously since 1991 and both continue to change at a rapid pace. Vote fraud coexists with evasion. Restrictions on speech coexist with countless think tanks manned by astute political observers whose voices are heard on a daily basis. A regime structure that limits the rise of new national leadership coexists with significant opposition at the regional levels of government. Voters who support Putin and EdRo out of fear of the chaos of the 1980s and 1990s stand with those who demand more from their government and want to

voice those demands through a competitive electoral system. There is nothing simple about Russia's political landscape and if we ignore the complexity and rely on simplistic analogies from the past, we are likely to be caught off guard once again.

