The Impact of Party Primaries and the All-Russian Popular Front on the Composition of United Russia’s Majority in the Sixth Duma

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Abstract
Duma scandals involving members of United Russia—notably the Vladimir Pekhtin affair—have further undermined the credibility of Russia’s parliamentary elite over the last year. This is despite measures that were taken before the 2011 parliamentary elections to clean up the ruling party: party primaries and the creation of the All-Russian Popular Front. This article examines the impact of these initiatives on the composition of United Russia’s parliamentary majority, and it considers the problems that will face attempts by party leaders to improve its image.

Introduction
Since the early 2000s, the centre of legislative decision-making has moved to the ruling parliamentary organs of United Russia, and successful legislative initiatives by opposition parties and rank-and-file members rely to a large extent on the support of the party of power. Although the reduction in the size of United Russia’s majority to just twelve seats has weakened this dominance in a number of respects—not least within parliamentary committees—the party retains the upper hand in legislative decision-making.

But, to what extent did the 2011 election change the characteristics of United Russia’s majority in the lower house? This article presents data on the new United Russia majority and considers whether efforts by the Kremlin to revive the party’s appeal—through measures such as the holding of party primaries and the inclusion of social activists in candidate selection (in the form of the All Russian Popular Front)—have introduced a new cohort of deputies into the lower house. It will also discuss whether these new members are likely to revive the party’s image.

Selecting Candidates for 2011
By recent Russia standards, 2011 was a bad year for United Russia. According to most pollsters, the party’s support fell during that year and it struggled to shake off its association with privilege and corruption. This negative connotation was captured to damaging effect by opposition blogger Alexey Navalny’s moniker of the party of “crooks and thieves”, and party managers took several measures to revive United Russia’s appeal. Over the course of 2011, the party sought the cooptation of social activists through the formation of a coalition of public organisations—the All Russian Popular Front—which had the power to select candidates for the party, and internal party primaries were used on a scale far greater than in previous elections. Both measures were aimed at attracting new people to United Russia.

The process of selecting candidates for the new Duma began in earnest in the summer of 2011. Primaries had been used by United Russia in the 2007 parliamentary contest, but they did not become part of the party’s statute until 2009, when the XI Party Congress ruled that internal party voting could be used to select candidates. The formation of the All-Russian Popular Front in May 2011 added a further dimension to the process of candidate selection. Half of the 200,000 or so individuals who were chosen to vote in the primaries—in rather unclear circumstances—were representatives of organisations that comprised the All-Russian Popular Front. Vladimir Putin also announced that one-third of all candidates included in the final list would be members of the Front (see gazeta.ru, September 5, 2011), even if they had not previously been members of the party. As the leader of United Russia at that time, Putin was responsible for compiling the final list of candidates that was submitted to party’s Congress in September 2011.

Over 4700 candidates participated in the primary process (see lenta.ru, July 27, 2011). This number included a large number of independents and representatives of public organisations, and this fact was heralded by the party leadership as an important step towards the creation of a more representative party elite. Speaking to an inter-regional conference in North Western Russia in September, Putin called for the renewal of more than half of the membership of United Russia’s parliamentary faction, and announced that the party’s list would include representatives of many different professional and social groups: “doctors, teachers, engineers, workers, farmers, military personnel and entrepreneurs, pensioners and the young” (see obshchaya.gazeta.ru, September 5, 2011).

The primary process drew supportive commentary from some unlikely quarters. While acknowledging their shortcomings, the analysts Nikolai Petrov and Boris Makarenko—both known for their critical reporting of the authorities—argued that the primaries were an
improvement on previous practice and had the potential to weaken the power of regional governors over candidate selection (see Kommersant, August 15, 2011; Moscow Times, August 16, 2011). However the primary process was also flawed in many respects and drew sharp criticism from other commentators. Despite the party’s stated aim to increase intra-party democracy, attention was drawn to the lack of openness and genuine discussion during the primaries (see lenta.ru, July 27, 2011). This led to a number of high-profile scandals. The former governor and Duma deputy Alexei Lebed questioned the transparency of the process and refused to take part (see Moscow Times, September 5, 2011), and there were other examples of politicians who declined the opportunity to participate. Moreover, analysis at the time suggested that the results of the primaries were not decisive in terms of the drafting of the final party list. The newspaper Izvestiya conducted an analysis of the candidates selected for the final list and found large inconsistencies with the results of the primaries (Izvestiya, September 25, 2011). According to the newspaper, of the 80 regions analysed the final list matched the results of United Russia’s primaries in only eight cases. They uncovered particularly large discrepancies in Perm’kii Krai, Primor’ye and Stavropol. For instance, in the case of the Perm’kii Krai, the researchers found that just one of the top ten candidates from the party’s primaries was included in the final regional party list. Rather, it seems that key decisions over the final party lists were not taken until the eve of the party’s Congress in September, and the protracted deliberations did not make for more consistent reasoning when it came to the exclusion or inclusion of candidates. In terms of increasing the number of Popular Front candidates, the results of the process were ambiguous. In some cases the final decision benefited Front candidates, in others it worked against them.

Therefore to what extent did the widespread use of primaries and the inclusion of the Popular Front transform the parliamentary party cadre? Has the composition of United Russia changed in significant ways from previous parliaments?

The New Duma

The December elections did result in the election of a large number of candidates from the All-Russian Popular Front. Consistent with Putin’s declared aim before the December ballot to select one-third of the party’s candidates from the Front, eighty deputies were chosen via this route. Yet, data compiled from the biographies of United Russia deputies in the Fourth (2003–07), Fifth (2007–11) and current Dumas suggest that the representativeness of United Russia’s parliamentary party has not been radically transformed.

Despite Putin’s pledge that there would be a significant turnover of parliamentary personnel, the proportion of returning deputies actually increased in December’s 2011 elections (see Figure 1). Around half of the United Russia members who took up seats in December 2011 had served in a previous parliament; this compares with around one-third in the previous Duma. While a number of long-serving and influential deputies like Pavel Medvedev and Valerii Draganov were denied places in the final list in rather controversial circumstances during the primary process, many familiar faces returned. Influential economic lobbyists from previous parliaments like Valerii Yazev (the energy sector), Vladislav Reznik (finance) and Gennadi Kulik (agriculture) all held on to their seats. Furthermore, the primary process enabled a number of established Duma deputies to gain seats in other regions. This led to criticism from local social activists that the primary process actually benefitted party insiders (see politcom.ru, August 15, 2011).

Figure 1: Percentage of United Russia Deputies Who Served in Previous Parliaments, Fourth–Sixth Dumas

Nor has the new parliament significantly changed in terms of the professional characteristics of those deputies who make up the parliamentary majority. The proportion of deputies who held senior business careers before their election to parliament, or held a leading position in a trade or business association remains broadly consistent with previous Dumas (see Figure 2 overleaf). In the last three Dumas, around one-third of United Russia deputies have entered the parliament from business backgrounds. Moreover, notwithstanding the public campaign to rid the party of its association with wealth and privilege, the 2011 election contest continued to reveal the party’s financial reliance on private business candidates. During the contest it was widely reported that business candidates were expected to fund regional campaigns to the cost of five million Euros (see Nezavisimaya Gazeta, October 4, 2011).
The sectoral ties of business candidates are consistent with previous parliaments, too. Of all the deputies with business ties, the manufacturing and energy/mining sectors continue to supply the largest proportion of candidates from the business world. Other patterns of sectoral representation are also consistent with what was observed in earlier parliaments (see Figure 3). The proportion of candidates with backgrounds in agriculture continues to fall, and there are increasing numbers of deputies with ties to the construction and retail sectors. This pattern reflects the changing nature of Russia’s political economy over the last decade.

Equally revealing are data on the representation of non-business professions. Efforts to revitalise United Russia ahead of the parliamentary contest were primarily aimed at co-opting deputies from professions with a good standing in local communities, notably teachers and doctors. This was evident in the final party list, where the proportion of educational and healthcare professionals in the top three hundred candidates increased significantly. However, many of these candidates did not make it into the parliament. As Figure 4 shows, the proportion of deputies who were finally elected from these professions was in fact consistent with previous parliaments. There was however a fall in the proportion of deputies from military/security and law enforcement backgrounds, and the December 2011 elections did produce a significant increase in the number of candidates from social organisations. The latter development is consistent with the involvement of the All-Russian Popular Front in the process of candidate selection. Nevertheless, these data also show that the main recruiting ground for United Russia deputies remains regional government, and in particular executive organs at the local level. This fact continues to highlight the importance of the regional elite within the political coalition that supports the rule of Vladimir Putin. The increase in the proportion of deputies from federal government also highlights the need to accommodate particular bureaucratic elites.

Therefore, the composition of United Russia’s new majority does not differ profoundly from that of previous parliaments. It appears that efforts to renew the party have not significantly changed the characteristics
of its Duma members. But is the same also true of those eighty members of the party who were elected with the backing of the All-Russian Popular Front?

The All-Russian Popular Front: An Alternative to United Russia?
The involvement of the Popular Front has brought new people into parliament. As Figure 5 shows, a lower proportion of returning deputies was backed by the Popular Front. However, a number of well-known Front candidates had served in previous parliaments, too. This number includes such senior United Russia figures as Andrei Isaev, first deputy secretary of the presiding body of United Russia’s General Council, and Vladimir Pligin, General Council member, co-ordinator of the party’s liberal platform, and Duma committee chairman. The Front also provided a way of co-opting senior politicians from other parties into United Russia. This is best illustrated by the inclusion of Aleksandr Babakov, one of the founders of the Just Russia party.

Figure 5 also shows that the involvement of the Popular Front in the process of candidate selection did little to reduce the number of business candidates. In fact, the proportion of candidates from a business background is slightly greater for Front deputies. The cohort of business candidates selected by the Popular Front includes individuals like Aleksandr Il’tyakov, the owner of a large meat processing empire who was selected to head the United Russia list in Kurgan oblast; Nadezhda Shkolkina, a former head of the Council for the Development of the Tobacco Industry, a lobbying organisation that represents the interests of tobacco corporations (see Novaya gazeta, April 22, 2009); and Mikhail Slipenchuk, who is estimated to be one of Russia’s wealthiest businessmen (see Finans, 14–20 February, 2011).

At the same time there was a notable increase in deputies from social organisations amongst Front candidates, and the number of deputies from health and educational backgrounds was greater than it was for those candidates who were not selected by the Front (see Figure 6). The Front’s involvement in candidate selection resulted in the election of deputies with ties to organisations representing youth and pensioner groups, the disabled, trade unions and popular local pressure groups. There were also fewer Front candidates with backgrounds in governmental institutions at the federal and regional level. In this respect, the Front achieved some progress in extending United Russia’s representation beyond those key elite groups that were integral to the party’s foundation in the early 2000s.

Figure 6: Non-Business Backgrounds of United Russia Deputies at the Sixth Duma

Whither the Popular Front?
The cooptation of social activists by the party of power did prove advantageous for Vladimir Putin in the run up to the presidential election. The Popular Front was effective at mobilising support for pro-Putin rallies that were held in early 2012. These rallies were organised to counter opposition protests that grew after the December elections. However, the Front has not transformed the parliamentary majority in the ways that were originally stated. This is largely because powerful regional and financial elites continue to crowd out other social forces; a situation that will be difficult to change. Since its inception, United Russia has provided a mechanism
for galvanising elite regional support for the regime, and this constituency remains vitally important for the Kremlin; the December parliamentary elections also highlighted the continued reliance of the party on funding from big business. These factors will present a significant obstacle to plans by United Russia’s new leader Dmitry Medvedev to radically transform the party and its membership.

About the Author
Paul Chaisty is the University Lecturer in Russian Government at St Antony’s College, Oxford University. His publications include *Legislative Politics and Economic Power in Russia* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2006), as well as articles in journals such as *Europe-Asia Studies, Government and Opposition, The Journal of Legislative Studies, Legislative Studies Quarterly, Party Politics, Post-Soviet Affairs*. He is currently researching the phenomenon of coalitional presidentialism in the former Soviet Union, Africa and Latin America.

Recommended Readings
- Paul Chaisty (2013), ‘The Preponderance and Effects of Sectoral Ties in the State Duma’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65:4

OPINION POLL

Ratings of President and Government and Trust in Politicians 2000–2013

Figure 1: How Do You Rate the Work of Putin and Medvedev as Russian President?

Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center January 2000 – April 2013, www.levada.ru