

POST-ELECTION PROTESTS IN THE CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: ANALYSIS OF THE KEY POLITICAL FACTORS

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The Russian 2011-2013 post-election protests have come as a surprise to many scholars, analysts and political experts. Thus, having recognised the need for in-depth analysis of these events the authors conducted a detailed analytical study. This paper focuses on political factors in explaining the causes of mass protests. The authors demonstrate that the degree of political elite fragmentation, societal resource balance between the government and the opposition and specific properties of a given political regime act as the key influences and determine the course of protest action. The analysis shows that these factors combined have generated a substantial social development during the 2011-2012 electoral cycle that produced favourable conditions for the increased participation in mass political action. Authors conclude that the Russian case appears consistent with collective action theory and resource mobilization theory in explaining the causes of mass political protests.

Keywords: election, mass protests, political institutions, political regimes, Russia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary history is marked by a rise of mass protest actions that can take many different forms varying from peaceful demonstrations to direct militant conflict between the protesters and the authorities. Increased political and social activity of masses, as well as the rise of social movements accompanied a number of political upheavals seen in the 2010-2011, including political crisis in post-Soviet space (Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan), and a number of Arab countries (so-called Arab Spring of 2011). The subsequent wave of mass protests in Russia following the 2011-2012 presidential election cycle has come as a surprise to many analysts. Thus, the need for an in-depth study that would enable better understanding of the nature of Russian election protests has been identified. The authors of this paper aim to determine the key factors contributing to the mass protest action in the contemporary Russia. This article presents critical analysis as to whether Russian political protests should be viewed as a part of the global trend or rather described as a unique case.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of political protest will be discussed and analysed in this paper based on the two key theoretical frameworks, namely Collective action theory and Collective behaviour theory.

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2.1. Collective behaviour theory

The concept of 'relative deprivation' is central to the collective behaviour framework. In the works of an American political science expert T.R. Gurr the scholar has developed the theory of political conflict and instability emphasizing the importance of relative deprivation as one of the key factors in explaining political violence. The basic conceptual model introduced by T. Gurr includes both social and psychological variables that act as constructs of protest action. The relative deprivation is defined as "actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities" (Gurr, 1970, p. 24). It is the gap between that "to which people believe they are rightfully entitled" and that which "they think they are capable of getting and keeping" (Gurr, 1970, p. 24).

Relative deprivation is viewed as a psychological experience of discontent and the root source of political violence. However it requires political attitudes for direct political action to be realised towards specific political objects and actors.

2.2. Resource mobilisation theory (Social movement theory)

The framework emerged in the 1960s-1970s in the influential works of J. McCarthy and M. Zald. The scholars were among the first to approach social movements and protest action outside the boundaries of irrational psychological impulse. They viewed social movements as rational and created by particular social actors not represented within the existing political institutions with a goal of taking specific political action (McCarthy & Zald, 1973). Those fundamental principles were then further developed in the works of American scholars C. Tilly, D. McAdam and S. Tarrow, who emphasized the political implications of the theory. The researchers have established the political opportunity approach to define the nature of social movements including protest action (Tilly, 1978; McAdam, 1982). They argued that political opportunity structure explained how effectively the marginalized social actors could be mobilized, given their specific resources at the time.

According to resource mobilization theory, the concepts of "resources" and "mobilization" are interconnected. Resources are available to individual actors, organisations, institutions and society in general. For any given social movement there is always some potential for resource mobilization. Mobilization is understood as the process through which an organized group obtains and utilises resources to achieve specific political goals (Jenkins, 1983, p. 532). Therefore, the activities of a social movement must be constantly directed towards aggregation of resources that are crucial to social movement's development and success. Structural macros (such as social, political and economic contexts) may also be considered as resources if the leaders and members of a particular movement are capable of mobilizing them as such.

Thus, from point of view of theorists of this direction main determinants of a mass political protest are not so much factors of social- psychological dissatisfaction

but the presence of political opportunities and resources capable of mobilizing population to take protest action. Following this assumption, C. Tilly argued that in any given society there would always be present a marginalized group discontent with the current government, political regime and social policies (Tilly, 1978). However, the dissent and deprivation alone would not generate social change up to the very moment when favourable political opportunity and resources are available at group's disposal to take action towards meeting its social and political goals.

Basic political opportunity structures were developed by the theorists of the framework enabling to theorise whether the mobilization of social protest was possible in any given society. Thus, S. Tarrow classifies the characteristics of political opportunity structures into three major categories: 1) general openness of a given political system 2) degree of stability of the political power balance 3) existing alliances within the political system (Tarrow, 1998).

3. METHODOLOGY

The authors argue that the existing relative deprivation is necessary but not sufficient to generate political protest. The realization of a political protest largely depends on political and social constructs such as:

- specific properties of a political regime
- degree of elite fragmentation
- distribution of resources among the political actors (resource balance)

3.1. Specific properties of a political regime

The specific properties of any given political regime would include any functional institutions existent within the regime that can effectively channel social protest potential towards conventional forms of political action. Examples of such institutions would be political parties, fair elections, independent executive authorities and other institutional democratic procedures. Although it does not exclude the possibility of political protest, the existence of such institutes facilitates transformation of protest potential into conventional political action and narrows the space for mass protest.

Authoritarian regimes restrict most forms of political activism because of repressive mechanisms that make the protest cost excessively high for the activists. Thus, despite the absence of any conventional protest channelling mechanisms in such regimes, it would be virtually impossible to mobilize masses to take any political action. As a result, the protest potential in societies under authoritarian regimes remains within the economic action (such as strikes) or transforms into passive protest behaviour such as absenteeism or political apathy.

The space available for political protest is considerably greater in cases of “soft” authoritarian regimes that are often defined by scholars as “competitive”

(Levitsky & Way, 2010) or “electoral” authoritarianism (Golosov, 2011). Such regimes could be identified by some degree of freedom, which do not allow for the weakening of incumbent grasp on political power, but at the same time are sufficient for the opposition to generate some opportunity and mobilize resources.

3.2. Degree of elite fragmentation

According to the theorists of elitism approach J.Higley and M.Burton, there are three types of elite structure: monolithic, divided and fragmented (Higley & Burton, 2006, p. 42). As the process of transforming protest potential into political action requires group organization and leadership, the role of political elites becomes increasingly important. In societies where elites are monolithic the protest action is unlikely or limited to disorganized short-lived riots typically marked by inconsistent political objectives. The organized political protest becomes possible where elites are divided (bipolar) and fragmented. Such elites are capable and willing to invest resources, mobilize masses and lead the protest.

3.3. Distribution of resources among the political actors (resource balance)

Finally, one of the most important factors that determine the success of political protest is the distribution of resources among the key political actors. Even when the elites are fragmented, without sufficient resources and political opportunities the opposition would find it difficult to commence mass mobilization. As long as the opposition actors aggregate more resources, the number of opportunities for political protest grows, and vice versa. Resources are understood here to include administrative, financial, human, technological, information resources and other material and immaterial basis that may generate further advantages for political mobilization.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the critical political constructs that contributed to the Russian election protests of 2011-2012 was the so-called logic of “political evolution” of the regime. Its distinctive characteristics will be discussed in the following chapter.

4.1. The distinctive characteristics of the political regime in Russia in the 2000s

While in some sectors of the Russian economy and industry the 2000s are marked by technological innovation, growth of free markets and modernization, the political developments were quite the opposite. The ruling party has strengthened its position as a dominant monopoly on real power having overcome certain elite fragmentation. During the 2003-2004 election cycle, a number of measures was taken aimed to increase the barriers to legal entry for the opposition that substantially subdued the political diversity and public competition. Introducing new political party regulations, elimination of direct election of regional governors and imposing further

ensorship on independent media produced favourable political climate for the dominant political regime with the popular leader V.V. Putin standing firm on the top of “vertical power structure” (Gel’man, 2005).

These developments were indicative of further shift towards authoritarianism and decline of democracy, which was well documented by a number of experts and academic researchers. The majority of analytical centres reported a marked drop in Russia’s democracy index (Freedom House, 2015).

At the same time, while the political system drifted towards more and more antidemocratic rule, the regime remained within the boundaries of electoral authoritarianism, far from completed dictatorship (Golosov, 2011). Most importantly, the presidential elections were upheld as a fundamental democratic principle. Although the election procedures were under direct control of the ruling party, and opposition members often experienced pressure to withdraw from competition (including administrative resources), acts of fraud affecting vote count and other antidemocratic incidents, the system opposition was not in fact excluded from elections. Thus, certain elements of political completion, to some extent, remained.

Certain “free space” remained to media and socio-political activism. Under strict federal control, behind the three top federal TV channels functioning as the unquestioned sources of information for the overwhelming majority of Russians, the right to exist was granted to a number of opposition channels (for example, TV channels such as REN-TV, “RainTV” and radio station “Echo of Moscow”) broadcasting to limited audience.

Compared to the classic authoritarian model, the Russian regime maintained some standards of civil rights and freedoms, unrestricted travelling worldwide and relatively low level of repressive action. Thus, severe repressive measures were taken selectively and relatively infrequently, - one example could be “Khodorkovsky case”, - while other loyal tycoons and businessmen enjoyed privileges (Hoffman, 2011).

To a certain extent, such “mild” approach acted to strengthen the regime. The available “free space” acted as a buffer for discontent individuals, allowing them to “to let steam out”, and at the same time it served to legitimize the regime in the eyes of the international community providing indisputable proof of the fundamental democratic institutes being present in contemporary Russia. Concerning this, a Hungarian political expert I. Krastev noted that in the contemporary Russia, in contrast to the USSR, open borders meant that discontent Russians including intellectuals and upper middle class preferred to emigrate instead of opposing the regime, thus paradoxically strengthening it (Krastev, 2011). Other research suggests that the contemporary Russian authoritarianism is characterised by manipulative rather than repressive strategies of control (Wilson, 2005). The regime found support not forced by fear and repressive measures but based on effective and well-timed propaganda and “bribing” the social masses. In the first case, the manipulator tactics

were carried out through the monopolized media to ensure the loyalty of the majority. In the second case, the ruling group instead of suppressing the opposition aimed to integrate it into the “systematic opposition” that could be monitored and controlled. The “bribing” strategy also involved a certain degree of protection granted to the “grey market” business activity of loyal elite members. In a greater sense, the increased national welfare and social benefits could also be pointed out as one of the typical characteristics of the regime – it was part of an “unspoken agreement” that offered prosperity in return for loyalty.

Therefore despite the obvious state of decline some of the main democratic institutes were in, the ruling party maintained some “free space” and rarely practiced direct repression. It is evident that those “generous” features were only feasible while the consistent economic growth was being sustained. Under such conditions the regime could afford to be fairly confident, it would gather all the support it needed for the upcoming elections. However in an event of an economic crisis, which meant severely depleted resources, the remaining “free space” could pose a real threat to the incumbents given the formal competitiveness of presidential elections (Shkel, 2014).

Looking further into the nature of the Russian electoral authoritarianism, it is important to note some crucial amendments to the constitution that took place after the 2007-2008 electoral cycle - as well as the significant changes that transformed the party’s ruling style, it is particularly relevant considering the causes of subsequent political protests. The elections demonstrated the stability of regime and its ability to solve the succession issues. Putin’s refusal to amend the constitution and to run for a third term in office legitimized the regime and helped him gain heartfelt support of the population. However a unique political “tandem” was born where two top power-figures, who formally belonged to the same team, demonstrated a marked political divergence. While V. Putin remained loyal to his conservative ideological values based on the principles of “stability” and “order”, D. Medvedev focused on a discourse new to Russians emphasizing modernization, liberalization and the value of “law”.

Without further analysis of the “tandem” phenomena, the authors point out that the competition between V. Putin and D. Medvedev was rather fictional. “Medvedev’s Thaw” as a political course served rather to reinforce the regime than to provide an alternative. Thus, despite the liberal rhetoric it was during Medvedev’s time in office that some of the more pro-authoritarian institutional changes in the design of a political system took place: the amendments to the constitution increasing the presidential term from 4 to 6 years in duration and Duma term from 4 to 5 years were among the most notable. The call for civil rights and freedom resulted in no action to substantiate it except for the formal law enforcement reform.

The modernization and high-tech industry development objectives were poorly met by the “Skolkovo” project of questionable scientific potential and effectiveness.

At the same time, far from fictional, Medvedev's liberal thaw had quite a substantial impact on political activism leading to the political protests of 2011-2012. Despite the expectations of the minds behind "tandem democracy" instead of consolidating the ruling party it had a disorganizing effect. Although the effect produced by Medvedev's rule was not sufficient to divide the elites it resulted in some fragmentation that played its part in contributing to subsequent protests.

4.2. The degree of Russian elite fragmentation prior to 2011-2012 electoral cycle

For the duration of a time period analyzed in this paper the ruling elites remained highly consolidated. Nevertheless, the integrity of elite was partially compromised during the "tandem democracy" rule. The considerable difference in emphasis and style of V. Putin's and D. Medvedev's rhetoric produced a certain division within the ruling party, this was further aggravated by the prolonged mystery with regard to who will run for 2012 presidential elections. The elite fractions were diverging as the possible future presented two distinct possibilities as to who would the President and Prime Minister be.

Contrary to the frequent statements made both by V. Putin and D. Medvedev who on many occasions emphasized their ideological unity and common objectives, some elite members came to view Putin and Medvedev as the potential leaders of two different teams. One example to illustrate this conflict could be "Kudrin case" when unwilling to work in the future government under the leadership of Medvedev the head of Ministry of Finance A. Kudrin was sacked after having openly spoken against D. Medvedev.

Such controversies within the ruling party continued as Medvedev proceeded to "purge" the gubernatorial ranks. As a result, the dismissed governors and minor regional elites began to treat Kremlin appointees with certain hostility. More so the conflicts and discontent among the regional elites reflected the federal politics as the Kremlin influence in regions gradually increased. Battling the outsiders from Moscow on many occasions the regional elites were prompted into public criticism of the president. The resonant examples of Y. Luzhkov's dismissal or that of Kaliningrad governor G. Boos serve as the most indicative of the internal tension within the elites.

In the latter case, local elites were so frustrated with a new appointment imposed on them by Kremlin that they were willing to support the local opposition leaders and mobilize people. Their effort resulted in mass protests in Kaliningrad. These events demonstrate how closely the division within political elites is linked to the opportunities for protest action.

The "vertical structure of power" sustained some substantial damage as the regional governors were uprooted, that led to some administrative control issues that surfaced in the process of presidential election. Indicative of those problems

were the results of regional elections that took place in 2010. The results demonstrated that the ruling party has lost its electoral advantage in a number of regions. Thus, in Sverdlovsk Oblast at the Duma elections the ruling party "United Russia" obtained only 39.8% votes (which is 22% less, compared to 62% in 2007), similarly the party lost some of its former glory in Altai Republic (25% less), Kurgan Oblast (23% less), YaNAO (15% less), Khabarovsk region (13% less) and Kaluga and Ryazan Oblast (8% and 6% less, respectively).

The impact of Medvedev's thaw should not be underestimated as it caused division among the groups of intellectuals, academics and political analysts. It contributed greatly to the change in public opinions. The heated polemics between the representatives of different groups encouraged general attitudes favorable of protest actions. One of the most typical examples would be the broadcast of analytical reports presenting different scenarios of Russia's future depending on who would become the next president. Similar discussions were broadcast on TV and widely debated all over the country. It is remarkable that during Medvedev's term such debates became more critical and outspoken than before. It is evident that D. Medvedev's liberal rhetoric had a direct impact on mass media that became actively more liberal in their criticism of current politics and discussing the contemporary agenda and in doing so 'loosened up' on their self-censorship practices. All this had a profound influence on public opinion affecting the protest potential of some social groups considerably.

The question as to who (from the two ruling party candidates V. Putin or D. Medvedev) would run for president gained utmost importance for the politically active citizens. People's hopes and expectations with regard to the future political course were highly polarized and projected on to the potential presidential candidates and what they represented. Thus the "tandem democracy" scenario failed to consolidate society and political elites, it has produced quite the opposite of the intended effect by throwing the Russian society into a situation where opinions are divided and choice is conflicted.

However some of the most significant changes that determined further protest escalations took place in the structure of the opposition camp. During the short period between 2009 and 2011 the opposition elites developed new organization forms and new political action strategies.

Firstly, in this period there happened the integration of different opposition segments and their unification on the basis of "negative consensus" against the ruling party. . This has largely come as a response to the government's attempts to limit "legal space" for opposition movements including increasing entry barrier to the 'political market'. Such measures included increasing entry threshold for political parties who wished to be represented in the Duma from 5 to 7%, and requiring new parties to have a far greater number of registered party members (increased to 50 000 members from 10 000 members). As a result the smaller

fractions of liberal opposition have formed a united coalition “Russia without lawlessness and corruption” which has later become People’s Freedom Party.

Similar processes could be observed in “street politics”. Since 2010 it has become common to see protests or rallies organized and managed by combined effort of both right and left opposition movements. The “Yabloko” liberal party that has lost its parliament seats since 2003 began to resort to the mass protest action joining forces with Communist Party, “Left Front” and other leftist movements, which was unthinkable in the political logic of the 90s.

Mass protest actions in Vladivostok and Kaliningrad in 2010 united a great variety of political forces under the common banner “against the ruling party” and have clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of this strategy. One of the leaders of Vladivostok rallies A. Samsonov commented: “Our parties and movements are weakened – we don’t have the money and resources to fight against the ruling regime on our own. But together we can do much more! Now no one can say oh it’s just the communists or it’s just the liberals - it is the People!”

At the same time we can observe the succession of opposition leaders who, compared to the opposition of the 90s, are free from the negative image of “democrats” responsible for the chaos of the volatile 90s and are far more flexible in their ideologies. For example, one of the most popular contemporary opposition leaders A. Navalny began his career with the combination of liberal, democratic and Russian nationalist slogans, presenting a striking contrast to the opposition leaders we could see in the 90s.

Party integration, emerging young opposition leaders and flexible eclectic ideologies capable of uniting masses for a common cause – all these factors generated new opportunities for opposition elites to enhance their resources.

Although the ruling elite remained highly consolidated the united opposition forces could shift the balance of power towards bipolarity. The situation created a distribution in the sphere of distributing resources among political actors which was not favorable for ruling elite.

4.3. The distribution of resources among the ruling party and the opposition preceding the 2011-2012 election cycle

The rapid development of information technologies has played a fundamentally important role in a rise of opposition mobilization potential preceding the 2011-2012 presidential election cycle. The growing number of Internet users helped opposition leaders overcome the influence of government-controlled media on public opinion. It gave opposition groups an opportunity to communicate their message to the public.

While the top TV channels continued broadcasting pro-regime opinions, the Internet provided multiple platforms for social media presenting a viable alternative for the politically active population. At the same time every year social media is

rapidly expanding its audience rapidly expanding its audience.. Thus, by 2010, “Vkontakte”, the most popular social network in Russia registered nearly 30 mil. users. Second most popular social network “Odnoklassniki” could boast 17 mil. registered users. The world’s most popular “Facebook” was the third in Russia (4.5 mil. users) (Lonkila, 2012).

By 2011-2012 it could be concluded that the Internet with its multiple resources could compete with the television channels. According to analyst firm TNS estimates by April 2012 the audience of the Russian Internet search engine “Yandex” has exceeded the size of “Russian Chanel 1” audiences. While 19.1 mil. people a day visited Yandex, only 18.2 mil. people watched “Russian Channel 1”.

However the key to shifting power balance was not only in the sheer number of the Internet users but also in the new opportunities the social media represented to opposition forces. New opposition leaders used them quite successfully for escalating their organizational and ideological resources. . At the same time the ruling party has evidently underestimated the importance of the Internet and relied heavily on traditional means of manipulation and propoganda such as television and radio.

Firstly, social media provided a simple and effective tool to bring the relevant political issues to the public. Opposition now had a chance to supply public with alternative political perspective, which helped to delegitimize the ruling party and shape the opinions of the politically active population. At the same time the Internet made it possible to present information through a wide variety of different formats and platforms making it easily accessible for every social segment. A prominent researcher of the Russian social media M. Lonkila points out that while “LiveJournal” was primarily used by intellectuals as a platform for analytical critique, “YouTube” gave public a chance to exchange videos, share visual content and produce emotional expressive journalism. Social networks such as “Vkontakte”, “Facebook” and “Twitter” proved useful in organizing protest action (Lonkila, 2012, p. 6).

At the same time, even the politically neutral Internet media sources generated cumulative effect in sharing opposition content. Internet pages that copied and reposted the content of opposition bloggers or the politically charged memes also added in to this effect spreading information about opposition leaders and news related to their social activity. Thus the study by S. Greene demonstrates that based on the “Twitter” database during the 2012 presidential election campaign even the politically neutral news portals such as “Lenta.ru” transmitted more opposition memes and news than pro-government information (Green, 2012).

Secondly, the online environment contributed to building up new forms of collective identity and developing strong personal and ideological ties within the network that brought structure to the previously scattered groups of individuals. Social media are based on mutual recognition of people who can then build virtual

communities united by the shared views, interests and ideologies. Although the research suggests that personal contact in real life between the social network users tends to be minimal, it does not disprove the fact that the collective identity built online can unite people for political protest action.

Thirdly, the social media made a strong psychological impact on public consciousness creating the basis for overcoming political apathy and individual fear connected with risks of political actions.

The nature of social media is such that they allow not only sharing opposition content but also seeing how many other opposition members are there. In the earlier stages protesters' information regarding the actual number of other protesters in the group was limited. However, with the emergence of social networks one of the greatest problems of collective action was solved – it has become possible to know precisely how many people are ready to support the cause (Olson, 1965). As a result the uncertainty is reduced to the extent that the potential protesters could feel fairly confident in taking the protest action.

According to R. Cricieli, Leven and B. Magaloni the fear of repressive measures could be one of the major reasons why individuals decide against taking political action. However when the number of protesters is large enough it becomes impossible to suppress them by force (Kricheli, Livne & Magaloni, 2011). Thus mass protests become safe for individuals due to their large numbers. Knowing the exact number of participants expected to take part in mass protests through social networks, other individuals become in their turn more willing to join the rally.

4.4. The strategies of political actors

The strategies chosen by the key political actors played an important role in shaping the election protests in Russia in the period since 2011 to 2012. The position managed to utilize favorable political opportunity and the available resources to actualize its political agenda. Not only the opposition electorate was consolidated but also public was mobilized for mass political protest.

In this case strategies used at the December 2011 Duma election will be discussed. Until the Duma elections opposition has never been successful in devising a unified voting strategy to counteract state-controlled competition. In a situation where entry barriers to the political market were artificially high, the Duma consisted of “old” party brands that were not representatives of the public opinion. As a result, the opposition electorate resorted to the strategy of absenteeism and passive resentment. That explains why in the 2007-2008 election cycle no vote count fraud issues were reported, as the pro-opposition voters for the most part simply ignored the election.

The reason why the 2011-2012 election cycle was fundamentally different was the novel protest strategy nicknamed “the Navalny option” after the opposition leader A. Navalny who devised it. The strategy consisted of two imperatives: 1)

one must vote in the election, but 2) one must give her/his vote to any party other than “United Russia”. Given strategy presented a number of challenges “the ruling party” was not ready for.

Firstly, such strategy served to consolidate the opposition camp, encouraging their unity in a fight against “the common enemy” regardless from political differences. The ruling party could no longer find any means of causing internal discord in opposition ranks. This voting strategy secured temporary peace between the “system” and “non-system” parties. In the present-time situation even relatively loyal parties to the Kremlin turned out to get interested in the implementation of the above strategy, as it created most advantageous opportunities for the electorate’s success. Thus, the activists and leaders representing a wide variety of political forces began working towards the same goal encouraging protest voting among their electorate.

Secondly, the Navalny strategy proved capable of attracting previously politically passive individuals to vote. Those voters hoped to see the real result of their political action that was founded on an attempt to crush the electoral dominance of the ruling party. Previously, in the absence of any political parties representative of their opinions and interests many voters remained passive and apathetic, this time it was different. There was a new strategic option offered to the public and they were eager to see the immediate results of their political action. Those public groups that used to be passive were now motivated to play their part in producing a visible political result.

And finally, this strategy had a profound psychological impact on those individuals who actually came to give their votes of protest. The success or failure of the protest voting has become a matter of personal significance to them once they have invested their time and effort into taking the direct political action. The failure in this case would be taken as a personal failure. This acted as a powerful stimulant for taking further protest action, too.

Although “United Russia” did not manage to achieve its target figures that were set at 65% of votes the official result of 49.3% was not satisfactory to the opposition. On one hand this result could not meet the objectives set to undermine the “ruling” majority in the Duma.

According to the current regulation the “United Russia” was assigned 238 deputy seats out of 450. On the other hand, the results were announced at the background of the information “wave” on Internet about multiple vote count fraud reports.. Besides, the official results differed dramatically from expert predictions, the numerous exit-polls and pre-election social research evidence. Thus, according to FOM (Public Opinion Fund) in Moscow only 27.5% of people gave their votes to “United Russia”, 25.5% supported the communist CPRF, 16.3% voted for “Just Russia”, 15.7% of votes were for “Yabloko” and 11% for LDPR. However, when the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation published the official results that reported 46% of Moscow votes went to the “United Russia”, FOM’s

exit-poll results were hastily removed from their website. Nevertheless, the FOM data has already spread among the bloggers and was later used as a crucial piece of evidence to support protesters' claims (Shkel & Gareev, 2015).

All of the above resulted in mass protest action that took place in December, 2011, the scale of the election protests was enormous and could be compared to the rallies of 1989-1991. Most of the provinces and ethnic republics of Russia mirrored the protests. On the 10th of December, 2011 protesters in nearly a 100 towns across Russia held rallies and demonstrations disputing the election results. The most impressive by far were the Bolotnaya Square protests, that gathered according to the media estimates up to 150 000 people (or 25 000 according to the Russian police reports).

5. CONCLUSION

In this article we have presented an in-depth analysis of key political factors that defined the mass election protests in Russia during the 2011-2012 election cycle. One of the most important conclusions of this research is that structural factors alone do not explain the origin of the protests. A number of political constructs must be examined closely in order to understand the causes of protest action in the contemporary Russia. The most influential political factors can be listed as follows: 1) the specific properties of a political regime in Russia mean that the authoritarian rule is upheld not by the severe repressive practices but by the manipulative strategies and effective propaganda; 2) the change in the elite structure, particularly the consolidation of diverse opposition groups in a fight against "the common enemy"; 3) shifting of resource balance in favor of opposition.

Thus the effects of Medvedev's "liberal thaw" on the public perception of "free space" were such that produced unjustified political and social expectations among both political elites and various public groups. This has caused a certain degree of political elite fragmentation, reduced administrative control and generated political opportunity for the emerging political actors.

The ambitious opposition leaders consolidating the diverse political movements in a unified effort to undermine the ruling party devised new protest strategies. Relying on the recent advances in information technology as the means to transmit alternative political message the opposition successfully utilized social media to organize and mobilize people all over the country. The combined effect of all the political factors presented and analyzed in this study made it possible for mass election protests to take place in Russia in 2011-2012.

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