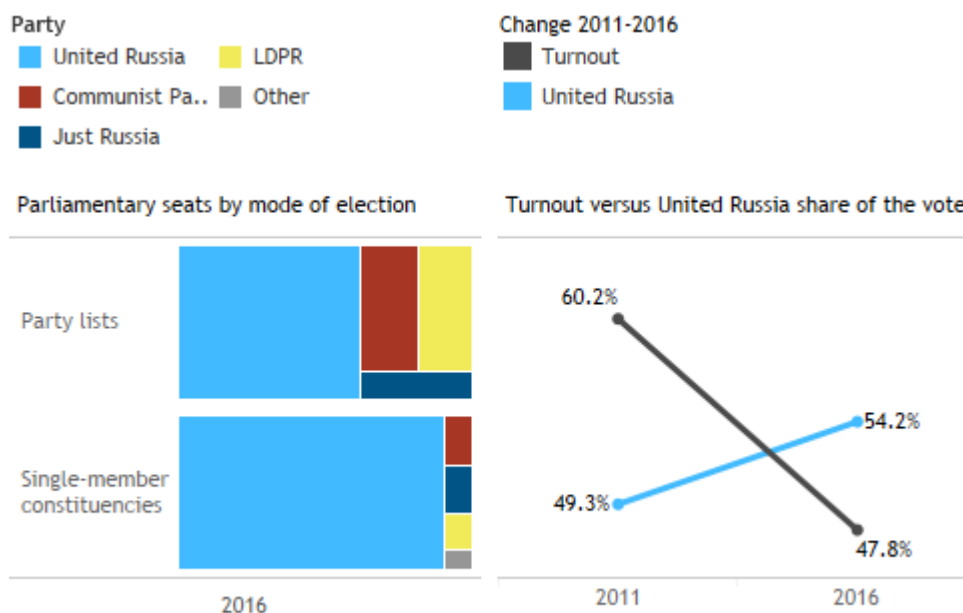


United Russia victory as a silver bullet for PM Medvedev

Blog post by Adviser Alexander Smotrov, 22 September 2016

The pro-Kremlin United Russia party secured a supermajority of 76% of the seats in the State Duma elections earlier this week. The result reflected changes to the boundaries (merging rural and urban areas), voting system (combining single constituency and lists) and indeed the season (from mid-winter to early autumn). These changes led to a rock solid position for United Russia deputies in the parliament, a reduced turnout and no repeat of the street protests that gave Vladimir Putin his closest brush with mortality in the winter of 2011.



Source: Russian Central Electoral Commission

The Duma election was seen as a dress rehearsal for the next presidential elections scheduled for March 2018, which are likely to provide a renewed mandate for President Putin if he decides to stand again. But this poll also had perhaps a bigger and less obvious winner: Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, a man whose political obituary has been written on countless occasions since he swapped jobs with Putin in 2012. The clamour for his removal went way beyond elite Moscow dinner parties, with one recent online petition demanding his resignation having received 285,000 signatures.

But this has been offset by the 28.5 million votes which United Russia - and Medvedev as its leader and sole representative listed on the party ballot paper - secured at the official count on Monday morning. Where once it was assumed Medvedev would move on after polling day, he is now guaranteed his position at the top table as Russia continues to navigate choppy political and economic waters. With Putin now looking ahead to the next election campaign, Medvedev seems to have secured a role alongside him, the 'tandem' has actually renewed itself. The Kremlin may again employ Medvedev's ability to reach out beyond Putin, to the liberal creative classes. Equally, he will need all the strength he can muster to handle and absorb the negative public effect of the economic downturn.

This result will have an impact beyond Russia. In recent years, foreign businesses have not fully engaged with Medvedev, thinking that, for all his status, he did not have the network of Igor Shuvalov or the tech-friendly credentials of Arkady Dvorkovich, two of his liberal deputies. The business community may now look to use Medvedev to more actively push their agenda and challenge the military-industrial securocrats who have been in ascendency since the introduction of sanctions in 2014. This may boost Medvedev's standing but it may also bring him back in the crosshairs of powerful vested interests who, in the past, had simply respected his office if not its holder.