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United Russia Facing a Crisis Of Confidence

By Nikolai Petrov

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According to a recent Levada Center survey, 45 percent of voters supported United Russia.

Among opposition parties, respondents had the most support for the Party of People's Freedom, whose political program is based on the slogan "For a Russia Without Arbitrariness and Corruption." These are good results given that the party was founded a month ago, but it earned only 2 percent of voter support nationally (7 percent in Moscow). Even if the party is registered in mid-2011— a big if — it will not be eligible for the December Duma elections because according to election law, a party must be registered at least a year before elections.

Every other opposition party, including Yabloko, received even lower results. It isn't possible to determine which among them is the least popular because all of their results are lower than the margin of error.

But the current poll does not account for two serious factors that could significantly influence

the results of the Duma elections in December. The first is the "Putin factor" — that is, the increase in support United Russia can expect if Prime Minister Vladimir Putin heads the party's list.

The other factor is an opposite scenario — a "crisis of confidence" that could negate those gains and strip United Russia of 10 percent of its voter base if it enters the elections without its "national leader" at the helm. A crisis of confidence might be seen in such regions as Kaliningrad, Sverdlovsk and Irkutsk where voters are "sick and tired" of the authorities, and is connected with mid-level officials in regions where the political machines that once faithfully produced record levels of support for United Russia have since been heavily damaged or outright destroyed. These include the regions of Moscow, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and, to some extent, Rostov, where United Russia scraped together just 20 percent to 25 percent of the vote in the last elections.

Moreover, United Russia cannot rely on former party heavyweights — like Bashkortostan President Murtaza Rakhimov and Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiyev, who were pushed out of office last year — to garner votes.

This crisis of confidence could lead to a systemic decline in United Russia's popularity, including in Moscow. If this occurs, Moscow might return to its former standing as one of the leaders in the protest vote.

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