

Rise Aside, Top Party's Rebranding To Proceed

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February 26, 2012

The  Moscow Times

United Russia's poll numbers are up 10 percent since December and now approach 50 percent, but experts close to the party say the jump doesn't indicate growing voter affection and that United Russia still needs to be rebranded.

United Russia's rating among likely voters fell throughout 2011, hitting an all-time low in December, when state-run VTsIOM said just 35 percent of voters would pick it over other parties represented in the State Duma.

The ruling party won slightly less than 50 percent of the vote in the Dec. 4 Duma elections, but allegations of fraud were widespread and some speculated that the actual result was as much as 20 points lower.

Urban middle-class voters took to the streets in a series of massive protests, and leaders of the reinvigorated opposition heaped criticism on United Russia.

They dubbed it "the party of crooks and thieves," using a phrase coined by anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny.

"The party reacted too passively to all the abuse. It should have fought back," said Olga Kryshтанovskaya, a prominent sociologist and party member, who earlier this month told Izvestia that a party rebranding was in the works.

"This idea that we're corrupt, all 2.5 million of us, is just ridiculous, but that's what we're being accused of," she said.

United Russia has kept a low profile since December and has played little role in the presidential campaign of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who heads the party without being a member.

Putin has instead used the All-Russia People's Front, an umbrella organization of unions and civic groups, to mobilize state workers and other supporters. Last week, a pro-Putin rally organized by the front drew more than 100,000 people to Moscow's Luzhniki stadium.

According to a Feb. 19 VTsIOM poll, 53 percent of voters intend to vote for Putin, an 11-point jump since Dec. 11. Over the same period, United Russia's rating among voters has risen from 35 percent to 46 percent.

VTsIOM head Valery Fyodorov speculated that United Russia's low profile had helped its image.

"The party has stopped giving people nightmares," he told Kommersant.

Sergei Markov, a Kremlin-linked analyst, said the party was riding Putin's coattails.

"When Putin's rating goes up, so does United Russia's," he said.

The ratings bump led at least one member of the presidential administration to question whether a rebranding is necessary, Kommersant reported. But party-linked analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times said United Russia still needs a facelift.

"There will absolutely be a rebranding. United Russia pulls Putin down," Markov said, adding that the form of the rebranding isn't yet clear.

Yevgeny Minchenko, a political consultant, suggested that the party be broken up along ideological lines into liberal, nationalist and right parties that could then be controlled by the Kremlin.

Others have suggested a change of name and logo, changes Minchenko said would be insufficient.

Kryshтанovskaya agreed the party needs reform but stressed the importance of holding on to its infrastructure.

"We need to keep the good parts while getting rid of the bad parts," she said.

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