



A photo of United Russia parliamentary group in the Hall of Plenary Sessions in State Duma, 2011
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New Rules, New Members, Same Results? A Look at the New Russian Duma

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Introduction

The halo of approval following the annexation of Crimea appears to have worn off for the Russian State Duma. Following a spike in support during the events of early 2014, public approval of Duma activities has tapered off and now significantly trails the sky-high ratings enjoyed by President Putin. Widely seen as a 'rubber stamp' for the executive branch, the Duma under Presidents Putin and Medvedev has come to resemble more an expensive forum for wealthy elites to promote their

own interests than a true legislative body. This has created lingering indifference among the Russian voting populace and was reflected in the record low turnout in the September 2016 parliamentary elections. However, the new deputies of the 7th Convocation that took their seats the following month quickly discovered that the cushy years of missing votes and using their office to promote their own ambitions may be long gone.

New Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin has spearheaded plans for reform, introducing myriad rules and regulations designed to increase discipline and professionalism among deputies. In a recent blog post, Ben Noble of the University of Oxford does a thorough job of cataloguing the changes.¹ Perks such as the publicly scorned *migalka* (the flashing blue lights that allow officials to circumvent driving laws) have been withdrawn, additional resources have been devoted to legislative capacity-building, and deputies now face pressure to respond to citizen appeals and regional issues. Noble argues that it is too early to tell whether the crackdown will lead to tangible changes in how the parliament performs its duties. Instead, these initiatives could just be window-dressing designed to strengthen Volodin's new position atop the hierarchy.

For all the attention to the changes in rules, much less has been paid to who actually populates the new Parliament. Recent work in political science and economics suggests that changing political structures may matter less than changing the actual people in charge of designing and implementing policies. In Russia, changes in procurement regulations can result in vastly different outcomes depending on the experience and quality of the bureaucrats that implement them.² Similar findings have emerged from Indonesia, where the level of human capital among state officials strongly affects the amount of tax revenue raised.³ Analyzing the effectiveness of changes to Duma regulations first requires looking at the biographies of the members primarily affected by them.

Who are the Deputies in the new State Duma?

Examining patterns in official biographical information provides a unique window into the

type of individuals responsible for lawmaking in Russia over the next five years. For the purposes of this exercise, I compare the composition of the 7th Convocation of the State Duma (beginning in October 2016) with that of its immediate predecessor – the 6th convocation that spanned from 2011–2016.⁴ Biographical data comes from the official State Duma website as well as the Central Election Commission and datasets collected by the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development.⁵ To maintain a strict comparison, I only include data on backgrounds for those 450 individuals who initially won office during the December 4th, 2011 (6th Convocation) and September 13th, 2016 elections (7th Convocation).

First, women are only slightly more represented in the new Duma, the proportion increasing to 16 percent from 14 percent. Deputies in the 7th convocation are also roughly two years older than their predecessors, coming in on average at 52 years of age. Interestingly, both the change in electoral rules (discussed in detail below) and the renewed emphasis on breaking from the past did not have a marked effect on the number of incumbents that were able to keep their seats. Whereas 41.6 percent of deputies in 2011–2016 were incumbents, that figure increased to 49.1 percent for the convocation starting in 2016 (Figure 1), a difference of 34 more incumbents. Lastly, the ruling United Russia party was able to expand its majority in the latest convocation, increasing its total number of seats from 238 to 342 after October 2016.

Beginning in 2007, State Duma legislators were entirely elected according to a proportional representation system. Each registered party submitted a list of candidates and received a number of seats according to a formula based on the proportion of the total popular vote they

received across the country. Parties that received less than 7 percent received no seats, a clear barrier to opposition members that helped consolidate a stable configuration of political parties in power during the Putin/Medvedev era.

Last year, government officials decided that changes were needed and brought back the mixed-electoral system first put in place under President Yeltsin. Now party lists were to be used to select only half of the members of the State Duma, while the other half would compete in winner-take-all contests held in geographically defined districts. The official justification given by President Putin for the reforms was to increase the number of political parties and ease restrictions on candidates running for office. But independent observers expressed concern that the move to a mixed-system would fragment any potential opposition, thereby preempting any post-election protests, as well as solidify United Russia's majority in the Duma.⁶

Looking at the backgrounds of the deputies elected under the new rules suggests that the switch to the mixed-system has returned on average a different type of legislator. The proportion of deputies listing the capital Moscow as their primary residence dropped by nearly 10 percent (Figure 1). Additionally, the number of individuals coming directly from regional and local government has increased in the latest convocation. If the intention was to anchor policy on regional matters, these new lawmakers have the connections and expertise to follow through. Experience working on the ground level is now much more prevalent in the legislature. Who lost out in this transition? Federal officials from the executive branch felt the brunt the change in

electoral rules, as the number of spots on party lists available to them contracted.

Finally, some observers expected that the prevalence of politicians with business backgrounds would recede in the new convocation. Federal Law 285 was passed in 2015 mandating that Duma deputies (as well as other federal officials) publicly reveal any conflicts of interests, putting some teeth into the constitutional requirement that Duma deputies completely leave their business behind upon taking office. Rumors of Duma seats being sold to the highest bidder and wealthy businesspeople dominating lawmaking have long damaged perceptions of the institution. Recent research has uncovered that businesspeople that win election at the regional level in Russia can amass incredible financial returns for their connected firms after just a single term in office.⁷ Accusations of conducting business activities while in office served as the basis for removing several deputies from the 6th convocation, including Aleksei Knyshev (United Russia) and Gennady Gudkov (Just Russia).

However, an analysis of the new set of deputies suggests that businesspeople are not fleeing from the chance to serve as legislators. The percentage of deputies coming from the private sector has dropped only slightly (Figure 1), from

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30.2 percent to 28.2 percent. Freshmen deputies came directly from high-level positions in sectors such as telecommunications (Rostelecom), agricultural (Kaloriya, FosAgro-Volga), transportation (AeroExpress), real estate (Kastor Group), and natural resources (PromGazService).

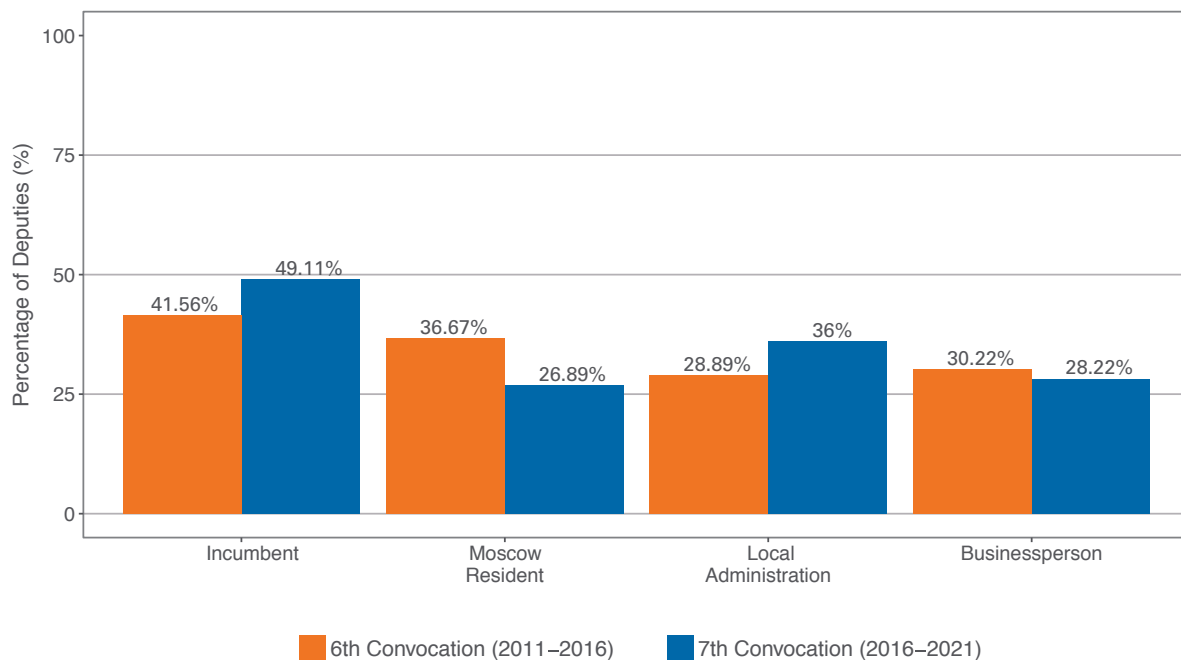
Attempts to change the profile of the Duma as a chamber for personal enrichment do not appear to have worked. The old-guard of the business community will continue to be center stage as the government attempts to kick-start the country's stagnant economy. Lobbying from such players in the Duma stalls attempts to promote small and medium-sized enterprises and lead to greater market concentration.⁸ The Duma remains a coveted

destination for big businesses to exert influence in service of private interests.

Removing the Bad Apples?

Another way to examine the composition of the new Duma is to see who managed to keep their seats and win re-election. Although some incumbents ran in single-member districts somewhat independently, the tight control that political parties wield over ballot access ensures that parties are able to scrutinize and vet their candidates' records in office. If attempts to refit the Duma were sincere, we might expect deputies with histories in office rife with corruption, dishonesty, and/or truancy to be less likely to make it into the

Figure 1: Demographic Characteristics





Protest against Russian State Duma Bill, photo courtesy of: commons.wikimedia.org

next convocation. I utilize unique data on divorce rates, plagiarism, and absenteeism among deputies of the 6th convocation (2011-2016) to make these comparisons, finding no evidence that holdovers had any more pristine records than those that left office.

At first glance, the 6th convocation (2011-2016) seems particularly prone to the divorce bug. Over the course of the five-year term, between 92 and 102 deputies filed for divorce from their spouses.⁹ While some breakups probably occurred for normal reasons, the timing of so many divorces within such a small group of politicians over such a short period might have a particular cause. During that term, pressure increased on deputies to submit income and asset declarations for themselves and immediate members of their family. However, ex-husbands and wives were excluded from this

requirement. The divorce loophole enabled deputies to avoid exposing inconvenient assets on their personal declarations by putting them in the name of their former spouse.¹⁰

To measure the incidence of divorces, I collected data from the income declarations from the official Duma website. The law states that each member has to declare all assets owned by every member of their immediate family. The Duma website shows that 92 deputies began the term by declaring assets for themselves and a spouse, but at some point during the five-year term, stopped declaring any assets or income for a spouse (regardless of income, spouses must be listed on a deputy's declaration). Russian newspapers at the time reported that this status change was the result of tactical divorces.

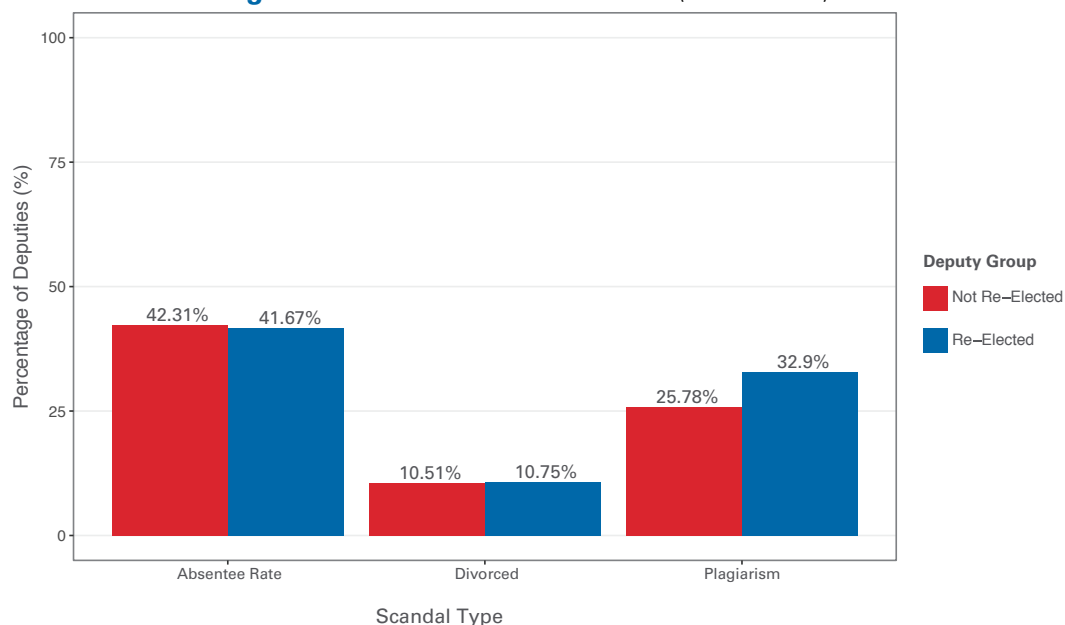
One of the major scandals impacting civil servants and office holders at all levels in Russia has been the thriving black market for fake academic dissertations.¹¹ A network of anonymous activists coordinated through the site Dissernet has uncovered thousands of instances of prominent officials having bought or plagiarized their degrees.¹² Doctoral degrees serve as a sign of prestige for ambitious politicians and command high prices and bribes. Investigations have uncovered that this type of malfeasance by Duma deputies may be particularly egregious. An expose in January 2016 found that one in nine deputies were found to have engaged in plagiarism.

Were deputies implicated in this scandal less likely to keep their seats? I compare plagiarism rates among deputies that either stayed in the Duma for the 7th convocation or exited in Column 2 of Figure 2. If anything, it seems that fake academic degrees

were more common among those deputies staying on, controlling for political party, age, and gender. Party leaders appeared to take different factors into consideration when constructing their slates for re-election, looking past the potential dishonesty of their members.

Finally, one of Chairman Volodin's main initiatives in the new Duma is to combat rampant absenteeism. The statistics from the 6th convocation attest to the breadth of the problem. The average deputy missed 37 percent of votes on bills. Moreover, 21 deputies missed over half of votes (first, second, and third readings) over their five-year term. That type of behavior can now result in pay deductions, while the ability to use proxy votes has been curbed.¹³ However, just as the case with divorce and plagiarism, a deputy's level of truancy is not connected to his or her ability to stay on in the Duma. Figure 2 shows that the average absentee

Figure 2: 6th Convocation Behavior (2011-2016)



rate among those members re-elected is nearly identical to those that left.

Overall, the statistics shown in Figure 2 demonstrate the very minimal differences between returning incumbents and those leaving office in 2016. In spite of United Russia officials being on record advocating a “cleansing of the ranks,” Russian analysts see little evidence that the new deputies are any different on paper than their predecessors.¹⁴ Leaders of all four parties in parliament did not punish party members suspected of cheating, suspicious activity, or absenteeism. Instead, they kept many of these individuals on the party list in order to continue to serve as legislators. Given their pasts, the returning group may especially be talented at identifying loopholes to the new disciplinary rules as well as pushing back at new requirements that they engage in more ‘serious’ work.

Conclusion

It is still too early to fully evaluate the effects of the new set of reforms, but one thing is for certain: Chairman Volodin is not working with a fundamentally different set of colleagues than his predecessor in the job. Given the new Duma’s composition, it is more likely that it will be business as usual over the next five years. Duma deputies have demonstrated an astonishing ability to skirt rules intended to bring them in line, and without tough sanctions (such as expulsion) on the table, changing their behavior will be difficult. Real change in the Duma requires new faces and interests, two things that are hard to achieve as the scrutiny of politicians increases and the pressure to win elections grows.





Endnotes

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10. Officials tried to counteract this practice by submitting a law in 2016 to mandate declarations by ex-spouses, but at the time of writing it had not become law.
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