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UK General Election 2015

Resume of the report for Russian public



With support and cooperation of Institute of
socio-economic and political researches
(ISEPR Foundation)



About the report

This study was conducted in the period from March 2015 to May 2015. It was supported by Moscow-based noncommercial foundation — Institute of socio-economic and political researches (ISEPR Foundation¹).

The main goal of the study was to understand the dynamics of electoral processes in the United Kingdom through the analysis of political technologies that were used by parties and their candidates to gain victory. We have also done the work to evaluate the possible political scenarios after the elections and present them to Russian public. The full version of the report in Russian is available for download from our website http://minchenko.ru/analitika/analitika_55.html.

We were focused both on the national election campaign and the fight for marginal constituencies which determines the outcome of the general battle between the British parties for the majority in Parliament. Particular attention was given to the systematization and analysis of political technologies.

The following methods were used in the study:

- Discourse of national and regional mass media analysis;
- Legal framework for the UK elections analysis;
- Monitoring of activity in social networks and official websites of political leaders, candidates, pundits and experts;
- Analysis of video and visual ads issued by candidates, parties and independent organizations;
- Analysis of electoral statistics;
- Analysis of electoral studies conducted by think tanks, agencies and Universities (Henry Jackson Society, Institute for Public Policy Research, Democratic Audit UK, Pew Research Center, MigrationWatch UK, Electoral Reform Society, Centre for Economic and Business Research, University of Edinburgh, Loughborough University, Local Government Information Unit);
- Analysis of sociological data (published polls from YouGov, Lord Ashcroft Polls, BBC, Ipsos-MORI, ComRes, ICM, Populus, TNS-BMRB and information from headquarters of political parties to which we were granted access);
- Expert survey (more than 20 politicians, campaign staff, analysts, political consultants and journalists);
- Direct observation of field campaigns in several marginal constituencies.

¹ <http://www.isepr.ru/en/>

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Summary and main conclusions. 2015 UK General Election

1. Main results and general trends

1.1 First-past-the-post voting system favors parties with strong regional bases. The Conservatives have complete control of the South-East of England, Labour dominate London constituencies, SNP managed to capture whole of Scotland. National parties that struggled to find a regional base – UKIP, Greens and Lib Dems - underperformed in the 2015 General election. Thus, regional fragmentation of British political system became even more pronounced. Moderate left voters in the North of England moved to Labour from Lib. Dems due to their right shift in the coalition government with the Conservatives. Former Lib. Dem protest voters moved to UKIP and Green party.

1.2 At the same time, UK voters continue to drift away from the Labour party and from the Conservatives. The big-two continue to lose ground in terms of vote share to non-mainstream and non-national challengers. The vote for minor parties after 2015 campaign is extremely high – 24, 6%. Small parties' rise hit Labour and Lib Dems the hardest. SNP and the Green Party preyed on the former center-left electorate. However, apart from SNP smaller parties are yet to make a breakthrough in terms of seats. Tactical voting is still widely practiced: some potential voters of the smaller parties do not vote for them hoping to make an impact on future government's composition by voting for the big-two.

1.3 Electorate is still skewed towards older, wealthier and whiter voters. White retirees' are disciplined voters and thus have disproportionate say in determining political outcomes in the UK. On the other hand, the 2015 General election highlighted a significant increase in the influence of ethnic and religious minorities on electoral outcomes, even though the vast majority of voters still identifies themselves as White British (82%). Increasing power of minority voters affects London the most, because over 40% of voters in the capital belong to ethnic minorities. In 2015, Muslim voters had direct influence on the outcomes in 25% of English, Welsh and Scottish constituencies (159 of 632). At the same time interviewed experts believe that the role of the minorities is unlikely to be such a significant factor as it is in the US because they are fairly symmetrically distributed between the key parties – Sikhs and Hindus tend to support the Conservatives, natives of African and Muslim countries – the Labour.

1.4 The growing influence on the outcome of the elections of immigrants from countries with relatively weak parliamentary traditions leads to an increase in the number of violations and fraud. Serious and systemic problem with voting by mail has been revealed on the eve of the election, cause voting by mail is a fragile institute based largely on trust. Fraud is unlikely to seriously affect the outcome. But still greater growth of such cases during local elections can probably force the UK government to reform the system of voting by mail, and even prohibit it again.

1.5 2011 fixed-term parliaments act that set 5 year fixed terms for the House of Commons MPs and drastically restricted the possibility of the parliament's early dissolution changed the nature of electoral campaigns. It gave the parties an opportunity to build a long-term political strategy. In particular, the Conservatives took advantage of this to prepare in advance detailed database of voters, which allowed them to campaign with great precision both on the ground, in the constituencies, and in the air, on the national level.

2. Political technologies

2.1 The Conservatives won the fight for the elite support. To be more precise, the Labour Party did not partake in it at all. They were pretty sure of their victory (over several years prior to the campaign, they were in the lead according to the national polls). The vast majority of the representatives of big business has made a bet on the Tories, who supposedly have provided economic growth and stabilization of the public finances. The Labour Party was not able or did not want to challenge this narrative. Even though the coalition government's macroeconomic record is rather unsatisfactory compared to Britain's post-WWII governments.

2.2 Nevertheless, the Conservative's advantage in elite support did not create an unbridgeable gap between them and their adversaries in terms of campaign finance. In the UK, election expenses are severely limited by law and there is a ban on direct political advertising on TV and radio. Public funding (tied to the results of previous elections) and support of trades unions provided Labour's campaign with solid financial basis. However, good relations with media-owners gave Tories an upper hand in creating and spreading important narratives. The press overwhelmingly supported the Conservatives. Due to neutrality of the TV and the radio, privately-owned newspapers are free to formulate and control electoral agenda in the UK. TV traditionally followed the newspapers in the coverage of major events, and Labour's attempt to give an alternative interpretation in the social media failed. As a result, the Conservative narratives dominated the media agenda for 5 out of 6 weeks of the short campaign.

2.3 The Conservatives managed to put the economic development and the public finance stability into the center of the campaign debates. The Conservatives in the opinion of the elites and the population outplayed the Labour Party on this field. Media described a possible rise to power of the Labour Party as the inevitable chaos for the UK economy.

2.4 The Conservatives managed to survive throughout the campaign chosen content line due to the consolidated and well-structured work of their HQ. One-man management style became possible due to the good relations between the party leaders and also because of high level of trust towards campaign general manager Lynton Crosby. Labour's HQ lacked coherent command structure and thus failed to articulate uniform and clear grassroots strategy and overall national narrative.

2.5 Labour campaign attacked the Conservatives as "the party of the establishment". That, on the one hand, strengthen the sympathy of the elites to the Tories, on the other hand, inflated in the public eyes a threat of "a class war" in case the Labour Party won the election.

2.6 Labour had an advantage in terms of the ground war - they had more activists and direct contacts with households. But they were impaired by several factors. Volunteers lacked professionalism in dealing with the voters (it is forbidden to pay for this work by law). Party's resources were thinly spread among hundreds of constituencies, instead of being concentrated on crucial ones. As well as that, Labour voter data bases were of poor quality. At the same time the Conservatives created detailed databases, which were continuously updated and improved throughout the campaign. Tories chose a 40/40 strategy (to protect 40 marginal constituencies, to win 40 new ones). Volunteer activists received special training and were deployed strategically across these key constituencies. Targeted mailing lists and contacts through the Internet including social networks assisted activists in crafting individual messages for key groups of voter, like middle-aged mothers and military veterans.

2.7 Coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats has been recognized within the Conservative Party as a failure. Therefore, the Tories have relied on getting the majority or even the minority Government in the hung Parliament. This strategy allowed Tories to target disaffected

electorate of their coalition partners - Liberal Democrats. Tory credited all the economic achievements of the government for themselves, and any unfulfilled promises were explained by the Lib Dem resistance. Former Lib. Dem. electorate was mostly divided between the Labour party and Conservatives (20% went to the Tories, 24% to the Labour), but not in the proportion that the Labour Party had planned (they hoped to capture two-thirds of the Liberal Democrat votes). In terms of seats, it looked even more painful for the Labour Party. Liberal Democrats lost 27 seats to the Tories and only 12 to Labour.

2.8 In Scotland Labour and Lib. Dems were hit by association with toxic brand of the Conservative Party, because in 2014 Scottish independence referendum, all national parties campaigned for the preservation of the region as part of the UK together. Thus traditionally strong Scottish Labour was damaged beyond repair. This, along with successes of nationalist regional government, helped Scottish National Party to concentrate in their hands the vast majority of parliamentary seats in Westminster from Scotland (56 of 59). SNP is a unique phenomenon, because it operates as a classic mid-XX century mass party in the XXI century.

2.9 The rise of the SNP was a trump-card for the Conservative campaign. Conservatives made tactical voting work in their favors by offering voters a choice between a stable conservative government and 'a coalition of chaos between left Labour and even more left SNP. Tories managed to re-attract English Nationalist vote that gravitated towards UKIP. Hence they divided Labour core vote in Scotland, but consolidate their electoral base in England. Conservatives tried to exploit the image of 'Red Ed' – a weak, infantile politician, who isn't up to the prime-ministerial role along with the image of future destructive pressure from aggressive left populists from the SNP. Control over agenda allowed conservatives "to glue" Labour to the SNP. The counter argument from the Labour Party about the possibility of a coalition of conservatives and the UKIP had no such effect, because none of the analysts, despite the growing number of supporters of this party, did not forecast more than four seats for the UKIP. Eventually the UKIP won just 1 seat.

2.10 The growing popularity of UKIP, which won the third largest share of popular vote in 2015, did not translate into parliamentary seats, because the party lacks concentrated regional base and large groups of potential UKIP electorate chose to vote tactically for Conservative Government and against the possibility of Labour-SNP coalition. It is worth noting reckless attitude of the Labour Party to the UKIP - they saw them only as a spoiler of the Conservative Party, but later learned that Farage likewise takes away their own voices.

2.11 The increased financial support for the "Green party" creates an additional burden on the electorate of Lib. Dem and Labour. Some observers believed it could be done in favor of the Conservatives

2.12 Prime Minister David Cameron won the leadership contest against Ed Miliband. His personal rating and rating as a potential Prime Minister exceeded ranking of Conservative party, while Miliband's personal rating was lower than Labour party rating. The negative campaign against Miliband began long before the election, and it only intensified during the actual campaign. With this campaign, Conservatives mainly targeted former Liberal Democrat voters and wavering middle class, concentrated in the marginal constituencies of England's South. Positive dynamic of Ed Miliband's rating during the short-campaign were not enough to give him any advantage, because this dynamic as driven by traditional left-wing electorate. These groups were concentrated in Labour safe seats and thus could hardly help the Labour party expand in the marginal constituencies.

2.13 The chosen TV debate format favoured Conservatives. David Cameron managed to avoid direct confrontation with Ed Miliband, who was inter-mixed with six other vocal opposition politicians. Two head to head Q&A sessions put Cameron forward as a better communicator with

clear positioning. At the same time, the seven leaders' debates format were extremely well for SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon. She outflanked Miliband from the left and thus strengthened nationalists' electoral credentials in Scotland. Such turn of events also created a sense of anxiety among English voters and supported Conservative "coalition of chaos" narrative.

2.14 National opinion polls got the trends wrong. They showed Conservatives and Labour going head to head until the polling day, and also highlighted high probability of a coalition government. The probable cause of the mistakes was an incorrect methodology for surveys (focus on nationwide sample instead the focus on the marginal constituencies, refusal to use candidate names in polling etc.). Conservative closed polls conducted by Crosby's team proved to be more accurate. However, Tories did not publish the results, because uncertainty, predicted by the national polls, increased the likelihood of tactical voting for the Conservative party by the undecided voters.

The day after

- After the win, the Conservatives started a campaign to broaden their base by absorbing parts of the electorate of their demoralized opponents. New Conservative rhetoric borrowed from their opponents' manifestoes. For instance, Tories try to rebrand themselves as the «real party of the working people».

- If the Conservative party manages to broaden its base, the coming reduction of constituencies from 650 to 600, can lead to a transition from current two-party system to long-term Conservative Party dominance.

About Minchenko Consulting

Providing consultancy services since 1993.

Main research agenda and services:

- Research of international practices of political and lobbying campaigns;
- Research of political and economic processes in the post-Soviet space;
- Monitoring of the elites' activities in Russia and the CIS countries;
- Research of Eurasian energy security, military and political security issues;
- Exclusive analysis for government bodies and private customers.

Research Projects

Permanent monitoring projects

- Monitoring of regional elections in Russia (since 1996);
- Rating of political survivability of governors in Russia (jointly with the Centre of Political Conjunction of Russia, subsequently with the St. Petersburg Politics Foundation, since 2007);
- Politburo 2.0 – analysis of elite groups of the Russian Federation (since 2012);
- Assessment of political risks for foreign investors in post-Soviet countries: comparative analysis (since 2013).

2015

- British parliamentary election: new trends in political technologies;
- Assessment of political risks for foreign investors in the countries of the Caucasus: comparative analysis;
- Lobbying competition in the Russian pharmaceutical market (confidential report);
- Lobbying competition over suburban railway transport in Russia (confidential report).

2014

- Politburo 2.0 and post-Crimean Russia;
- Technological aspects of 2014 elections to the European Parliament;
- Monitoring of gubernatorial elections in Russia;
- Lobbying competition in the Russian automotive industry (confidential report);
- Ukrainian revolution: analysis of the first stage and development prospects;

2013

- Assessment of political risks for foreign investors in Central Asian countries: comparative analysis;
- Politburo 2.0 in the Lead-Up to a Reset of Elite Groups;
- Political strategies of new Russian governors, appointed in late 2011-2012;
- Political Survival Rating of Russian Governors;
- Investment Potential of Uzbekistan: Political Risk Analysis;
- First Anniversary of Dmitry Medvedev's Cabinet: Results and Prospects;

- Mayor of Moscow Elections: Scenario Programming of Campaigns and Candidates' Reputation Management;
- Political Strategies of 2013 Governor Candidates.

2012

- System of Presidential Elections: Russian and Foreign Experience;
- French Presidential Elections: Analysis of Political Technologies;
- U.S. Presidential Elections: Analysis of Political Technologies;
- Presidential Elections in Turkmenistan: Political and Economic Risks of Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's second term;
- Turkmenistan's Investment Potential: Political Risk Analysis;
- Vladimir Putin's Greater Government and Politburo 2.0.

2011

- Social Engineering for Russian Modernization (based on survey of moods of mono-cities inhabitants);
- Post-crisis situation in mono-cities: problems and solutions.

2010

- 5th Anniversary of Governor Appointment System in Russia. Time to Return to Direct Elections;
- 2010 Presidential Elections in Poland. Main Candidates and Tactics;
- Pre-election Situation in the Kyrgyz Republic;
- Future of the South Stream Project;
- Political Influence Index of the Heads of 100 Largest Cities in Russia (jointly with the Petersburg Politics Foundation);
- 2010 Parliamentary Elections in Moldova: Analysis of Political Technologies.

2009

- Geopolitical Lobbying over the NATO Eastern Enlargement;
- Monitoring of the 2009 European Parliament Election;
- Images of Russia and the United States in the Lead-Up to Relationship Reset;
- Algorithms for conflict resolution in Russian mono-cities;
- Foreign Influence in the 2010 Ukrainian Presidential Elections;
- Russia's Recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's Independence: One Year After;
- Monitoring of the Lobbying Struggle over the Federal Law on Foundations of State Regulation of Trade in the Russian Federation;
- Economic Situation in Belarus and Vectors of Geopolitical Lobbying in the President Lukashenko's Team;
- Lobbying in Russia and Pressure Groups: What Changed during the First Year of the Putin-Medvedev Tandem;
- New European Security Architecture and Prospects for Kazakhstani OSCE Presidency.

2008

- Political Survival Rating of Russian Governors (jointly with the Centre of Russian Current Political Situation and the Petersburg Politics Foundation), 2007-2013;
- Conflict in South Ossetia: Geopolitical and Image Consequences for Russia.

2007

- Pressure Groups and Lobbying Technologies in Ukraine (jointly with Kiev Gorshenin Institute of Management Issues);
- Energy Potential of Ukraine (jointly with Free Europe Foundation, United Communications and Sofia Center);
- United Economic Space Project lobbying. Pressure groups and lobbying technologies in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan: comparative analysis (2006-2007);
- Lobbying by Foreign Companies in Turkmenistan;
- Scenarios of Power Succession in Central Asia and Kazakhstan: Experience and Perspectives;
- Russian Energy Strategy in Eurasia: Priorities and Technology of Implementation.

2006

- Optimization of Russia's Administrative and Territorial Division: First Results and Future Steps;
- Attitudes of Ukrainian Electorate and Experts towards the Prospect of Joining Accession (jointly with Sofia Center for Social Technologies and Army, Conversion and Disarmament Research Center).

2005

- Universal Electoral Technologies and Country-Specific Features: Experience of Russian Political Advisers;
- How to Become and Remain a Governor. Second edition. Lobbying Technologies for Candidates Running for Regional Leadership in the Russian Federation (2005-2009);
- Monitoring of the Ukrainian Rada elections (2005-2006, 2007).

2004

- President-2004. Comparative Analysis of Electoral Technologies Implemented in Russian, Ukrainian and U.S. Presidential Elections;
- Psychological Portraits of Candidates for Ukrainian Presidency;
- Monitoring of Regional Parliamentary Elections in the Russian Federation: Technologies of Political Party Brand Promotion (2004-2007).