

## United Russia and the 2011 Elections

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### Abstract

The December 2011 elections will be the third time that Russia's current party of power, United Russia, has competed in a national election. United Russia has dominated elections over the past decade by ensuring cohesion among the regional elite, crafting an effective catch-all ideology, and capitalizing on Putin's popularity. This election will be no different. The only remaining questions are 1) whether the Kremlin's potent PR machine can revive United Russia's popularity, which has lagged slightly over the past several months and 2) whether the inclusion of outsiders from the All-Russian People's Front on United Russia's party list will frustrate party loyalists enough to cause them to defect. All signs indicate that the party is prepared to manage these issues and that United Russia will win the December polls by a large margin.

### Putin, Medvedev, and the Party of Power

United Russia's most significant resource has always been its association with Vladimir Putin. Putin identified much more closely with the party than Yeltsin had with any party of power in the 1990s. Prior to the 2007 Duma elections Putin announced that, while he would not formally join the party, he would agree to head the United Russia list. Since that time he has served as party chairman without being a formal party member. As Figure 1 shows, United Russia's popularity does indeed trend with Putin's.

In 2008, responsibility for coordinating the executive branch's relations with United Russia was transferred from the Presidential Administration to the Apparatus of the Government. Beginning in March 2010, Putin has presided over a series of eight interregional party conferences. Putin uses these conferences to announce major party initiatives oriented toward the regions. In short, Putin has settled into the role of party chairman in deeds as well as name.

The paradox of Putin's relationship with the party is that by closely tying his name and reputation to United Russia, Putin generates greater elite and mass support for the ruling party, but close affiliation also brings with it the risk that Putin could become constrained by the party and its image. Putin has sought to manage this tradeoff by refraining from joining the party formally while simultaneously ramping up his commitments to the party. Whether as prime minister or president, Putin has tied his name to the party to such an extent that it seems unlikely he will now abandon it.

President Medvedev, meanwhile, has not affiliated as closely with United Russia and often levels criticism at the mono-centric nature of Russia's party system. He took part in United Russia congresses in 2008 and 2009, but has not taken part in the inter-regional conferences since then. He rarely meets with United Russia leaders exclusively, preferring instead to hold joint meetings with all parliamentary parties. Thus, Medve-

dev's role has been more akin to that of Yeltsin in the 1990s: a non-partisan president who, while implicitly aligned with the party of power, fancies himself in the role of an impartial arbiter.

Several scenarios exist for Medvedev's future relations with the party. If Medvedev remains as president, the current status quo could persist, with Putin at the helm of United Russia and Medvedev continuing in his role as non-partisan arbiter. Another possible scenario has Medvedev affiliating even more closely with United Russia in a bid that would seek to boost United Russia's ratings by bringing Medvedev's personal electorate to the party. Either way, United Russia's chances in December depend, in large part, on strong executive support and it seems certain that it will receive such support.

### United Russia and the Political Elite

United Russia's success in winning elections has always depended not only on support from the Kremlin, but also on its ability to recruit prominent elites into its ranks. Indeed, the coordination of almost all of Russia's regional political elite inside the party is one of its greatest strengths. In Russia, as in many other countries, political elites, such as regional governors, prominent legislators, enterprise directors, and mayors are important opinion leaders whose autonomous resources drive the vote. United Russia's main task in the 2000s was the cooptation of Russia's fractious and powerful regional elites.

It has not always been easy for United Russia to attract commitments from regional elites. In exchange for relinquishing their autonomy to United Russia, Russia's regional elites need assurances that they will receive ample spoils and career opportunities within the party. They need credible signals that the Kremlin will be investing its own resources in the party and making it a forum where spoils could be accessed and career advancement secured. In the early 2000s, many of Russia's regional elites did not see any such assurances and

calculated that maintaining control of their own autonomous political resources was more politically beneficial than linking their fates to the party of power.

But as the decade wore on it became clear that United Russia had the full support of the Kremlin and would be made a part of the regime's apparatus for distributing spoils and careers. Thus, more and more elites signed on to the dominant party project. In 2003, the party was only able to enlist 29 regional governors to place their names on the party list and put their powerful political machines to work for the party. By December 2007, however, 78 of Russia's 83 governors (now appointed by the president rather than elected directly by constituents) had joined the party. The party obtained a constitutional majority in the 2007 Duma elections, owing in no small measure to the administrative resources of the governors that it had recruited. Since that time, the party's influence among governors has only grown, as the vast majority of newly appointed governors are already party members (see Figure 2).

Progress in recruiting regional legislators, who also tend to represent the most powerful business interests in a region, has been gradual. But the party now enjoys the allegiance of an overwhelming majority of regional parliamentary deputies. As Figure 3 shows, United Russia initially had difficulty winning large majorities in regional elections. Majoritarian electoral rules disproportionately favored large parties, so the inability of United Russia to consistently dominate single member district (SMD) races in the early and mid 2000s is a strong indication of its difficulty closing out the market on strong candidates in the locales. Only after 2005 did United Russia begin dependably winning a majority of SMD races. Since 2008, United Russia has consistently won over 80% of single member races in the regions. Thus, even as its rating among voters fell in 2010 and 2011, the party maintained average seat shares near 80%. This is undoubtedly due to the party's monopoly on strong elite candidates, and speaks to the party's solid position among regional economic elites.

United Russia's (UR) representation among local and municipal elites has recently grown significantly. As of 2010, 21 of Russia's 25 largest cities had UR mayors. Data on other local and municipal posts is not easily available, but a United Russia press release from October 2010 indicated that 71.5% of the 42,335 local council positions elected in October 2010 were United Russia members, including 79.5% of city council deputies in regional capitals. Of the 2,325 municipal heads elected during that election cycle 67.5% were UR members. These figures are all the more impressive when one considers that the party with the next highest share of local deputies, the Communist Party of the Russian Federa-

tion (KPRF), held only 4 percent of seats and 2% of the heads of municipal administrations. These figures suggest a robust and penetrating ruling party organization with tentacles in all levels of representative government.

In sum, the vast majority of regional elites have now coordinated inside the ruling party. In return for linking their fates to the party and making their resources available to the Kremlin these elites receive access to intra-party logrolls that often determine the outcome of policy making and career advancement for themselves and their clients. Thus, the rules and norms embedded in the party, such that they are, reduce uncertainty for elites about how career opportunities will be distributed. This arrangement has given most elites little reason to abandon the party. Their prospects for career advancement are better inside the party, especially if they follow party discipline. One of United Russia's great success stories is the remarkable lack of defections that occurred during the economic crisis. To date, the party has experienced almost no high level defections.

In return for these career opportunities, regional elites put their machines, resources, authority and name recognition to work for the party in elections. This strategy of winning elections has proved wildly successful for United Russia. In the early 2000s, the party attempted to run candidates against locally popular gubernatorial candidates with disastrous results. In regional elections from 2003–2007, the party performed much better in regional elections where the governor headed the list, and the party's victory in the 2007 Duma elections owed as much to governors' machines as much as it did to Putin's popularity.<sup>1</sup>

The consolidation of Russia's regional political elite inside United Russia will remain one of the ruling party's greatest resources in the 2011–12 election cycle. But the electoral resources of Russia's regional elites have lost some of their former potency. Russia's most powerful regional governors, deputies, and mayors cut their teeth on relatively competitive elections in the 1990s and early 2000s. Only the most charismatic and resourceful survived these contests. In many regions, these powerful elected governors and mayors have been replaced with loyal appointees who lack the political machines and autonomous resources of their predecessors. Thus, in its search for loyal agents, the Kremlin may have undermined its own vote mobilizing capacity.

For the 2011 elections, the Kremlin is attempting to compensate for this lack of political talent by dispatching federal ministers to key regions to head United Russia

1 Golosov, Grigorii. 2011. "Russia's Regional Legislative Elections, 2003–2007: Authoritarianism Incorporated" *Europe-Asia Studies* 63.3.

lists. Sergei Shoigu (Krasnoyarsk), Igor Shuvalov (Primoriya), Aleksandr Zhukov (Kaliningrad), Viktor Zubkov (Volgograd), Dmitrii Kozak (St. Petersburg), Igor Trutnev (Perm) and Igor Sechin (Stavropol) have thus far been proposed as candidates to head regional lists. The idea is not that these individuals are especially charismatic politicians, but simply that the direct involvement of a federal minister in a regional contest will give regional authorities an extra impetus to ensure that voters are mobilized for the ruling party. Hegemonic parties in other countries mobilize votes with the help of tentacle-like party organizations that penetrate social networks at the local level. With 2.2 million members, 54,000 primary party cells, and strong representation in organs of local self-government, United Russia's organization is much stronger than it was in 2007, but its organization still lags behind that of well-known hegemonic parties such as the PRI in Mexico or the KMT in Taiwan.

### A Hegemonic Party in the Electorate?

The United Russia vote is primarily a function of Putin's popularity, the consolidation of regional elites, and economic perceptions, but the role of voter appeals and partisanship is non-negligible. Studies have found that United Russia voters in 2007 tended to be 1) younger, and 2) more market-oriented than the average voter.<sup>2</sup> These same studies reveal that United Russia partisanship is important even while holding constant support for Putin, evaluations of economic performance, and ideological stances. One poll from 2007 indicated that 40% of voters thought that United Russia was an independent political party, while 38% viewed it only as an instrument of Putin.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, United Russia also captures for itself that segment of the population that is comfortable with the idea of limited democracy and a strong ruling party. United Russia's electorate also consists of dependent voters (e.g. rural voters, pensioners, state employees) who respond to patronage appeals. Lavish government spending on National Projects clearly had an electoral purpose in 2007, as many of the objects built under those programs were advertised as initiatives of United Russia.

United Russia's typical campaign strategy reflects a combination of these elements. United Russia's former campaign initiatives to build the middle class reflect the liberal ideological strand in its platform. At the same

time, the party's erstwhile embrace of sovereign democracy embodied its appeals to voters that were more concerned with stability than democracy and corruption. Meanwhile, the party's long-time moniker as "*partiya realnykh del*" (party of real deeds) reflects its emphasis on clientelistic appeals to voters. In spite of all this, however, the dominant theme in the party's 2007 campaign materials was Putin.

Heading into the 2011 elections, the ratings of both Putin and United Russia have declined from their peak after the 2008 Presidential election (see Figure 1). The decline, which began in earnest at the beginning of 2011, comes amid high inflation over the first six months of the year, which led to a drop in real incomes. It also comes as an increasing number of Russians are expressing preferences for political liberalization and dissatisfaction with corruption. Prominent blogger and political activist, Alexei Navalny, whose anti-corruption efforts have gained widespread attention on the internet, has criticized United Russia relentlessly, labeling it as a "party of thieves and swindlers" (*partiya vorov i zhulikov*). While few average Russians are familiar with Navalny, the vitriolic dissatisfaction with United Russia among members of the liberal elite and in the blogosphere has certainly stained the party's image.

However, the Ministry of Finance's efforts to curb inflation appear to have worked, as real wages are now rising again. In addition, United Russia's ratings, at 54%, are about where they stood at the start of the campaign in 2007. In both of the past two election cycles, United Russia's ratings went up 10% in the three months between September and December. As the Kremlin's PR machine swings into action, there is no reason to believe that the same will not happen this year.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin appears to be reacting to perceived changes in voter preferences by changing its campaign strategy. First, in May, Putin announced the creation of the All-Russian People's Front (ONF), an umbrella organization uniting social organizations and trade unions in support of United Russia. Putin announced that 1/3 of the spots on United Russia's party list will be reserved for representatives of these organizations, although it remains to be seen how many of those will secure Duma seats. The ONF is clearly an attempt by the Kremlin to broaden the electoral appeal of United Russia, coopt new elites, and create a façade of liberalization for moderate-liberal voters.

Yet, the party recognizes that opportunities for expanding its electorate among liberal votes are limited. Thus, all signs point toward a leftward turn in United Russia's platform, with a strong focus on patronage spending. Indeed, at United Russia's 8<sup>th</sup> Interregional party conference, Putin previewed a series of initiatives

2 Hale, Henry. 2009. "What Makes Dominant Parties Dominant in Hybrid Regimes?: The Unlikely Importance of Ideas in the Case of United Russia" Paper Presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.

3 Levada Center, Nationwide Survey 5–10 October, 2007, N=1600

from the party's draft platform. Much of it centered on increases in spending on infrastructure, healthcare, and government salaries. United Russia's leftward turn is also evidenced by the apparent decision to jettison Just Russia as the Kremlin's other sanctioned party.

### Having Their Cake and Eating it Too?: The Creation of the All-Russia People's Front

United Russia is faced with two tasks ahead of the 2011–12 election cycle: 1) expanding its electorate and 2) maintaining cohesion among the current political elite. The ONF was created primarily to achieve the first task. The difficulty is that bringing new cadres into the party severely complicates the task of maintaining elite cohesion. Authoritarian leaders often need to coopt outsiders with access to spoils; but by distributing spoils to opposition elites on an ad hoc basis, they run the risk of undermining their own ruling party coalitions, which are held together by the promise that elites will have privileged access to spoils if they remain loyal to the party. If upwardly mobile United Russia cadres are snubbed in favor of outsiders for places on United Russia's party list, then ruling party elites may calculate that their chances of gaining career advancement are just as good outside the party, where they do not have

to relinquish their freedom of maneuver to a centralized party leadership.

Unstable hegemonic parties are those that either promote too much rotation of cadres, in which case uncertainty among the elite prompts unrest, or too little rotation, in which case ambitious cadres become frustrated. UR leaders have announced that the party's Duma faction will be renewed by 50%. This figure is not as important as who is replaced, why they are replaced, and what happens to those who are replaced. If party loyalists are replaced by non-partisans, then the bonds of the ruling party may weaken. On the other hand, if up and coming United Russia cadres from the regions replace inactive or older deputies in the Duma, then the bonds of the party may strengthen. For United Russia, the best option may be to replace inactive deputies with both ambitious party cadres and outsiders. To the extent that displacing loyal partisans in the Duma is necessary, they could be transferred to higher posts in the Presidential Administration and government, or at the very least to the Federation Council. If United Russia can successfully coopt new elites without creating schisms within the current ruling elite, then the ONF will be judged a success by its creators, and United Russia will perform well in December.

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**Figure 1: Popularity Ratings of Putin and United Russia 2000–2011**

