

Just Russia—From “Second Leg” to “Footnote”?

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Abstract

At the onset of the 2011–12 election campaign, the left-wing social democratic Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*, sometimes translated as “A Just Russia” or “Fair Russia”) is the fourth-placed party at the national level (with 38 of 450 State Duma seats, making it the smallest of the four parliamentary factions). However, it claims over 400,000 members, making it the second largest membership party after United Russia. Moreover, it is the third-placed regionally, polling at approximately 10 percent of the vote in 2007–2011 and having representatives in 72 regional parliaments. The party is not insignificant then. However, Just Russia (JR) is the only Duma party that may drop out after December 2011, with the consensus of the Russian commentariat that it has failed to develop a stable niche in the party system and will soon become a historical footnote. While this expectation is by no means guaranteed, it is very plausible. Accordingly, this article examines why the considerable potential the party showed at its formation has failed to materialise.

The Kremlin’s “Second Leg”

Just Russia originated in 2006 as the merger of three smaller left-leaning parties: the largest, Motherland (*Rodina*) was a populist-nationalist bloc created by the Kremlin in 2003 to siphon off communist votes; the Pensioner’s Party had gained an increasing regional foothold with an oppositionist platform supporting strong social policies. The weakest component, the Party of Life, was an esoteric ecologically-minded party, whose primary purpose was to increase the visibility and influence of its founder, the head of the Federation Council Sergei Mironov, among the public and federal elites.

Why 2006? Just Russia’s foundation served several aims simultaneously: for the parties in question, merger was a question of simple survival in the context of the authorities’ attempts to consolidate the party system: both Motherland and the Pensioner’s Party in particular had started to take their opposition status seriously and had accordingly run afoul of the authorities (most notably, Motherland head Dmitrii Rogozin “resigned” in March 2006 after the party sustained a media offensive and was debarred from most regional election campaigns).

Without question, the founding also served the strategic and tactical aims of the Kremlin. Since at least 1995 the authorities had mooted the strategy of pivoting the party system round two pro-Kremlin parties, “a little to the left” a “little to the right”, a project which would marginalise the communists, promote a loyal, systemic opposition and simultaneously project an image of modernity that having the communists as the principal opposition undermined. At the same time, the Kremlin appeared fully aware that a large number of Russian voters could be regarded as left-wing (i.e. with a preference for paternalist state-welfare values)—as VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) noted there was a “huge unfulfilled niche of left-statist orientation”. For a while, the Kremlin had hoped that the Commu-

nist Party itself could be prevailed on to modernise, but this aspiration was finally abandoned by 2004. Motherland, on the other hand, had shown the dangers of more dynamic “opposition” projects escaping Kremlin control. Analyst Alexei Makarkin noted that the Kremlin’s major short-term calculation in the 2007 elections was to secure the affections of United Russia’s “electoral periphery”—pro-Putin voters sceptical of the chief party of power, either because of its centre-right ideological colouring or its enmeshment with corrupt regional bureaucracy. United Russia’s national popularity has consistently lagged behind Putin’s and Medvedev’s, and has been impossible to sustain without manipulation. A second “party of power” would act as a “sparring partner” for United Russia and provide an alternative avenue for elite recruitment, preventing disaffected regime figures from defecting to the extra-systemic opposition (as former PM Mikhail Kasyanov did with the “Other Russia” coalition). In sum, it would channel the political competition in regime-supporting ways, incentivising United Russia (UR) to perform well: either UR would gain the all-important Duma constitutional majority (301 seats) or a strong performance for Just Russia would “have Putin’s influence spread all over the political field” as Kremlin-connected politician Sergei Markov put it, allowing a second pro-Kremlin party Duma positions that could act as auxiliary support for the authorities.

It was for this reason that the Kremlin gave JR its conditional blessing—presidential administration deputy head Vladislav Surkov’s statement to the Party of Life in March 2006 that the regime needed a “second leg” eventually to replace the dominant party was widely reported. Symptomatically, it was unsurprising that the least prominent component dominated the party merger, i.e. the Party of Life and its unthreatening leader Mironov, a close personal friend of Vladimir Putin and one of his most publically sycophantic acolytes. The

more electorally successful (and dangerous) Motherland provided the statutes and party structure, but was otherwise marginalised. Prominent ex-Motherland figures, such as Sergei Glaz'ev or the financier Aleksandr Lebedev, conspicuously failed to join the new party, allegedly under pressure. Putin's indirect approval of the new party was evident in his audiences with the leadership of Motherland and the Pensioner's Party, which occurred just before the merger.

Difficult Relations with United Russia

Whereas the Kremlin's promotion of Just Russia shows a keen awareness of its own power needs, it demonstrates that the leadership's understanding of party-system dynamics (and the role of opposition!) has been less acute. JR's role as "second party of power" was envisaged as incentivising, but not undermining, the primary party of power. At the same time, it was a genuine "programmatic" party (articulating the vacant moderate social-democratic niche) and a "project" party, competing with the communists for the protest vote. But these aims are basically incompatible, a dilemma which JR has never yet been able to overcome. Since the communists had already been reduced to their core vote by 2003, JR's ability to make further inroads into their electorate by promoting a moderate centre-left strategy is limited—it has always been more likely to take votes from other parties (including United Russia). But attempts to compete effectively with the communists by appropriating their radical slogans will inexorably lead Just Russia into further criticism of the authorities and United Russia.

These problems were graphically shown in the March 2007 regional elections, where JR performed strongly on its electoral debut with a 15 percent vote average. But the elections opened up fierce elite competition (particularly in Stavropol, where JR gained 37.6 % of the vote by vilifying the United Russia governor). This proved counterproductive for the Kremlin: either JR failed to supplant the communists, or it seriously undermined United Russia, or (more problematically still), competition between the parties of power boosted the communists' protest vote. Although these elections showed that in conditions of free competition JR could realistically aspire to 15–20 percent of the vote, open elite competition in the run-up to "Operation Successor" was the last thing the Kremlin required and Just Russia was reined in as the elite lost interest in the project. The Kremlin warned the party to avoid "populism", mudslinging and sparring with United Russia—it should concentrate on fighting the communists. Surkov has consistently remained supportive of Just Russia only to the degree it can strengthen United Russia, ultimately not so supportive after all.

Of course, the plug was dramatically pulled on JR in September 2007 when Putin headed the United Russia party list, which immediately consolidated its "electoral periphery" and completely undermined JR's claim to represent any realistic pro-regime alternative. Similarly, JR's decision to join UR in nominating Medvedev for the presidency resulted in some tortuous and sophistic rationalisation as its support ebbed away. It was as if the Democrats fought the Republicans tooth-and-nail for Congressional seats, but offered no alternative to a Republican presidency. That JR got into parliament at all in 2007, with 7.7 of the vote, was a success of sorts given the circumstances and indicates that 1) the authorities did not actively campaign *against* the party, continuing to give it funding and low-level logistical support as a "reserve" party of power: 2) the party, albeit in a diminished way, had appealed to moderate left-leaning voters unimpressed by either United Russia or the Communists.

Finding a Niche

In the 2007–2011 Duma, JR appeared to gain a recognised position in the party system, avoiding the administrative pressures that had dogged it in its early years and benefitting from approving statements from Medvedev's team. It more regularly entered regional parliaments and leapfrogged Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democrats into the third-placed regional party (albeit still far behind the communists). Indeed, the party appeared to develop a more consistent ideological and strategic position as an ardent promoter of Medvedev's modernisation programme, thoroughly endorsing his view of the 2007–9 economic crisis as necessitating a breakthrough towards the post-industrial economy and democratisation of the political system. However, in the latter sphere, the party's aims were more radical than the president's—as in the 2007 elections the party tried to tap into the protest vote, and now offered the return of elected regional governors, the "against all" ballot and the lowering of the parliamentary threshold from 7 to 3 percent. Moreover this was consistent with a genuine social democratic position that combined an emphasis on overcoming inequality and poverty through progressive taxation and promoting greater political liberalisation (the latter emphasis being far more consistently articulated than that of the communists).

Overall, a definite move towards Medvedev was discernable. Just Russia voted against Putin's anti-crisis plan in April 2009 and the government's 2010–11 budgets. This was not yet a definitive change of presidential patron, but merely reflected that the nuances of "tandemocracy" allowed a pro-regime but anti-governmental position more scope—in this way JR could develop

clearer policy differences from United Russia while still declaring its “constructive opposition”.

However, within the 2007–2011 parliamentary term, Just Russia conspicuously failed to transcend its founding flaws or develop beyond a severely compromised opposition. Medvedev signally failed to give any party apart from UR more than lukewarm endorsement (indeed, some allege that he was privately increasingly irritated with Mironov’s declarations of support) while JR’s attempts to criticise Putin’s government were denounced by United Russia. The result was a tortuous “coalition agreement” between UR and JR in early 2010, whereby JR agreed with both Medvedev and Putin’s strategic direction but was allowed to criticise the government on economic policy and remain an opposition party towards United Russia. Yet, JR’s claims to be an “opposition” in any real sense were constantly undermined by its compromising parliamentary behaviour (e.g. by supporting further restrictions on street protests in 2009). Although its party platform was increasingly ideologically consistent, it had no monopoly over Medvedev’s “modernisation strategy” (ALL the parliamentary parties support this to some degree). Its “Forward Russia” movement in support of modernisation announced in September 2010 was obstructed by United Russia and refused registration. Moreover, unlike all other parliamentary parties, JR lacks strong national leadership: United Russia of course has Putin, while Mironov and his close ally Nikolai Levicev are colourless, even compared with Zyuganov’s peculiar form of non-charisma.

In compensation, what Mironov did provide as chair of the Federation Council (the third position in the national hierarchy) was national visibility, high-level links and patronage abilities. However, in May 2011 he was forced to relinquish even these attributes by being recalled as representative of the St Petersburg Municipal Assembly (where UR has the largest fraction). He temporarily relinquished leadership of JR in an unsuccessful attempt to forestall this. Afterwards, he was parachuted into the Duma as head of the JR parliamentary faction when MP Elena Vtorygina ceded him her deputy’s mandate.

This episode revealed that certain patterns of the 2007 electoral campaign are repeating themselves. In the March 2011 regional elections, Just Russia, without scaling its 2007 heights, gained a respectable 13 percent, while United Russia’s 50 percent was well-down on its 2007 rating. With the rating of president and PM also declining perceptibly, the problem of maintaining a presidential majority in the new Duma has again become acute. In this context, even the limited intra-elite competition that Just Russia provides is again surplus to (regime) requirements. Moreover, as with so

many regime-sponsored projects before, JR clearly has an incentive to develop genuine opposition stances, if only to guarantee its own electoral survival—as Stanislav Belkovskii has argued, Mironov now “has to believe his own oppositional story”. But such opposition cannot develop: Mironov’s April 2011 statement that JR would not support UR’s presidential candidate whoever it was, although a logical stance from a genuine opposition, was widely considered an infringement of the informal rules of the game (whereby only the KPRF can (occasionally) directly criticise prime minister and president), making his removal from the Federation Council inevitable.

Even without this faux pas, JR’s opposition to United Russia in St Petersburg, where UR governor Valentina Matvienko is deeply unpopular and Petersburg native Mironov has strong links, had begun to threaten an embarrassing defeat for United Russia in Putin and Medvedev’s hometown. Although Mironov’s removal has long been mooted, moving both him and Matvienko out of the conflict zone (with Matvienko due to replace him as Federation Council head after a stage-managed election) is aimed to defuse the threat and simultaneously to put Mironov in his place.

The 2011 Duma Campaign

Accordingly, Just Russia enters the 2011 Duma campaign in worse shape than 2007, without even the limited high-level patronage of four years before. Its opinion-poll ratings are dipping, from a high of 9.4 percent in June 2011 to 7.1 percent currently, making surpassing the 7-percent barrier no sure thing. The consensus view is that if JR makes parliament at all, it will be as a “pygmy” party granted 1–2 seats for polling between 5 and 7 percent of the vote by Medvedev’s party system reforms. There are many other reasons to expect that even this result is beyond it. For instance, the Kremlin’s dalliance with “Right Cause” as a liberal party-of-power indicates that JR has fallen far in its priorities. Right Cause’s ongoing difficulties might re-open scope for JR but could equally indicate that the Kremlin would settle for three parties returning to the Duma (perhaps the simplest way of securing a presidential majority after all). Indeed, the formation of the “Popular Front” and United Russia’s candidate primaries indicates that the Kremlin has settled on a new method, both of expanding United Russia’s electoral periphery and enabling elite recruitment without the inconvenience of forming a second party of power. Moreover, this could be a way of drawing the left-patriotic vote directly behind United Russia for the first time. Certainly, the defection of former Motherland leader (and Just Russia’s chief financier) Aleksandr Babakov to the Popular Front in July 2011 and the possible return of Dmitrii Rogozin from Brus-

sels to join him indicates this. If so, Just Russia's niche will be further squeezed.

At the same time, as analyst Tat'ana Stanovaya argues, Just Russia *can* make parliament if it radicalises its rhetoric and becomes a real opposition. Although the obvious questions are whether such a real opposition is permissible beyond very narrow regime-defined limits, and whether it may be psychologically and intellectually beyond the Mironov-Levichev leadership, Mironov's release from the Federation Council does make this more feasible and plausible than hitherto. Indeed, Just Russia's 2011 draft electoral programme mentions Mironov's re-employment as an indication of his principled opposition to the government's "anti-popular" laws (a favoured phrase of the Communists). As in 2007, the platform is a hard-hitting left-wing social democratic critique of the Russian authorities, essentially similar to the communists' programme without (much) Soviet rhetoric and with a more liberal stance. JR lays heavy emphasis on the party's role as a constructive opposition that opposes high-level corruption, seeks the democratisation of the political system and has the primary aim of improving the socio-economic position of ordinary Russians. Now though, the party declares its absolute opposition to Putin's government (but not Medvedev). In Russia's post-crisis climate, such a programme might have a significant appeal. Moreover, although Mironov has

fallen from elite favour, he is hardly *persona non grata* in the Kremlin—if so, one would hardly expect him to transfer to the party's Duma fraction unhindered. It is quite possible that as in 2007, he has been given license to develop a moderately oppositional campaign, so long as it targets the communists and protest electorate.

Whether or not JR makes the 2011 Duma might appear unimportant. It is the least significant national party, its contribution to political life to date has been negligible and its absence after December will make little obvious difference. Yet, it has at least, however imperfectly so far, represented the potential of a different future for Russia, one where the party system is based more on programme than personality, and one that approximates European norms where social democratic parties anchor the left of the party system. Indeed, as the only parliamentary party with strong links to a European party family (JR is a consultative member of the Socialist International), Just Russia may represent Russia's most European political party. Its programme, promising a more equitable, democratic and socially-orientated constructive opposition, is potentially electorally attractive, particularly since the communists have long failed to offer such an alternative. It would be hard not to see its demise as another nail in the coffin of genuine multiparty politics in Russia.

About the Author

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Further reading

- Luke March "Managing opposition in a hybrid regime: Just Russia and parastatal opposition", *Slavic Review*, 68:3, Fall 2009, pp. 504–527.
- Aleksandra Samarina, Aleksei Gorbachev "Esery v zone turbulentnosti", *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 18 August 2011, www.ng.ru/printed/258341.
- Just Russia Website: www.spravedlivo.ru
- Sergei Mironov's Website: www.mironov.ru