



The Limits of Managing Russia's Party System

By Alexander Kynev, Moscow

Abstract

The absence of effective representative institutions means that Russia has no parties that can operate in the normal sense of the word. Voters increasingly do not trust them. Over the years, the authorities adopted electoral legislation that had the effect of reducing the number of parties and increasing central control over their activities. Medvedev's reforms led to a further deterioration of the situation, with the extension of the presidential term to six years and the parliamentary term to five years. The existing parties are losing their ideological coherence as their various regional branches start to represent a variety of different interests. A change in Russia's political system could lead to a rapid change in its party system as well.

Weak Parties

One should not draw an analogy between Russian political parties and the parties familiar in the West. It would be a mistake, though, to view the Russian party system as a complete fiction, with the parties no more than ornamental constructs.

Russia's political parties are weak, and their internally-defined ideological identity raises many questions, but they do represent definite social networks that have core electorates characterized by differing degrees of cohesion, numerical strength, and long-term stability.

The key factors determining the nature of the party system in Russia today are the specific features of the country's state institutions. Extraordinary events interrupted a process of natural evolution that the party system was undergoing in the 1990s. Afterwards, it became clear that the country's parliament had lacked the traditional parliamentary functions right from the start—namely, the powers defined in Russia's 1993 constitution—and that a president with no party affiliation had taken powers that were, in practice, unlimited.

In many respects, this system, in which power is concentrated within an executive branch that is strongly dependent on the personality of the leader, created the conditions that resulted in the gradual degradation of societal structures, the degeneration of the electoral mechanism, the step-by-step elimination of free political competition and the creation of a system of “managed parties”.

As the legislative bodies do not have any real power, the public sees only diminishing reason for the parties' existence, despite the introduction of a mixed majority-proportional representation electoral system for State Duma elections in 1993 and the subsequent transition to pure proportional representation in 2007. Under the present circumstances, in which the parties are obviously not in a position to implement their programs, competition among parties is changing from a battle of ideas and programs into a battle for parliamentary offices and seats: the programmatic and ideological confrontation is becoming the simulacrum of one. That kind

of simulation promotes widespread mistrust of political parties among the public, as opinion surveys have long been documenting.

Thus, the result is not simply that Russia lacks a sustainable and stable party system: no parties, in the traditional meaning of the term, exist in Russia at all. The absence of fully-fledged parliamentary institutions and the lack of separation of powers mean that parties cannot exist and operate in the normal fashion.

The Emergence of the “Managed Party” System, 2000–2010

The creation of a regime in the form of a super-presidential republic brought with it—despite the introduction of elements of proportional representation, officially intended to stimulate the development of parties—a gradual tightening of the rules regulating the formation of civic organizations.

Vladimir Putin launched a new round of legislative reform governing political parties and elections. First, the Federal Law “On political parties”, which came into force on July 14, 2001, decreed that from July 14, 2003, political parties became the only type of entity that could compete in elections at the national or regional level. This provision effectively banned, regional political parties as of that date, while the number of parties entitled to participate in national elections was reduced. The requirements for registering a party were expanded to include a minimum national membership of 10,000 persons and regional representation in the form of regional branches with at least 100 members in at least one half of the regions.

The 2001 legislation also required political parties to submit a list of their members to the Ministry of Justice when registering their regional branches. This requirement hindered the development of opposition parties since citizens in several regions balk at joining such a party, knowing that the authorities would be aware of their affiliation. Experience has shown that security and judicial authorities are actively involved in the verification of membership numbers. Taking current practices

in Russia into account, it is not hard to imagine that citizens might often refuse to confirm their membership in a party to authorities when subjected to what amounts in practice to psychological pressure.

The structures of the parties themselves are authoritarian as well: their governing bodies have nearly unlimited options to expel any given number of members, or even an entire regional branch.

In December 2004, the legislation on political parties became five-times more potent: the national minimum for party membership was increased to 50,000. In 2006 the parties had either to subject themselves to an examination with respect to the new provisions or to disband. In 2007, many parties were dissolved by court order. Parties already represented in the Duma were given a privileged status by law to the disadvantage of other parties. These benefits included the exemption of the Duma parties from the requirement to either submit signatures of supporters or pay a deposit when nominating their candidates. Moreover, the Duma parties enjoy a privileged position when nominating their representatives to electoral commissions.

The legislation included requirements for party membership numbers that obviously could not be met in practice (i.e. the parties that in reality existed as a collection of officials were forced to simulate a mass membership), with the result that all parties are potentially in violation of the regulations.

Extension of Governmental Control

Meanwhile, the inspection authorities in Russia fail to provide equal treatment to the various political parties and civic organizations; no uniform standard is applied to their activities and there are no uniform sanctions levied for regulatory violations. Most of the provisions in the national legislation can be met only if the registration and supervisory authorities are well disposed towards the organization involved. A policy of double standards is in place: certain regulations apply for some organizations but not for others.

The members of the bodies responsible at the national level for registering parties, supervising their activities and certain matters associated with their budgets are directly appointed by the president and are accountable to him. Thus the executive authority has de facto secured an exclusive right to decide who will be permitted to run in elections to representative bodies—and who will not. Hence the parties are de facto “under the thumb” of the state bureaucracy.

In the years that followed, the laws on political parties and elections were repeatedly tightened. In 2005 the formation of electoral blocs was banned, uniform dates were introduced for regional elections, the requirements

for registration of candidates were increased... In 2006 the parties were barred from including representatives of other parties on their candidacy lists. Parliamentarians are no longer permitted to switch their party affiliation while in office. The spring of 2007 saw the adoption of provisions providing for vacant seats to be filled at the discretion of the party leadership, regardless of the place the new members may have held on the electoral lists.

The State Duma has been elected according to a system of purely proportional representation since 2007. At the same time the threshold for party representation raised from 5 to 7%. The threshold was also raised to 7% in most of the regional legislative elections as well during the period from 2007 to 2011.

The regulations governing state funding of political parties have also contributed to creating de-facto governmental control over the political parties. For instance, as of January 1, 2009, parties that win more than 3% of votes receive funding amounting to 20 rubles per vote-received per year, instead of the five rubles they received previously. In conjunction with this support for “stronger” parties, an additional financial burden was laid upon their weaker counterparts: all parties that receive less than 3% of the vote must reimburse the costs incurred for the airtime provided at no cost for campaign ads and the free advertising space in the newspapers, a move that has forced several parties to disband in the face of looming bankruptcy.

In conjunction with the reform of political parties in May and June 2002, the Duma adopted the new Law “On basic guarantees of electoral rights and the right of citizens of the Russian Federation to participate in a referendum”. That law requires at least 50% of the members of regional parliaments to be elected from party lists. This reform was part of Putin’s general policy towards the regions, one designed to ensure that the regional parliaments are dependent on the central powers in Moscow at least to the same degree that they are on the governors of their particular regions.

That same period saw party lists introduced in ever more municipal elections, initially on a voluntary basis. In 2010, this time under President Medvedev, the Duma passed a law requiring the introduction of a system of mixed or purely proportional representation for cities and districts whose local councils were made up of more than 20 members.

Thus there has emerged a system in which political representatives are dependent to the utmost degree on party bureaucracies, which are, in turn, equally dependent on the state bureaucracy. In the environment of the managed party system, pure proportional representation created the mechanism for de-facto control of all political representatives, and this is the reason for its introduction in more and more areas.

The Permitted Parties

The dramatic decrease in the number of parties permitted to participate in legal political competition can be depicted as follows. In the Duma elections of 2003, 44 political parties were able to take part; 37 of them were still around by early 2006; in the Duma elections of 2007 their numbers were down to a mere 15.

Currently there are seven parties: United Russia; the Communist Party (KPRF); Zhirinovskiy's party, the Liberal Democrats (LDPR); Just Russia; Yabloko; Patriots of Russia and Just Cause.

There has been no successful attempt to establish a new party since 2004, with the exception of the Kremlin-friendly Right Cause project, despite the formation of several dozen initiative groups.¹ In the run-up to the 2011 Duma elections, the refusal to register the Party of Popular Freedom (PARNAS) drew a lot of attention. Four leaders of the democratic opposition serve as co-chairmen of this party, Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Milov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov. In April 2011, the European Court of Human Rights declared that the forced dissolution in 2006 of the Republican Party of the Russian Federation had been in violation of the law. The Russian authorities have not complied with the ruling however: in an interview, Justice Minister Alexander Kononov proposed that the former party leaders should establish a new party rather than reconstitute the earlier one.

Medvedev's "Reforms"

Notwithstanding his formally modernization-friendly rhetoric, the actual policy of the new president with respect to several genuinely important issues has entailed a further deterioration of the situation: the presidential term of office has been extended to six years, the parliamentary term to five; civic organisations no longer have the right to put up their own candidate lists for municipal elections; the mayor is no longer directly elected in many places and the option of submitting a deposit in order to register candidates has been eliminated at all levels.

The reduction in the minimum number of members required to register a party at the Justice Ministry is merely symbolic. As of 1 January 2010 it was lowered from 50,000 to 45,000 and as of January 1, 2012, it will be lowered again, to 40,000 members, which does little to change the repressive nature of the law.

Parties that receive 5–7% of the vote at Duma elections have been granted a few minor privileges (they now obtain "consolation seats": one seat for a percentage of

5–6, two seats for 6–7%). Parties that have won between 5–7% of the vote may now be involved in the formation of election commissions and can register candidates and candidate lists at elections at any level without having to submit signature lists. In addition, they are no longer threatened in the periods between Duma elections with dissolution on the grounds that they lack regional representation (regional branches with the required minimum membership in at least half of the Russian regions) or sufficient total membership.

On March 20, 2011, President Medvedev signed an act amending the law "On basic guarantees of electoral rights..." and the law "On the general principles for organizing local self-government". Under that act, at least half the members of local councils in city and urban municipalities must be elected from party lists if the council has a total of 20 or more members.

The Evolution of the Parties and the Limits to Their Manageability

The artificial preservation of the existing party system and the de-facto impossibility of forming new parties are not the only results to emerge from the conditions applied to the activities of parties in Russia discussed above.

Right from the start, the formal transformation of extremely weak and quite often fictitious parties into structures through which citizens are supposed to exercise their right to run for office entailed considerable risks of corruption associated with the introduction of the party lists.

As one would have expected, the membership of the regional branches of most parties started to become ideologically diffuse. In many respects the collective self-identity of the parties had already been weak before, for institutional reasons. The purchase, by persons who had the necessary financial and administrative resources at their disposal, of several of these party branches only served to consolidate the transformation of many local party branches into PR structures with no ideological pretensions. Naturally, the parties do have a core that is more or less ideological in character, but the degree to which that ideology has roots in the membership of the various parties differs. The cores themselves do not exist because, but rather in spite of the general circumstances. These ideological cores have been retained to the greatest extent on the left (KPRF) and among the liberals (Yabloko and earlier the Union of Right Forces Party [SPS]). Under pressure from the generally applicable rules of the game though, those parties are also gradually losing them.

The developments described above have resulted in a situation in which the regional branches within the parties are becoming less and less similar, both in terms of their real interests and the formal positions espoused by their leaders.

¹ The other ostensibly "new" projects of that year (the Patriots of Russia and A Just Russia) are, in reality, old parties that have changed their names and leadership).

Due to the diminishing number of parties, elite groups have flocked to the few that remain, with the lack of any alternative dictating the choice of new party in many respects.

United Russia, which is the party most attractive to the career-conscious politician or businessman, faces the greatest challenge in this respect. By and large, one can find former members of all currently or formerly existing parties represented among United Russia's members. The party's Moscow headquarters worked hard, using both formal and informal methods, to acquire as many representatives of influential local groups as possible for their lists, in order to gather up their constituencies. This, of course, led to even more intense ideological erosion in a party that had been structured from the outset as a conglomerate of the nomenklatura at all levels. In some regions, de-facto "parties within the party" emerged: "agrarian groups" and similar groupings of Duma members from the United Russia faction took shape. At the national level, "clubs" have formed within the party itself (Center for Social and Conservative Policy, Club "4th of November", State Patriotic Club). However any attempt to introduce strict party discipline within United Russia or promote this or that particular group of elites in specific regions would inevitably be felt as a snub by the other groups and deter the voters who look to them for guidance.

For that reason, the personnel policy within United Russia is growing ever more evocative of a centrifuge: On the one hand, there is an ongoing attempt to include any person who has won any sort of election, at whatever level, and regardless of who he may have been before. On the other hand, the mass of conflicting groupings within the party makes it impossible to strike a balance among them, resulting in open battles between people who are nominally fellow party members.

In the run-up to the elections, one could observe Duma members and candidates switching from nominally right-wing parties to left-wing parties, and vice versa.

Candidates and the Prestige of Parties

On the whole, the party lists tend up to be drawn up according to the principle under which potential candidates have to take a position on a list determined on the basis of what the idiosyncratic hierarchy of status permits. Members of the elites try first to secure a spot on United Russia's list and, failing that, snag a spot on the list of some other party. The situation recalls that of students applying to several universities at a time, just to be on the safe side.

About the Author

Aleksandr Kynev is the head of Regional Programs at the Foundation for Information Policy Development in Moscow. See p. 20 for information about the election observation activities of GOLOS and the context of the project for which the present analysis was written.

Thus the formal normative strengthening of the role of political parties goes hand in hand with an even more powerful trend toward internal destruction and the loss of a distinctive profile. The loss of profile has been affecting the KPRF with increasing force: once the most intensely ideological of parties, it now lacks the strength to resist this general trend.

In defence of the parties, it may be said, firstly, that their dependency on the state is not of their own choosing, and, secondly, that a change in the political situation and possible divisions among the elites would quite probably bring changes to the strategic approaches taken by the party leaders.

These specific features of the Russian party system are responsible for producing not only the phenomenon of flurries of candidates switching from one party to another, but also for a type of voter behaviour in which voters can opt for any of the "alternatives" to United Russia with ease—basing the choice on their judgement as to what voting behaviour might be most productive (voting for the alternative that did best in the opinion polls, for instance), which individual candidate is more worthy personally of support, or which campaign, positive or negative, struck the voter as being superior. Protest voters in today's Russia have been de-ideologized; the division of the constituency is between the "party of power" (status quo) and "the other guys". Although differences in ideology, in style and elsewhere do exist among the "alternatives", they are not essential in the present situation.

Conclusions

What have the central powers achieved through this process of changing the party and electoral system and is it now possible to manage elections at the national and regional level? Formally, that possibility exists in many respects: from outside it appears that one single party is supreme. In practice, however, the contradictions among local interest groups in the regions have not by any means disappeared, only the format in which they are resolved has changed. The competition among the parties has now been replaced by one within the parties, sometimes expressed in public internal party conflicts and scandals, sometimes with juicy intrigues and anonymously waged media wars. In many cases both go on simultaneously.

Hence if the general political or economic situation in the country were to change, the apparently managed party system might undergo rapid change as well.

Translation: Alison Borrowman