Analysis

The Transformation of Russia's Party System

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Abstract

Russia's party system has swung like a pendulum from the one party control of the Soviet era, to the hyper-fragmentation and volatility of the 1990s, to an attempt to restore centralized control in the 2000s. The danger of the new system is that it will cause the death of the political opposition. Now Russia may be developing a "Dresden" style political system, in which one main party controls several satellite parties that have little political power. Such a system could be in place for a long time, though it is unlikely to be permanent.

Swings of the Pendulum

Russia's party system in the 1990s demonstrated several distinctive features in comparison with the post-Communist party systems of Eastern Europe. First, Russia's party system was greatly fragmented, because all segments of Russia's electoral market were over-supplied. Second, the extremely volatile electoral support demonstrated great uncertainty in voter demands, which created opportunities for establishing new parties during every election cycle. Third, non-partisan politicians who possessed resources other than party support (mainly backed by regional and/or sectoral interest groups) also played a major role in national and, especially, sub-national electoral politics. Executive elections at all levels are largely a non-partisan enterprise. But even in the arena of legislative elections, the impact of political parties was limited, while the role of legislatures themselves remains secondary.

In the early 2000s, some observers hoped that the increasing demand of federal elites for the re-centralization of Russian politics would lead to the formation of a stable and competitive party system. Centralization makes it possible to increase the role of political parties and intensifies coalition politics among parties.

The reality turned out to be different from these hopes. Although the party system in Russia actually stabilized after the 2003–2004 parliamentary and presidential elections, the political consequences of its stabilization went too far. Hyper-fragmentation and high volatility on Russia's electoral market were replaced by trends toward a monopoly of the ruling elite. The "party of power," United Russia, acquired a super-majority in the State Duma and in 2004–2007 gained control over most of the regional legislatures in Russia. This dominance is a clear sign of the lack of meaningful competition in the party system: all of the other parties and candidates combined do not have enough potential to form real alternatives to the pro-governmental parliamentary majority and to the incumbent president. Thus, the developing trends in Russia's party system are similar to swings of a pendulum. After the equilibrium of Soviet one-party rule, the party system changed to hyper-fragmentation and high volatility, and then to consolidation with a monopoly held by the party of power.

The Rise of the Party of Power and the Extinction of the Opposition

The story of the successful establishment of the party of power's monopoly in Russia is rather complicated. Early attempts at party-building during the 1993 and especially the 1995 parliamentary elections failed. Parties of power at this point were not only unable to garner a parliamentary majority, but could not even become key players, and later disintegrated after heavy losses in subsequent parliamentary elections.

During the 1999 parliamentary elections, two claimants for the role of the party of power competed with each other: the coalition Fatherland – All Russia (FAR), established around regional governors, and the Kremlin-backed bloc Unity. The latter was relatively successful (winning 23.3 percent of the votes, against 13.3 percent for FAR); due to political maneuvering in the State Duma, Unity first isolated FAR and later acquired it in the manner of a hostile takeover. Unity and FAR established a majority coalition in Duma, and in late 2001 transformed themselves into a single party, United Russia (UR). This party was the major winner of the 2003 parliamentary elections, primarily due to the strong endorsement from the popular president, Vladimir Putin. Even though UR won only 37.8 percent of the party list vote, it was able to secure a faction with more than two-thirds of the Duma seats (306 out of 450).

All these incarnations of the party of power share major common features: (1) they were established by the executive branch in order to get a majority in the

federal and regional legislatures and are controlled by top executive branch officials; (2) they lack any definite ideology; and (3) they shamelessly use state resources for campaigning.

Beyond parliamentary politics, the role of the party of power remains rather limited. During the 2003–2005 regional legislative elections, UR was successful only in those regions where its local branches were under the strong control of influential governors. The presence of UR in the cabinet was merely symbolic: Although in Mikhail Fradkov's cabinet three members of the government, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Zhukov, Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, and Agriculture Minister Alexei Gordeev, joined UR, the party's impact on governmental policies was extremely limited. Rather, it serves as a Kremlin "transmission belt" for conversion of major proposals into laws.

While Vladimir Putin's high approval rating is still the major resource for the party of power, signs of UR's further institutionalization became visible over the course of the post-2003 regional legislative elections. In March 2007, it won over 46 percent of the vote and the majority of seats in almost all regional legislatures.

In early 2006, Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head and chief strategist of Putin's administration who has been credited with the construction of UR and the orchestration of political control over the State Duma, instructed UR activists that the party should run the country over the next 10–15 years. This ambitious goal seems to be feasible. In the mid-2000s, Russia's ruling group initiated serious institutional changes that aimed to preserve the party of power's monopoly on Russia's political market. First, entry barriers protecting this market from outsiders were increased. The higher barriers diminished chances for the formation of new strong parties and for coalition politics among existing parties. Registration of new parties became more difficult: minimal requirements increased from 10,000 to 50,000 members, with regional branches in two thirds rather than half of the country's regions. The formation of electoral coalitions (blocs) was prohibited, and the electoral threshold in the State Duma and regional legislative elections rose from 5 percent to 7 percent. Second, the electoral system has been restructured due to the introduction of mixed or proportional electoral systems in regional legislative elections (since 2003) and a purely proportional electoral system in State Duma elections (adopted in 2005 for implementation in 2007). Third, in 2004–2005 Vladimir Putin initiated the abolition of popularly elected regional governors and proposed the appointment of representatives of parties that won regional legislative elections to these posts. In fact, this idea also enhanced the position of the party of power. Some other innovations, such as the installation of an imperative mandate (deputies who leave their party would also lose their parliamentary seat), the use of electronic vote counting during elections, and the minimization of the role of independent electoral observers in the polls, are also aimed at the same goal.

While the party of power began to dominate Russia's political scene, the previously active and lively opposition – the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) and liberal parties, Yabloko and Union of Right Forces (SPS) – bore heavy losses. Parties that continue to protest became marginalized and lost influence, while those that were co-opted into the regime lost their separate identities because they were no longer distinguishable from the authorities. The massive defeat of all opposition parties in the 2003 Duma elections (when Yabloko and SPS failed to cross the 5 percent threshold), as well as the lack of meaningful alternatives to Putin in the 2004 presidential elections serve as the most explicit examples of these trends.

Although some minor opposition groups around the National Bolshevik Party led by Eduard Limonov and United Civil Front led by chess champion Garry Kasparov and former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, recently joined together to sponsor some protest activities, even attracting some other parties such as Yabloko in St.Petersburg, their potential is currently rather modest.

The Kremlin, however, is deeply concerned about the (unlikely) threat of a "color revolution" in the wake of the coming 2007–2008 elections, and is working to prevent it at all costs using two different, though overlapping, methods. First, the elite shamelessly use the police to brutally suppress protest actions. Second, they encourage loyal youth NGOs to establish militant units and prepare them to use violence against the opposition. Third, they attempted to establish a puppet-like "semi-opposition," based on the left and nationalist camps as well as around the loyal liberals, aimed at splitting and thus weakening possible protests.

Toward a "Dresden Party System"?

In August 2006, when the monopoly of UR seemed unchallenged, the Kremlin launched a new venture in Russia's electoral arena: It established Just Russia (JR), led by the chair of the Federation Council, Sergei Mironov (previously a leader of Russia's Party of Life) on the basis of the previously existing pro-Kremlin

parties, Party of Life and Russia's Party of Pensioners, as well as the nationalist party Motherland. The new party's debut during the March 2007 regional legislative elections demonstrated a partial success: JR ran second or third in most regions, with only the KPRF winning a comparable number of seats and votes. Although most observers agreed that JR's potential is strong enough to surpass the 7 percent threshold during the 2007 State Duma elections, it is hard to consider JR a genuine challenger to UR. Rather, it was established as a junior satellite to UR, or a typical fake alternative. As Surkov frankly mentioned once, while "there is no alternative major party, society has no 'second leg' onto which it can shift when the first has gone numb. This makes the system unstable." Although Putin during his news conference in February 2007 classified UR as liberals while described JR as social democrats, in fact this distinction was little more than a smokescreen, because at the same time he argued that both parties should nominate a common candidate for the 2008 presidential elections. No wonder that Vladimir Ryzhkov, State Duma deputy and the Kremlin's opponent, noted that the establishment of a new party of power is a step toward a "Dresden party system", referring to a system in which there were a number of puppet parties under strict Communist control in pre-1989 Eastern Germany (a system quite familiar to Putin because of his KGB service in Dresden in the 1980s).

Among non-democratic political systems, one-party regimes usually live longer than personalist regimes. In this respect, the strategy of monopolist dominance by the party of power in Russia is very rational over the long haul. Although the establishment of a monopoly by the party of power (unlike personalist regimes) requires numerous significant political investments, it might bring long-term and large-scale benefits to the ruling group. Alternatively, the establishment of personalist regimes in some post-Soviet countries required almost no investments, but the ruling groups have been unable to secure long-term benefits, and sometimes faced bankruptcy, as in the "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. Finally, personalist regimes are very vulnerable in terms of the problem of leadership succession.

The transformation of Russia's party system through its various pendulum swings has complicated Russia's political development. In the 1990s, the fragmentation and instability created major roadblocks to the formation of an efficient party system. Political parties failed to link elites and masses, represent society's interests, perform on the level of decision-making, and provide government accountability. These features of Russia's party system, although widely criticized, did not prevent the development of a more open and competitive party system. But the turn in the opposite direction toward a monopoly for the party of power is more dangerous for the party system. This monopoly will lead to the extinction of the political opposition, an undermining of incentives for mass participation, and the politicization of the state. If the state of Russia's party system in the 1990s can be viewed as the protracted growing pains typical of nascent party systems in new democracies, in the 2000s there are symptoms of a chronic disease. Once established, this monopoly of the party of power could reproduce itself and stay in power for a long period. The experience of Communist Russia tells us that these monopolies can survive for many decades – but not forever. After the 2007–2008 elections, it will be clear whether or not attempts to re-establish one-party rule in Russia have achieved their goals.

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