

Analysis

Parties in the Russian Political Context: What Has Changed?

By Igor Rabinovich, Ufa

Abstract

The authorities are using changes in the electoral laws to eliminate opposition parties. Since regional leaders control most local elections, they are able to exert extensive control over the party branches operating on their territories. The result is that parties must either be co-opted into the system or be marginalized.

There are two ways to evaluate the changes in the situation of political parties in Russia: first is the parties' freedom for creation, existence, and activity; second is the guarantee for honest, open, and just political competition, including in elections.

Eliminating Unwanted Parties

Recently, the authorities have imposed unprecedented strict limits on the very existence of political parties. According to amendments to the federal law "On Parties," adopted in December 2004, Russia had to eliminate all parties that had fewer than 50,000 members or fewer than 500 members in 44 regions. Currently of 33 officially registered parties only 17 have the right to compete in elections. The remaining 16 must go out of existence if they do not increase their membership in the course of a year. The authorities eliminated 8 parties in September 2006 and an additional 5 at the beginning of 2007.

Among the parties eliminated were some of the oldest Russian parties from the first democratic wave. At the beginning of April, the most recent example of such a party being eliminated was the Social Democratic Party of Russia, headed by former USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev. In March, the Russian Supreme Court eliminated the Republican Party of Russia, which was headed by State Duma member Vladimir Ryzhkov, for insufficient membership. According to official statistics, it had about 35,000 members in 32 regions and had been in existence since 1990. Party officials tried to present documents showing that the party actually had more than 58,000 members in 44 regions, but the court did not accept this evidence. In Altai Krai, Ryzhkov's home region, protesters took to the streets to voice their anger at the decision.

Nevertheless, the authorities are unlikely to change this policy. Parties in Russia should represent a significant part of the population since they are seeking power, according to Galina Fokina, head of the Federal Registration Service. Therefore discriminating against small parties is completely justified, she claimed. The authorities have no claims against the parties of power, United Russia and Just Russia, and the key parliamentary parties, the Communists and the Liberal Democratic Party. However, according to Fokina, the

other parties list individuals as members of their party even though they are not. She claimed that her investigators had found many people listed who did not know that their names had been included and had no intention of joining a political organization.

For their part, the parties accused the Registration Service of using crude and illegal methods to confirm party membership. Yabloko members asserted that in several regions the inspectors demanded of citizens that they write declarations that they are indeed members of the party. In other cases, the inspectors demanded that party members name the head of the party groups at the local and regional levels and also explain how often they participated in party meetings and when they were held. Additionally, the inspectors demanded that parents confirm that their children were party members. The parties described these tactics as exerting pressure on citizens for political reasons.

Clearly, the authorities are seeking to define a simplified quasi-multiparty system, at the center of which will be the one or two multi-million parties of power. The other parties will not play a significant role and their fate will not be crucial for the existence of the system.

The membership barriers are aimed not at "small" parties, but those that refuse to participate in the party system that the authorities are forming. The remaining parties effectively agree to play by the rules dictated to them. However, even the remaining parties may ultimately be removed if they start to threaten the monopoly of the parties of power. This possibility is suggested by the most recent change in the electoral legislation adopted at the end of 2006 at United Russia's urging. This new legislation bans any criticism of the authorities in the live broadcasts of political debates. Many parties labeled this measure the introduction of political censorship.

Regional Authorities Control Parties

In many regions, to survive and continue operation parties must be loyal to the governor or mayor. Par-

ties in the opposition are oppressed and their activity is effectively blocked by the authorities. Essentially, the local authorities have established de facto political censorship. There are no public debates, the opposition has no access to the media, and there are illegal limits on conducting demonstrations and other forms of mass protest. Frequently, the authorities replace local party heads with leaders who are more loyal and dependent. To achieve these ends, the regional authorities provide extensive resources for party branches, including office space, communications, and help in finding jobs for party activists.

The national leaderships of political parties frequently ignore the manipulations by local authorities in the regional and local party organizations, hoping

to receive in exchange more votes in the elections, which are effectively controlled by the local authorities. In these conditions, only political structures that are inclined to conform, compromise, and make agreements with the authorities continue to survive.

In these conditions, it is not surprising that society has little interest in parties that have not made an agreement with the authorities, but at the same time distanced themselves from the radical opposition. Yabloko is characteristic in this regard. The party is going through some of the most difficult times in its history, losing elections and facing the opposition of the authorities. The same is happening to other parties: they simply must marginalize themselves in order to survive.

About the author:

Igor Rabinovich is deputy director of the Center for Economic and Political Research “Uralbizneskonsalting” in Ufa.

Regional Report

Elections in Komi: A Sign of Future Victory or Defeat?

By Yury Shabaev, Syktyvkar

Abstract

A detailed analysis of the March 11 elections in Komi shows that United Russia and Just Russia did not do as well as they could have and that others parties made gains. Surprisingly, the result may be a more active republican legislature.

Elections Boost All Parties

On March 11, 2007, Komi was one of 14 regions to hold elections to its regional legislature. A detailed analysis of the results in this region suggest that the outcome was not completely predictable and that the mood of the electorate could change by December, when the federal legislative elections will be held.

One way to look at the Komi elections is that everybody won. The biggest winner was the governor and the executive branch, which actively supported United Russia (UR), and saw its victory as a vote of confidence. UR itself won the most votes, gaining 36.4 percent. The opposition parties also won because neither the Communists (14.2%), nor the LDPR (13.6%), nor the Union of Right Forces (8.9%) had been represented in the local parliament previously and the degree of their support within the population was significant. Just Russia also won, gaining 15.8 percent in its political debut.

The population also won, though to a lesser degree, because the republican parliament will likely represent the interests of various social and territorial groups. There is reason to hope that the opposition will force the majority to stop simply rubber stamping the decisions of the executive and actually begin to monitor its actions. Potentially, there will be hearings on difficult social issues and state programs, such as developing villages, and investigations of difficult situations, such as the need to address the poverty of the mining cities of Inta and Vorkuta. The population will likely support such initiatives by the legislature.

Parties of Power Lag

The authorities backing UR could not use their strategic superiority to full effect. They had announced that they would take 50 percent of the vote, but did not reach this self-imposed goal. Polling results show that only hard-core UR supporters voted