

Analysis

Russia at the Crossroads? The Realignment of the Party System

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Abstract

A structural realignment is taking place in the president's camp in preparation for the fifth State Duma elections on December 2, 2007. The elite groups supporting the "Putin System" are contending in a surprisingly open competition between two "parties of power" whose agendas are practically indistinguishable in terms of substance. So far, the electorate has not responded to this staged competition.

Voter Preferences and the Next Elections

Presidential elections are scheduled in Russia for March 2008. According to his own statements, incumbent Vladimir Putin will not run for re-election. Whether the "Putin System" will remain viable without its central figure is a question that is vividly debated. The elections to the State Duma on December 2, 2007 are expected to deliver important signals as to how the secession will be resolved. These elections are the background for an emerging competition between certain groups within the Russian elite that so far seemed to be fully integrated into the existing system. They now are determined to have a say in its future prospects.

The "traditional" opposition is barely affected by these developments. There have been no structural, personnel, or programmatic changes in this camp in the past months. The electoral support for the Communists and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party has not changed since the last Duma elections in December 2003. Both parties can expect to earn roughly 10–15 percent of the votes. The electoral basis of the (social-) liberal Yabloko Party and the (economically) liberal Union of Right Forces is continuing to erode slowly, and both parties will probably fail to pass the 7 percent threshold to the Duma again. On the other hand, there is vibrant voter approval for the United Russia party, which has acknowledged the president as its "moral leader". Compared to the 2003 elections, it has accrued another 10–15 percent and would win approximately 50 percent of the vote if elections were held today.

The stagnation of the "traditional" opposition should not obscure the possibility that the political playing field may shift in a dynamic manner during the next few months. The rivalry between ambitious groups with disparate power resources opens space for contingent developments that nobody can fully control or predict. The upcoming Duma elections have set off processes bringing forth new structures and profiles in the hitherto diffuse pro-presidential center of the party spectrum.

Impact of New Legislation on Parties and Elections

The restructuring of the party landscape is a reaction to the reforms of party and electoral law since 2001. Their declared aim has been to centralize and consolidate the party system and subsequently to strengthen parliamentarism. Indeed, the amended legislation on political parties has reduced the number of registered parties to only 17, eliminating smaller and unstable formations. Besides, parties now are the only organizations permitted to field candidates for parliamentary elections. As a consequence, the political arena became easier to monitor, compared, for example, to the 2003 elections, when 27 parties and five electoral blocs (the latter consisting of 12 parties and one "social movement") were in competition with one another.

Even more grave than the effects of the party legislation will be the impact of the new electoral law that will take full nationwide effect for the first time in December: It mandates a shift from a mixed electoral system that combined voting in single-mandate constituencies and party-list proportional representation to a strictly proportional electoral system where deputies are elected solely on the basis of party lists. Thus, it is now impossible to win a Duma seat as an "independent" by securing a simple majority of votes. Instead, every candidate for a parliamentary seat has to compete for a promising place on a party list. The result is that party organizations have become more important than ever in Russia's history, and most importantly, that candidates are becoming increasingly dependent on the party apparatuses. Furthermore, the new rules severely jeopardize the political prospects of the leaders of smaller parties that have no chance of clearing the 7 percent hurdle.

Just Russia: The "New Left" project

For these reasons, ambitious politicians have undertaken a number of initiatives since the summer of 2006 to enhance their electoral prospects by merging their respective parties. The various projects'

ability to succeed depends on several factors. One key determinant is the parties' individual political clout and the "chemistry" between the politicians involved. Furthermore, success is shaped by the force of Putin's "strong hand": The restructuring of the party system is highly controversial because the logic of bottom-up self-organization is not the only determinant of the future outcome. This logic suggests that political actors by themselves modify their strategies in reaction to changing conditions in their environment. Instead, party-building in Russia is also managed from the top by the head of the executive branch.

It is well known that Putin's strategy to build a "directed democracy" consists of direct intervention in the institutionalization of political actors. The goal is to create a coherent and controllable intermediary space between the state and its citizens. This strategy, which is best documented in the civil society arena, but also extends to interest groups in the broadest sense, now is being extended to the party system, where only a limited diversity is becoming institutionalized. With the approval and the support of the presidential administration, the system thus develops several "pillars" in the parliamentary-party arena that compete among themselves without representing meaningful policy alternatives. In July 2006, the Rodina and Russian Party of Life parties announced they would "create a strong left-wing patriotic force"; one month later, they were joined by the Russian Pensioners' Party. On October 28, this "New Left" alliance brought forth a new party: Just Russia: Motherland/Pensioners/Life. Just Russia has achieved official registration, is represented in parliament with a faction of its own (29 deputies) and is led by Sergei Mironov, the chairman of the Federation Council. Its leaders have thus significantly enhanced their chances of being re-elected to parliament under the new proportional representation system. Furthermore, all observers agree that this project is supported by influential groups within the presidential administration who are trying to secure the long-term prospects of "directed democracy" by building up two parties that are loyal to the system.

United Russia versus Just Russia

Even though voter support for the "New Left" so far has only been fluctuating around the 7 percent mark, competition between the two "parties of power" is escalating. In late autumn 2006, United Russia seemed temporarily inclined to exert its political dominance in order to force early elections. Ahead of the parliamentary elections in 15 regions scheduled for March 2007, both parties initiated smear campaigns against their respective opponents and appealed to the

Ministry of Justice to investigate alleged abuses. At the same time, in the Duma, United Russia has been trying for months to enforce ever more changes to the electoral law in order to improve the party's chances at the polls in December. The Just Russia faction in parliament, for its part, demands legislation to counter its rival's practice of forcing new members into the party.

The "New Left" can be expected to gain additional weight as soon as it manages to dispel any remaining doubts that it has serious prospects at the elections. There are already signs that the new party has begun to attract politicians who are dissatisfied with the large, amorphous United Russia party, but support Putin's policies. Just Russia is also attractive for relatively well-known politicians because there is so far little competition for promising slots in the new party. Since its existence has ended the necessity for regional elites to join United Russia in order to secure access to the "administrative resources" within the presidential vertical axis of power, their future voting behavior within the regions also becomes less predictable.

Two "Parties of Power" and the Source of "Power"

The rivalry between the two parties is so bitter because the conflict is a domestic one within the Russian power elite. While it is true that in earlier elections, the "party of power" has always been attended by smaller pro-presidential parties, these have primarily siphoned additional votes from the opposition (e.g., "Rodina" in the 2003 elections). The "New Left", too, appeared initially to enjoy the protection of the presidential administration as a counterweight to the Communist Party. It also appeared to be a clever strategy for enhancing the legitimacy of the political system by creating "virtual" electoral alternatives. In the meantime, however, United Russia and Just Russia are mainly competing for personnel and administrative resources within the pro-presidential camp.

This development also sheds additional light on some of the risks that the president's administration is incurring with the "second pillar strategy": On the one hand, it may strengthen the president's autonomy if he can utilize the rivalry between two parties that are beholden to him by playing them off against one another and curbing their political ambitions. On the other hand, however, he may also lose control over the dynamics of such competition, since the respective actors and organizations are by no means mere puppets of the executive as a cohesive actor. They are backed by extremely ambitious politicians who have survival instincts and are embedded in networks of their own. Their connections extend into the presidential execu-

tive branch, where there is a very real competition for power and appropriate strategies in securing the perpetuation of the system after Putin's relinquishing of the presidency in 2008.

It would be naïve to assume that this complex "successor game" – which must be permanently re-interpreted, given the moves of the players and unforeseeable developments – would evolve according to the script of a dominant group within the presidential administration. On the contrary, by reacting to the dynamic developments and testing the limits of pluralism in the party-political sphere, "the Kremlin" also engages in experiments. Once again, it applies the strategy of "directed democracy" that focuses the political realm around a president acting in a paternalistic manner. Thus, he is able to obligate the competing actors to cooperate and reconcile in the name of the "national interest". For example, in December 2006, Putin invited representatives of the "ten most important political parties" to participate in the establishment of a joint "consultation council". This approach is a proven blueprint which during recent years occasionally has been applied with selected representatives of "civil society" and with loyal entrepreneurs. The declared purpose of the meeting was to facilitate joint action against political extremism, i.e., radical nationalist as well as "orange" forces. The selection of participants, which included Communists, Liberal Democrats, and the two liberal opposition parties as well as the two "parties of power," signaled Putin's support for United Russia while at the same time bestowing legitimacy on its rival. The importance of Just Russia, in turn, was downgraded by the fact that other minor parties – which pursued their own project of a party merger directed against the "New Left" – were also invited. This latter project of the "Newest Left" fell apart after months of negotiations between the prospective partners.

What About the Voters?

The current vivid competition between presidential coalitions of power is a new phenomenon

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within the "Putin system". It is directly linked to the increased importance of parties because rivalries between various groups now are becoming more noticeably linked to perceptible structures. However, in the absence of distinctive political profiles, these rivalries can hardly be regarded as anything beyond intralite competition. Therefore, the top-down "assisted" process of party-building and re-building also forces United Russia and Just Russia to engage in program-building. The development of stronger political profiles could signal a re-orientation towards the voters and their preferences. This, in turn, might counteract the self-destructive tendencies of the pro-presidential camp.

Indeed, the ideological and programmatic differences between the two parties are barely distinguishable at the moment, as shown by Putin's comments at a press conference on February 1, 2007: "The difference, as far as I can see, is that United Russia seems to be more of a right-leaning, liberal center, at least in terms of economic policies, although it also features many Social Democratic aspects. But Just Russia, of course, is a party that is reminiscent in all of its aspects of a Socialist, or Social Democratic trend. This may not be completely evident or visible at this point in time, just as the right-leaning liberal tendencies of United Russia are not yet fully visible yet. That takes time."

At the same time, "directed democracy" provides a very narrow framework for establishing such a profile. Voters, at least, have so far failed to respond by developing a stronger interest in politics, as shown repeatedly by opinion surveys. There is no evidence so far that competition between the two "parties of power" is able to galvanize the electorate and thus to broaden the legitimacy of the "directed democracy" and its prefabricated political alternatives.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay