

## Analysis

# The Upcoming 2007 Duma Elections and Russia's Party System

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## Abstract

President Vladimir Putin's October 1 announcement that he will lead the United Russia party list in the 2007 Duma election marks a watershed in Russian party politics since it is the first time a sitting president has agreed to any sort of party affiliation. At the same time, Putin continues to insist on his "non-party" status, refusing to become a formal member. These actions reflect a leadership ambivalence toward parties that is typical of systems with strong executive authority. More significant for Russia's party system, though, will be what Putin does next.

## The Dilemma of Partisanship for Presidents

Pro-presidential parties represent a mixed blessing for any president, and presidents who dominate their political systems feel this tension most acutely. On one hand, a pro-presidential party can be a very useful instrument of rule. If successful, it can provide a large basis of support in the parliament, bring up a steady supply of new cadres for executive positions, usher presidential supporters into elective offices across the country, and keep presidential supporters in line when a president leaves office so as to avoid succession crises. These are the benefits most observers note when discussing the United Russia Party's remarkable rise to prominence under the Kremlin's wing.

There is a darker side to pro-presidential parties, however, as far as presidents themselves are concerned. If the party is truly strong, commanding significant mass loyalties and organization, then such a party also has the potential to constrain the president. Furthermore, a party too closely associated with the president might make political missteps that tarnish the reputation of the president himself. And most worrisome of all, such a party might take on a life of its own. Such a party could, for example, fall under the influence of ambitious younger politicians who might want to challenge presidential authority. The party might also gradually become invested in particular sets of ideas on which its institutional interests start to depend; should the president want to do something different, the "pro-presidential" party can become a source of resistance.

Russia's presidents and their advisors have consistently recognized both the pluses and minuses of pro-presidential parties. While some like Gennady Burbulis urged then-president Boris Yeltsin to invest his personal authority in establishing a pro-presidential party permanently on Russia's political scene, others like Andranik Migranyan urged him to avoid the con-

straints that such a party could bring. Yeltsin's strong instinct for political survival led him to the latter tendency, as he refused to formally lead, join, or even associate himself with the party list of any of the pro-presidential parties created under his watch, most notably the 1993-vintage Russia's Choice and the Our Home is Russia of 1995. Yeltsin's fears regarding the potential for pro-presidential parties to "backfire" were indeed partially confirmed in 1994–95, when his first "party of power" sharply condemned the Chechen war that he had launched.

Putin has also clearly recognized both the advantages and disadvantages of pro-presidential parties. While United Russia leaders and activists have long called on him to formally join and lead the party, Putin refused to do so even as he endorsed it for the 2003 elections and even as he agreed to head its parliamentary party list in 2007. Thus observers last month were treated to the odd spectacle of Putin lavishing praise on the party while accepting its invitation to head the party list at the same time that he specifically qualified this acceptance by saying that he wanted to remain "nonpartisan."

Due to this dilemma of partisanship, presidents who are not originally elected as party nominees have incentive to wholeheartedly invest their own authority in a single strong party only when forced to do so by the rise of an alternative party that threatens their interests in ways that cannot be reliably countered by presidential institutions (formal and informal) alone. Yeltsin himself never faced such a threat. In 1991, he cruised to victory on the basis of personal popularity gained through his vociferous opposition to Communist Party incumbents. While the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) mounted a mighty challenge in 1996, Yeltsin found he could defeat it by mobilizing his allies in mass media, recently privatized big business, and other spheres of society dependent on presidential favor.

By 1999, however, a different situation had emerged. When the political opponent was not seen as an odious or dangerous force by most media and big business, but was instead the popular tandem of a former Prime Minister and strong Moscow mayor, Yeltsin's inner circle found that the media, business, and even administrative structures that had brought it victory in 1996 were now fragmenting. Many, indeed, started actively backing the rival coalition, Fatherland-All-Russia. Most worrisome of all, this coalition appeared to be winning as of summer 1999, just months before the parliamentary election and less than a year before the presidential contest was scheduled (in which Yeltsin was not allowed to run). As is well known, an absolutely wild series of events eventually led to the victory of Yeltsin's team, backing an originally little known candidate named Vladimir Putin. But such extraordinary circumstances could not be counted on to all fall into place again for the next succession. Indeed, 1999 made it apparent to the incumbent clique that presidential structures alone could not ensure long-term victory.

It was against this backdrop of near-defeat in 1999 that Putin's team began pushing the development of a pro-presidential party in earnest, leading Putin to endorse one more openly and unequivocally than Yeltsin had ever done. The president's supporters adopted a whole series of laws and administrative reforms that served to advantage what became the United Russia Party. Television, now brought more securely under state influence, more uniformly favored United Russia relative to its main rivals. And in the most recent step, Putin with great fanfare and media acclaim announced his decision to lead United Russia's party list.

But then again, it still remains striking what Putin did not do: join United Russia or accept a position of formal leadership, which could have been arranged had he wanted it and which would have made the party significantly stronger given his high approval ratings and authority. Putin thus continues to forego available opportunities to strengthen the party that he supports most and that he calls essential to securing Russia's stable future development. Putin's strategy is thus not solely an attempt to build a hegemonic party. It also reflects a fear of certain unpleasant side effects that such a dominant party can trigger. Through his seemingly asymptotic movement toward United Russia, therefore, Putin appears intent on finding new ways to "have his political cake and eat it too," gaining the benefits of a presidential party without personally taking on the risks.

### **The Impact of Putin's Decision to Lead United Russia's List**

Putin's decision to head United Russia's list nevertheless marks a qualitative breakthrough in the link between

party and president in Russia, constituting a step that neither he nor Yeltsin had taken before. What exactly is broken through to, however, will depend on what Putin does with his new status as a semi-party man during the remainder of the campaign and shortly after the election. While scenarios are infinite, I will focus here on several realistic possibilities that are most interesting from the point of view of Russia's party system development.

Perhaps the biggest question is whether Putin will in fact step down, ceding the presidency to someone else during this election cycle. While the Kremlin clearly takes great pride in thwarting all the speculations of those who would dare call themselves experts, I tend to believe that Putin actually wants to leave executive politics. And not simply because he has said so, but because of the way he has said so. A man who secretly intends to stay on would most likely cite "the desire to be with my family" or some other concern that would be easily overridden by the mass popular calls for the great leader to remain. But Putin has said that to change the constitution (or violate its spirit) so that he could stay on would damage the constitutionality that he has consistently said he has fought hard to establish. Such words are not impossible to take back, but they unnecessarily raise the cost of reversing oneself if that is one's real intention. I also do not expect Putin to try to become a Russian Deng Xiaoping, pulling all the strings of power from behind the scenes, or perhaps from the prime ministerial post. In Russia's "patronal presidential" system, someone as smart as Putin who wants to maximize power would not leave the presidency, even temporarily, especially when the law could be changed to allow a third term with relative ease. Of course, what we cannot rule out is that some shock (such as a major terrorist tragedy) could occur that forces Putin to change his mind.

Should this happen and Putin decide to remain president, we would most likely see a continuation of the status quo party system: a president who favors United Russia but refuses to meld his own authority into it as a party member or formal leader, thereby weakening its potential to become a truly hegemonic party. So long as the economy is doing well or the regime proves otherwise successful in sustaining popular support, United Russia is likely to appear to be dominant and to accumulate a hard-core base of supporters that could eventually weather times of crisis or succession. But if times turn hard sooner rather than later, other parties would gain an opening and the party system could again become truly competitive.

The converse scenario also deserves consideration: Putin simply departs the political scene entirely, leaving a United Russia supermajority in the Duma and

hand-picking a successor, who would then run for the presidency, like before, as an independent. This would also likely produce a situation much like we have today, with United Russia having a rather vulnerable hold on dominant party status. But this vulnerability would be accentuated since it is doubtful that a successor will be able to replicate Putin's eight-year success in sustaining the high approval ratings that have helped underpin United Russia's own ratings.

Even as Putin wants to free himself from the day-to-day executive decisionmaking and formal duties of the presidency, though, he may still want to retain a kind of veto power, finding a position that would enable him to be a check on any unwanted initiatives of the new president. Among his options are several with interesting implications for the party system. In particular, there are two ways in which he might well use United Russia to bind not himself, but his successor.

One would be to actually accept his Duma seat so as to become both the formal and informal leader of United Russia, unmistakably fusing his personal appeal with that of the party. This would have the major effect of boosting the authority of the party as a distinct institution, one that would no longer be linked primarily to executive power. Survey research shows that United Russia is not an empty vessel, and that there is a high degree of consistency between certain policy views held by its electorate (for example, for deepening marketization as opposed to a return to socialism), perceptions of what United Russia stands for, perceptions of what Putin stands for, and patterns of voting and loyalty to United Russia. By linking himself to the party in the way supposed here, Putin would likely anchor the party more firmly than before in this ideational capital, the kind of capital that would give the party a true base of power separate from the state. As head of parliamentary United Russia, then, Putin would have a strong mechanism by which to check the new chief executive, even if the latter continues Russia's tradition of formally nonpartisan presidents.

A second option would be for Putin to essentially force his successor to do what neither he nor Yeltsin

did: run for the presidency as a United Russia nominee, thereby making the presidency a "partisan" office for the first time. This becomes thinkable if United Russia is able to win a large enough majority to credibly claim to represent all but the fringe elements of Russian society, if United Russia nomination would not be seen as likely to alienate significant numbers of voters who would otherwise vote for the successor. Thus while presidents themselves may not want to subject themselves to the constraints that a ruling party could bring, they may want to subject their *successors* to such strings as a way of checking their behavior, tying them to a particular course of action that does not interfere with the interests or goals of the outgoing leader. Of course, this "binding" effect would be most powerful if Putin assumed parliamentary leadership of the party himself. In this way, Putin could succeed in restricting the autonomy of the future presidents, tying them more tightly to the party-embedded course he has laid out, without formally altering the constitution or betraying its spirit.

### Conclusion

In short, Putin's decision to head United Russia's party list but not to become a party member illustrates that the dilemma of partisanship continues to be a major factor in Russian presidential politics. Whether United Russia becomes a truly dominant party along the lines of Mexico's PRI or Japan's LDP will depend heavily on whether Putin, upon leaving office, finally fuses his authority with that of the party and makes party membership the price a would-be successor must pay for his personal endorsement and hence election. While observers are correct to note the danger that this latter eventuality could reinforce authoritarian government much as the Communist Party did in the USSR, there is also some room for hope there. So long as Putin himself is not the president in that scenario, there would remain a major source of party authority that is independent of the presidency and that is associated with certain values, a situation that could create the possibility for democratic accountability to develop over time in Russia.

#### *About the author:*

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