

Analysis

Political Trends in the Russian Regions on the Eve of the State Duma Elections

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Abstract

During previous State Duma campaigns, the Russian regions were an arena for battle among various parties. In particular, in 1999, there was intense conflict between the Fatherland-All Russia bloc, set up by the regional leaders, and the pro-Kremlin Unity. On the eve of the 2007 elections, the Kremlin wants the United Russia party of power to have unquestioned dominance in the new Duma, and is trying to remove the possibility of any unexpected outcome which would block a complete victory. As a result, the political landscapes of the regions are increasingly identical and loyal to the Kremlin.

Merging Regional Political Machines into United Russia

The most reliable means of guaranteeing electoral loyalty among the regions has become naming regional leaders as members of United Russia. Accordingly, the entire regional state apparatus is now at the service of the party of power, making it one large electoral "political machine." Among the weapons in the arsenal of these regional "machines" is one-sided coverage of the elections in the mass media, administrative pressure on the voters and the opposition, and, sometimes, even falsification of the voting results. While initially the governors acted only at the regional level, now, as part of United Russia, they have been united into the country-wide "hierarchy of power."

In the 2003 Duma elections, 29 governors (less than one third) headed regional lists of United Russia. In Russian political slang, governors who participated in the elections were "locomotives" (*parovozy*): the governors rounded up votes for the party of power, but did not themselves become deputies in the parliament, preferring to remain on as governors. After Putin cancelled direct gubernatorial elections in 2004, the process of including the governors into United Russia became more all-encompassing. By the spring of 2007, 70 of 85 governors announced that they were participating in the party of power. Sixty-five of these joined the regional lists of United Russia in the Duma elections, which also included 14 highly-placed bureaucrats from regional administrations, 12 chairmen of regional legislatures, and 26 mayors of regional capital cities. Three governors are leading party lists for elections to regional legislatures that will take place in December 2007 simultaneously with the Duma elections. The few governors who did not join United Russia typically were elected to their posts before 2004 with the support of the Communists and have little

chance of being reappointed by the president under current legislation.

The governors' membership in the party of power has served two goals. First, the governors are seeking to use United Russia as an instrument for controlling their regions. Second, the Kremlin is seeking to control the governors through United Russia. On the eve of the 2007 electoral campaign, the governors of two regions – Novgorod-the-Great and Samara – were forced to resign, partly because it was feared that they would not collect enough votes for United Russia. The functionaries who replaced them are leading United Russia's party lists. After President Putin announced on October 1 that he would lead United Russia's federal list, the merger of the "party of power" with the government apparatus in the center and the regions was complete.

Winning At Any Cost

In the elections to the 14 regional legislatures that took place in March 2007, United Russia won 46 percent of the vote on average, a score that gave it the majority of mandates in almost all regions. Using these figures as a guide, United Russia representatives on the eve of the Duma elections initially sought to win no fewer than half of the votes. However, after Putin announced that he would lead the United Russia list, the party planners increased their indicators and now have the goal of winning two-thirds of the seats in the Duma. The leaders of United Russia have turned the vote into a "referendum on Putin," and the governors were ordered to secure the Kremlin's desired result at any cost. They must surpass the number of votes Putin won for his election to a second term in 2004, when 71 percent of the voters backed him with 61 percent turnout. The presidential administration released an informal directive that turnout for the December 2 elections must not drop below 70 percent.

Since most public opinion polls indicated that such a high level of participation in the elections is unlikely in most regions, the increased turnout will be achieved with a variety of administrative measures. In addition to organizing the voting of military conscripts, the homeless, and people who have USSR passports but are not technically Russian citizens, several governors are pressuring public sector workers, demanding that they vote in polling booths organized where they work rather than where they live to ensure that the authorities will have better control over the vote. In the regions, there is increased pressure on journalists who are critical of United Russia. For example, in Mordovia, two opposition papers were closed, while in Saratov Oblast 11 criminal cases were filed against journalists who published investigative articles about the activities of United Russia General Secretary Vyacheslav Volodin, who is from the region. Additionally, the spurt of inflation and the rapid growth of retail prices in the regions in fall 2007 created a challenge for the United Russia campaign, provoking dissatisfaction among the voters. In order to bring the situation under control, the governors froze prices on essential products, which strengthened demand and increased tension on the eve of the voting.

Simultaneously, the governors are actively participating in the campaign backing a third presidential term for Putin launched by the Kremlin in October 2007. In Russian cities stretching from Tver to Kamchatka, a wave of demonstrations has supported Putin and the extension of his powers. Although formally the governors have stood aside from these mass actions, which are presented as free expressions of the popular will, in fact the rallies are being held at the direction of the regional administrations. In Novosibirsk, for example, a mass demonstration took place under the aegis of a social organization led by Governor Viktor Tolokonsky's wife. It is noteworthy, however, that only 27 of the 65 governors running on the United Russia list received official permission to use the name and image of President Putin in the regional campaign for United Russia. These governors are the most influential in their regions and have the trust of the presidential administration.

Little Chance for the Opposition

In these conditions, the positions of all other parties in the regions have been severely undermined. In compar-

ison to the regional elections of 2006-2007, Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia has reduced its activity in the regions. In several regions, a sharply negative campaign has been rolled out against the liberal party Union of Right Forces, which in the spring 2007 regional elections won almost 8 percent of the vote and could claim support from some of the United Russia electorate. The other liberal party, Yabloko, is seriously weakened, with significant support only in a small number of regions (such as St. Petersburg and Karelia) and its campaign in the regions is not very active.

The greatest blow in the campaign fell on Just Russia, the party headed by Federation Council Chairman Sergei Mironov that is seeking to be a second party of power. This organization tried to attract to its lists well-known regional politicians, but now the Kremlin is exerting great pressure on it, seeking to push voters to United Russia. After the Kremlin turned on Just Russia, strong candidates were excluded from its lists, including the banker Aleksandr Lebedev in Moscow and Yekaterinburg Duma Deputy Yevgeny Roizman (in fact, the branch of the party that he headed in Sverdlovsk Oblast even left the Just Russia party). Several regional politicians who had joined the party, including the mayor of Voronezh, withdrew their membership. One party member who is a deputy in the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly even suggested disbanding the party and having all its members join United Russia.

Today only the Communist Party of the Russian Federation has a stable organizational structure and base of support in the regions, but its potential is limited, and the Communists are not capable of presenting a serious challenge to United Russia.

Although the public opinion polls show a variety of results, most experts agree that the party of power will achieve its goals without massive falsification of the vote. Several ethnically-defined regions have a reputation for falsifying elections since the 1990s, including the republics of the North Caucasus and rural areas in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. However, the extent of falsifications in the regions could be significantly expanded in the upcoming elections.

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