

Analysis

Building a New Political Machine

By Grigorii Golosov, St. Petersburg

Abstract

The United Russia “party of power” dominated the March 1 regional elections. Whereas in the past, it gained support by providing the voters with a constantly rising standard of living, now it must rely on a new mechanism. The components of this political system include limited competition among a small number of political parties, falsification of results when necessary, placing the regional electoral commissions under the regional leaders, and depriving elections of all political content. At the regional level, governors have built up political machines to ensure sufficient turnout to demonstrate the population’s loyalty to the authorities. These machines operate through the regional media, material enticements, and election day entertainment at the polls.

United Russia Dominates March Regional Elections

Russia had its latest twice-yearly round of regional elections on March 1. Nine regions elected their legislatures and several municipalities held local elections. On the eve of the elections, several analysts argued that they would mark a turning point in Russian politics: the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, having dominated all similar elections since December 2007, would gradually start to lose its position as a monopolist. The basis for such predictions was the economic crisis, which by the beginning of March was having a significant effect on the standard of living in the Russian regions.

In fact, however, nothing of the kind occurred. Several of the municipal elections disappointed the “party of power.” But in all regional legislatures, United Russia won a majority of seats: 52 of 72 in Kabardino-Balkaria; 48 of 73 in Karachaevo-Cherkessia; 87 of 100 in Tatarstan; 53 of 75 in Khakasia; 38 of 62 in Arkhangelsk Oblast; 47 of 60 in Bryansk; 27 of 38 in both Vladimir and Volgograd oblasts, and 6 of 11 in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

United Russia achieved these outstanding results partly through the majoritarian side of the ballot, which allows parties with only moderate electoral support to score an absolute majority of seats. But the party also did well on the proportional representation half of the ballot. In all regions except for Volgograd Oblast and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, it received more than 50 percent of the vote, and in the latter two, more than 40 percent. Accordingly, it is fair to describe United Russia’s performance in the elections as successful.

The March elections demonstrated that United Russia’s electoral results are not greatly influenced by the social conditions in the regions. If earlier it was possible to tie the success of this party with some sort of “so-

cial contract” between the authorities and the population, presumably one in which the people swap loyalty for improving economic conditions, now the mechanism for the party of power’s electoral success is different. This article will lay out the main elements of this mechanism.

Securing the Authorities’ Success

The most important elements of United Russia’s success derive from the institutional changes that took place in Russia during Vladimir Putin’s second presidential term, particularly in the years 2004–2007. Most important is the artificial limit on political competition, which gives only a limited number of parties the right to participate in electoral competitions. At the end of 2003, there were more than 40 registered parties in Russia but their number has dropped steadily since the beginning of 2004. Currently, the only parties active in Russia include the four parties currently represented in the parliament and the Patriots of Russia party headed by Gennady Semigin. These were the parties that participated in the March 1 elections. Yabloko is burdened by the debts it incurred during the 2007 State Duma campaign and exists under the constant threat of liquidation, while the new “Pravoe delo” [Right cause] party had not secured official registration by the time the campaign began.

Obviously, it is not simply a matter of how many parties there are. Even a limited number of opposition parties could offer serious competition to United Russia, but only under two conditions: if they offer serious programmatic alternatives able to mobilize the voters and if they can attract influential regional politicians to their ranks.

None of the current parties met those conditions. Two of the four parties competing with United Russia in the regional elections – the Communist Party

of the Russian Federation (KPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) – have a narrow appeal. The source of their core support is, respectively, archaic Communist rhetoric and the personality of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. These parties cannot abandon these defining features without endangering their current position. The cost, however, is that they are unlikely to attract new voters. The third party, Just Russia, does not have a clearly defined ideological profile or a recognizable national leader. At the height of its popularity in March 2007, this party sought to attract influential local elites to its ranks. However, judging by its subsequent actions, the presidential administration forbid party leader Sergei Mironov from using this tactic further and Mironov strictly follows all orders from above. Cutting Just Russia's ties to the regional elite doomed the party to playing a marginal role in the regional electoral campaigns. The fourth party, Patriots of Russia, has no resources to expand its electoral potential.

Thus, United Russia's competition is limited to a small number of parties, each of which is focused on a narrow niche and does not seek a wide range of voters. Beyond the hard-core supporters of the Communists and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, most Russian voters have reason to believe that there simply are no alternatives to United Russia. This situation deprives the elections of any political content, turning demonstrations of loyalty into the only possible rational approach to the electoral campaign.

Key Role of Governors

The second institutional change defining elections in Russia today is the 2004 cancellation of gubernatorial elections. Since then, the presidential administration several times made clear to the governors that their political survival as a regional leader depended directly on their ability to secure good results for United Russia in the elections. Governors who could not handle this basic task failed to win appointment to a new term or were fired before their term was up. Faced with such threats, the governors made serious attempts to fulfill the tasks set by the federal government. The presidential administration was the main body that defined these tasks. Before each campaign, it informed the governors what kind of results the Kremlin would consider acceptable. Information about these targets occasionally reaches the media. This evidence suggests that the governors usually carried out these instructions with a high degree of precision.

How do the governors carry out these orders? Of course the type of instruments available to regional leaders varies from place to place. In some cases, the results

of regional elections have no relationship to the actual preferences of the voters – in other words, they are completely fabricated. A classic example of this type of voting is the elections to Ingushetia's Popular Assembly in March 2008. The announced results so obviously differed from the experience of the republic's residents that they led to mass demonstrations. Among the most recent elections, the results from Kabardino-Balkaria apparently fit into this mold. The Central Electoral Commission published the preliminary results of these elections in approximately half of the voting precincts on its website only two hours after the end of the voting. These preliminary results varied little from the ultimate final results. As a rule, such speed in the electoral count indicates that the electoral commission prepared the protocols earlier, even before the elections took place.

On the basis of numerous, but episodic, facts, one can assume that falsifying electoral results to one or another degree takes place in the vast majority of regions. This level of cheating is not surprising considering that in recent years the regional administrations have gained complete control over the system of regional electoral commissions. Similarly just as the governor bears personal responsibility for the result of the election before the presidential administration, within the regional administrations there are employees whose career perspectives depend directly on the results of the elections. The chairmen of the electoral commissions, in turn, are responsible to these bureaucrats. Additionally most of the rank-and-file workers in the electoral commissions depend on the income they derive from the elections. Thus, this well functioning vertical in many cases explains the election results.

De-Politicizing the Elections

However, direct falsification is not the main factor in most regions. Often, there is no need for it. Also, it is not the optimal method from the point of view of the Russian authorities, although they don't consider it unacceptable. The most important thing is that United Russia wins in the elections. And, in conditions in which the elections are deprived of political meaning and the main alternatives only appeal to a narrow slice of potential voters, one must do only two things to win the elections: maintain their de-politicized character during the entire electoral campaign and create significant stimuli for the voters to go to the polls to demonstrate their loyalty to the authorities.

The authorities ensure that the campaigns remain depoliticized by guaranteeing that none of the parties participating in them raise difficult political issues, es-

pecially of a local character. All parties without exception must obey this rule. Earlier, to carry out this instruction, Russian officials used such instruments as disqualifying already registered party lists and candidates. Sometimes, they relied on accusations of extremism or promoting national or social tension. Usually, however, the reasons given for disqualification were formal, such as violating the rules for campaigning or the departure of a large number of candidates from the party list (often under pressure).

Now, when the circle of parties is already so limited, these methods remain effective in regard to independent candidates in regions where there is a mixed electoral system and local politicians can run without being a member of a party. In relation to the parties, the most effective threat to keep them in line is to count the electoral results so that they cannot overcome the barrier (usually 7 percent) to gain seats in the proportional representation system. In relation to all parties (except the Communists in some regions), this threat is fully convincing. To change a result from 8–9 percent to 6.5 percent requires only an insignificant amount of falsification. Many remember how the Union of Right Forces received only 6.5 – 6.99 percent of the vote in a series of regions in March 2007. Under such pressure, parties prefer to avoid actively conducting campaigns on issues which would be of interest to significant groups of voters, concentrating instead on general ideological rhetoric (KPRF) or the personal calls of the national leader (LDPR).

Mustering Turnout

Having achieved the depoliticization of the elections, the regional authorities must address the second problem: guaranteeing sufficient turnout in the election to demonstrate loyalty. To achieve this task, most regions have created “electoral machines.” The chief element of these mechanisms is the administrative mobilization of socially-dependent categories of the population. One key category of this type is pensioners. It is well-known that in the 1990s, senior citizens were the electoral base of the KPRF. During the last 5–6 years, there was a massive restoration of the state social support system which provides pensioners with a source of small, but stable and gradually growing, monetary payments. To receive these payments (as well as holiday gifts and other material benefits), the pensioners need to interact constantly with social security agencies. And since participating in the elections is a traditional form of social activity, it is not surprising that mobilizing them for the elections is relatively easy.

A second category of the socially-dependent population includes several groups of public sector employees, including the numerous doctors and teachers. Since they have extremely low pay and are heavily dependent on the directors of the schools and clinics where they work, these categories of the population are easy to mobilize. However, their importance for the electoral machines is not only in their own votes, but in their ability to convince large groups of others to participate in the elections (and vote for United Russia). In schools, this campaigning takes place at parent meetings, through personal contacts with the parents, and especially by telephone. The practice of having class leaders systematically and repeatedly call parents on election day, summoning them to vote, has become wide-spread. It is well known that in hospitals, there is almost 100 percent participation in elections and 100 percent support for United Russia. Additionally, in recent years, college students have become a target for active electoral mobilization.

A third important category of the socially-dependent population is government workers themselves. They make up a significant part of the population and find voting for United Russia part of their job. This category also includes military personnel, who have a significant influence over election results in the areas where they are based.

An increasingly common form of administrative mobilization targets hired personnel employed in private enterprises. There are numerous well-known cases when representatives of employers demand that employees vote and the next day present evidence that they turned out and made the “right” choice in the form of a ballot photographed with a mobile phone. In other cases, such monitoring methods are not necessary since the turnout is organized by having the workers all go to the polls at the same time. There are often campaign meetings during working hours and in places of employment. While these methods are relatively new to the big cities, they have long been practiced in rural areas and small towns in many regions.

Mobilizing the Harder Cases

The administrative mobilization of the socially-dependent population by itself is able to mobilize a significant turnout for the elections. One big advantage of mobilizing this group of individuals is that it provides nearly 100 percent support for United Russia. A clear deficiency, however, is that it provides a relatively limited turnout. In the rural areas, its potential is great, but in the large cities, by a rough estimate, it guarantees only 20–30 percent participation in the elections.

Additional measures are necessary to attract voters who are not subject to administrative pressure or only weakly influenced by it.

These additional measures include several components. One is the massive influence on voters through the regional media, which is typically under the direct or indirect control of the regional administration. The media and, in particular television, constantly remind the voters about the up-coming elections. The accent in the reporting is not on the choice as such (there is none), but the idea that the act of voting represents a civic duty, prestigious type of civil behavior, and manifestation of “adulthood”. A large part of this propaganda is aimed at young voters. Additionally, the media reminds voters that on election day they will find free goods and entertainment at the polls.

In my observations, such attractions have become a central form of turning out the vote. The material benefits take the form of souvenirs, free or significantly-discounted food, and, in some cases, other consumer goods. A variety of lotteries are also held on election day. Although there are laws against this practice, the distributors get around this problem by handing out the

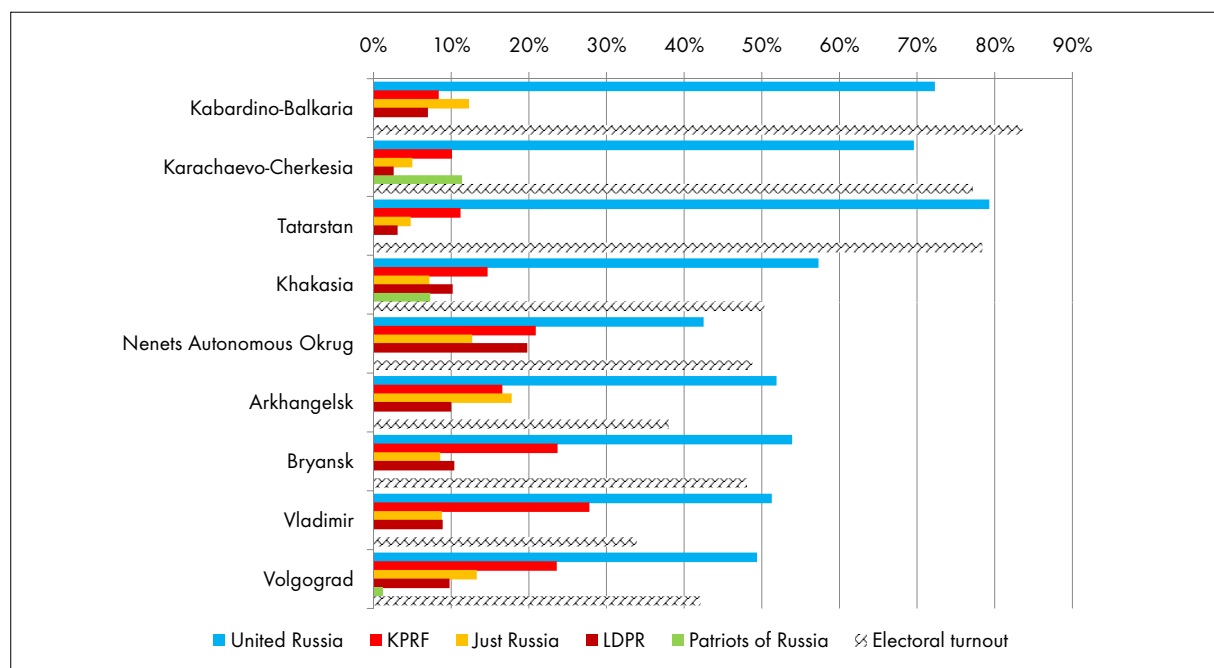
lottery cards as people vote, but not announcing the winners until later. There are free concerts and events aimed at bringing voters onto the streets and then convincing them to fulfill their civic duty. Thus, the authorities are consciously transforming the elections from a substantive political event into an entertaining holiday with a large number of participants.

The electoral machines exert an influence on Russia’s political development. Undoubtedly, as the global economic crisis continues, critical attitudes among the population will grow. But that does not mean that these critical attitudes will affect regional elections. As now, the electoral machines will block such sentiments from having political consequences. Most of these machines are relatively new (with a few exceptions in the republics): they were first widely tested in the 2007 Duma elections and brought to full force only in the 2008 presidential elections. Accordingly, simply increasing the capacity of these machines could support the current situation for a long period of time regardless of the political mood in society. Cardinal changes will only occur in the case of a significant change in the overall Russian political context.

About the author:

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Overview over Regional Election Results



Source: <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/izbirkom.html> (see overleaf for figures)

Overview over Regional Election Results

	United Russia	KPRF	Just Russia	LDPR	Patriots of Russia	Electoral turnout
Kabardino-Balkaria	72.3%	8.4%	12.3%	7.0%	-	83.6%
Karachaevo-Cherkesia	69.6%	10.1%	5.0%	2.6%	11.4%	77.2%
Tatarstan	79.3%	11.2%	4.8%	3.1%	-	78.4%
Khakasia	57.3%	14.7%	7.2%	10.2%	7.3%	50.3%
Nenets Autonomous Okrug	42.5%	20.9%	12.7%	19.8%	-	48.8%
Arkhangelsk	51.9%	16.6%	17.8%	10.0%	-	38.0%
Bryansk	53.9%	23.7%	8.6%	10.4%	-	48.1%
Vladimir	51.3%	27.8%	8.8%	8.9%	-	33.9%
Volgograd	49.4%	23.6%	13.3%	9.8%	1.2%	42.1%

Source: <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/izbirkom.html>

Analysis

Rostov Oblast: Transformations during the Economic Crisis

By Maksim Vaskov, Rostov-na-Donu

Abstract

Rostov Oblast had been relatively successful over the previous decade, but now is facing economic challenges as a result of the global economic crisis. Unfortunately, the Rostov regional and local leadership lacks adequately trained personnel to address the problem; policies adopted so far focus on saving large enterprises rather than developing the region over the long term. The economic crisis is unlikely to provoke political instability since there is little organized opposition and the various groups affected by the crisis – such as members of the middle class who lost their jobs and marginalized Communist Party backers – are unlikely to join ranks against the incumbent leaders.

Economic Difficulties Create Challenges

Rostov Oblast is the administrative center of the Southern Federal District, making it the strategic center of the entire North Caucasus region and the focal point of the federal transportation system in this part of Russia. It is among the Russian regions with a strong agricultural sector and several types of industry. Rostov is second only to Krasnodar Krai in the region in terms of integration into the national and international financial-economic system.

Unfortunately, during the current global economic crisis, the region's high level of development means that it is facing severe difficulties. Regions that in the past attracted foreign companies are now suffering from the crisis, leading to layoffs and, consequently, increasing social and political tension. The regions that had

fewer links to the world economy, where local output consists mainly of small- and medium-sized businesses that generally serve only the domestic market, have suffered least of all.

Likewise, the fate of various regions depends on whether they have access to recession-proof industries. Within the Southern Federal District, Krasnodar Krai is lucky to have a large part of its economy focused on preparations for the 2014 Sochi Olympics. The region will benefit from the guaranteed profits provided by the state orders for new infrastructure and payments into the krai budget. The North Caucasus republics receive extensive federal budget subsidies and these will continue, but the crisis has definitely hurt these struggling economies. The federal government hopes to prevent a situation in which economic difficulties cause an