

Critical Political Mass: Russia's Emerging Party System

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It has become common wisdom that Russia has nothing we can call a party system. No fewer than 141 "electoral associations" registered with the Ministry of Justice by December 1998, and only the Communist Party is usually seen as much more than a small, leader-centric clique of individuals with no strong roots outside of Moscow or perhaps St. Petersburg. There are strong signs, however, that a real party system is now coalescing in Russia in the run-up to the 1999 parliamentary elections. While Russia is still many years away from Western levels of party development, there is good reason to expect parties to play a much more important role in these elections than in the past, and we may even be witnessing the emergence of a relatively stable four-party system in Russia.

The Russian Electoral System

Russia has two sets of elected federal officials. First, people vote directly for Russia's president. To win, a candidate must garner at least 50 percent plus one vote. If no candidate wins 50 percent in the first round, there is a runoff between the top two first-round vote-getters. Second, Russia elects a lower house of parliament, the Duma. Half of the Duma's 450 members are elected in territorial districts (also called single-member districts, or SMDs) as are members of the US House of Representatives. The other half of the Duma, however, is elected according to a system of proportional representation (PR), whereby people vote for parties rather than for individual candidates, and the parties then divide up this half of the Duma seats according to the percentage of votes they receive. Only parties that gain at least five percent of the seats, however, are eligible to be part of this division. By definition, therefore, parties play a strong role in the PR half of the Duma elections. One key test of party strength, therefore, is whether parties have an impact in the other half of the Duma elections, the SMD half. Russia's upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, is not directly elected but is filled by governors and the heads of local legislatures, who automatically become Federation Council members upon being elected to their regional leadership posts.

Parties on the Rise 1993-95

Parties (and I use the term loosely) were extremely weak in 1993, the year of Russia's first multiparty parliamentary elections since the collapse of Communist rule. In fact, in the single-mandate districts, party candidates actually fared worse than independents. But

by the second Duma elections, in 1995, parties were noticeably gaining importance. This can be seen in several conclusions drawn from analyses of survey results and voting patterns.

- Parties in Russia have distinct social bases. Yabloko has received disproportionate support from the intelligentsia; the Communists from the elderly and former members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; and Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) from men in small towns.
- Voters distinguish between parties in terms of ideas in a reasonable way. Polls show that Communist voters tend to be anti-reform; Yabloko voters tend to be pro-reform; and the LDPR's voters tend to be pro-law and order. These policy positions correspond quite well to the policies espoused by the parties' central leaders.
- There is evidence even that party loyalties are beginning to form. A study by Joshua Tucker and Ted Brader has shown that roughly a quarter of Russian citizens consistently supported one candidate and his party 1) in a survey before the 1995 Duma election, 2) in the act of voting for a party in that election, and 3) in the 1996 presidential election.
- In 1995, people often voted for candidates of the same party in both the PR and the SMD voting. This is evidence that even in 1995, parties were about more than their national leaders. Instead, people were linking local party candidates to the federal ones in systematic ways.
- By 1995, parties had come to provide their candidates with significant electoral benefits. Party-nominated candidates received more votes than independents in the single-mandate districts. Voting patterns show that the Communist Party gave its nominees the biggest electoral boost (on the order of 14 percentage points), although the Agrarian Party, Yabloko, Our Home is Russia and Russia's Democratic Choice also had significant positive effects.

The Turning Point of 1999: Reaching Critical Mass

In the run-up to the December 19 elections, several important developments suggest that 1999 may be a watershed year for the Russian political party system. After two rounds of political disintegration, politicians are now starting to converge around four parties (the Communists, Primakov's Fatherland-All Russia, Yabloko and the LDPR) that have a real chance to become the core of Russian politics for some time to come. These parties have created a critical mass of organizational and reputational resources sufficient to begin attracting major political figures that had previously sought to safeguard their "independent" status.

- Single-member district candidates are increasingly deciding to seek party nomination rather than to run as independents. While large numbers of independents are still running, many major local figures are aligning with parties, whereas they had refused to do so in the past. Two examples are illustrative.

Former federal Prosecutor General Stepankov was twice elected to the Duma from Perm with a self-conscious strategy of presenting himself as "above parties," trading primarily on his renown from his days in federal office. In 1999, however, he has tied himself to Fatherland-All Russia. Another example: in Bashkortostan, not known to be a hotbed of partisan activity, former republic Prime Minister Marat Mirgazyamov decided to seek (and won) nomination from the Yabloko Party despite a proud history as an independent. Joining these parties brings these candidates a brand-name "seal of approval," significant organizational support, some financial backing, and additional recourse should they run afoul of local authorities unhappy with their candidacies.

- Major national political figures are deciding to join parties rather than create their own movements. The most famous examples are, of course, former prime ministers Primakov and Stepashin. Either of these politicians could easily have gathered close associates and attracted enough regional followers to form their own political movements, as so many prominent politicians had done before them. Failing that, either would still have been in a good position to mount an independent bid for the presidency, putting himself above partisan politics as both had done while serving as prime minister. Yet both decided that they were better off joining political machines that had already been built rather than starting from scratch. Primakov, already Russia's most popular politician, gained an organization. Stepashin, by winning the imprimatur of the one major party with a "squeaky-clean" image, added credibility to his claim to be a committed corruption-fighter. Not least, of course, each ex-premier also "guaranteed" himself some kind of electoral victory, since analysts concur that both parties are virtually certain to clear the five-percent barrier into the Duma.
- Governors are actively involved in the formation of key electoral blocs. Regional chief executives are a cagey lot, notorious for hedging their bets and for paying lip service to a wide variety of parties they find unobjectionable. Nevertheless, in 1999 some key governors and mayors are agreeing to put their own names in top spots on the party lists, laying their prestige and credibility on the line. The biggest examples include Moscow Mayor Luzhkov and St. Petersburg Governor Yakovlev on the Fatherland-All Russia list, Tula Governor Starodubtsev on the Communist Party list, and Saratov Governor Dmitri Ayatskov on the Our Home is Russia list. Importantly, governors are not only joining blocs sponsored by the Kremlin--some of the governors most active in party politics in 1999 have embraced a very Kremlin-unfriendly bloc (Fatherland-All Russia) that involves serious political risk. Of course, governors continue to hedge their bets in most cases, but there are signs that key governors are taking partisanship seriously.

Towards a Four-Party System?

Taking predictions about Russia too seriously is foolhardy, but such predictions are nevertheless an interesting intellectual exercise. In this light, one can see the possible beginnings in Russia of what might be called a four-party system. Fatherland-All Russia

and Yabloko have reached critical mass--authoritative political leaders are gradually but steadily gravitating towards them and they are sure to clear the five-percent barrier into the Duma. Since Fatherland has decided to continue tightening its organizational structure and cultivating its own identity, it is likely to survive as a major party even if the "All Russia" governors and even Primakov peel away after the Duma election. The Communists have long reached this threshold--while several erstwhile allies have sought to strike out on their own in 1999, the party continues to attract major figures of the political left (including many governors) and will get by far the largest share of leftist votes. The LDPR, having confounded pollsters twice by exceeding expectations, is likely to make it into parliament a third time (now reincarnated as the "Zhirinovskiy Bloc") on the basis of a loyal "protest" and "law and order" electorate that finds Zhirinovskiy a capable outlet for its outrage. While few major politicians have gravitated to the LDPR for reasons other than to gain immunity from criminal prosecution, this protest/law and order electorate is stable and likely to maintain representation in parliament so long as times remain tough in Russia.

Other, smaller parties do stand a chance of clearing the five-percent barrier. Ones to watch include the Pensioners Party, the National Bloc (which includes the proto-fascist Russian National Unity), the Union of Right-Wing Forces, one of three competing radical communists blocs, and whatever bloc emerges to represent Kremlin interests, be it Our Home is Russia, Unity, or a combination of the two.

One system that may emerge, therefore, would include two "senior" parties (the Communists and Fatherland) that regularly get 15-35 percent of the vote, two "junior" parties (Yabloko and the LDPR) that get 5-15 percent of the vote consistently, and a series of "fresher" parties that constantly alternate stays in parliament as they teeter around the five-percent mark.

Russian parties remain weak and underdeveloped organizationally, but four have reached a critical political mass that is enabling them to attract supporters and new senior members more rapidly than their rivals closest in ideology. If they run their campaigns well, and if central authorities don't remove them from the race, they could become the foundation for Russian politics as the new century begins.

