

Power as Patronage: Russian Parties and Russian Democracy

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"These elections are not about issues, they are about power." During the Russian parliamentary elections in December 1999 any number of people could claim this statement. This characterization--along with the perception that this election included the dirtiest campaigns to date--was agreed upon by Westerners and Russians, participants and observers, central and regional officials, and independent and party-affiliated candidates. These shared perceptions reveal a great deal about campaign outcomes, electoral politics, and consolidation of the Russian party system. Most importantly, the juxtaposition of issues and power reveals the collision between the main forces of Russian electoral politics: 1) political parties; and 2) independent economic groups headed by the infamous oligarchs.

The synthesis of these two connected but not overlapping political forces occurred for a number of reasons. First, going into an electoral season that included both parliamentary and presidential elections within six months, Russia lacked a clear national leader to succeed Boris Yeltsin. This void left regional governors (themselves machine bosses) looking to exert national influence by promoting their own candidate--either Moscow mayor Yuri Luzkhov or former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. In doing so, the governors linked regional patronage-based organizations and national party organizations more closely and more publicly than they had been in the past.

For the first time, the Kremlin faced a national opposition unfettered by the limits of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), and it had no contestant of its own. The situation demanded that the Kremlin use its considerable state resources to launch a party organization, Edinstvo ("Unity"), and anoint it with the support of Yeltsin's handpicked successor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. In just three months, between September and December 1999, party and machine were joined at the national level, supported by extensive expenditure of state resources.

These two linkages--between regional machines and national parties, and between the executive and national parties--profoundly influenced the structure of party system competition. As the success of the Union of Right-Wing Forces (URF) demonstrated, the competition was not about positioning parties' presidential candidates per se, but about positioning party organizations to take advantage of the new president's patronage apparatus. Importantly, these changes in the logic of party competition rippled throughout

the entire party system, influencing the campaign strategies and the electoral support of all parties in the system.

Not Issues...Personalities

As far as participants are concerned, Russian campaigns have never been about issues. A series of surveys of party elites conducted by the author over a three-year period leading up to the parliamentary elections confirms that party organizations lack the capacity to communicate logical positions on related policy problems to potential voters. Absent parties' abilities to articulate issue positions, voters find it difficult to choose among contestants on the basis of issues and elected party representatives find it difficult to agree on viable solutions to problems. Likewise, organizational questions indicate a profound lack of linkage between central and regional officials and a lack of investment in the infrastructure of regional organizations.

In the recent election, those few party organizations--such as Grigory Yavlinsky's Yabloko and the KPRF--that managed to stake out clear positions on critical issues such as state involvement in the economy were severely handicapped in the policy process. Because of the overwhelming concentration of power in the executive these opposition parties were unable to turn their positions into clear solutions to the problems facing voters or remedy these problems through government action. Between 1993 and early 1999, these organizations retained their core voters but failed to expand beyond their base.

Absent clear programmatic competition to link party elites and elites and voters, party leaders needed to find an alternative logic to drive party development. Ultimately, they needed to win votes. Without issues to structure elections, candidates and party leaders most frequently argued that elections were about personalities. Party organizations relied on charismatic leadership as the catalyst for organization, but a number of leaders revealed themselves to be inadequate to the task as the electorate became more familiar with them. Yegor Gaidar, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Yavlinsky himself represent disparate examples of this phenomenon. In each case, their party organizations either lost support or were forced to reinvent themselves.

And Then Patronage

Analysts' focus on personalities masked the evolution of a different type of coordinating mechanism among party organizations--political patronage. Throughout the 1990s, patronage machines were emerging at both regional and national levels, although they remained only tangentially linked to party organizations. For the most part, candidates and party leaders with access to patronage shied away from party membership, recognizing its potential constraints on future action. The best example of this has been Boris Yeltsin's (and now Putin's) decisions to remain above party competition.

Yet even in the 1993 and 1995 parliamentary elections, the Kremlin, governors, and oligarchs provided behind-the-scenes support to party organizations and individual candidates, while remaining divorced from party organizations per se. By the 1999 election, however, Russia's particular form of patronage provided a clear alternative logic to both programmatic and charismatic party organization. Edinstvo and URF explicitly organized around patronage-based appeals.

It's about Power

Power in the Russian electoral context is not direct control over policy outcomes, but rather control over patronage levers at all levels of the political system by a wide range of political actors. Russian parties are merging with national and regional machines that rely on patronage to coordinate elite action and provoke elite cooperation. In a sense, party organizations provide the infrastructure to manage the transformation of state resources into effective patronage levers.

In the Russian context, patronage includes mechanisms familiar to students of US party building--the awarding of contracts, public sector jobs, and use of state resources for campaign purposes. In the post-Soviet context, privatization of state assets highlighted a second form of patronage: the de facto award of economic property rights and bureaucratic regulation favorable to private economic activity. Increasingly, winners in the privatization sweepstakes participate in electoral politics through campaign funding, candidate recruitment, and direct participation at both the regional and national levels.

Such organizations remain focused on elite concerns. Limited resources, ineffective bureaucracies, and lack of linkages between the center and the regions have minimized the direct impact of party machines on the majority of voters. Furthermore, the effect of the machines on voting behavior is largely indirect. Patronage levers provide elite politicians in Moscow and in the regions the power to orchestrate electoral choice and competition during the campaign period to shape outcomes.

In Russia, as in other countries, patronage-based organizations create opportunities for political corruption. Arguably, since 1993 the control of the media and violations of campaign finance laws have been increasing rather than decreasing. It is also clear that when more subtle mechanisms to control candidate and party entry and campaign activities fail, Russia's regional machines have the coercive tools to deliver votes.

This type of loosely orchestrated vote fixing has been a cornerstone of Russian elections since 1993. The caveat is that coordinating electoral manipulation from the center is a time- and resource-consuming process that may not always be perfectly successful. In short, party machines exert strong but not perfect control over outcomes, and national party machines face enormous coordination problems in their relations with regional bosses. Thus, when the central and regional powers face off, as they did in the recent gubernatorial elections in Moscow oblast, all bets are off.

Evidence of Patronage Organizations in Election Outcomes

Although these patronage-based machines evolved from the organizational legacy of the Soviet system, the December election marked a new stage in the linkage between party organizations and central and regional patronage organizations. For the first time, regional governors who largely eschewed party membership in their own campaigns joined national party organizations that sought to put their own patrons in the Kremlin and the Duma. As long as Luzhkov and Primakov looked like winners, governors supported them, lending both infrastructure and their own political support to the Fatherland-All Russia (FAR) campaign. The party led the federal list polling in the eight regions where regional governors were FAR supporters.

However, weakness in the party system and the power of Kremlin resources gave rise to a late entrant in the race--Edinstvo. Helped by a Kremlin-directed media blitz, the meteoric rise of Putin, and a great deal of private sector money, Edinstvo looked increasingly like the organization that could capitalize on proximity to state resources. As Edinstvo rose in the polls, many governors hedged their bets by supporting both Edinstvo and FAR. With Edinstvo's strong showing in both the federal list and single-member district elections, even those governors who previously supported the Luzhkov-Primakov alliance jumped to support Putin.

The governors recognize that the president will control the patronage necessary to maintain their own positions and Putin appears to be the person who will dispense these favors. If Putin manages to sustain the strong-state myth constructed and tested through the Edinstvo campaign, he is likely to consolidate a party machine organization at the center. This action will elevate party administrative development to a new height, but limit the choices facing citizens on the ballot.

Implications for Future Development

Russian parties are merging with national and regional machines that rely on patronage to coordinate elite action and foster elite cooperation. In essence, the political structure ensures two flows of patronage resources. The first and most powerful originates in the President's office. The second source of patronage resources originates with oblast-level officials. This dual structure creates an enormous administrative dilemma for central officials, since there is no effective vertical institutional structure that allows the center to monitor how its resources are spent once they are dispatched to the regions. Further, competing interests on the regional level create pools of voter support for individuals within the region, rather than for a team of politicians with common interests.

Absent an effective administrative structure, Boris Yeltsin found it impossible to manage the patronage-based system. Regional authorities increased their autonomy over the decade of the 1990s by building individual and personalized machines. Early signs are that Vladimir Putin recognizes the need for stronger coordinating mechanisms in order

use the existing base to develop organizational discipline, effective leadership, and cadres to administer the patronage apparatus. But this organization need not take place through a single party. His recent meeting with old and new party factions in the Duma suggests that he sees a coalition of parties with strong regional bases as a potential set of coordinating mechanisms.

At the same time, the pool of deputies elected in single-member districts provides a natural constituency for a president willing to trade funds and favors for support in the legislature. Many of these deputies were elected as independents; others will switch party allegiances. These moves provide Putin with an important mechanism to circumvent recalcitrant party officials and directly pressure individual deputies. In particular, the large contingent of KPRF deputies elected in single-member districts is likely to feel significant pressure from the president's office to break with their party on key votes in exchange for resources important to their districts, making the party extremely vulnerable to Putin's demands.

In this scenario, programmatic weakness continues within the Russian party system. Brazil provides a telling example of how strong presidents have used state resources to co-opt or capture national party organizations. The use of state forces weakens party organizations, creating loosely affiliated and often conflictual regional politics. This enables the president to maintain central power while ensuring that no national opposition can form to threaten their dominant position in politics.

On a regional level, patronage levers breed conflict among the local elite because they fracture voter loyalty and distribute it among different officials within the organization. In the Brazilian example, this has led to instability within the party structure, organizational weakness, and lack of individual loyalty to the organization. Brazilian presidents have exploited these weaknesses to prevent the rise of national opposition. Unfortunately, there is little reason to expect otherwise for Russian party development.