

The Limited Reach of Russia's Party System: Under-Institutionalization in the Provinces

Kathryn Stoner-Weiss
April 2000
PONARS Policy Memo 123
Princeton University

With the 1999 elections to the State Duma completed and a new president recently elected, a Russian party system, although fragile, is perceptible. Party factions are active and somewhat enduring within the State Duma, Russia's lower house; party identification among citizens, while comparatively low, appears to be increasing; and we can now speak of trends in national legislative elections such that at least some parties endure from one electoral period to the next. Yet, despite these positive gains, a peculiar and possibly enduring characteristic has also developed--a failure of parties to have significantly penetrated the political institutions of most of Russia's 89 provinces. The representation of national parties in both regional legislatures and executives is strikingly low. Further, in most regions, regional political party development is generally faltering. As Russia's party system appears to be slowly institutionalizing along other measures, why have political parties still not managed to penetrate politics in the periphery?

The nature of dual economic and political transitions makes the underdevelopment of political institutions preferable for regional political elites who have benefited from the early stages of economic change. They prefer a "partial reform equilibrium" in political institutional development so that they can avoid widening the sphere of accountability for their decisions in order to protect the gains they have made in the early stage of the economic transition. Strong political institutions--like competitive political parties that penetrate the periphery--would render transitional winners (in this case, regional political elites) more accountable to wider societal interests as well as to national political actors. Building on the findings of scholars in East European contexts, I argue that regional political elites work against party development in order to control the pace and scope of political inclusion and to protect their early transitional winnings.

The intention of this memo is to point out the fact that Russian parties are especially unsuccessful in penetrating politics in the periphery and to discuss the implications of this for Russia's future political development. Drawing on methods of measuring degrees of party institutionalization derived from other country contexts, I base my assessment of the development of Russia's party system on four measures: 1) stability and patterns of party competition; 2) citizen perceptions of parties; 3) elite perceptions of parties; and 4) organization.

1) Stability and Patterns of Party Competition

There is at least some continuity in the parties gaining representation in the Duma, although parties do come and go in Russian politics with startling frequency. Russia has a mixed electoral system for national legislative elections such that 225 of the 450 seats in the Duma are elected through proportional representation party list, while the other 225 seats are elected through single mandate elections. Between the first elections to the State Duma in December 1993 and the third and most recent elections in December 1999, three parties--the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), Yabloko, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) under Vladimir Zhirinovskiy--have consistently cleared the 5% barrier required to gain representation in the national legislature through party list voting. In addition to these three parties, a fourth more fluid grouping--a "party of power" whose name and membership has changed between electoral periods--has consistently represented the government at the time of the election. The number of deputies elected to the Duma as independents has decreased between the first and third electoral periods, indicating that gradually more candidates for national office may be opting for party affiliations than previously. Thus, the rough outline of a "three plus one" party system can be seen in Russia at the national level.

2) Citizen Perceptions of Parties

Although parties are almost universally negatively regarded and distrusted in post-Soviet Russia, presumably because of the overarching and threatening presence of the Communist Party since 1917, there is evidence of rising voter identification with parties. In 1993, surveys found that although most respondents in a national survey were anti-party and/or did not identify themselves with any party, 22% of voters were either strongly committed or committed partisans. Only two years later, however, prior to the second elections to the State Duma in December 1995, there was an apparent jump in partisanship. In a national sample of voters, 49% of respondents were partisans. Alternate ways of posing questions that might uncover partisanship may account for some of the differences in results, but the differences may also indicate an actual increase in partisanship between Russia's first and second parliamentary elections. There is also, of course, variation among parties as to which have more firmly committed partisans. There exists the curious (but by now well known) phenomenon of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (the successor, after all, to the detested Soviet Communist Party) as the most appealing party to the most number of "post-communist" Russians.

In sum, there is at least preliminary evidence of a gradual increase in partisanship among the Russian citizenry. In comparison with the United States and Britain, where only 13% and 8%, respectively, identify themselves as non-partisans, Russian partisanship is still low, as we might expect. But given the short period of time in which Russian parties have had to establish a political presence, their progress toward institutionalization on this measure is rather striking.

3) Elite Perceptions of Parties

Russia's scorecard on this measure is mixed. Clearly, most political elites in Russia perceive the need to form organizations, call them political parties, and use their labels in national elections. That said, there is startling fluidity in elites' membership in parties, and many parties rise and fall between electoral periods. The elections to the State Duma in 1999 are an excellent example of this. Having been formed slightly less than three months prior to the December election, Unity (the government's "party of power") finished second only to the KPRF in proportion of the popular vote.

Many all-Russian parties (both relatively old and new) are similarly focused on a single personality and should the leader abandon the party, it would likely dissolve. Nonetheless, there is also the persistence of older parties, like Yabloko and the KPRF in particular, that have consistently run candidates in national legislative and presidential elections since 1993. These organizations appear bigger than their leaders. Moreover, although elites (particularly provincial elites) often switch party affiliations between national elections, or hold several party affiliations during a single electoral campaign, their propensity toward forming electoral organizations--and the overall decline in the number of deputies winning national office as independents since 1993--indicates that elites attribute some value to political parties in elections to national political institutions. However, the fleeting existence of many of these organizations, and the fluidity of elite membership in them, caution against arguments regarding deep institutionalization of the Russian party system.

4. Organization

For all their other weaknesses, parties clearly have a presence in national legislative institutions, and have even penetrated the executive to some degree (although President Yeltsin himself carried no party label, certain cabinet members have done so in the past and President Putin may well do so in future). As weakly institutionalized as Russia's party system seems at the national level, its most significant organizational challenge remains penetration of the country's heartland.

Between 1993 and 1998 at the subnational level in Russia, there were more than 200 elections. Hence, since the adoption of the constitution and the first parliamentary elections (both in December 1993), all-Russian political parties have had ongoing opportunities to affect electoral outcomes and, by extension, political practice in the provinces. Yet, with a few exceptions, they have accomplished neither of these tasks.

In the first electoral round of 79 regional legislative elections held in 1993 and 1994, 13.8% of newly elected deputies carried a political party affiliation, while 86.2% carried no party affiliation. The low party penetration of the periphery in this electoral round is in some ways peculiar, given that parties had just fought national elections to the State Duma and some regional elections were even held concurrently with national parliamentary elections. Presumably, all-Russian parties could have used the regional

branches they may have developed to fight parliamentary elections in December 1993 for the advancement of their parties in the regional races that were either held concurrently or soon after. For the most part, however, the all-Russian parties that did best in the 1993 elections to the State Duma proved unable to make significant electoral inroads to the newly formed regional legislatures.

This is understandable given the context in which the national and local parliamentary elections took place. In the wake of the October shelling of parliament, President Yeltsin temporarily banned opposition parties and called snap elections for the new State Duma. Although the Communist Party (KPRF) did field candidates in these elections in December 1993, some other opposition organizations did not. It also was difficult for these young and often poorly organized parties to field candidates in the regional legislative elections that followed. Despite this, however, the KPRF appeared to capitalize on its success in the Duma elections (leveraging some of its old CPSU networks), and managed to elect the highest number of deputies to regional legislatures-- 6.3% of all deputies elected. The Agrarian Party of Russia, which garnered 1.1% of all elected deputies to regional assemblies, followed the KPRF. These two parties received a combined total of 7.4% of all deputies elected to regional legislatures in 79 regions. Although they were by far the most successful parties in this initial round of legislative elections in the provinces, their relative victories hardly amounted to a sweep of Russian regional assemblies. Parties of the democratic center fared even worse.

Between 1995 and 1997, the Central Electoral Commission reports that more than 17,900 candidates participated in elections for a possible 3021 electoral mandates in 72 of Russia's 89 regions. Of this number of candidates approximately 25% were nominated by electoral organizations or electoral blocs (two or more parties in combination), while 75% of candidates ran as independents. Overall, of 2,934 deputies elected, 16.8% had party affiliations, but 83.2% did not. Of that 16.8%, only 11.3% had national party affiliations, while the remaining elected deputies (5.3%) were sponsored by local party organizations, having no ties to national parties whatsoever.

The KPRF, Yabloko and the LDPR--three of the parties that crossed the 5% hurdle in the national proportional representation (PR) vote for the State Duma in all three national elections since 1993--do have at least some representation in a few regional legislatures. But even for the KPRF, this hardly demonstrates a controlling interest in regional politics. Paralleling elections to the State Duma, the left opposition has certainly been more successful in regional legislative elections than "democratic/centrist" parties. However, they have in no way been as electorally successful in the provinces as at the national level, where in 1995 and 1999 the KPRF alone garnered over 20% of the vote.

Undeniably, the KPRF does reach farthest into the periphery, but its degree of penetration is less than impressive. In 1995-1997, it registered 776 candidates in 46 regions and 215 candidates in 37 regions were successfully elected. This amounts to an average of slightly less than six deputies per legislature in fewer than half of all those legislatures for which elections were held in this period. As in the first round of provincial legislative elections in 1993-1994, the Agrarians were also relatively successful (winning 32 seats), but this

also amounts to a handful of deputies in a handful of regions. Continuing earlier trends, the democratic centrist parties fared much worse; NDR (Our Home is Russia) ran candidates in sixteen regions, but ten deputies won in only six regions; Yabloko ran candidates in nineteen regions and fifteen candidates won in only five regions, Democratic Choice of Russia ran in eleven regions and won only three races in two regions. Interestingly, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR had among the more developed regional party structures (second only to KPRF), running more than 400 candidates in 48 regions, but won only 3 races in 2 regions.

More recent elections to regional legislatures demonstrate the same pattern. The few elections that took place in 1998 for which data is available indicate that all-Russian party influence may even be declining in regional legislative elections. Of the 17 legislative elections that took place in 1998, most were in traditionally communist strongholds in the Black Earth region of Russia. Further, although the KPRF did manage to win seats in fifteen of seventeen elections, the communists appear to have lost some support in their traditional strongholds. Finally, as in the previous two electoral periods, in 1998 other parties continued to win only a handful of seats in regional legislatures.

On average, since the first electoral period in 1993 through 1998, more than 80% of winning candidates in regional legislatures have consistently spurned all-Russian party affiliations. Further, voters in these elections even appear to prefer candidates without party affiliations--be they national or regional. That is, the problem is not only that there is an insufficient number of candidates with party affiliations running in regional elections, but also that the candidates who carry party affiliations are often passed over in favor of candidates who run as independents.

Thus, where we might expect to see an increase in the number of deputies elected in regional legislatures with all-Russian party affiliations, in fact we see a slight decrease since 1993. This provides a very preliminary indication that the lack of all-Russian party presence in the Russian heartland may prove to be an enduring phenomenon. Of particular note is the poor showing of national parties in the gubernatorial elections that took place in 73 regions between 1995-1997, and the reelection of some governors in 1998. Recent analyses of these gubernatorial elections indicate that pro-Kremlin and opposition forces made great efforts to influence the outcomes of these elections. The results indicate, however, that regardless of political stripe, Russian national parties fared poorly.

For example, of the 153 "real candidates" in the initial set of gubernatorial elections only one third had a discernible ideological orientation. So fuzzy were some candidates' affiliations, that the two major opposing ideological blocs in the elections--the pro-government bloc the All-Russian Coordinating Council (OKS), backed by the Yeltsin administration and the KPRF's umbrella organization in the provinces, the Popular Patriotic Union of Russia (NPSR), both claimed victory in the elections. Overall, there is general agreement that the role of parties in these elections was limited--even the role of the Communist Party and its affiliated organizations. Despite the frequent claim that the Communist Party of the Russian Federation is Russia's only truly national party, of the 73

governors elected between 1995 and 1997, only 19 (26%) unambiguously carried a Communist orientation.

Our Home is Russia and Yabloko fared even worse in the gubernatorial elections. This is despite the fact that Yabloko has pervasive grassroots organizations, and Our Home is Russia was thought to serve as the party of power in both the center and periphery. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR, despite doing surprisingly well in elections to the State Duma in 1993 and 1995, also managed to win only one gubernatorial race between 1995 and 1997, echoing its poor performance in provincial legislative elections during the same period.

In 1998 ten more gubernatorial elections took place. In four of these elections, incumbents managed to maintain their offices, while in six, they were defeated. Only in one of the ten regions was the winner clearly a partisan of any all-Russian party (Smolensk, where the new governor was a communist). Following the patterns established in the 1995-1997 elections, winning candidates for governor more often than not had no sponsorship by any of the leading all-Russian parties. At the time of writing, results were available for only seven gubernatorial elections held in 1999. Of these, in only one region (Belgorod) can the Communists clearly claim a victory. In all the others, either candidates are reported to have been nominated by a group of voters; candidates are nominated by a few regional parties (as in the case of Sverdlovsk); or all-Russian parties nominate candidates, but those candidates consistently lose the elections.

Russian parties in the provinces are particularly ineffective. The evidence underscores the fact that it is not just parties on the right that are weakly institutionalized in the Russian provinces. For although they have more of a presence in provincial politics than parties of the right and democratic center, even leftist parties like the KPRF are far from a commanding presence in provincial politics. Parties--all national parties, but even regional parties too--are clearly not viewed as vital vehicles for election to provincial legislatures or executives. Party labels (both regional and national it seems) are either shunned completely or easily exchanged and discarded by provincial politicians: exit over loyalty.

Explaining Poor Penetration of the Periphery

In the longer study of which this memo is a part, I test various sociocultural, ethnic and economic differences between regions in trying to explain the low degree of national party penetration in the Russian provinces. Tentatively, there appears to be a weak negative correlation between party development and all-Russian party penetration and relative wealth of a region. Given that party penetration and development is universally weak across Russia and variation among the vast majority of regions is not great, there is a related, but more compelling argument than relative wealth or investment potential to explain why parties have consistently failed to penetrate the Russian periphery.

An Equilibrium of Under-Institutionalization

This explanation is more closely related to the simultaneity of Russia's attempt to build proto-democratic institutions and its efforts to assemble the building blocks of a market economy. That is, although both national and regional political parties are weakly institutionalized in provincial Russia, there are organized local interests that are deeply involved in regional politics. The partial transition equilibrium of the economy has created entrenched interests in the provinces who see little benefit in joining national parties or even in formalizing their particularistic interests as parties.

Local elites (political actors in both legislatures and executives as well as regional economic elites) see little to gain, but much to lose in joining national parties, because at this stage of the post-Soviet transition from plan to market the establishment of strong political institutions, like parties, constrain their freedom to extract rents and amass greater wealth. That is, local political and economic elites derive more benefit from relying on old networks than forming new institutions, the cost of which is high--especially ones that might constrain their freedom to make decisions for private rather than public good. Those in control of financial resources that might help with party building are not interested in constructing organizations that might enable the national state to introduce curbs on their own avenues of direct influence and authority over regional political affairs. Powerful economic interests have little interest in building political institutions like political parties that might constrain their freedom of access, or expand their political accountability to wider societal interests.

The under-institutionalization of Russia's party system in the periphery indicates that a partial reform equilibrium may be hindering political institutional development. In particular, with respect to the construction of parties, short-term winners have little interest in constructing political institutions that can broaden participation in public life and thus possibly regulate and restrict their activities or access to rents, property and other transitional economic opportunities. By conscientiously ignoring the task of political institution building, and especially by keeping political parties weak, short-term winners ensure that the broader spectrum of losers from the transition in society more generally have limited avenues through which to express their discontent. Thus, short-term winners can continue to extract rents and acquire property with the aid of political actors whose support they have effectively purchased without fear of institutional oversight or public accountability.

There is, then, at the regional level in Russia, a universal urge to conserve and protect what has already been gained through partial reform. In those regions that have gained a little more than others, in those that had more to gain from the beginning, this general urge appears to be even stronger. This might account, therefore, for the slightly weaker party penetration we observed in wealthier regions than in poorer ones. It might also account for the general propensity of regional elites to prefer single mandate to proportional representation electoral systems. Since regional elites do not want parties interfering in politics in the periphery, they are likely to avoid any change in the electoral system that might promote party system formation and the reach of national parties into

provincial politics. They seek to actively avoid further political institutionalization in order to protect the gains they have made thus far in the dual transition and to avoid the construction of institutions that might prevent them from gaining more in the future.

Regional economic and political elites in the provinces employ several strategies to maintain an equilibrium of under-institutionalization of political parties. First and foremost, regional political leaders control the rules of electoral competition--for the most part choosing single-mandate over mixed single-mandate/proportional representation systems. Second, they can control candidate registration requirements (including age, language and residency requirements). Third, they often control the local electronic and print media such that they can greatly influence the ways in which candidates are presented to and perceived by voters. Fourth, through their often overlapping ties with local economic elites, political elites possess independent and often significant financial means to run regional elections. Using these mechanisms, regional governors in particular often actively oppose the incursion of political parties--regional or national--into provincial politics. In the absence of competitive national political parties able to capture, incorporate, and neutralize particularistic provincial interests, highly fluid patron-client relationships dominate Russian center-periphery relations and provincial politics. Ruling elites prefer not to institutionalize these relationships into parties (even single, monopolistic parties) to avoid even minimal accountability to an institution, as opposed to a more narrow group of clientelistic interests.

Implications and Conclusion

When we think about what it is that institutionalized competitive party systems do in democracies, the implications of Russia's equilibrium of under-institutionalization is cause for concern. Parties are supposed to aggregate interests as they integrate disparate parts of the polity. They help to convey electoral success into concrete policy accomplishments and provide accountability and representation to a large sector of society. Yet in the Russian case, because the national party system does not penetrate provincial politics, few of the potential gains that party systems can provide are present.

The territorial under-institutionalization of a party system has important consequences not only for democratic consolidation and the growth of political pluralism, but also for national integration and central state capacity. With regard to the effect of under-institutionalization on political pluralism, without the establishment and further development of regional and national political parties in the Russian provinces, emergent political interests will go underrepresented in provincial political institutions. Regional politics will be dominated by particularistic, clientelistic concerns.

This has important negative implications for state integration. While having a poorly institutionalized party system in the periphery does not in itself pose a direct threat to Russia's territorial integrity, it does contribute to a growing problem of vertical integration of the Russian state. In the absence of strong national political parties, central political actors must compete for the loyalty of regional governors with local economic

interests who possess rival political agendas and autonomous economic resources. Equally damaging is the fact that even if the central government could buy off regional political leaders strategically in return for their support on key policies, patronage of this sort is a less predictable and more costly mode of linkage--especially as the center runs out of money and favors to distribute. Clientelistic ties that result from a weakly institutionalized party system will ensure the subordination of public interest to private interests at the regional and national levels.

Clientelism, rather than institutionalization, encourages further rent seeking and ensures continued corruption in government. It is, therefore, hardly a firm foundation on which to build a state capable of sustaining any degree of socioeconomic development. The weakness of all-Russian parties in the provinces will also contribute to a continued inability to implement policy evenly across the Russian Federation. That is, without strong parties in a competitive party system to support their electoral efforts and help implement policies, political leaders--in order to win elections--will tend to back away from making tough decisions that might improve Russia's deeply troubled economy.

The short-term result for Russia is likely to be a chronic cycle of weak institutions, as public officials lacking autonomy from emergent financial interests and lacking the benefit of coherent, linking national institutions, continue to subordinate their public service role to exogenous interests. The state becomes weaker as a result, as it is hijacked for personal gain. In an equilibrium of political under-institutionalization, therefore, low state capacity is pervasive.

The findings here indicate that stalled development of the party system in the Russian provinces is a more likely outcome than further institutionalization. The fact that Russia's party system has moved toward institutionalization in other ways suggests that the lack of party penetration in regional politics may endure.

PONARS 2000