

United Russia Ruling Party or Emperor's New Clothes?

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Background

After a bloody conflict in October 1993 between Russian president Boris Yeltsin and the Parliament, Russia's elites recognized the need for strong parliamentary support of the federal executive. However, the nonpartisan nature of the Russian presidency and the lack of parliamentary accountability to the federal government have made for an uneasy institutional linkage between the federal executive and legislative branches. The Kremlin has attempted to create a vehicle to build parliamentary support for its program in the form of a so-called party of power. This strategy should be considered a reasonable step in the process of building political parties in Russia.

The Kremlin's first two attempts at party building were far from successful. During the 1993 elections, two competing parties of power, Russia's Choice and the Party of Russian Unity and Accord, gained 15.5 percent and 6.7 percent of the vote respectively and occupied 106 out of 450 seats in the State Duma. Neither party was able to control the parliamentary agenda nor impose the will of the president on the Duma. Lacking legislative success, both parties rapidly lost membership and then, not surprisingly, lost heavily in the next elections. The experience of the party of power in the 1995 parliamentary elections was even worse. The attempt to build two Kremlin-backed parties—the left-wing Bloc of Ivan Rybkin and the right-wing Our Home is Russia (NDR)—was a failure from the start. The former got only three seats; the latter, with 10.1 percent of the vote and 55 seats, was unable to oppose the major decisions of the Communist-dominated legislature. The fate of NDR was similar to its predecessors: it lost heavily in the next parliamentary elections.

Nevertheless, members of the Russian federal elite appear to have learned from their experiences in party politics. The major contenders in the 1999 parliamentary elections were two parties of power, Unity and Fatherland–All Russia (OVR), who received 23.3 percent and 13.3 percent of the vote and occupied 80 and 69 seats, respectively. Their competition soon turned into cooperation. After the consolidation of the Russian elite around Vladimir Putin on the eve of the 2000 presidential elections, both parties of power and their allies established a pro-government coalition in the Duma. The centrist coalition of four factions and groups (Unity, OVR, Russia's Regions, and People's Deputy) controlled a firm majority of 235 out of 450 Duma seats. The Kremlin enjoyed support

for virtually all of its legislative initiatives, ranging from long-awaited tax and land reforms to some dubious decisions, such as the restoration of a slightly amended Soviet anthem as the Russian national anthem. In December 2001, Unity, OVR, and Russia's Regions joined forces and formed a new political party: United Russia.

According to data from Russia's leading opinion polling firms, the popular support of United Russia in 2002 varied between 25 percent and 33 percent. The only party with nearly the same approval rating is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). One year before the 2003 State Duma elections, most Russian and Western analysts have agreed that United Russia will play the most important role in the distribution of the parliamentary seats and will garner a parliamentary majority, either alone or with some satellite pro-government parties.

Party of Power: Toward a Success Story?

Although Vladimir Putin has never openly expressed support for United Russia and apparently has no intention of joining the party, his political agenda has contributed greatly to the formation of this party of power. Putin has used national political parties as a mechanism to strengthen federal power in the regions. The new law on political parties, proposed by the Central Electoral Commission and initiated by Putin, prohibits the registration of regional parties and provides strong institutional incentives for coalition building among existing parties. This law also introduced barriers against the formation of new political parties. In addition, recent amendments to the electoral law (which will be enforced come July 2003) impose the same kind of electoral system used in State Duma elections on regional legislatures. Half of the seats in regional legislatures will thus be distributed among representatives of the national parties proportionally to their votes. Finally, according to the latest draft of the law on presidential elections, initiated by Putin, the nomination of candidates for the presidency will be limited to parties (or their coalitions) and to self-nomination. Nonpolitical entities (e.g. citizens' groups, etc.) will not be allowed to nominate candidates. All these institutional innovations are oriented toward strengthening larger parties, while the great popularity of the president enhances the likelihood of his supporters riding the president's coattails to electoral victory.

But what about the new party of power as a political actor? Does it have real autonomy from the Kremlin—its own political and policy agenda as well as a real and independent impact on Russia's developments? Or it is just a puppet in the hands of behind-the-scene political technologists, one that could be easily replaced by another party of power if the party becomes inefficient or even disloyal? The evidence is rather mixed, but there is reason to expect that, unlike the past parties of power, United Russia will be sustainable over time. For example, the deputy head of Putin's administration, Vladislav Surkov, announced in a speech before regional activists of United Russia in Spring 2002 that the major goal of the new party of power is the maintenance of the organizational continuity of the Russian elite beyond Putin's departure from the presidency (expected in 2008). Surkov suggested that "we should stay [in power]," and that if United Russia will be unable to perform this task well, the solution could be found without the builders of that party.

The process of United Russia's organizational formation was distinctive from the previous parties of power. Behind the figure of Sergei Shoigu, head of the Ministry for Emergency Situations and the second most popular Russian politician after Putin, Secretary of the General Council of United Russia Aleksandr Bespalov headed the party organization. Bespalov, a former KGB officer and long-term Putin ally from St. Petersburg (both served in the apparatus of the City Hall in the early 1990s), prioritized institution building for the new party of power. The party organization was built on a purely top-down model based on strict hierarchical subordination: all the heads of regional branches of United Russia were appointed by the central leadership without the consent of local party activists. Simultaneously, United Russia avoided the temptation to base its provincial branches on the support of regional administrations. As the experiences of NDR and OVR demonstrated, regional governors often pursued their own goals during federal parliamentary campaigns and could not be viewed as reliable partners of national parties. Moreover, some regional branches of United Russia expressed their opposition to the incumbent regional leaders; the most notable case in St. Petersburg, where the party of power already announced its unwillingness to allow current governor, Vladimir Iakovlev, to be elected to a third term in office. Last but not least, United Russia members, including Bespalov, occupied 35 out of 178 seats in the Federation Council (Russia's upper house).

Based on these successful steps, United Russia claims to have further increased its role in federal decision-making. In September 2002, Bespalov, in a speech before Russian business leaders, heavily criticized the federal government for Russia's economic slowdown and put the rapid growth of Russia's national economy at the top priority of the party's policy agenda. More importantly, he insisted that after the 2003 State Duma election, the new Russian government should be formed on the basis of parliamentary majority rather than presidential dictate in order to pursue coherent policies. Although the Russian Constitution does not prescribe such a role for parliamentary parties in government formation, this is not prohibited politically: for example, Evgenii Primakov's government in 1998–1999 was based on the support of a broad parliamentary coalition. However, in the case of United Russia, this step would represent a transformation from the Kremlin's instrument of political influence to a real ruling party and would thus be a major change in Russia's political landscape.

Problems and Prospects

Optimistic observers view the rise of the new party of power as a sign of the political consolidation of the Russian elite and a source of political stability in this country. Others have expressed serious concerns about the prospects of democratic developments in Russia, especially the possible (re)emergence of one-party rule. Both of these views on the future of United Russia have merit. But a realistic analysis of Russian politics must also consider the obstacles and limits in the development of the party of power.

The powerful Russian presidency, with its overwhelming formal and informal powers, can easily undermine the rise of United Russia (or any other party of power) as an independent and powerful political actor. Even though the conduct of presidential policy requires parliamentary support, Putin is unlikely to restrict powers in his policy domains in favor of any political party. Furthermore, the existence of the party of power

gives the president some means of avoiding political accountability. This is why a strong presidency rarely coexists with a party system that allows dominant and independent political parties. The history of Soviet political leadership also followed this pattern: Communist rulers who claimed autonomy from the ruling party either faced hard-core opposition within the party (like Khrushchev and Gorbachev) or used permanent purges in order to weaken the potential danger from such an organization (like Stalin). Given the fact that Putin's popularity is high enough for him to maneuver successfully in electoral and policy arenas without the support of any party, United Russia's plans of participating in the formation of the next government (should they gain a majority of seats) will remain unrealized. But party control over the next presidency might be a plausible solution to such a possible conflict over leadership.

Russian federalism and its system of regional government is another institutional limit for the independent development of United Russia. Regional chief executives have even less incentive to accept subordination to the party of power than federal executives. From an electoral perspective, incumbent governors as well as their challengers should acquire the support of an absolute majority of regional voters. Although strong regional leaders could be elected or reelected regardless of partisan support, their weak colleagues are more interested in establishing a broad and loose nonpartisan coalition than basing their power on the support of a single party. From a policy perspective, the development of the regions and the survival of their governors is heavily influenced by financial and industrial groups, and in this respect, Lukoil or Yukos seem more relevant and reliable allies of regional leaders than United Russia or any other national political party. Even an increase in party representation in regional legislatures would likely have little effect on regional chief executives because the powers of assemblies in most of Russia's regions are rather limited. One might expect that United Russia would advocate further centralization as well as a curb on the powers of regional governors in favor of legislatures, or may even advocate abolishing gubernatorial elections.

Finally, the strategy of building a strong ruling party might be challenged in the short run if Russia's economic recovery becomes stalled. In this case, the party of power will take most of the blame, and hopes for increased political stability would disappear. In other words, Russians could view the new ruling party as little more than "the emperor's new clothes." The lack of alternatives to the party of power could be too costly for Russian leaders. If United Russia is able to avoid possible policy crises and institutional traps, however, its attempts at maintaining the organizational continuity of Russian elites across the cycle of 2003–2004 elections and squeezing through the following electoral cycle might be successful. Such a victory of the party of power would easily turn into its long-term and unchallenged domination over Russia's political scene.