

What Went Wrong? Regional Electoral Politics and Impediments to State Centralization in Russia, 2003-2004

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In the fall of 2004, Russia's national executive launched a major reform that affects the development of center-region relations in the country. The pivotal component of the reform is a move to replace direct elections of the regional executives with a new system under which the executives will be 'endowed with powers' (*nadeliat'sia polnomochiiami*) by regional legislatures, with the prerogative to nominate candidates for such endowment being held solely by the president of Russia. The technicalities of the proposed reform are not to be discussed here if only because it may so happen that the bill will be amended while moving through the chambers of the Federal Assembly. The essence of the reform is, however, clear and quite unlikely to change: regional executives will be appointed. Regional legislatures will provide some additional legitimacy for the appointees without ever really being involved in the selection process, which is guaranteed by a provision that they can be dissolved if they choose not to approve the nominee twice in a row. This system, if implemented, will strongly push the Russian statehood in the direction of centralism. The officially vocalized reason for the reform was to increase state capacity against the terrorist threat. Without discussing the validity of this claim, this paper seeks to explicate additional incentives for the reform by analyzing developments in the regional political arenas from December 2003 through October 2004. The evidence for the analysis will be derived largely from the regional elections held throughout the period.

For a long time encompassing the whole first tenure of Vladimir Putin, the Russian political leadership vocally excluded the possibility of replacing direct regional executive elections with appointment, while indirect elections by legislatures were ruled out by the Constitutional Court in 1996. Thus, the proposed reform epitomizes quite a drastic departure from the past. Meanwhile, centralizing moves were not alien for the Putin administration from its very first months in office, and it does seem that early centralization plans were based on the assumption that the governors would remain directly elected. This suggests that the most recent political developments in the regions have revealed a gap in a previously pursued centralization strategy, and that this gap, as viewed by the national executive, cannot be filled without eliminating direct executive

elections. In order to understand the reasons, it is useful to cast a look at the previously pursued strategy.

One of the important institutional reforms implemented during the first tenure of Vladimir Putin was the reform of political parties. It seems that while the primary incentives for the reform came from the national political arena, it had a very salient regional dimension too. In the 1990s, most of the regions of Russia had succeeded in effectively isolating themselves from the center by developing closed political arenas. The two principal characteristics of these arenas were the domination of the political groups around the regional executive, and the lack of political influence of the national political parties, which was most clearly expressed in the fact that most deputies of the regional legislative assemblies were independents. The Law on Political Parties, as adopted in June 2001, sought to facilitate the territorial penetration of the national political parties by granting them an exclusive right to run candidates in elections of all levels above municipal. To further facilitate their entry into the regional political arenas, the 2002 amendments to the national electoral law made it imperative to use mixed electoral systems in regional legislative elections. In the political rhetoric that surrounded these legislative moves, it was made clear that they were expected to unlock the regional political arenas, thus effectively centralizing the country. The 2003 Duma elections increased the credibility of this party-based strategy of state centralization by transforming the party of power, United Russia, into the strongest political force in the electorate throughout the country. Hence the principal question of this study: what went wrong?

One way to answer this question is to look at the regional executive elections held after the aforementioned reforms were implemented in full. As many as 30 regional executive elections took place from August to October 2003. Of the 191 candidates that were on the ballot, only 33 (17.3 percent) were party nominees. Even more indicative is that only three of them won, and all were incumbent governors for whom party nomination was most probably not the most important electoral resource. Thus, it would be fair to conclude that the implemented measures simply failed to make political parties more important in regional executive elections. The national political leadership's desire to make the regional political process more predictable remained unsatisfied, as epitomized by the election of a stand-up comedian, Mikhail Evdokimov, as the governor of Altai territory in March 2004. Nor did the national leadership succeed in making the regional leaders reliable on party support. Most of the incumbent governors who did succeed in rallying voter support achieved that without being party-affiliated, while some of those whose candidacies were endorsed by United Russia, such as in Altai territory and Arkhangelsk province, failed anyway.

One would argue that the executive elections were not the principal target of this strategy anyway. Indeed, the most important institutional innovation, mixed electoral systems, concerned solely regional legislative elections. While it is true that regional legislatures are not predominantly important within the current constitutional framework of Russia, they are not politically insignificant either. First, within this framework, as understood before the policy moves proposed in the fall of 2004, the assembly was the only institution theoretically capable of dismissing the elected governor by initiating an impeachment procedure. Second, an opposition majority in a regional legislature

promised nothing good for a governor in terms of legislative output and, perhaps more importantly, budgetary policy. Third, as suggested by the experience of the mid-1990s, an assembly could play the role of an institutional site providing political opposition with crucial capacities to consolidate and accumulate resources, and develop a leadership ultimately capable of ousting the incumbent governor. Thus, there were grounds to expect that once the party of power achieved strength in the electorate, becoming capable of creating majority factions in the regional legislatures, the governors would follow the party line much more willingly than before.

Table 1 reports the results of the 18 regional legislative elections held from December 2003 through October 2004 in chronological order. Before turning to the substantive interpretation of the data, some factual clarifications are to be provided. All but two of the elections were held by mixed electoral systems, with proportional tiers being either equal to plurality tiers or slightly exceeding them. Most of the plurality tiers consisted in single-member districts; in Ingushetia, Kalmykia, and Sakhalin there were multimember districts. Sverdlovsk province elected half of the lower chamber of its legislature (14 deputies) by proportional system, and the entire upper chamber (21 deputies) in single-member districts. Vologda province elected half of its legislature, 17 deputies, solely by proportional system. Some of the plurality elections in individual districts returned no deputies because of the “against all” vote or low voter turnout. Yet, the results of by-elections in such districts are not reported. The thresholds of representation were established at the level of 5 percent in 11 regions and at higher levels in 7, which partly accounts for the increased numbers of seats received by the electorally strongest parties in these regions, especially in Kalmykia (10 percent threshold).

Table 1. The results of the December 2003–October 2004 regional legislative elections in Russia.

Election Date	Region	Share of Seats won by United Russia, %	Share of Seats Won by Other Parties, %	Share of Seats Won by Independents, %
12.07.03	Ingushetia	20.6	38.2	41.2
12.07.03	Kabardino-Balkaria	75.2	11.9	12.8
12.07.03	Kalmykia	74.1	11.1	14.8
12.07.03	Mordovia	91.5	6.4	2.1
12.07.03	Volgograd province	31.6	44.7	23.7
12.07.03	Vologda province	52.9	47.1	–
12.07.03	Ulyanovsk province	45.8	37.5	16.7
03.14.04	Karachaevo-Cherkessia	63.0	20.5	16.4
03.14.04	Tatarstan	85.0	4.0	11.0
03.14.04	Altai territory	30.6	48.4	21.0

03.14.04	Sverdlovsk province	58.8	17.6	23.5
03.14.04	Yaroslavl province	25.5	46.8	27.7
03.14.04	Ust-Ordynskii Buryat autonomous district	58.8	29.4	11.8
10.03.04	Tula province	23.9	50.0	26.1
10.10.04	Marii El	57.1	34.7	8.2
10.10.04	Irkutsk province	44.2	34.9	20.9
10.10.04	Sakhalin province	17.9	42.9	39.3
10.24.04	Chita province	38.5	41.0	20.5

Note: numbers do not always total 100 percent because of rounding.

As the table indicates, United Russia won outright majorities in the legislative assemblies of nine regions, but it failed to achieve this target in the remaining nine. This was not a very inspiring result in itself. Indeed, for a governor to be attentive to United Russia, the party has to form a majority in the legislature. Otherwise, the governor may simply rely on an alternative majority instead. True, a substantial representation of independents in the regional assembly makes it possible to manufacture a United Russia majority with their participation, in a way similar to what happened in the State Duma after the December 2003 elections. Yet, convincing independents to join a party faction requires political capital, and the carriers of such in the regions are governors. That is, if United Russia fails to win a majority from scratch, the prospects of manufacturing it lie largely with the governor, which provides him or her with a strategic advantage over the party of power.

It seems that some of the regional executives were quick to realize that the superior levels of United Russia's electoral success were not in their best interests, and they did not fail to develop mechanisms that made it possible to avoid such an outcome. Importantly, this happened not only in those few regions where the sitting governors were politically hostile to the national leadership, such as in Tula province, but also in several regions where governors, while generally quite submissive to the national authorities, found it expedient to take care of providing larger operative freedom for themselves on their regional turf. Consider the case of Sakhalin, where United Russia suffered its worst defeat. The relatively weak new governor, Ivan Malakhov, failed to attract the support of all of the important power groups in the region, and in this situation, it would be less than wise to rely solely on United Russia for legislative support. Apparently aware of that, Malakhov helped to create two electoral blocs, Our Motherland—Sakhalin and Kurily and For Dignified Life and Social Justice, both of which consisted mostly of his supporters. While not formally breaking with United Russia, Malakhov treated the blocs preferentially in terms of media access and other campaign opportunities, as a result of which, both of them entered the assembly. Thus the governor, not United Russia, was the winner.

From this perspective, it is illuminating to look again at those regions where United Russia did win majorities. Seven of them are ethnic-based formations: republics or autonomous districts. It is well known that most of the republics have strongly consolidated, sometimes monopolistic, political regimes. One of the consequences of this situation is that the executive leaders of the republics were capable of establishing their control over the regional branches of United Russia already in their formative phases. This, in turn, means that it is in their interests to provide United Russia with legislative majorities, while their superior resources make this strategy feasible. Yet, it is clear that the executives' control over United Russia is the principal prerequisite for cooperating with the party. In such situations, however, United Russia is unlikely to become helpful as a transmission belt for the national leadership's centralizing efforts. Quite the reverse, the completely obedient regional branches of United Russia produce the "political heavyweights" of the republics, such as Mintimer Shaimiev of Tatarstan, with additional means of exerting pressure on the center.

Hence the answer to the question of what went wrong is this: the party-based centralizing strategy failed to counterbalance the superior resources of the elected governors by making them politically attentive to the national parties. The parties did not become important players in regional executive elections; they won legislative elections only when completely controlled by the governor. If they are not important players, the governor is entirely capable of reducing United Russia to the role of a minority faction. It seems that under such conditions, the national leadership found it possible to proceed with its centralizing effort only by eliminating the elected governors altogether.

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