

Maintaining Control

Putin's Strategy for Holding Power Past 2008

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There is little question that Vladimir Putin's Kremlin is developing a strategy to preserve power beyond the 2007-2008 election cycle. There is also little question that neither his potential political rivals nor we will know what that strategy is until very late in the game. Just as Yeltsin did before him, Putin will reveal his plan at the last possible moment. The logic of waiting is inescapable. Regardless of the ultimate strategy—amending the constitution to remove the restrictions on reelection, rule through a dominant party within the confines of a parliamentary system, or appointing a malleable successor—revealing the Kremlin's intent would provide potential opponents time to formulate effective strategies and coalitions and/or render President Putin a lame duck. Any indications of the future prior to spring 2008 should be taken with a grain of salt as Putin works to manipulate uncertainty to his own advantage.

While keeping the world guessing about its ultimate plans, the Kremlin is clearly laying the groundwork to support a range of strategies that will enable it to maintain power within the structure of a democratic regime. Any effective strategy requires that the Kremlin control the electoral environment in order to choose and implement the line of attack that maximizes regime durability. Two sets of actions define potential tactics for reducing electoral uncertainty. The first actions center on building barriers to entry that would limit electoral competition. These actions include direct barriers to entry and psychological barriers designed to discourage opposition candidates from running. The second actions focus on building elite cooperation within the context of the

existing party of power, United Russia. Observers of the Kremlin's electoral interventions will recognize that neither of these actions is new. They are merely an intensification of the strategies that successfully got Russia's leader this far.

Controlling Electoral Competition: Limits and Loyalty

Since the first election in 1993, the Kremlin has influenced elections by shaping the choices offered to party organizations. It spawned a large number of parties in order to siphon voters from potential rivals or generate coalition partners for the Kremlin's electoral vehicle, referred to as the party of power (POP). While many of these organizations never surpassed the electoral threshold, they did their job admirably by generating seat bonuses for the POPs and fragmenting the opposition. The Kremlin also meddled in vote counting, used state resources to support preferred parties, and activated the judiciary and electoral apparatus to eliminate potential rivals. Since the last election, the Kremlin has adopted two new strategies: institutional renovation to favor large, incumbent parties and the elimination of resources for potential opposition organizations.

Institutional Change: In spring 2005, the Kremlin completed an overhaul of the election law that transformed the system from a mixed electoral structure to a pure proportional representation system (PR) with a 7 percent electoral threshold. On the face of it, this change is democratic but in partner with other changes in the new system it profoundly favors large parties and discourages the formation of new organizations. The effects of these changes are clear if we use the 2003 electoral system to estimate the outcome of the 2007 race (see Table 1). If we assume the same field of competition and distribution of votes, the United Russia party would receive even more seats under the new system than it did in 2003 but so would the other incumbent organizations. This outcome, presented in the estimate in column A, reflects the fact that PR coupled with a high electoral threshold both eliminates independent deputies and generates a significant seat bonus for larger parties.

Table 1: Predicting the Effects of the New Election Law

	Actual 2003 Results		Simulated 2007 Results	
	Votes	Seats	Estimated Seats (A)	Estimated Seats (B)
United Russia	37.6	222	238	239
Communist Party	12.6	51	80	81
Liberal-Democratic Party	11.5	36	75	73
Rodina	9.0	37	57	57
Other	30.2	104	0	0

However, it is not far-fetched to assume that the 2003 winners are likely to define competition in 2007, since prior changes to regulations governing the registration of political parties made it increasingly difficult for small parties to obtain ballot access. In addition, the 2005 law bans blocs or coalitions from competing for parliamentary seats, precluding a marriage of convenience among opposition groups. Finally, the Kremlin recently raised an enormous psychological barrier by decreasing the legal requirements for eliminating a party from the ballot, making it easier to shape competition through administrative means. These changes suggest that the race may be limited to the incumbent parties from the 2003 elections unless the Kremlin sees an advantage in creating a new competitor. The results of competition under this assumption are shown estimated in column B.

In addition to United Russia's overwhelming influence, the implications of these changes for increased political control are clear. First, in the absence of primary systems, party leaders control political careers and can trade list positions for loyalty in the legislature, the campaign, and the party organization. Second, party leaders do not have to deal with renegade independent candidates who have access to non-party resources and are concerned with a district-level constituency. In sum, the payoff from the new law is likely to be an increased discipline within party organizations that allows for even more efficient bargaining in the Duma and more Kremlin control.

Control of Electoral Resources: The new election law has also limited state financing to new parties. Only incumbent organizations with more than 12 seats in the Duma or more than 3 percent of the list vote are eligible to receive funding for the next election. This new regulation provides a strong disincentive for new or small parties to compete given the decline in alternative resources available for party organizations. Funding caps on campaign expenditures also limit the party's

contributions and increase the amount that must be raised from constituents and supporters, an uphill battle in Russia.

At the same time, there has been a decline in the availability of non-partisan resources. Changes in regional election laws eliminating direct election of governors brought gubernatorial resources under the control of the Kremlin. The new election law prohibits foreign funding for parties, limiting the role that international NGOs can play in future campaigns. Intimidation of the oligarchs, most prominently Mikhail Khodorkovsky, patron of the opposition Yabloko party, shut off the flow of funds from the business sector. Increasing control of civil society organizations that played a significant role in some elections further consolidated resources in the hands of the state. Finally, the decline of independent media outlets in the regions ensures that anti-Kremlin parties will have a hard time getting their messages out. The impact of these resource constraints on party competition looms larger if one factors in the new electoral system mandating that successful parties run national campaigns over an enormous geographic space.

Forging Cooperation among Elites, or the Growing Strength of the Party of Power: Politicians do not join political parties that have no chance of success. The changes described above that limit small and new parties' access to the electoral arena also strengthen United Russia as it becomes the vehicle of choice for ambitious politicians. Political scientists describe such parties in terms of a stag hunt game. All the hunters have an incentive to circle the prey and cooperate in the hunt because they will share in the spoils, even if the hunter that brings down the stag actually gets a disproportionate share. Increasingly, this description fits United Russia. Elite cooperation within the party is rapidly becoming the only way to access political office and therefore the spoils of office.

Where Are the Voters? Voters are always the wildcard in controlled elections. In the past few years, voters objected to fraudulent outcomes in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. However, it is unlikely that similar mass objections would be voiced in Russia. First, the types of controls outlined above do not require fraud to shape a very narrow choice for voters. Second, if the Kremlin engages in fraud, conclusive evidence would require knowing with some certainty how the country will vote. Since Russia lacks the regional and ethnic divisions that made this information clear in other cases, it is unlikely that a significant proportion of the population will feel slighted enough to take to the streets. Finally, with oil prices high and the economy growing, voters have few incentives to defect from the president's party.

Loyalty, Cooperation, and the Permanent Putin

Regardless of which strategy Putin chooses to ensure that he retains power, elite cooperation within a dominant party and very limited

electoral competition are significant assets for the Kremlin. If Putin decides to change the constitution and run indefinitely for office, this two-pronged strategy of limiting competition while building a dominant party will ensure a compliant legislature and a strong electoral base. If he opts for a parliamentary system with an indirectly elected head of state, he would be the clear pick of the parliamentary majority and have enormous capacity to guarantee party loyalty within the Duma and across the federation. Similarly, if Putin installs a figurehead for a term in preparation for running again in 2012, the party will limit the autonomy of that individual and ensure that Putin is the party's choice for president in the subsequent election.

