

The End of the Chapter?

THE 2011-2012 ELECTORAL CYCLE IN RUSSIA

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Once again, forthcoming elections in Russia – parliamentary in December 2011 and presidential in March 2012 – are about a transfer of power. With expected changes to the roster of MPs as well as in the positions of prime minister and president, the political landscape will be new after the 2011-2012 electoral cycle.

The fact that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin chose a tandem model in 2008 that separated formal and real leadership roles, and provided no power to President Dmitry Medvedev, means that once again the system will experience a turbulent period. This is partly due to the timeframe of the upcoming cycle. Unlike in the past, when parliamentary deputies and the president were elected for four years apiece, the former will now be elected for five years and the latter for six years. This makes the upcoming election cycle the last for a while when presidential elections will take place soon after parliamentary elections. This pair of elections thus heralds the end of one stage in Russia's political development and the start of another. This could be the last election cycle in which Putin plays an epoch-making watershed role.

The upcoming cycle is already marked by economic stagnation and a creeping disillusionment with the "party of power." It is further characterized by several peculiarities. There is the unusual and direct involvement of Putin, as well as intensive Kremlin maneuvering with regard to political parties and, specifically, the formation of the All-Russia People's Front (PF). There has also been a rise in the sphere of public politics.

Shifts in Party Landscape

As elections approach, we have seen shifts take place in at least three out of the seven registered national political parties and two out of the four parties now represented in parliament. United Russia (UR) has received numerous allies via the Putin-created People's Front (PF). The Just Russia (JR) party has seen considerable reshuffling and a

decline in its administrative resources, together with the new “tandem” leadership of Nikolay Levichev and Sergey Mironov, while the Right Cause (RC) party has a new and extravagant leader, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov. In short, we have seen UR acquire more room to expand, without having to share administrative resources, and RC become a “natural target” represented by a “wild oligarch.” In January 2011, the power of Sergey Mironov, JR leader and then Federation Council speaker, was weakened due to amendments to the law on the formation of the Federation Council. According to these changes, the speaker can no longer block the appointment of senators or initiate their resignation. (He was then dismissed as speaker after JR’s impressive showing in March 2010 local elections.)

Mikhail Prokhorov, Russian’s “modernization oligarch” and a fairly scandalous figure, was chosen by the Kremlin to lead the RC party, which inherited the conformist wing of the Union of Rightist Forces and which had almost disappeared from the political landscape. Unlike other party leaders, Prokhorov cannot be controlled by a short financial leash – he is the third richest man in Russia. However, his strong negative public popularity prevents any political project led by him from receiving mass support in the foreseeable future. In developing this party, the Kremlin can be sure that RC will not be able to live on its own, unlike the Rodina party project of 2003. At the same time, RC can serve two important goals for the Kremlin: first, it can help the “party of power” look more centrist by “protecting” ordinary citizens from oligarchs, and second, it can be used in the future, after the presidential election, as a force that can take responsibility for embarking on unpopular liberal reforms.

The People’s Front

Putin is participating in both upcoming elections in an active and direct way. The PF, Putin’s political brainchild unveiled in early May 2011 in Volgograd, is a multipurpose political project. Not only can it be seen as a rebranding of UR (a way to cleanse and promote competition inside the party), which has become labeled as the “party of swindlers and thieves,” but it is a step toward the transformation of Putin from the leader of the dominant party to the leader of “the nation.” It is also, more practically, a way for him to co-opt the elites and improve the image of the “party of power.” PF campaigns use attractive celebrities, sportsmen, showmen, artists, and intelligentsia.

Today, 16 national organizations and more than 400 regional, interregional, and municipal organizations have signed onto the PF, with 200 other organizations expected to follow suit. The invitation to join is open to practically everyone (excluding representatives of the “radical opposition”). Enthusiastic local organizers report that nearly everyone in their districts is ready to join the group. Interestingly, the PF does not have its own organizational structure and is not intended to. This can be interpreted as a sign that there are no plans to replace the existing UR party apparatus on the ground. The directors of Putin’s public liaison offices in the regions, mostly second-tier UR functionaries, provide basic organizational support.

One quarter of the UR list will be filled by PF members, which will dramatically intensify the internal struggle for a place on the party lists. This may help bring fresh

faces into the deputy corps of the “party of power,” something UR badly needs. The party has already announced the criteria by which it will “cleanse” its lists. It will only take deputies who have not served more than two or three terms in parliament, who have not been involved in any public scandals, and who have contributed in some way to the party.

Although the PF exists, it lacks a program. The nongovernmental organizations that have come on board will make their recommendations for that program in mid-June. The Institute for Social, Economic and Political Research, headed by former minister of justice and long-time president of Chuvashia, Nikolai Fyodorov, has essentially been charged with developing its mandate. The institute has promised to present its “five-year plan for the transformation of Russian society” to the newly elected parliament in December.

The PF might even manage to pull in a significant percentage of the growing protest vote that the Communist Party (CP) once had and, until now, had again been gaining. According to a VTsIOM poll, more than 25 percent of the Communist electorate believes that the CP should join the PF.

Despite its amorphous form, the PF has already accomplished a number of important tasks by bringing countless individuals and groups under its auspices, diverting attention away from “the party of crooks and thieves,” and reinforcing Putin’s role as national leader. It also undermines Russia’s already extremely weak party system.

United Russia’s Primaries

Russian primaries in the regions are much more systematic than they were in 2007 (when they took place for the first time). Still, it would be an exaggeration to call these authentic primaries. The process more closely resembles a series of opinion polls, with UR using the results to create its party lists (reserving one-fourth of slots for PF candidates). Electors for primaries are chosen by both the UR regional leadership and allied forces from the Front with voting organized and controlled by UR functionaries (the Front’s federal coordinating council, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Vyacheslav Volodin and his staff, formulates the final lists). In reality, UR has no obligation to base its final candidate lists on the primary results. After the primaries end on August 11, results are sent to Moscow for fine-tuning. This will occur in parallel with regional UR conferences, when delegates will be chosen to the party’s national congress and final proposals for candidate lists will be submitted. Into the final list of candidates any names can be included by both the federal leadership and by Putin personally (including names of those who did not participate in primaries). The list is then submitted to the UR national congress for confirmation at the start of September.

However, it is already apparent that many UR politicians will be culled from the roster. Major personnel shifts have already taken place since the last elections, most notably among the governor corps. The result is that a host of parliamentary deputies whose political fortunes were linked to former Mayor Yuri Luzhkov (once vice-chairman of UR) and former Bashkortostan President Murtaza Rakhimov will be absent

from the upcoming elections. In Moscow, 10 of 16 incumbent deputies will not participate in the primaries, and, as mentioned, the same fate awaits about one-fourth of all incumbent UR deputies. Putin is determined to get rid of the party's deadweight.

Among the new names can be found famous artists like actor Vladimir Mashkov from Kemerovo, singer Nadezhda Babkina and tennis player Marat Safin from Nizhny Novgorod, Olympic champion Dmitry Sautin from Voronezh, and cosmonaut Roman Romanenko from the Amur region. Their involvement is to soothe voters and improve the image of the "party of power."

In the most troubled regions, UR is employing a tactic of heading party lists with deputy prime ministers or Putin-appointed ministers, on whose coattails other candidates can ride and whose names elicit the least negative reaction among voters. Meanwhile, the number of regional leaders heading party lists in their own regions has substantially dropped.

Even in Russia's version of primaries, in which Moscow remains the ultimate arbiter, it is possible to discern a certain growth of intra-party democracy and political competition. However well these tactics might enable the ruling party to hold onto its Duma majority, they will not solve the problem of its declining legitimacy – an issue that will come to the fore after the new government is formed in 2012.

Regional Patterns

Out of three major ingredients of electoral success for the "party of power" – governors, Putin, and administrative resources – only one, Putin, has not weakened even if his popularity has recently slid a bit. There are no longer any strong and popular regional governors (due to extensive rounds of replacements last year), and administrative resources are not as strong and consolidated as they once were.

There are two groups of regions where the UR will definitely lose a good portion of what it had before. The first group consists of regions that have accumulated a considerable store of negativity toward authorities at all levels: places like Kaliningrad, Moscow, Sverdlovsk, Irkutsk, and the Primorski region. In these places, increasing protest mobilizations have already contributed to UR losses in local elections. The second group is composed of regions where political machines have been dismantled, like Moscow, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Rostov. This means that the UR/PF will lose an essential part of its electoral support in comparison to 2007. It also serves as a reminder that sociological polls, based on national samples, do not reflect the full scale of the ruling party's potential losses.

Moscow is an especially interesting case. Being part of both groups, it is once again becoming the capital of electoral protest. St. Petersburg is another such capital. Even if the national results will be reported in a way that is satisfactory to the authorities, their humiliating defeats in both places are almost inevitable. This will have important symbolic significance and underlines the difference between the countryside and ethnic provinces, where the "party of power" is supported, and the major cities.

The Kremlin is playing its regional card actively and in many different ways. Beginning in April 2010, large-scale gatherings have been held under UR aegis in all

federal districts with Putin and key participating ministers (usually just as federal funds are being offered to regions in support of various projects). Such events are called UR mini-congresses. They began in Siberia (April 2010), and were followed by the North Caucasus district (July 2010), the Far East (December 2010), Center district (March 2011), South (May 2011), and the Urals (June 2011). The final mini-congress will probably take place in Putin's native northwest.

Other platforms have been created to bargain with governors and regional political elites as the elections have drawn near. These include a working group on decentralization, initiated by Medvedev and run by Dmitry Kozak, as well as other meetings convened by the PF.

The replacement of unpopular governors, such as Dmitry Zelenin in Tver and Valentina Matviyenko in St. Petersburg, and the placement of popular individuals at the head of regional UR lists, are other important dimensions of the Kremlin's regional work.

The Day After

On December 5, the day after parliamentary elections, Putin will probably make a public speech and say that the "party of power" (or the PF) received 60-something percent of the vote. Feeling great responsibility and the enormous trust of the populace, Putin will probably announce that he will return to the office of the president. Less probable, though still possible, he might offer up another candidate, Medvedev excluded. Thus, the next president, if it is not Putin himself, will get his post from Putin's hands.

Once again, as in 1996, the question is not whether the regime will declare victory but whether this victory will be achieved by somewhat free elections or by massive fraud. As the time draws nearer, the fate of election observers will provide a good indication of whether or not an overwhelming PF victory is planned. If it is, there will be no reason for an OSCE election mission to be allowed into Russia.