

Russia's Political Party System as a (Continued) Impediment to Democratization: The 2003 Duma and 2004 Presidential Elections in Perspective

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Abstract: This article offers a brief assessment of the 2003 Duma and 2004 presidential elections in light of the arguments that we presented earlier in this journal concerning Russia's transition to democracy (Riggs and Schraeder 2004). In that article, we concluded that, until the Russian party system re-establishes its links with society and the incentives of party elite behavior are shaped by the need to promote societal interests rather than their own, Russia's party system will continue to be dysfunctional, contributing to democratic decay as opposed to democratic consolidation. Unfortunately, proponents of strengthening democratic consolidation in Russia cannot take heart from the 2003 Duma and 2004 presidential elections, which have become more rather than less elite driven, contributing to the "Mexicanization" of the Russian political party system (i.e., the creation of a one-party dominant political system).

Key words: democratic decay, Mexicanization of Russian party system, party politics, Russia's 2003 Duma elections, Russia's 2004 Duma elections

The primary purpose of this research note is to offer a brief assessment of the 2003 Duma and 2004 presidential elections in light of the arguments concerning the development of Russia's party system that we presented earlier in *Demokratizatsiya* (Riggs and Schraeder 2004). In that article, we argued that Russia's transition to democracy has been inhibited by the development of a dysfunctional and unstable party system. Specifically, we made three arguments: (1) the

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sudden collapse of the Soviet system disrupted the development of the nascent party system, severing its connections to society and leaving it to be reconstituted from above by elites in circumstances that limited its connections with the society and the political system; (2) the later changes made to the overall political system during the 1993–95 and 1999–2000 election cycles have reinforced the party system’s susceptibility to the behavior of the elite at the expense of developing links between political and civil society; and (3) those changes also shaped the incentives for self-interested elite action in ways that have led away from the development of a well-structured party system. We concluded that, until the Russian party system re-establishes its links with society and the incentives of party elite behavior are shaped by the need to promote societal interests rather than their own, Russia’s party system will continue to be dysfunctional, contributing to democratic decay as opposed to assisting democratic consolidation. Unfortunately, proponents of strengthening democratic consolidation in Russia cannot take heart from the 2003 Duma and 2004 presidential elections, which have become more elite driven, contributing to the “Mexicanization” of the Russian political party system (i.e., the creation of a one-party dominant political system).

The More Things Change, the More Things Remain the Same

The 1993 elections for the newly created Duma and the elections that followed were held under new rules designed to foster a stable party system. Half of the Duma’s 450 seats are elected by party list through a proportional representation system (in which votes are cast for parties, and seats are apportioned to the parties based on the percentage of the vote attained), while the remaining half are elected through a single-member district plurality system (in which votes are cast for individual candidates in electoral districts, and the one with the greatest number of votes wins). Rules were added to minimize insignificant parties and concentrate votes.

A cursory examination of the results of the 2003 Duma election might suggest that a stable multiparty system is developing in Russia (see table 1). Most of the parties have an established identity, whereas the new parties are the result of party consolidation rather than constituting elite “parties of convenience.” The Motherland (People’s Patriotic Union) party has brought together more than thirty political organizations under one umbrella. The United Russia party was formed by the merger of the Unity and Fatherland–All Russia parties. The People’s Party of the Russian Federation represents the transformation of the People’s Deputies Duma faction of independent candidates into an electoral party. Yeltsin’s party of power (Our Home Is Russia) has disappeared. Other parties in the Duma hold only six seats divided among four parties, and the contingent of independents is down to sixty-eight. In short, the 2003 Duma election encouraged a less fragmented party system than had previously existed in Russia.

These patterns do not signal that Russian civil society is becoming more vibrant and politically engaged, however. Russia’s parties are still primarily elite driven, with the main difference in the 2003 and 2004 elections being that President Vladimir Putin became the prime mover in Russian politics. The structure

TABLE 1. Comparing the 1995, 1999, and 2003 State Duma Elections

	2003	1999	1995	% change	
				'99 to '03	'95 to '99
<i>PR List Seats</i>					
Communist Party	40	67	99	-40	-32
Unity*	120	64	NA	18	
Fatherland-All Russia*		37	NA		
Union of Right Forces	0	24	0	-100	100
Yabloko	0	16	31	-100	-48
LDPR (Zhirinovskiy Bloc)	36	17	50	112	-66
Our Home Is Russia	NA	0	45		-100
Agrarian**	0	NA	0		
Motherland†	29	NA	NA		
People's Party‡	0	NA	NA		
Other Parties	0	0	0	0	0
Independent	0	0	0	0	0
Total	225	225	225		
<i>SMD Seats</i>					
Communist Party	12	46	58	-73	-21
Unity*	102	9	NA	155	
Fatherland-All Russia*		31	NA		
Union of Right Forces	3	5	15	-40	-67
Yabloko	4	4	14	0	-71
LDPR (Zhirinovskiy Bloc)	0	0	1	0	-100
Our Home Is Russia	NA	7	10	-100	-30
Agrarian**	2	NA	20		
Motherland†	8	NA	NA		
People's Party‡	17	NA	NA		
Other Parties	6	9	29	-33	-69
Independent	68	114	78	-40	46
Total	222§	225	225		
<i>Total Seats</i>					
Communist Party	52	113	157	-54	-28
Unity*	222	73	NA	57	
Fatherland-All Russia*		68	NA		
Union of Right Forces	3	29	15	-90	93
Yabloko	4	20	45	-80	-55
LDPR (Zhirinovskiy Bloc)	36	17	51	112	-66

(table continues)

TABLE 1. (Continued)

	2003	1999	1995	% change	
				'99 to '03	'95 to '99
<i>Total Seats</i>					
Our Home Is Russia	NA	7	55	-100	-87
Agrarian**	2	0	20		
Motherland†	37	NA	NA		
People's Party‡	17	NA	NA		
Other Parties	6	9	29	-33	-69
Independent	68	114	78	-40	46
Total	447 [§]	450	450		

Source. Russia Votes, http://www.russiavotes.org/Duma_system.htm; White, Stephen, Richard Rose, and Ian McAllister, *How Russia Votes* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1997).

*In December 2001, Unity and Fatherland—All Russia merged to form the United Russia party.

**For the 1999 elections, the Agrarian party joined forces with the Communist Party, competing under the Communist Party label.

†Motherland (People's Patriotic Union) is an electoral bloc of more than thirty party organizations formed in August 2003.

‡The People's Party formed in November 2002 on the basis of the People's Deputies faction in the Duma (*RFE/RL*).

§In three electoral districts, repeat ballots will be held due to "Against All" receiving the most votes.

of Russia's party system has become less fragmented because its key organizing principle is whether elites are falling into line with Putin or reacting against him, with the former being much more common than the latter. The latest round of elections in Russia reveals that, to a considerable extent, Putin has been able to direct Russia's politics in the direction suited to his own ends, and that neither the means nor the ends bode well for Russian democracy.

What is it that has made Putin and his supporters pivotal in Russia's latest elections? Certainly he is popular, with an overall approval rating close to 80 percent (Russia Votes 2004c). Yet when asked to name five or six politicians in which they had the most confidence, only 49 percent of respondents mentioned Putin (Russia Votes 2004d). The disconnect between these two statistics is demonstrative of the argument that there was an element of resignation in voting for Putin in the 2004 presidential election. The average Russian's quality of life has not improved, but Putin's challengers were not considered to be serious opponents. As one Russian put it, "They're all clowns" (Ozernoy 2004; 39). There even appears to have been some semblance of a protest vote. Putin's percentage of the vote, although certainly high, was nearly ten points below his overall approval rating, while his six opponents as a group garnered a higher-than-expected percentage of the vote (see table 2). Moreover, in the preceding Duma elections the

TABLE 2. Comparing the 1996, 2000, and 2004 Presidential Elections

Candidates	% vote	Round 2
<i>1996</i>		
Boris N. Yeltsin, Ind.	35.79	54.39
Gennadii A. Zyuganov, KPRF	32.49	40.73
Aleksandr I. Lebed, Ind.	14.73	
Grigorii A. Yavlinsky, Yabloko	7.45	
Vladimir V. Zhirinovskiy, LDPR	5.79	
Svyatoslav N. Fedorov, Party of Workers' Self-Administration	0.94	
Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Ind.	0.52	
Martin L. Shakkum, Ind.	0.37	
Yurii P. Vlasov, Ind.	0.20	
Vladimir A. Bryntsalov, Russian Socialist Party	0.17	
Against all	1.56	4.88
Total	100.00	100.00
<i>2000</i>		
Vladimir V. Putin, Ind.	53.44	
Gennadii A. Zyuganov, KPRF	29.49	
Grigorii A. Yavlinsky, Yabloko	5.85	
Aman-Gel'dy Tuleev, Ind.	2.98	
Vladimir V. Zhirinovskiy, LDPR	2.72	
Konstantin A. Titov, Ind.	1.49	
Ella A. Pamfilova, For Civic Dignity	1.02	
Stanislav S. Govorukhin, Ind.	0.44	
Yurii I. Skuratov, Ind.	0.43	
Aleksei I. Podberezkin, Spiritual Heritage	0.13	
Umar A. Dzhabraïlov, Ind.	0.11	
Against all	1.90	
Total	100.00	
<i>2004</i>		
Vladimir Putin, Ind.	71.3	
Nikolai Kharitonov, KPRF	13.7	
Sergei Glazyev, Ind.	4.1	
Irina Khakamada, Ind.	3.8	
Oleg Malyshkin, LDPR	2.0	
Sergei Mironov, Russian Party of Life	0.7	
Against all	3.4	
Total	99.0*	

Source. University of Essex, Project on Political Transformation and the Electoral Process in Post-Communist Europe, <http://www2.essex.ac.uk/elect/database/indexElections.asp?country=RUSSIA&election=ru96presidential> and <http://www2.essex.ac.uk/elect/database/indexElections.asp?country=RUSSIA&election=ru2000presidential>; and Russia Votes, <http://www.russiavotes.org/The2004PresidentialelectioninRussia.htm>.

*The total does not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

United Russia party was not as popular as the outcome suggests. In a December 2003 survey that asked what party or political outlook respondents sympathized with most, only 20 percent responded “the party of power” (United Russia) while 30 percent responded “none of them” (Russia Votes 2004a). In the most interesting result of the Duma elections, voters in three single-member district contests expressed a general dissatisfaction with Russia’s current politics by giving the largest portion of the vote to “Against All.” In two follow-up elections, “Against All” was again “elected.”

Putin has indisputably placed himself at the center of Russia’s politics (as Yeltsin never had been able to) by more adroitly engaging with Russia’s “floating party system” (i.e., one with

“Restoring considerable power to the federal center has reduced regional freedom of action and has enabled Putin to exert his influence over the governors . . .”

few if any roots in civil society). Putin began with a greater advantage in popularity than Yeltsin, although there was no founding election held when Yeltsin’s popularity was at its height. In a floating party system such popularity attracts the support of political elites, particularly since the real alignments in the Duma occur after

the elections, and Putin did not suffer a lack of support there. But he also did not remain aloof from political parties as Yeltsin had, having endorsed both the self-styled centrist Unity party and the democratic-right Union of Right Forces (SPS) party in the 1999 Duma elections, thus broadening his base of support. The single most important maneuver, however, involves the fate of the Fatherland–All Russia party (OVR). Having won only five seats less than the Unity party in 1999, the OVR had gained significant representation. The fact that the OVR was a “party of convenience” formed to back the candidacy of ex-Prime Minister Yevgenny Primakov for president nonetheless ensured that it lost its *raison d’etre* with Putin’s victory three months later. Until April 2001, it had functioned in opposition to Putin and the Unity party in the Duma, but then made an about-face and joined in a united front with the Unity party. The two parties formally merged to form the United Russia party in December 2001.

The reason for the OVR party’s switch is emblematic of the rootless nature of parties in a floating party system. It was bought off with the promise of a share in the resources provided by the Kremlin (Russia Votes 2004e). By eliminating such a significant source of opposition with one stroke, Putin not only gained key regional elites as allies but also was able to carry out his reforms for establishing “managed democracy,” the most consequential of which was the reversal of the gradual loss of central power to the periphery. It has become widely recognized that the regional governors have considerable influence over electoral results in their regions. Restoring considerable power to the federal center has reduced regional freedom of action and has enabled Putin to exert his influence over the

governors, creating stronger incentives for them to influence elections for the benefit of Putin and the United Russia party.

Russia's recent elections were significantly influenced by manipulation and machinations that point to the Kremlin's efforts toward the "Mexicanization" of Russia into a one-party dominant political system. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which monitored Russia's elections, expressed more concern over the fairness of these elections than those in the past. In their report on the Duma elections, they indicated two main problem areas. First, an OSCE report noted that "widespread use of State administrative resources blurred the distinction between United Russia and the executive administration" (OSCE/ODIHR 2004a; 1), including the services of paid government personnel, use of government office space and equipment, and free travel. Many high officials, including some regional governors, combined official activities with endorsing the United Russia party, exceeding democratic norms and violating Russia's election laws (OSCE/ODIHR 2004a; 12–13). There also were instances in which opposition candidates were denied access to meeting places and advertising and even pressured and intimidated by tactics such as police detention of campaign workers. These documented abuses are only the visible, and increasingly blatant, results of political manipulation of elections at regional and local levels.

The OSCE's second concern regarded problems with ensuring "unimpeded access to the media on a non-discriminatory basis" (OSCE/ODIHR 2004a; 1). This was an important factor in the 1999 and 2000 elections, but there is a consensus that the situation has gotten much worse during recent elections. According to Freedom House, the Kremlin "gained nearly total control of the broadcast media in 2003" by "using restrictive legislation and exerting financial pressure through the government and government-related companies" (2004; 164). Reporters Without Borders (2004a) has similarly concluded that the "authorities exploited the public media during legislative elections and obstructed free coverage of the campaign to guarantee victory, particularly in some republics in the Caucasus." Simply put, Russia has become a difficult and dangerous place for journalists. Indeed, the Reporters Without Borders' *Second Worldwide Press Freedom Index* (2004b) ranks Russia 148 out of a total of 166 countries for which statistics are compiled. In all, the depth of feeling over the fundamental unfairness of the Duma elections is so strong that it has surmounted ideological differences. The Communist Party (KPRF) and the Yabloko party have joined together in a lawsuit to have the elections overturned. The KPRF has even claimed that, according to its own recount, the Yabloko party actually gained 5.2 percent of the proportional representation vote and should receive additional seats in the Duma (Yasman 2004).

The situation was similar during the presidential election of 2004. One observer referred to Putin's media coverage as "reverential" (Ozernoy 2004; 39). Government officials again were actively engaged in influencing the election, although, recognizing the level of apathy and resignation among the electorate, their greater concern was with getting out the vote to prevent a turnout of under 50 percent of registered voters from nullifying the election and necessitating that another be held. Perhaps the greatest problem with this election is that it lacked

“a vibrant political discourse and meaningful pluralism” (OSCE/ODIHR 2004b; 2). In addition to media bias and other irregularities, this was due to Putin’s virtually complete disengagement from the presidential campaign, which prevented an informative dialogue, that is an important feature of a competitive election.

The results of the Duma elections had a tremendous impact on the presidential contest. It is obvious that previously untested aspirants for the presidency would not use this Duma election as a primary for testing the political waters; hence, no new parties of convenience emerged. But the unbalanced United Russia victory made Putin’s re-election appear inevitable. In response to a December 2003 survey asking if, in light of Putin’s seemingly inevitable victory, the presidential election should be cancelled to save money, 27 percent of respondents “definitely agreed” and an additional 28 percent “probably agreed”—a simple majority of 55 percent before the first vote had even been cast (Russia Votes 2004f). It also drove three well-known party leaders out of the race—the LDPR’s Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the KPRF’s Gennady Zyuganov, and the Yabloko party’s Grigory Yavlinsky, all of whom had run for president in both 1996 and 2000. Zyuganov and Yavlinsky both stated publicly that they decided not to run because they had no expectation of a fair election (Yasman 2004). Those who did become presidential candidates obviously shared these concerns, as three of them, Irina Khakamada (Independent), Sergei Glazev (Independent), and Nikolai Kharitonov (KPRF), took the unusual step of collaborating in organizing the Public Center for Election Monitoring to observe the presidential elections.

As for the results of the elections, Zyuganov made the statement that, under the circumstances, the elections were nothing but a “special operation with the goal of cleaning up the right flank and cutting the left flank in half” (Yasman 2004). Although he undoubtedly gives too much credence to the power of manipulation, Zyuganov accurately described the new Duma. On the right, the Yabloko and SPS parties, the latter still backing Putin but no longer endorsed by him, were reduced to minor party status. Only the LDPR increased its representation. The LDPR’s illiberal ideology nonetheless sets it apart from the Yabloko and SPS parties; in the past it has usually provided the swing votes when necessary to ensure passage of Putin’s major policies (Russia Votes 2004b). The left has been split between the KPRF and the new Motherland party, which had campaigned as a “patriotic” (i.e., not an opposition party) alternative to the KPRF. Not only did the KPRF suffer a substantial loss, the left as a whole has lost ground. The combined total number of seats of the KPRF and the Motherland party is twenty-nine seats less than the KPRF alone won in 1999. This puts the United Russia party in a virtually unassailable position, with 222 seats.

Factions in the current Duma provide the clearest picture yet that alignments are primarily structured around support of or opposition to the Kremlin. As of December 29, 2003, when the Duma opened, the United Russia faction had already grown to three hundred deputies, as individual deputies gravitated to United Russia from the Peoples’ Party, the SPS, or a few from other parties (even one from Yabloko), as well as sixty out of sixty-eight independents. In past Dumas, independent deputies formed their own factions oriented around region-

al issues. That they do not do so presently indicates Putin's growing influence over the regions. The three remaining factions—the Communists, the Liberal Democrats, and Motherland—displayed a pattern uncharacteristic of the usually fluid factional alignments in that their membership was virtually identical to their electoral results (Motherland lost one deputy to United Russia). By engineering a lopsided victory, Putin and his forces also have produced to an unusual degree greater cohesion and less obviously self-interested behavior among the deputies of those parties committed to preserving their independence from the Kremlin. It also has to a degree reunited the left; in August 2004 the KPRF and the Motherland party announced that they would be coordinating their efforts to maintain a viable opposition to the United Russia majority (Mereu 2004; 3). This does not pose much of a challenge to the Kremlin, however, in that an opposition of eighty-eight deputies can only be effective in the event an issue produces large-scale defection among United Russia faction members. Although efforts also have been made to create a democratic opposition on the right, the extremely small number of deputies espousing this viewpoint has made such efforts a futile gesture.

Conclusions and Predictions

In the past, Russia's weak party system manifested itself by a high degree of fluidity. Over time political parties appeared and disappeared, while deputies aligned and re-aligned according to their self-interests. The apparent stability of the current party system, however, belies the fact that it has actually become weaker. In the past, the party system was shaped by the aspirations, self-interests, and influence-peddling of multiple competing elites, whereas the present situation reflects the extent to which Putin has been able to superimpose his will on Russia's political elites, making his interests theirs and redirecting their influence to suit his ends. Putin took advantage of the weak party system by leveraging his popularity and resources to obtain the support needed to strengthen the presidency, subsequently using his increased power and influence to undermine the fairness of elections, the competitiveness of the party system, the representativeness of the legislature, the freedom of the media, and even the independence of the judiciary to produce a political system compliant to his wishes. In short, he has weakened virtually all of the democratic institutions except the presidency.

If his objective is the Mexicanization of Russia's politics, then Putin appears to have created the proper framework. It must be acknowledged, however, that he is only the proximate cause of the weakening of Russian democracy. The ultimate cause is that political elites may act without the constraining force of accountability, because Russia's political parties have few roots in society and Russia's weak civil society engenders more passive resignation than active political engagement, providing poor soil for these roots to develop. Herein lies the weakness of a renewed one-party dominant system in Russia. The strength of the United Russia party comes not from within but from its ties to the presidency. If Putin were to be succeeded by someone significantly less popular and capable as president, that person could possibly experience a loss of influence over the regional governors, encounter challenges from other political leaders, and suffer losses both for

the party of power and even himself in the following elections. It is an open question whether the United Russia party could hold together if its patron lost a grip on the means to perpetuate the party's majority.

Or rather, it *was* an open question, but it may not remain so for long given Putin's recently proposed electoral changes. Although formulated months earlier, Putin announced in response to the terrorist tragedy in Beslan his proposals to have the Duma elected solely by proportional representation party lists and to have the regional governors appointed by the president with the approval of the regional legislatures. As a whole, these proposals pose a serious threat to continued democratic development in Russia. A proportional representation electoral system will eliminate the unruly independents with whom Putin currently has to contend and will likely be designed to further reduce serious competition to the party of power's control of the Duma. The impact of the second proposal was succinctly expressed by one regional governor who, when asked why so many governors favor this change, stated, "[I]t is much easier to lick one boot than to clean 400,000" (Corwin 2004). The fact that the majority in the Duma and the regional governors owe their positions to the president will be all the leverage necessary to eliminate democratic competition and perpetuate presidential dominance over Russia's political institutions. As Celeste Wallander points out, this will give Russia's president control of both houses of Russia's legislature and thus the means to amend the constitution, which she suspects Putin may use "to avoid stepping down as president in 2008" (2004). After the implementation of these changes, there will only be two ways to prevent them from undoing Russia's democracy: mobilization of a concerned civil society or the president's own reticence to do so, neither of which is realistic.

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