



Political competition on the up

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Overview

The fourteen regional legislative elections held on 11 March attracted interest as a 'dress rehearsal' for next December's Duma election. But they are even more interesting for a different, and deeper, reason.

The key to political risk reduction in Russia is greater political competition, which in turn will also bear down on wider country risks such as corruption. This latest batch of regional elections saw the debut of the new officially-approved opposition party, 'A Just Russia'. The result is a mesh of competitive situations - still well short of the Kremlin's plan for a classic two-party system, but with strengthening prospects for that outcome. Meanwhile, a notable liberal revival points to variable geometry in the next Duma with important potential policy impacts.

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Steady progress towards greater political competition

Context

The results: hardy foursome plus liberal comeback

Since 2006, all Russian elections falling due in each half-year period must be held on the second Sunday of either March or October as appropriate. So 11 March 2007 was the third such 'Super Sunday'.

There were fourteen regional legislatures re-elected this time around, compared with eight and nine respectively in March and October 2006. These fourteen regions comprise a representative cross-section of the country as a whole, and account for a quarter of the total population of Russia.

This batch of regional elections is also an important leading indicator of the shape of the new State Duma due to be elected in December 2007 - both because of the representative sample of regions, and also due to the timing: this is the last major live test of voter intentions ahead of the Duma election.

The results, set out in the table below in comparison with previous election outcomes, show a stable political landscape comprised of four parties, with one liberal party on the borderline.

Party	Average vote share (%)			
	Duma '03	Reg'l Mar '06	Reg'l Oct '06	Reg'l Mar '07
United Russia	37.7	37.6	51.8	46.0
Communists	12.6	13.6	12.7	15.8
A Just Russia	9*	10.5*	22.9**	15.4
Lib Democrats (Zhirinovskiy)	11.5	8.2	6.2	9.0
Union of Right Forces (SPS)	4.0	n/a	n/a	6.9

* Vote share for 'Motherland', a party in the same niche as now occupied by 'A Just Russia' (i.e. Kremlin-backed, non-communist, combining nationalist and left-wing economic positions), but now absorbed into 'A Just Russia'

** Aggregate score of three parties (Motherland, the Pensioners' Party and the Party of Life) since merged to form 'A Just Russia'

Source: Central Electoral Commission

The overall average vote shares for each of the parties in these regional elections are well in line with our existing forecast result of the forthcoming Duma election - see .

For a breakdown of party vote shares in each of the fourteen regions holding elections on 11 March (data from Komi and Omsk still unavailable), click [here](#).

The parties and the campaign

In all but one of the contests, the dominant pro-Kremlin 'United Russia' won a plurality of votes, with tallies ranging from a low of 24 per cent in Stavropol to an overwhelming 69 per cent in Dagestan.

Most attention was concentrated in these elections on the performance of 'A Just Russia' the new

Kremlin-approved left wing competitor to United Russia fighting its first election since formally coming into existence. For background on this Kremlin project of creating a classic two-party system from above, see . 'A Just Russia' topped one poll - in the populous southern region of Stavropol - but overall was pipped into third place by the Communist Party which produced its strongest performance in the present political cycle to date.

Parties which are not already represented in the State Duma now face tough hurdles registering their lists of candidates for elections. Some of these hurdles are formal (such as expensive deposits or collecting signatures), others visible in informal official bias against political outsiders. To submit an electoral list in the first place, political parties must survive a tough registration process - including a minimum membership requirement of 50,000 spread throughout the country. But 31% of the party lists submitted for participation in one or other of these regional elections were struck off the ballots, including six lists put up by the two leading liberal parties, SPS (or 'Union of Right Forces') and 'Yabloko', mostly on grounds of allegedly fake supporting signatures or the withdrawal of some of their candidates (sometimes in dubious circumstances).

The establishment status of 'A Just Russia' was underlined by the fact that despite its being a new party all fourteen of its lists were registered without difficulty. Also significant is the fact that the disqualification of the Communists by zealous officials in a couple of regions was overruled by the Centre. This reflects the Kremlin's understanding that its goal of ensuring the legitimacy of elections depends on Communist participation.

Despite official harassment, SPS staged a notable recovery from its failure in the 2003 Duma election, squeaking over the 7 percent vote share barrier required to win seats in five of the nine regional legislature races in which it was allowed to compete. Its average overall score was within a fraction of the same minimum 7 percent which will be needed to get into the new State Duma next December.

Yabloko, by contrast, was wiped out. Unlike SPS, which has positioned itself as a constructive liberal opposition force while keeping its hand in with the authorities, Yabloko is now drifting towards the radical opposition fringe - and its representatives are now more often seen alongside followers of former world chess champion Gary Kasparov and Eduard Limonov's riotous 'National-Bolsheviks' in street demonstrations.

Since the previous round of elections in October 2006, 'United Russia' has machined through some amendments to electoral law designed to smother protest voting. These changes have removed both the minimum voter participation threshold for an election to be valid, and the 'none of the above' option on the ballot paper. So the only remaining way for voters to register protest is not to go to the polling station. Yet in these latest regional elections, the average turn-out rose above 39% from last year's regional election average of 37%. This improvement suggests growing public interest in politics in the run-up to the national elections of December 2007-March 2008, and possibly also as a result of the increased competition resulting from the appearance on the scene of 'A Just Russia'.

Public Judgements

'A Just Russia' has broken through

Igor Bunin, General Director of the Political Technologies Centre, Moscow. 'A Just Russia' has made a successful debut, transforming itself from a virtual project to a live political brand. The party attracted support from the periphery of both 'United Russia' to the right and the 'Communists' to the left. Its low vote shares in Siberia [Tomsk, Tyumen and especially Omsk] reflect the fact that the new party did not manage to get organised in time in these regions. In these circumstances, its Siberian vote share of 4-8 per cent is a sign not of failure but rather of the party's considerable potential. The arrival of 'A Just Russia' erodes the dominance of 'United Russia' and sets the stage for a further increase in competition between the two parties in the run-up to the Duma election in December..

The two-party system is stillborn

Gleb Pavlovsky, President of the Effective Politics Foundation. Sergey Mironov, the leader of 'A Just Russia' has not succeeded in his stated goal of creating the second leg of a two-party system. The big surprise of these elections was the failure of 'A Just Russia' to compete effectively with the Communists, and displace the Communists as the left opposition party. Instead, 'A Just Russia' merely took away some of United Russia's potential vote share.

Are the liberals (SPS) heading back into the Duma?

Boris Gryzlov, Leader of United Russia and Speaker of the State Duma. Yes. SPS will get back into the Duma next December with 7-9 per cent of the vote.

Oksana Goncharenko, Senior Expert, Political Conjuncture Centre, Moscow. Probably not. The SPS campaign platform was indistinguishable from that of the main parties (and even the Communists), so not particularly liberal. The potential SPS vote - hovering on the 7 per cent borderline - might be diluted by the new liberal party 'Civic Force' and certainly by Yabloko which, though it now has no chance of getting back into mainstream politics, will continue trying to damage its liberal rival.

Vladislav Surkov, Deputy Kremlin Chief of Staff. Perhaps. The recovery of SPS is an interesting development. But since the party campaigned on a left-wing platform, it may not be meeting the demand that exists for representation in the liberally-minded part of society. The party's prospects depend on how it positions itself in the forthcoming election campaigns.

Wrap

In our view, political risk in Russia would be much reduced if anything resembling a classic two-party system were to develop. So this debut performance of 'A Just Russia' deserves the attention it has been getting from commentators. The verdicts of Pavlovsky and Bunin each have plenty of interest - and are less contradictory than they may seem.

Pavlovsky is right to point out that whereas a workable two-party model must involve displacing the Soviet-nostalgic Communists with a new left opposition committed to post-Soviet institutions and values. 'A Just Russia' has not made inroads into the Communist vote (which went up). Instead, it has largely cannibalised the pro-Putin vote hitherto harvested by United Russia. This conclusion matches Bunin's main point, that United Russia has lost its exclusive position.

Political competition

The picture which has been pulled into focus by these elections shows two distinct divisions.

First, the pro-system or 'Putin' constituency is now being contested by two parties. As the junior contestant, 'A Just Russia' is typically supported by voters and interest groups that are broadly pro-Putin but not part of the local power elite under the incumbent governor, who almost invariably heads the United Russia list to very good effect (for United Russia, that is). And if United Russia looks sure to continue to dominate this contest in the present political cycle, its dominance is being eroded. In Stavropol (southern Russia), where 'A Just Russia' was supported by the mayor of the regional capital against the unpopular regional governor, United Russia suffered its sole defeat of these latest elections.

The second division lies between the two conformist parties and the outright opposition to the present order. The Communists continue to lead this hard opposition. Some of the small parties (such as the Pensioners' Party) now absorbed into 'A Just Russia' were previously able to attract votes away from the Communists. But many of those voters have now returned to the Communist fold rather than support a Kremlin-approved party in the form of 'A Just Russia'. The competitive edge of 'A Just Russia' has also been blunted by the fact that Kremlin backing is incompatible with campaigning for the hard nationalist vote. The Kremlin's previous experiment with an officially-sanctioned alternative to the Communists was a party called 'Motherland' which derailed into racist nationalism and had to be wound up. The Communists and (especially) Zhirinovskiy owe part of their improved scores in these latest elections to regaining some of the xenophobic vote.

Two questions arise: the first, more important, about the evolving political system and hence long-term stability; the second about the likely shape of the new Duma in the light of these latest regional elections.

Two-party system prospects

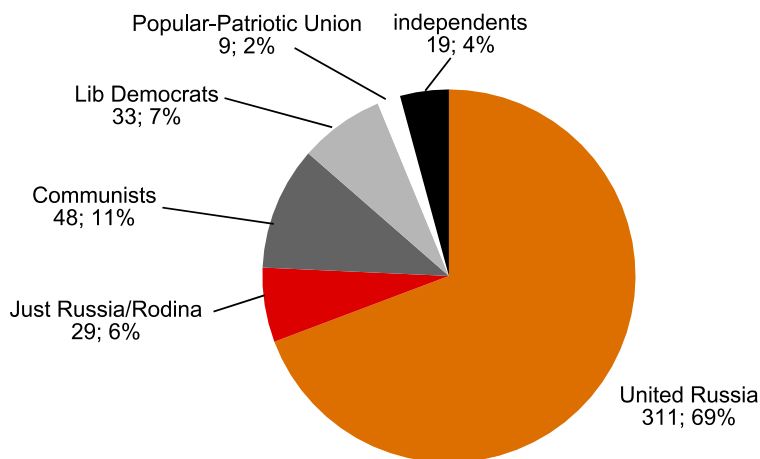
On the first question, these elections reveal a fair measure of political competition, albeit not exactly on the lines envisaged in the Kremlin's top-down construction of 'United Russia' *versus* 'A Just Russia'. The prospects for that construction depend on whether the 'pro-Putin' vote constitutes a broad enough base for a workable two-party system along the lines envisaged by that construction. The 11 March election result shows that this 'conformist' constituency accounts for at least half and, on a good day, up to two-thirds of active voters. This base does look adequate for two reasons. First, in a major national election the aggregate 'loyal' vote can most likely be pushed up towards the upper end of that range. Secondly, a good part of the protest (especially nationalist) vote goes to Zhirinovskiy, whose hard opposition ends with his campaigning rhetoric: once in the Duma, he and his followers cast their votes for the government.

Outlook for the new Duma

Turning to the political balance in the new Duma to be elected in December 2007, the lessons of these March 2007 regional elections are more interesting than at first meets the eye. Two factors stand out.

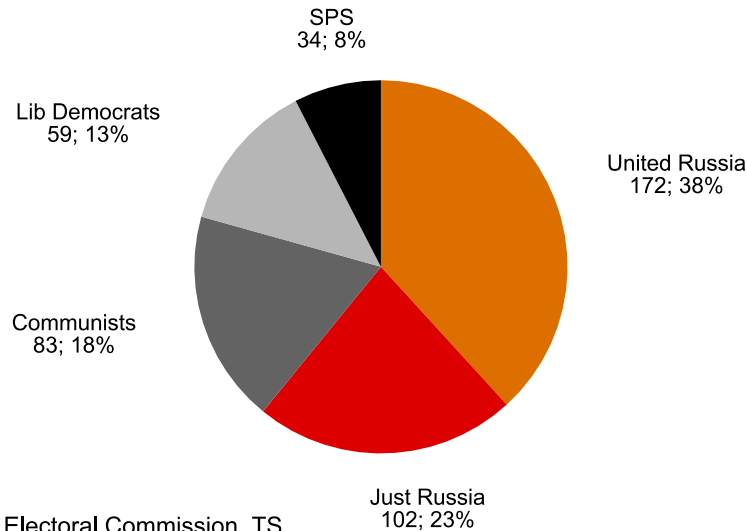
First, one of these fourteen regional races was the Leningrad Oblast, the region which in the last Duma election in 2003 most closely matched the overall national result (with a correlation of over 99 per cent). Now, by contrast, this previous national bellwether was an outlier in the group of fourteen regions. In particular, United Russia's score in the Leningrad oblast was well below (eight percentage points) the inter-regional average. If reproduced nationally next December, this Leningrad Oblast score would produce a very different Duma compared to the existing one (see charts below).

Existing Duma party distribution (number of deputies; percentage of deputies)



Source: Central Electoral Commission, TS

Duma based on results of Leningrad Oblast 11 March 2007 regional elections (number of deputies; percentage of deputies)



Source: Central Electoral Commission, TS

Even assuming that the Leningrad Oblast model no longer holds good, and that the average result across this representative sample of fourteen regions is the better indicator of the countrywide standing of the parties, it looks quite possible that United Russia will lose its overall majority. Against this background emerges the second point of interest of these regional elections as far as the next Duma is concerned. This is the revival of the liberal cause in the form of SPS, the reformist liberal party historically led by Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais.

The political character and legislative capacity of the new Duma will depend importantly on whether SPS scrapes over the 7 per cent barrier in next December's national parliamentary election. This conclusion is based on the assumption that United Russia does fall below half the seats. For the purpose of passing legislation to which the Kremlin attaches importance, United Russia will form a majority in combination with 'A Just Russia'. And when 'A Just Russia' wishes to keep its distance (in annual budget votes, for example, where it will always want to be seen advocating higher public spending), then Zhirinovskiy's votes could always be mobilised to form a majority. But in the case of any serious structural reform legislation (for which neither 'A Just Russia' nor Zhirinovskiy would have any natural enthusiasm), United Russia could create an alternative tactical majority with the SPS deputies.

In any event, SPS's return to the national political mainstream would further increase the level of political competition - and perhaps even help accelerate the development of a classic two-party system based on 'United Russia' and 'A Just Russia' with SPS and the Communists respectively in tactical support roles. In this light, the range of judgements on the prospects of SPS presents considerable interest - in particular Vladislav Surkov's non-committal stance, since Surkov as the Putin administration's top political manager will have a major personal influence on the outcome. Surkov regards both SPS and Yabloko as soiled goods from the 1990s, and has been supporting a new liberal party to be called 'Civic Force'. But perhaps SPS's feisty showing in these latest regional elections will clinch the discreet, passive Kremlin support (that is, the Kremlin refrains from spoiling tactics against SPS) which would assure the party's success in next December's Duma election.

Next tests

15 April 2007 - political party vote shares in the inaugural legislative election of the newly formed united region of Krasnoyarsky Krai, a major industrial and territorial entity in central-eastern Siberia. The liberal incumbent governor Alexander Khloponin (a former CEO of Norilsk Nickel and Interros partner) has indicated that he will not be heading the United Russia list.

April 2007 - planned congress of a new liberal party, 'Civic Force' will reveal whether this is a serious Kremlin-backed project, and hence cast light on the overall prospects for the liberal cause in the December 2007 Duma election.