



Birth of a two-party system

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Overview

The latest round of regional elections in Russia went unnoticed (largely because they coincided with the murder of the anti-government journalist, Anna Politkovskaya). But they deserve notice, as the results point to a possible sea change in the country's political system which would reduce underlying country risk.

This is a move to a classic two party system, with the formation of a new centre-left party to compete with the present ruling party, United Russia, positioned on the centre right. If successful, this project would spell genuine political competition between mainstream forces ensuring, as in more mature democracies, broad systemic stability amidst alternating governments - which, in turn, would increase accountability and so reduce corruption. The cultural and practical obstacles to this top-down (Kremlin-backed) initiative are large. But the project is for real, and conditions are more favourable than at any previous point in Russia's post-Soviet history.

Context

Parties set to comprise a new centre-left force break through in regional elections

Public Judgements

The new centre-left party project is for real

- > **Political Technologies Centre**, A leading Moscow political think-tank
- > **VTsIOM**, polling organisation

Controlled political competition won't work

- > **Levada Centre**, polling organisation
- > **Ivan Denisov**, political columnist
- > **Mikhail Delyagin**, Globalisation Institute, Moscow

Wrap

Next Steps: successful registration of new centre-left party by year end, and next batch of regional elections, due in March 2007

Context

Parties set to comprise a new centre-left force break through in regional elections

A change in Russia's electoral law enacted in 2005 provides for two days each year - the second Sunday of March and October - on which all due non-federal elections must be held together. 8 October was accordingly the second of these 'super-Sundays', with legislative elections in nine regions (one more than on the first super-Sunday back in March).

The regions concerned constitute a good cross section of Russia as a whole, in terms both of geography and socio-economic conditions. Also, as in March, there were various mayoral and municipal elections - and a couple of by-elections to vacant seats in the State Duma (federal parliament). But it is the elections to the regional legislatures which offer the significant insight into trends.

There are two reasons for paying attention to these elections.

First, in the run up to elections that really matter - to the Duma in December 2007 and the presidency in March 2008 - the results of these nationwide votes provide much better evidence than any amount of opinion polling about the public mood.

The key indicator to watch here is the vote share for the United Russia party (the main pro-Kremlin political force, which controls the present Duma). Due to a change in the rules for Duma elections, United Russia will need to improve on its 38% vote share in the last Duma election if it is to maintain its majority - in turn providing the basis for broad policy continuity in the post-Putin period.

Secondly, and more importantly, this latest batch of regional elections was a first test for what may prove to be an important political initiative. This is a top-down move to create a two-party system - with United Russia on the centre-right competing with a new centre-left party.

The project was effectively blessed by President Putin in August, when he received the leaders of all three parties set to make up the new centre-left grouping. Its working title then was the Union of Confidence. At its founding convention on 28 October, the title was chosen of Just Russia (a confusing name in English, though not in Russian: "Just" is as in "justice", not "only").

These parties - the Party of Life (led by Sergey Mironov, a Putin associate who has been speaker of the upper house of the federal parliament since 2002), the Pensioners' Party and "Motherland" - contested this month's regional elections separately. If successful, this project would enhance underlying political stability by establishing some genuine political competition - and the accompanying improvements in accountability and transparency (anti-corruption) - in a secure systemic framework.

State of the major parties

The answer provided by these regional elections to the first question - about the prospects of United Russia is clear enough: their vote share jumped above 50% (see table).

The three parties comprising the planned new centre-left party (highlighted in table) polled an aggregate 23%, putting them in comfortable second place.

Party	Average vote share		
	Duma Election '03	Regional* Mar '06	Regional** Oct '06
United Russia	37.7	37.6	51.8

New Centre-Left Party	11.9	10.5	22.9
Communists	12.6	13.6	12.7
Lib Democrats (Zhirinovsky)	11.5	8.2	6.2

* In eight regions: Adigey, Altay, Kaliningrad, Kirov, Kursk, Nizhny Novgorod, Orenburg, Khanty-Mansiysk

** In nine regions: Chuvashia, Karelia, Tuva, Astrakhan, Lipetsk, Novgorod, Maritime, Sverdlovsk, Jewish Autonomous District

*** Aggregate score for three parties ('Life', Pensioners, Motherland) due to comprise the new party

Sources: Central Electoral Commission; Kommersant, 10/10/06

Public Judgements

These regional election results show that that the Kremlin-backed initiative to establish a new mainstream political force, positioned on the centre-left to compete with the hitherto dominant United Russia, is for real. This project has the potential to reduce underlying country risk. But will/can it work?

Probably yes: a two-party system is emerging

The alternative mainstream centre-left political party is being constructed among strong regional elites, and against the background of public demand for a serious opposition force.

- **Political Technologies Centre (PTC).** A detailed survey by this leading Moscow political think-tank shows that in region after region the new centre-left party (that is, for now, one of its three component parts) has become an attractive channel for the ambitions of local elites at odds with, or left out of, the incumbent regional governor and his circle (these days almost always members of United Russia). These opposition elites include successful entrepreneurs ready and able to provide the necessary financing. Several of these business sponsors are based in the agro-industrial sector, a traditional stronghold of more statist and dirigiste political preferences. The PTC study also shows that gone are the days when the incumbent governor would arrange for an associate to lead a respectable (non-communist) opposition party as a token sparring partner during the elections and a coalition partner afterwards. Such practices are being stamped out by the new force, especially its core component - Sergey Mironov's 'Party of Life' - which is developing itself into a rallying point for mainstream (non-communist) opposition to United Russia.
- **VTsIOM.** A nationwide survey conducted on 14-15 October (i.e. since these regional elections) by this polling organisation shows that a substantial portion (45%) of the public has already heard of the new centre-left party - even before its formal creation, and that 39% say they will either "definitely" (6%) or "probably" (33%) vote for it.

Unlikely: practical and cultural barriers are too high

Wide popular support for what remains a virtual party is far from assured. Non-ideological Kremlin-backed constructs will not deliver genuine political competition.

- **Levada Centre** Aleksey Grazhdankin (the Deputy Director of this polling organisation quoted in *Vedomosti*) reminds that the 39% potential vote share for the new centre-left party will in practice be distributed also between the Communists and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's 'Liberal Democrats'.
- **Ivan Denisov** (political columnist of *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*) points out that supporters of the Pensioners' Party (PP) may not transfer their loyalties to the new centre-left party. Already one regional PP branch (in Ryazan) has disbanded in protest at the planned absorption into the new party.
- **Mikhail Delyagin.** Writing in *Vedomosti*, this former official turned think tanker and publicist, highlights how radical the proposed shift is from bureaucratic clans competing for influence and rents in dark corners of the big tent to genuine and open competition progressively involving wider society. He predicts that precisely for this reason, the initiative will be abandoned as incompatible with the present "Tsarist" order and with the fundamental interests of the ruling bureaucracy.

Wrap

The prize of establishing a functioning moderate two-party (centre-right, centre-left) system in Russia is so attractive in terms of creating a healthier polity and cementing long-term stability that there is a danger of wishful thinking about its prospects. But the secular decline of the communists offers an historic window.

The political culture strongly favours a 'big tent' where the conformist majority congregate as a single ruling party (now United Russia), marginalising and radicalising all opposition parties. A previous attempt in 2005 to seed a two-party system by creating a right and left 'platform' inside United Russia was quickly stamped out by the party leadership.

And the Kremlin's own previous attempt at creating a non-communist left-wing party ('Motherland', represented in the present Duma) failed in its own terms, as Motherland departed from token opposition to populist nationalism verging on racism. Kremlin support for Motherland was withdrawn; the party was struck off most of the ballots in the 'super-Sunday' elections last March; and a sanitised version of the party under a reliable new leader is now due to be merged into the new broad centre-left party.

But since that abortive Motherland project, there has been an important change which supports the view that the latest centre-left party project should be taken seriously.

This change is the marginalisation of the Communists (a party which would more accurately be labelled the 'party of nostalgia for the Soviet Union'). The shrinking of the Communist vote share from 20-30% to below 15% now looks irreversible.

So there is no longer any need to rally the non-communist majority of voters under a single banner to preserve systemic stability. Unlike Motherland, which was a tactical creation to erode the Communist vote, the new centre-left party looks like a more strategic project. At any rate, United Russia is already reacting nervously against the new party - that is, viewing it as a genuine rival.

Even if the centre-left party is given a real licence to compete - presupposing some loss of Kremlin control over political life - the resulting two-party system would not be totally real until it reached up to the presidency itself. This seems unlikely to happen any time soon.

However, Mikhail Delyagin's argument about a two-party system falling foul of "Tsarism" might be cast in a more positive light by substituting Gaullism for Tsarism. That is, while the Russian presidency will remain in the Gaullist mould of a plebiscital office conferring final decision-making power above squabbling factional interests, this could still be combined with successive Russian governments meanwhile becoming more accountable to alternating majorities in the Duma.

That would be a useful first step towards a more mature political system.

Next Tests

With the founding convention of Just Russia having successfully taken place on 28 October 2006, the merger must be registered by the Ministry of Justice by year-end (deadline for participation in the next Duma election due in December 2007). Of interest then will be to see how relations develop with United Russia - a lot of bitter words have already been thrown the way of Just Russia since the recent elections.

It will be interesting also to see whether the three factions of Just Russia really do merge into a single party in time to fight the next 'Super-Sunday' regional elections on 11 March 2007. This will be a more significant test for two reasons. First, seventeen regions will be in play (as opposed to nine this time around). Secondly, coming as they do just nine months ahead of the Duma election, this next round of regional elections will be that much more revealing of how much

stomach the Kremlin has for promoting genuine political competition