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Analysis

“Modern Times” Is There Movement in Russian Politics?

By Henning Schröder, Berlin

Abstract

In 2009 the Medvedev Administration launched a comprehensive modernization policy seeking to overcome the many problems that hinder Russia's development. In 2010 the first concrete results of these policies can be seen. Of course, no one expects Medvedev to make quick progress in restructuring the state apparatus, replacing personnel or reducing the level of corruption. However, in some areas there are perceptible changes. These are most obvious in the reform of the Interior Ministry and the police force. The measures initiated by the Medvedev administration are followed by a public that uses the Internet as a medium for criticism. However, democratization is not the goal of the president's modernization policies. He has not sought to change the functioning power vertical which depends on a loyal corps of governors, flanked by regional legislatures under the tight control of well-managed parties. There is no space for initiatives from below. Moreover, a further goal is to forge alliances and to weaken potential adversaries in the run up to the decision on presidential succession, which will be made in the second half of 2011.

The Legacy and the Crisis

When Vladimir Putin installed Dmitry Medvedev as his successor as president, Medvedev inherited numerous social and economic problems. In a series of programmatic speeches that Medvedev gave in January and February 2008 as a presidential candidate, he criticized among other things:

- The overall atmosphere of “legal nihilism,” which led to a lack of independent courts, the absence of a legal culture, and a climate of legal uncertainty;
- The widespread corruption prevalent in the state administration, which hindered economic development;
- The demographic crisis, particularly the high mortality and low birth rates and the inadequate health care system as one of the causes of this crisis;
- The raw material dependence of the economy and the weakness of the manufacturing industries, especially the lack of innovative production;
- The infrastructural decay in all areas of transportation and municipal services, and the obsolescence of production facilities;
- The lack of capital within the Russian economy and the insufficient inflow of foreign investment into it;
- The weakness of “civil society,” the political party system, and the democratic institutions at the local and regional levels.

Medvedev did not mention two other topics, although they have a significant impact on the scope for policy reforms:

- The great social differences within Russian society, particularly the extreme contrasts between rich and poor, and

- The political passivity of the population and its deeply-rooted distrust of public institutions.

The social differences are a source of latent discontent and threaten the stability of the political system in the medium term. Although the widespread political apathy protects the regime from social unrest, it also makes it difficult for leaders to mobilize the population in support of their reform policies.

As if this legacy was not enough, Medvedev became president just as the Russian economy, which had been booming since 2000 due to the rising oil price, fell into a deep crisis. The slump in energy prices and the international financial crisis of 2008 had a massive impact on the country. Growth in industrial production faltered: following an increase of 6.3% in 2007, it grew only 2.1% in 2008, and declined by 10.8% in 2009. Investment, which had risen by 21.1% in 2007, grew only 9.1% in 2008 and dropped by 17% in 2009. The crisis underlined once again how vulnerable Russia's commodity-dependent economy is to fluctuations in world markets. Diversification, innovation and structural reforms were necessary to improve the economy.

Blueprints for Reform

In order to address these problems, the leadership must initiate structural reforms in some areas. After the summer break, the Medvedev administration launched a political campaign in the fall of 2009, proclaiming as a goal the radical modernization of the country. The basic ideas of this policy were formulated in an article published on 10 September under the title “Russia, forward” on the Internet website of the newspaper gazeta.

ru. The decision to publish the manifesto by means of such a contemporary medium as an Internet news site – rather than through a television speech or a government newspaper – signaled that the president was willing to part with old habits. Medvedev promoted his modernization strategy in a series of high-level events, including a conference in Yaroslavl, which was held on his birthday, at the meeting with the Valdai Club, at an economic forum in Sochi and at a meeting where he founded the Committee for Technological Development and Modernization of the Economy. The campaign culminated in Medvedev's address to the Federal Assembly, the Russian president's "State of the Union" speech before the two houses of the Russian parliament.

The basis of the modernization strategy is the technological renovation of the entire sphere of production, in part with the help of foreign investors and imported know-how. The key technology areas identified by the president include medicine, energy, information, aerospace, telecommunications, and energy efficiency. To promote progress, Medvedev urged the modernization of the state sector and a cautious privatization. State-owned enterprises and those with state participation should be subject to independent audits and will be redesigned according to modern concepts of business management. The state should launch a comprehensive program to promote science and research, and incorporate the private sector in these efforts. The approval process for investment projects would be streamlined, the tax system and mandatory insurances reformed in order to create favorable conditions for investors. Medvedev also called for expanding and improving the education system and improving conditions for charitable foundations and NGOs.

Such widespread structural reforms needed backing in the political arena because they are not enforceable without support among society and the elite. Here the president did not follow through, however. He described the party system, whose distortions were particularly obvious in the October 2009 elections, as, on the whole, consolidated and the parties as true mass organizations, strengthened by their battle for voters. Rather than introducing extensive reform, he announced a series of small changes in the electoral legislation, which facilitated access for the smaller parties to representative bodies at the regional and local levels. While the president called for more transparency in the electoral process and promoted the spread of the Internet as an opportunity for greater public debate, he set clear limits on the opposition forces, threatening: "Any attempts to use democratic slogans to create unrest, to

destabilize the state or divide society will be blocked." Democracy "from below" was not part of Medvedev's modernization strategy.

If the Medvedev administration was not ready to mobilize society to enforce his policy of reform, we must ask who would in fact do it. Large parts of the elite long ago had settled into the status quo and a change would create anxiety and curtail their access to resources. A functioning legal system would limit the opportunities available to officials, politicians and business leaders to influence court decisions. Efforts to combat corruption block sources of income for members of the state apparatus. Independent audits of state enterprises and a more streamlined management system make it difficult for officials and politicians to access resources. In short, Medvedev's modernization plans caused disadvantages for large parts of the elite. Such a modification of the "rules" would change the balance of power within the ruling class, ultimately making Medvedev's modernization strategy vulnerable. To some Russians, Medvedev's modernization campaign also brought back bad memories of Gorbachev's perestroika proposals. In particular, the idea that a reform campaign might lead to the politicization of society and thus gain a momentum of its own is perceived as dangerous.

Words and Deeds

The Medvedev Administration therefore acted cautiously in implementing its strategy. It took a number of specific measures to induce support, avoiding dramatic political change, but making it clear that something was in motion.

One such small step was the compilation of a presidential personnel reserve. In early 2009 the Presidential Administration announced that it wanted to compile a list of 1,000 young, competent executives which could be used to fill important management positions. The first 100 names on the list were announced in February 2009 and another 500 names became public in December. This list, which contained no surprises, obviously served a double purpose. On one hand, it signaled the bureaucracy that the administration had ready staff who could be used to replace anyone involved in misconduct or passive resistance. On the other, it showed the young people that the reforms could also provide an opportunity for personal advancement.

In order to make a bigger impression, the Medvedev administration made a series of key political appointments. Already in 2009 the president had replaced some governors, typically when their terms expired. Thus, for example in Volgograd, Orel and Sverdlovsk oblasts,

Medvedev replaced longtime governors who had won considerable political authority. On the other hand, he retained the incumbent governors in Primorsky Krai, Kurgan and Mari El. During 2010 the terms of 30 governors will expire. Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiev has already relinquished power, but passed his seat on to his prime minister, assuring that he will retain influence. Thus, Medvedev is not simply replacing old cadres with new ones, but is deciding what to do on a region-by-region basis. The recent performance of the regional economies and the willingness of regional leaders to implement the modernization plans both seem to play a role.

Medvedev also took a few tentative steps to change the party system. After massive criticism of the regional elections on 11 October 2009, in January he invited the leaders of the main parties, including the liberal opposition Yabloko party, which had been removed in recent years from nearly all legislatures, to discuss the electoral manipulation and distortions of the political system. However, the corrections to the Political Parties Act, which the president brought to the State Duma in March 2010, were modest. It allowed parties which were not represented in the Duma and regional parliaments to once a year participate in the plenary meetings of the legislative committees. It also discussed the possibility of rolling back the 7% threshold that parties must pass in order to gain representation in the legislature. All these measures were but cosmetic revisions, which changed little. In the regional elections on 14 March 2010 Yabloko was excluded from the voting process. In addition to the systemic parties, United Russia, Fair Russia, Zhirinovskiy's LDPR and the Communists, only two other organizations won seats, Right Cause and Patriots of Russia, both of whom received little more than 1% or 2% of the vote. So far, there have been no real efforts to reform the political system.

The Medvedev Administration invested greater efforts in the fight against corruption, which had been a concern of Putin and was taken up by his successor. Already in July 2008, the president had adopted a national plan to combat corruption and on 25 December 2008 a law to address this problem followed. On 14 April 2010 Medvedev announced a new national plan to combat corruption. All these efforts led to a series of individual measures, including new legislation, enhanced law enforcement, an improved legal system, higher salaries for public officials, improved financial supervision, increased public participation and efforts to involve Russia in anti-corruption efforts within an international

context. These were useful approaches, but their implementation requires a long time. A short-term improvement is not expected.

As part of the anti-corruption initiatives, the president ordered the ministers and governors to disclose their financial situation. Medvedev and Putin led by example, ministers and many leading regional politicians followed suit. The president told the public that he had a 2009 income of 3,335,281.39 rubles (\$115,000) and a bank balance of 3,574,747.34 rubles (\$122,000). He also had a flat of 367.8 square meters and a cottage with 4,700 square meters of land. His wife had virtually no income and was driving a VW Golf. What is interesting about this initiative was that it made fighting corruption a public enterprise. Politicians whose declared assets exceeded what they could reasonably earn in public service came under pressure to explain their sources of income. A graphic example was the newspaper "Vedomosti" which published on its website photographs of politicians and the estimated value of their watches. Citizens were able to ask themselves if the Chairman of the Foreign Committee could really afford a Patek Philippe for 16,000 U.S. dollars on a public salary and why the Governor of St. Petersburg was wearing a Harry Winston for 26,000 U.S. dollars, and how the Deputy Mayor of Moscow had financed his Greubel Forsey for 360,000 U.S. dollars.

Police Reform and the Internet

The president has carried out actual change in one area of the state service – the Interior Ministry (MVD) and the police force under it. The police have long belonged to one of the most despised institutions in Russia. Criticism of the police gained national attention, as in November 2009 when police Major Alexei Dymovsky from Novorossiysk posted a YouTube video in which he sharply criticized police officials in Novorossiysk. In February 2010 the opposition magazine "New Times" published an article that revealed the relationships within a Moscow special police unit in which members of this unit complained that their superiors used them to perform services for private companies.

Criticism of the Interior Ministry corresponded with a presidential initiative to thoroughly reform the entire police force. On 3 February 2010 Medvedev took part in a discussion of MVD reform, in which he declared that the work of the ministry needed serious corrections. The announcement was soon followed by deeds. On 18 February the president fired 16 high-level police officials and ordered a thorough restructuring of the ministry.

The reform of the MVD, which is, after all, an institution that is one of the power ministries, has had public consequences that the president probably did not expect. On 25 February two people driving in a small Citroen were killed in a head-on collision with the armored Mercedes of a Lukoil vice president. The police quickly decided that the blame lay with the victims. Thereupon, the famous rapper Noize MC posted a video on the Internet, in which he attacked both the police and Lukoil. The video drew 600,000 hits in just a few days. The media followed up with its own criticism and the president ordered the police to investigate the incident again. Shortly thereafter, on 5 March, a video showed how the Moscow police forced motorists at night to form a road block on the ring road in order to catch a car thief. The drivers were allowed to sit in their cars even though they were in danger. Again, the Internet took up the case of the “living shield” and ultimately attracted media attention to the issue. What was remarkable in these events was that conflict with the police spilled over to the public sphere and that the extent of criticism voiced on the Internet definitely was not to the Medvedev administration’s liking. When Noize MC at the end of his video called on people to stop the “highway killers with special license plates and flashing lights,” it amounted to an attack on the prevailing social order.

Great Expectations

The modernization campaign, which Medvedev initiated in September 2009, began to take shape in 2010. Certainly there are few concrete results, but they were not to be expected. A reconstruction of the state appa-

ratus, the modernization of the economy and the fight against corruption take time. Some progress has been made in restructuring the Interior Ministry. The suicide bomb attacks in the Moscow metro on 29 March, shook the public, but they have not brought an end to the reforms.

Still, the questions remain of where the modernization program will lead and who will support it. The modernization policy does not seek to mobilize the public and does not include plans for democratization. Even though some analysts see such political reforms as necessary in Russia today (see, for example, the publications of the Institute of Contemporary Development – INSOR), this is not the intention of the administration. However, there are increasingly critical voices on the Internet, which are featured in the media if they coincide with the objectives of Medvedev’s policy. But still no opening of the political system is sought. The Putin-Medvedev tandem seeks a functioning power vertical with a loyal corps of governors, flanked by legislatures, under the tight control of the managed party system. There is no room for initiatives from below.

At the same time, there is a hidden agenda. In spring 2012 a new president will be elected. Medvedev has made clear that he imagines a second term of office for himself. Putin also has not ruled out that he might again serve as president. The decision will be taken in the second half of 2011. Thus, the various interest groups are seeking to use the reform policy enacted in 2010 to gain the best possible position for 2011. So the modernization policy is also about forging alliances and weakening potential adversaries. Democracy is not a consideration here.

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Analysis

Understanding Recent Developments in Russia's Political System

By Robert W. Orttung, Washington

Abstract

Russia's political institutions have increasingly diverged from democratic standards in recent years. Observing these changes, political scientists have put forward a variety of analytical tools useful for describing Russia's current political system. After briefly summarizing the trends in Russia's recent political development and efforts to interpret them, this article argues that the best way to understand the system is as an authoritarian one defined by the lack of an opposition, difficulties recruiting new leaders, and an increasingly brittle information-gathering process.

Overall Decline in Democratic Institutions

Russia's democratic institutions have experienced an overall decline during the last 10 years, as measured by Freedom House's Nations in Transit Index. The drop is across the board, including electoral processes, national governance, civil society, media, local governance, the judiciary, and corruption. However, the most dramatic decline is in the country's electoral process. While elections are far from being the sole element in a democratic system, they play a central role in defining the nature of the regime and deserve special attention.

Federal Elections

After each successive round of parliamentary and presidential elections, the Russian leadership has fine tuned the electoral system to improve its ability to control electoral outcomes. In the first amendment to the constitution adopted in 1993, the leaders pushed through changes in December 2008 that extended the presidential term from four to six years and lengthened State Duma terms in office from four to five years. Presumably, this change was made to benefit Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. If he decides to return to the presidential office, the newly-amended constitution would allow him to remain in office for an additional 12 years, assuming he wins reelection.

In addition to amending the constitution, Russia's leaders have frequently rewritten the electoral law. Most importantly, reforms replaced the previous system of electing the lower house of the federal parliament through half party-list seats and half single-member districts with a system that now relies exclusively on party lists. Additionally, the authorities increased the threshold number of votes a party needs to enter the parliament from five percent to seven percent. Since Russia currently only has seven registered parties that are able to compete for these seats, the effect has been that four parties are currently represented in the legislature. In

addition to the official Kremlin party, United Russia, two of the other parties consistently support the authorities – Just Russia and Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The Kremlin set up Just Russia as an officially-sponsored alternative to United Russia and the LDPR consistently votes with the authorities. The Communists are often critical of United Russia, but their appearance as heir to the defunct Communist Party of the Soviet Union dooms their future prospects. Accordingly, Communist criticism of the elites in power only “further legitimizes that elite by enabling it to appear tolerant of criticism,” according to Sergei Peregudov, a historian at the Academy of Sciences' IMEMO.

Regional Elections

At the regional level, a key feature of the Putin-era reforms was to replace direct gubernatorial elections with presidential appointments. During the period 1996–2004, Russia elected its governors directly. Such elections were an anomaly in Russian history, throughout which central leaders appointed regional representatives.

The practical consequence of appointing the governors from 2005 onward was to make the federal authorities directly responsible for what happens at the regional level in Russia. So now when people express anger at what is taking place they are as likely to target the federal leadership, typically Putin, as the appointed governor. The January demonstration that brought approximately 10,000 protesters onto the street in Kaliningrad foreshadowed a number of similar events across the country, though none as large as what took place in Russia's northwestern exclave. In Moscow and other cities, the authorities used police force to control many of the street demonstrations. These demonstrators were angry about local price hikes, but often included calls for Putin's resignation among their demands.

While only a few are willing to participate in such protests, currently there is strong support for restoring gubernatorial elections. According to Levada Center public opinion polls, 57 percent support the return of such elections, 20 percent prefer the current practice, and 23 percent had no opinion.

Russia's recent regional and local elections have also proven controversial. After United Russia won an overwhelming 70 percent of the seats up for election in the October 2009 electoral cycle, the three other parties in the parliament staged a walkout. Although the protest did not result in any changes, it drew attention to the perceived illegitimate nature of the voting. Indeed, according to Central Electoral Commission statistics, the authorities removed from the ballot 54 percent of the Patriots of Russia candidates, 26 percent of the Right Cause candidates, and 33 percent of the Yabloko candidates while denying registration to only 0.5 percent of United Russia candidates.

The March 2010 regional and local elections gave the ruling party a similar 68 percent of the seats up for election, but perceptions about the elections differed greatly this time because United Russia won less than 50 percent of the vote in the proportional representation section of the ballot in four of the eight regional legislatures that were being contested. Ironically, the authorities sought to manipulate the ballot as much in March 2010 as they did in October 2009, but the usual techniques did not work as well against voters determined to signal a protest. For example, in the Irkutsk mayoral elections, when the United Russia-backed candidate Sergei Serebrennikov was trailing behind his opponent Anton Romanov (also a United Russia member, but running without official endorsement), the city's electoral committee removed Romanov 10 days before the vote, claiming that he had not collected enough valid signatures. The result was that most voters shifted their backing to Communist candidate Viktor Kondrashov, who won a surprising 63–27 percent victory.

Reform Proposals

In recent months, there have been several proposals to reform Russia's political system, but little sign that they will be enacted soon. In January, the Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR) issued a report that proposed restoring many of the democratic institutions that had been changed during the Putin era. For example, these proposals included reducing the presidential term to five years, restoring the single-member districts used in State Duma elections, moving the barrier for political parties to enter the State Duma down

to 4 percent, and allowing the residents of regions to directly elect their governors and senators. While this report was widely discussed shortly after it was released, its proposals have not been taken up as a basis for reform.

Similarly the State Council held an unprecedented session on January 22, 2010, to discuss political reform. The meeting had been convened by Medvedev, but unexpectedly was joined by Putin at the last minute. Putin evidently sought to slow the reform process by stressing the need for "healthy conservatism" and a desire to avoid "Ukrainization" of Russian politics.

While Medvedev and Putin often seem to express different ideas, they are united in both words and deeds when it comes to political reform. So far, the only reforms that they have accepted do not address the central features of the current system. For example, both Putin and Medvedev have rejected the idea of restoring direct gubernatorial elections.

Analyses of the Current Political System

Russian and Western observers of the Russia political system have put forward a variety of interpretations of the current Russian political system. These analyses each provide unique insights into understanding how the current Russian political system functions today. The following section provides an overview of the existing literature and then proposes a framework for understanding the events described above.

The first set of explanations falls within the hybrid regimes approach. This approach describes Russia's political system as highly centralized and replacing gutted democratic institutions with substitutions that serve the function of democratic institutions but do not challenge the incumbents' hold on power. Within this framework, Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman, and Henry Hale describe Russia as an "overmanaged democracy" in which leaders have to exert manual control in order to ensure the regime's survival. This system is more likely to achieve the population's social ideals than one that relies on repression, they argue. A *Slavic Review* article by Timothy Colton and Hale argues that Putin wins votes because voters essentially agree with his policies, respect his leadership qualities, and admire his ability to project competence. Ultimately, the authors argue, Putin and Medvedev must appeal to the electorate to beat their opponents at the polls.

A second approach, developed by Vladimir Gel'man, refers to the existing system as one of "non-democratic consolidation." According to this form of analysis, Russia has elections that are free but not fair. There is limited electoral competition, but not enough to re-

place the existing elite. In contrast to the hybrid regimes approach, which sees the current system as unstable, this approach focuses more on the longevity of the status quo.

A third perspective emphasizes “authoritarian state building.” This approach focuses on applying repressive tools, ensuring elite unity, and maintaining a ruling party that shapes the political environment as keys to building non-democratic governments. By emphasizing these factors, this approach serves to correct other analyses that instead stress components like civil society and democratic institution building.

A fourth approach focuses on the importance of “virtual politics.” With a largely passive electorate, the elite can control information flows in a way to manipulate how voters perceive current events. Manipulating information makes it possible for the elites to maintain their hold on power.

A fifth approach claims that Russian elections are largely the product of fraud. In their book *The Forensics of Election Fraud*, Mikhail Myagkov, Peter C. Ordeshook, and Dimitri Shakin, for example, claim to have identified 10 million suspect votes in the 2004 presidential and 2007 State Duma elections and assert that the 2008 presidential election was so fraudulent as to not even merit analysis as an election. Their investigation, in particular, points to the implausibly high turnouts in the North Caucasus republics, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan as indicating vote rigging. The Russian authorities lent credibility to assertions of fraud when they imposed such strict conditions on OSCE monitors that the organization ultimately refused to send observers to the 2007 State Duma and 2008 presidential elections.

Finally, in stark contrast to the other approaches, the Russian authorities claim that the existing system is democratic. In a book examining the winners and losers of the controversial October 11, 2009, regional elections Igor Borisov, a member of the Central Electoral Commission, wrote “With the adoption of the 12 December 1993 Constitution, the Russian Federation began to form a contemporary democratic electoral system. During recent years, the institution of elections was built organically in the Russian social-political system as a real acting mechanism for the realization of popular power at all levels – from local self-government to the federal organs of state power.”

A Framework for Analysis

Each of these approaches points to different elements of the regime which, to a greater or lesser extent, define its

main characteristics. They provide a useful set of concepts to explain the political evolution described above.

In developing a framework for analysis, it makes sense to start with the observation that the current regime is authoritarian in nature since it seeks to control all of the key political institutions. It has concentrated power in the national executive, particularly in the prime minister’s office. Most crucially, the leadership works hard to eliminate any form of uncertainty during the conduct of Russian elections.

A second defining feature is the lack of a viable opposition with access to the political system through which people can articulate and consolidate their policy desires. The lack of an effective opposition makes it difficult for the population to conceive of a realistic alternative to the current authorities. In the absence of an opposition, voters can only lodge a protest vote by supporting whomever happens to be running against the United Russia candidate.

A third feature emphasizes the current regime’s difficulties in renewing itself. Elections serve the purpose of helping to identify and promote new leaders. By running for office and proposing new solutions to society’s problems, young people can bring themselves to the attention of the wider public while gaining useful governing experience at the local and regional levels. Ultimately such leaders are able to seek federal office and present themselves as an alternative to the existing leaders. However, in the absence of free and fair elections, the Russian authorities have to rely on other forms of leadership recruitment, such as the creation of a presidential cadre reserve, similar to the Soviet-era Nomenklatura system, as a way of identifying and promoting new leaders. Such a system is not likely to promote *politicians* who can articulate and integrate various interests. More likely, it will advance *bureaucratic managers* who have support from existing leaders. While Medvedev has lately revived the use of the reserve, an analysis of similar practices during Putin’s first term as president concluded that they served to consolidate authoritarian rather than democratic systems.

Finally, the regime is defined by its need to gather information. Russia’s federal leadership must have accurate data on the preferences of the population in order to ensure that its policies and performance in delivering public services are sufficient to prevent an outbreak of unrest. Given the controlled nature of Russian elections and the limited nature of political discussion in the broadcast and print media, the authorities have to look to other sources for information about what is happening in the country. In the absence of a free me-

dia, this information typically comes from the special services and bureaucratic organizations, though today the lively discussions on the Internet are also a useful source. Additionally, the authorities have access to sophisticated public opinion polling provided by a variety of agencies, including some who work directly for

the state and at least one that is independent. To date, the authorities have been relatively effective at addressing popular concerns while also deploying police forces against any street protesters that appear, preventing unmet demands from boiling over into regime-threatening instability.

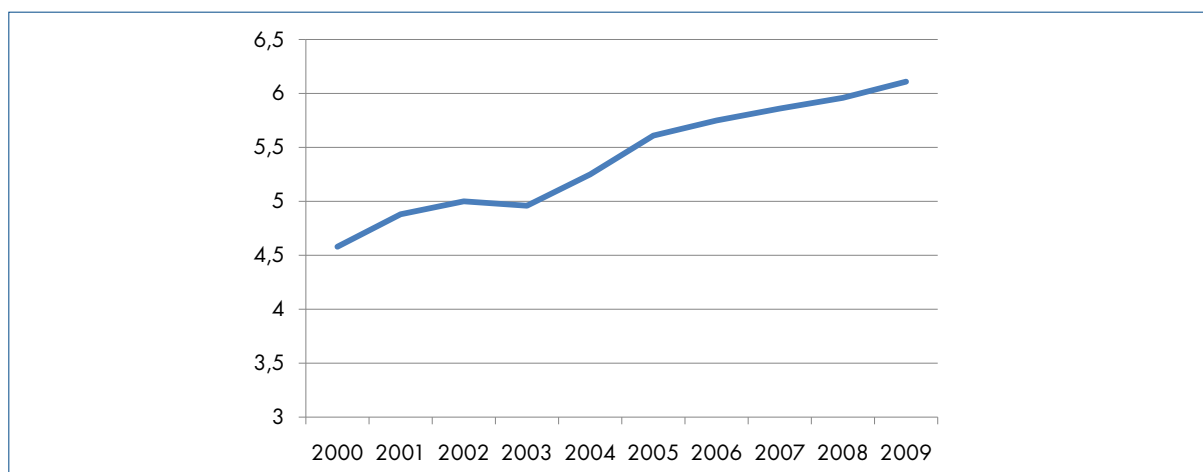
About the Author

Robert W. Orttung is a visiting fellow at the Center for Security Studies of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and the president of the Resource Security Institute.

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Freedom House Democracy Scores for Russia 2000–2009



NB.: lower scores = more democratic; see overleaf for detailed scores

Source: Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org

Table

Freedom House Nations in Transit Scores for Russia 2000–2009

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Electoral Process	4	4.25	4.5	4.75	5.5	6	6.25	6.5	6.75	6.75
Civil Society	3.75	4	4	4.25	4.5	4.75	5	5.25	5.5	5.75
Media	4.75	5.25	5.5	5.5	5.75	6	6	6.25	6.25	6.25
Governance	4.5	5	5.25	5	5.25	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
National Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.75	6	6	6.25	6.5
Local Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75
Judicial	4.25	4.5	4.75	4.5	4.75	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.5
Corruption	6.25	6.25	6	5.75	5.75	5.75	6	6	6	6.25
Democracy Score	4.58	4.88	5	4.96	5.25	5.61	5.75	5.86	5.96	6.11

NB.: lower scores = more democratic

Source: Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org

Analysis

Contemporary Regional Politics in Russia: A Chronicle of Degradation

By Grigorii Golosov, St. Petersburg

Abstract

When Putin cancelled the gubernatorial elections, he changed the way regional politics operate, but did not fundamentally transform the system in which the governor is the predominant actor at the regional level. The combination of gubernatorial elections and proportional representation at the regional level had been starting to build a political process of compromise among various parties, but the cancellation of the gubernatorial elections prevented these processes from evolving further. Now, the governors have a strong political interest in making sure that United Russia wins as many seats as possible. However, at the Kremlin's orders, they must do so in a way that gives the electoral process the appearance of legitimacy.

Cancelling Governors' Elections

On 14 September 2004, immediately after the terrorist attack in Beslan and its bloody outcome, Vladimir Putin announced that "compassion alone is insufficient, it is necessary to act," and called for a "fundamental restructuring" of the operational mechanism of governmental authority in Russia. The most important and far-reaching of his recommendations was the cancellation of direct gubernatorial elections. The new order came into effect at the beginning of 2005. Under the current system, the president of Russia proposes the appointment of governors. Once the nomination is made, the regional legislature must approve the candidate. If the legislature votes against the president's recommen-

dation, then it would have the opportunity to vote for the same or different candidate twice more. If the governor is not confirmed after three votes, the president has the right to disband the legislature. In this case, he would then, at his discretion, appoint an acting governor who would take over as the regional executive. In practice, such a scenario has never taken place. As a rule, the legislatures confirm the candidates proposed to them by an overwhelming majority and frequently unanimously. In this sense, the right of the legislature to confirm the presidential appointees does not have real political consequences.

The new system of appointing governors has seriously affected the internal political life of the regions,

but did not change it in a fundamental way. By the fall of 2004, in the majority of Russian regions, the governors were the dominant political actors. Cases in which they lost the elections were becoming rarer and regions lacked political institutions with similar weight that could serve as checks and balances against their power. The regional legislatures lost their political significance in the second half of the 1990s. In the first half of the 2000s, they consisted, as a rule, of representatives of the local administrations and business elites. The basic goal of these members was to lobby their own material interests in the corridors of the executive branch. The governors controlled the most important media and the vast majority of regional political regimes were authoritarian in character.

It is important to note that the curtailment of democracy at the regional level took place before the authoritarian turn in Russian federal politics. The Duma elections of 2003 were significantly more democratic than the regional elections that took place from 2000 through the first half of 2003. Moreover, in 2002, the federal center initiated an important reform which could have led to a democratization of regional political life: it adopted a law according to which the regions should elect no less than one-half the members of the regional legislatures, or one of its chambers, by the proportional representation system. And, in fact, the elections of the regional legislatures which took place from December 2003 to Spring 2005 demonstrated a significant revival of political life in the regions. The representation of political parties grew significantly, and this trend affected not only United Russia, but many other parties as well, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the Union of Right Forces, Yabloko, Rodina, and the Party of Pensioners.

Changing Regional Practices

This does not mean that the governors gave up their positions as the most important political actors in the regions. The real result of the reform was that the governors could no longer maintain control over the regional legislatures simply by satisfying the lobbying demands of the local economic groups. Coalition politics was now at the top of the agenda, requiring pre-electoral agreements between the governors and various political parties. Typically, even then the governors made their main bet on United Russia. But many of them followed a more complex strategy, supporting other parties, and in several cases, creating their own electoral blocs, which participated in the elections alongside United

Russia. As a result, the governors continued to maintain political control over the legislatures, but now at the basis of this control lay coalitional coordination and compromises. In the future, this path could have led to the democratization of regional political life.

The cancellation of the gubernatorial elections cut off these progressive tendencies since they did not figure in the federal government's political strategy. One of the most important consequences of the new format of regional politics was that, although the influence of United Russia in the regions had grown, the level of its electoral support did not meet the expectations of the Russian political leadership regarding the State Duma elections of 2007. These elections had enormous significance for the question of Putin's succession since he had reached the end of his second term as president and could not participate in the next presidential election. This meant that the candidate who ran for president had to be a politician who was deliberately weak, not widely known, and not in possession of great political resources. If he did have such resources, he would be a threat to Putin, who did not plan to give up real power. In these conditions, it was extremely important that United Russia did not simply win the State Duma elections, but that it did so in a landslide against all other competitors. In the run up to the presidential elections, the State Duma elections had to demonstrate a clear national consensus. However, the results of the regional elections of 2003–2005, when the share of voters who backed United Russia varied from 25 to 30 percent, did not promise such an outcome.

The previous federal elections, both in 1999 and 2003 demonstrated that the governors wielded colossal resources for influencing the results of the voting. This is not surprising. The regional leaders perform the basic organizational functions in elections, effectively controlling the system of electoral commissions. Accordingly, the key to realizing Putin's strategy in the 2007 and 2008 elections was creating conditions in which the governors' interest in political survival was directly tied to the electoral success of United Russia. Such was the goal of the new system for appointing governors. First, the Kremlin was exclusively responsible for nominating candidates for governors' posts. Therefore, United Russia's electoral results could be one of the criteria for evaluating the incumbents. Now the federal government could simply remove governors in regions where United Russia did not perform well. Second, the participation of the regional legislatures in the process of appointing governors meant that it no longer made sense to engage in coalitional politics. The governors

now had a direct incentive to secure a majority in the regional legislatures for United Russia.

United Russia Predominant

Today, it is clear that the federal government's strategy seeking to direct the election activities of the governors in favor of United Russia was a complete success. Beginning in 2005 there was a transition in the level of support the party received in regional elections. In order to achieve that breakthrough, the federal government had to take several additional steps: banning electoral blocs, dismantling the Rodina party and Party of Pensioners, and removing the ability of voters to vote "against all," an option that up to 15 percent of regional voters were choosing. Of course, the determining factor was that now the governors bore personal political responsibility for the results of United Russia.

It is clear that in cancelling the governors' elections, the federal government did not have any particular concern for the consequences for regional politics as such. Extensive personnel turnover among the governors was not planned and did not take place. Immediately after the introduction of the new system, many of the governors began to appeal to Putin to be reappointed and such requests were generally granted. During 2005 and 2006, the president made 53 appointments, and this list only included 14 newcomers, while the others simply continued to carry out their duties. This personnel continuity makes sense since it is hard to imagine that newly appointed governors would be able to deliver the necessary results in federal elections as successfully as seasoned veterans of regional politics. The governors who lost their posts were generally governors who came to power with the support of the Communist Party or preserved their ties to the opposition or those who had lost control over the situation in their regions. In 2007 the number of governors who lost their posts grew. In particular, the governors of Smolensk and Yaroslavl oblasts were fired following the poor showing of United Russia for the Duma elections in their regions.

Thus the result of the reform of the regional political systems was a return to the configuration of 2000–2003: a monopolistic model of authority which completely concentrated power in the hands of the governors, leaving weak legislatures, media and civil society institutions. Regional authoritarianism was fully incorporated into the structure of national authoritarianism. At the same time, the situation deteriorated in several respects. One example is the system of controlling the regional legislatures. In 2000–2003, when elections were conducted on a non-party basis, the governors did not

have to exert special efforts to secure the victory of the candidates they preferred. Often it was enough to simply announce support for these candidates and the candidates' own resources would be sufficient for success.

Now, when these elections are held partially or fully on the basis of party lists, and the significance of these elections has grown, such a model is no longer sufficient. Therefore the administrative machines for voting and falsifying the results of elections, which were created for achieving the success of United Russia in 2007 and Medvedev in 2008 were not dismantled after achieving their political goals. Instead they were used in full force in the regional elections. Now the governors were guided not only by their desire to demonstrate their loyalty to the federal government, but their own political considerations.

Controlling Regional Elections

It is well known that before every series of regional elections (they take place in March and October of every year), the Kremlin, through the Presidential Administration's Chief Department of Domestic Politics, informs the regional authorities their impressions of what kind of results United Russia should achieve in each particular region. It is assumed that a performance significantly below these thresholds could cost the governor his position. Frequently, however, the governors strive to not only achieve their planned target, but to over fulfill them. Their own political interests drive these efforts. First, according to the practice in place before the cancellation of gubernatorial elections, all significant financial industrial groups and all important institutional clients of the governor (such as major universities) should have their own representatives in the regional legislatures. Earlier such representation was achieved on a non-party basis. Now the situation is such that the only way to ensure continued representation is to increase the number of seats allocated to United Russia. Other parties are simply not appropriate as channels for such representation. Second, these parties are not always viewed as sufficiently loyal to the governors and sometimes are in conflict with them. The conclusion which many governors draw from this constellation of conditions is that it is necessary at any price to win as many seats as possible for United Russia.

The apotheosis of such an approach was the regional elections which took place on 11 October 2009 in three regions – Moscow, Marii El, and Tula. According to the evaluations of many observers, these elections were characterized by massive abuses on the part of the authorities, expressed in the failure to register many op-

position candidates, the absence of conditions under which they could conduct an electoral campaign, and outright falsifications. It is impossible to say that these abuses were unprecedented. Several of the elections that took place in March 2009 were not much better. The difference, however, was in October 2009 the desire of the governors to guarantee the best results for United Russia led to very few seats for all the other parties. Moreover, LDPR and Just Russia won representation in only one region each.

The outcome of the regional elections led the opposition in the State Duma to stage a protest, which achieved national political significance. This protest drew the attention of the press to the massive falsifications in the elections. It seems that these consequences contradicted the plans of the Kremlin. The results of the elections that will take place in 2011 and 2012 are largely predetermined and the risks are much less serious than four years ago. In these conditions, the primary concern of the Kremlin is the legitimacy of the elections. An important factor determining the legitimacy is the participation in them of the official opposition parties. Their role in the contemporary political system is not great, but their complete marginalization and alienation from the system is not in the Kremlin's plans. In any case, it finds unacceptable a situation in which the stability of the political system in general is undermined by risks associated with the situational political interests of the governors.

In these conditions, it appears that the Kremlin gave the regional authorities a direct order to not use so many

crude and obvious forms of falsifications. This had an immediate impact on the results of the regional elections which took place on 14 March 2010. The level of United Russia's success fell significantly since in four of the eight regions where elections were held, it did not reach 50 percent of the vote and only scored an average of 50.6 percent. In contrast, the Communists' performance was much better than in previous elections conducted on the basis of party lists. On average it won 19.7 percent of the vote, and more than 20 percent in four of the regions. Just Russia and the LDPR were less successful, but they did win representation in all of the regions being contested. However, the elections did not change the overall political situation because in all regions United Russia managed to preserve a legislative majority due to the support of the winners in the single-member districts.

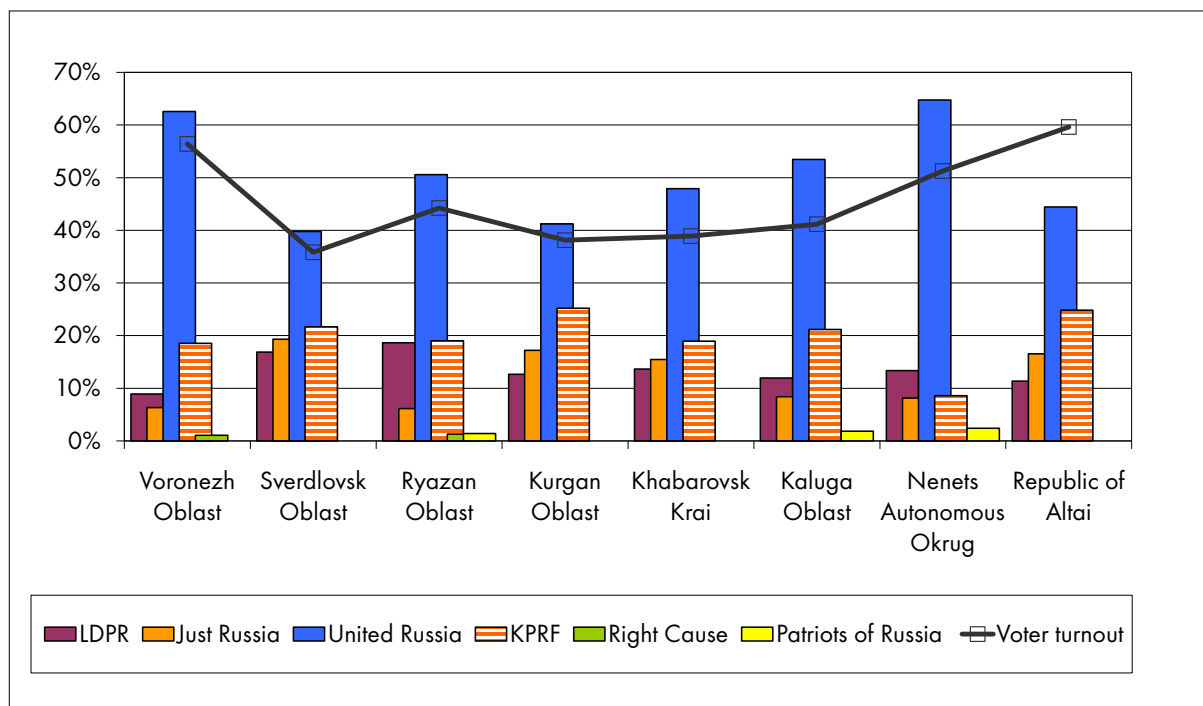
This outcome does not provide the basis for optimism. A situation in which the Kremlin must directly intervene in order to preserve an appearance of democracy in the elections demonstrates the deep degradation of regional politics in Russia. All elements of open public competition have been removed. Conflicts continue but they are not carried out and resolved in the electoral arena; rather they are addressed in the difficult process of interaction between the federal center and the regional influence groups, which is carefully hidden from the public.

About the Author

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Table and Diagram

Results of the Elections in Eight Regions on 14 March 2010



	Voronezh Oblast	Sverdlovsk Oblast	Ryazan Oblast	Kurgan Oblast	Khabarovsk Krai	Kaluga Oblast	Nenets Auto-nomous Okrug	Republic of Altai
LDPR	8.93 %	16.88 %	18.65 %	12.66 %	13.63 %	11.93 %	13.35 %	11.37 %
Just Russia	6.32 %	19.30 %	6.15 %	17.20 %	15.45 %	8.40 %	8.14 %	16.52 %
United Russia	62.55 %	39.79 %	50.58 %	41.23 %	47.93 %	53.45 %	64.76 %	44.43 %
KPRF	18.52 %	21.69 %	19.01 %	25.21 %	18.93 %	21.17 %	8.57 %	24.83 %
Right Cause	1.06 %		1.29 %					
Patriots of Russia			1.39 %			1.86 %	2.40 %	
Voter turnout	56.39 %	35.83 %	44.23 %	38.14 %	38.92 %	41.15 %	51.25 %	59.63 %

Source: data provided by the regional electoral commissions, accessed on 23 March 2010: <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2042000164954®ion=2&prver=1&pronetvd=1>; <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2662000289582®ion=66&prver=0&pronetvd=null>; <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2892000193027®ion=89&prver=0&pronetvd=0>; <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2402000155518®ion=40&prver=0&pronetvd=null>; <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2272000245817®ion=27&prver=1&pronetvd=1>; <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2362000269056®ion=36&prver=0&pronetvd=0>; <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2622000248614®ion=62&prver=1&pronetvd=1>; <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&vrn=2452000334020®ion=45&prver=0&pronetvd=0>.

About the Russian Analytical Digest

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