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FROM A PSEUDO-SYSTEM TOWARDS FRAGMENTATION

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BRIEFING PAPER 34, 16 June 2009



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
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THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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FROM A PSEUDO-SYSTEM TOWARDS FRAGMENTATION



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- The key player in the Russian party system is the executive power and the presidential administration. The so-called party of power, United Russia, is its major instrument. Its main function is to guarantee the adoption of the bills initiated by the executive power in the State Duma. United Russia is a quasi-dominant party and cannot control the executive power.
- Political parties in the State Duma are not independent political actors. A partial exception is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – the only opposition party in the federal parliament and the only party having a real party organization in all federation subjects.
- The opposition outside the State Duma is still marginal, supported by very few Russians. Oppositional groups offer very different perspectives for Russia's development. The only thing that unites the opposition is its anti-regime nature: it is against the current political system, the power vertical.
- The potential political consequences of the economic crisis or threat thereof (destabilization, divisions in the elite), Medvedev's declared interest in a certain liberalization of society, and the potentially strengthening political opposition (without representation in the State Duma) all call for changes in the party system.
- If the economic crisis does not turn into a large-scale political crisis and Medvedev stays on as president, we can expect moderate liberalization of the party system by the end of 2012. This would mean a more fragmented party system and a State Duma with more parties than today. It would also require further amendments to the laws on political parties and on elections. The future of the party system is tied to the future of the political system as a whole, and the ruling elite are determined to keep their controlling grip – even if it is loosened – on the political parties.
- Actors outside Russia should maintain or try to establish good relations with as many different Russian political actors as possible (both loyal and disloyal to the current ruling elite). Significant actors in the future party system may emerge from any of these groups.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs
Russia in the Regional and Global Context Programme



Photo: www.kremlin.ru

Stability has not been characteristic of the Russian party system: political parties have appeared and disappeared between the federal elections, both politicians and the electorate have changed their affiliation, and legislation regarding political parties and elections has been amended. During the 2000s, the party system has also undergone significant changes. Both the changed political culture and the creation of Putin's power vertical have required – and enabled – a stronger control of the party system by the executive power. We can even argue that the most important actor in the party system is the executive power and, in particular, the presidential administration. The parliamentary tool in the hands of the executive power is the United Russia Party, which received the majority of the seats in the State Duma in the last two elections in 2003 and 2007, and thus ensured a smooth process for adopting the bills prepared by the president, the presidential administration or the government. Economic growth and the popularity of Mr Putin have secured the survival of the current party system as part of the power vertical but now, with the consequences of the economic crisis and with a president more liberal in his rhetoric than his predecessor, there are expectations, and even some signs, of the liberalization of the party system.

Pseudo-party system

Formally, political parties play an important role in the Russian political system because State Duma deputies are elected exclusively from party lists. In order to participate in the federal parliamentary elections, a party should get an official registration as the law on elections, amended in 2005, requires. In addition, political parties must pass the 7% threshold and they can no longer form election blocs in order to get seats in the Duma. Since the passage of the party bill (2001) and its amendments (2004), a political party should have had at least 50,000 members and branches in no less than half of the 83 federation subjects in order to get the required registration. It seems that during Putin's presidency the purpose was to erase from public politics all other political parties except those which were loyal to the executive power. This was executed by amending the above mentioned legislation and by administratively interfering in the election campaign and election process (interference extending to the level of the despotism of the bureaucracy). Consequently, only four political parties are now represented in the State Duma, two of which were created by the presidential administration during Putin's presidency: United Russia (315 seats; according to their own estimation,

approximately 2 million members) and Just Russia (38 seats), the other two being the most long-lived Russian parties (represented in the State Duma since the 1993 elections): the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. Only one of them can, however, be classified as an opposition party, namely the Communist Party.

The main architect of the current party system has been Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head of the presidential administration. His ideal would have been a party system with one dominant party in the centre (United Russia) and loyal satellite parties on the left and right (Just Russia and Right Cause). This plan has not been fully implemented. It should not have required any other parties like the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party. However, the Kremlin, together with these parties and their leaders, Gennadi Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, has found a way to come to an agreement; these parties have known which decisions and persons they could criticize and which not.

The parties created by the initiative from the presidential administration are not – unsurprisingly – independent political subjects in the sense that their party organizations would make decisions independently. Instead, there is a widespread belief that their agenda and voting behaviour are guided, if not controlled, from above – from the presidential administration and partly from the governor's office in the regions. The parliamentary majority in the State Duma has no control over the executive, rather it is vice versa: the executive controls the legislative with the help of United Russia. United Russia could not survive without support from the executive power because it has no independent authority in society, but its electoral success is mainly based on Putin's popularity, and economic growth – not to mention the above mentioned legislation and interference by the administration. A deeper analysis explaining United Russia's success due, for example, to the lack of a democratic tradition in Russia is beyond the scope of this paper. Accordingly, the so-called party of power, United Russia, is not a party in power, nor a dominant party as such. At best, it offers a place for negotiating between different interests of the ruling elite. As the party system is controlled by the executive power and there is no real free competition between political parties, the Russian

party system should be classified as a pseudo-party system.

The role of the economic crisis, Medvedev and opposition in the developments

Even though the developments in the Russian party system, or political system in general, are very difficult to predict, it can still be argued that Russia will most probably see a moderate liberalization of the current party system by 2012. This calls for a few words on three interdependent factors which will, among others, have an impact on the developments, namely the economic crisis and its social and political consequences; President Medvedev's views; and the strength of the political opposition.

Economic crisis and political consequences

The economic crisis makes it very difficult to continue exactly the same way as in the past. Of course, a lot depends on how widely and extensively Russian society will be touched by its consequences (the impact has already been felt by the middle class, in terms of growing unemployment, actual devaluation of the rouble, and so on), how long it will last and how successful the government policies will be in mitigating its consequences. Regarding the political consequences of the crisis, we should perhaps stress more the implications of the crisis for the elite, whose representatives are socially more active than those of the middle class.

So far we have seen very few public demonstrations on account of the crisis (in the Russian Far East they have been instigated due to the taxes on imported cars, the usual meetings of the Communist Party and those of Other Russia; United Russia has also tried to mobilize people for demonstrations in support of the government policies) and it has not had any significant impact on the popularity of Medvedev and Putin. Still, according to Levada Centre surveys, only 43% of Russians are happy with the direction the country is taking, in comparison with the figure of 59% only a year ago. Moreover, there is a public discussion going on about an alleged social contract between the elite and the masses during Putin's presidency, according to which Russians would have given up part of their political rights in exchange for better standards of living and economic growth. Now, due to the crisis, the contract is bound to be broken. It should also be mentioned that the



Demonstration of the Solidarity movement

Photo: Evgeniya Maslova

existence of such a contract would not be unique to Russia, but in paternalistic political cultures we can see similar paths of development, giving up rights for security, economic well-being etc. President Dmitry Medvedev and Deputy Head of the presidential administration Vladislav Surkov, not surprisingly, deny the existence of such a contract: economic well-being and political rights have not been traded, and democracy cannot be replaced by economic well-being or vice versa. All in all, we can suggest that the crisis may have given rise to nascent demands for interest representation in the State Duma from different social groups, including the middle class.

Even though United Russia was able to take the majority of seats in most of the regional and local parliaments in the elections on 1 March 2009, it lost on average 10% of the votes compared to the previous elections. Some United Russia members also ran as independents and thus hid their party affiliation. Voters expressed their dissatisfaction with United Russia by giving their vote to the Communist Party, even though they would not support the communists as such. (The Communist Party was able to attract 50–100% more votes, and other parties like Just Russia and Russia's Patriots increased their share of votes too). The Communist Party simply represented the only oppositional alternative available. This is what happened in Tver (the Communist victory in the election to the City Council of Tver), and it can be taken as the first evidence of the ruling elite's incapability of having total control over the system. During the election campaign we could also witness conflicts within United Russia, for example in

Murmansk between the governor and the local party structure (the governor eventually had to resign).

The ruling elite, or their tool in the parliament, United Russia, have also been forced to prepare themselves for the prospect of growing dissatisfaction and competition between ideas. They have now called for more openness and discussion, for which they had not been prepared before (for example, United Russia refrained from participating in any TV debates during the election campaigns). In addition, United Russia has changed its stance towards ideology (ideological debates have not figured before). Before the crisis, United Russians were about to accept social-conservatism as their ideology. The uncertainty brought about by the economic crisis, however, forced them to form three different discussion clubs: liberal conservative, social conservative and state patriotic. United Russia could refer to any one of these three ideologically different clubs depending on how the government's policies change vis-à-vis the economic crisis. At this point, United Russia cannot tie itself to any one ideology, but should be able to offer all possible alternatives and leave no room for potential competitors.

Even before the crisis, in spring 2008, a survey on Russian elites (not the narrow ruling elite, but the wider elite including actors from the state administration, defence and law enforcement, jurisprudence, business, health care, science and education, and the media) conducted by Nikkolo M Consulting Centre suggested that the majority of the Russian elites were not that happy with the power vertical, but argued for free elections, competition

in the economy and politics and thus also adaptation of the party system. It can be assumed that the economic crisis further increases dissatisfaction with the power vertical, and also creates more intra-elite conflicts. The differences in elite opinions are echoed in United Russia, too. United Russia politicians expressed contradictory views on the future of the country, for example in the Forum on the Strategy-2020 (a government development strategy for the country) in April 2009.

Medvedev and the “freedom” rhetoric

The future of power sharing between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin will have a significant impact on the future of the party system. Even though according to the Russian Constitution the president has the superior power over the prime minister (Russia is a (super-)presidential system), analysts have argued that Prime Minister Putin holds the power in practice, even when it comes to foreign policy. Even if Medvedev becomes an independent political actor, it does not guarantee liberalization of the political system, as this could also signal an end to the power vertical and the current leaders.

Yet, a modest – some say decorative – adaptation of the party system is already underway. In his Address to the Federal Assembly in November 2008, Medvedev suggested minor changes to the laws on political parties and on elections and these amendments have now been passed by the State Duma and the Federation Council. The party membership requirement will go down to 40,000 from 50,000 and parties which get 5–7% of the total vote may get one or two representatives in the State Duma. Medvedev has continued to stress that it is normal for legislation on elections, parties, and public organizations to be amended from time to time. He brought this up for example in his interview for an opposition newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, in April 2009. Giving this interview was interpreted as a sign of the democratic and liberal thinking of the Russian president as such, but can also be taken as merely paying lip service to those criticizing the state of Russian democracy both in Russia and abroad.

It is also worth mentioning that President Medvedev has said that he plans to make meetings with representatives of different political parties a regular event. So far he has met not only with United Russia but also with Just Russia, the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party. In these meetings,

Medvedev hinted at lowering the 7% threshold in the future and argued for the participation of all political parties in TV debates. One example indicating a more liberal attitude towards elections was the election for the mayor of Sochi – the host city of the Winter Olympics in 2014. Even though the United Russia candidate won (and the administration did everything in its power to disrupt campaigning by other candidates), the opposition candidate Boris Nemtsov from Solidarity was allowed to run for the position.

In addition to his ‘freedom-friendly’ rhetoric, President Medvedev is beset by analysts arguing for pluralism and such like. For example, in a report commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Development (President Medvedev is the head of its board and it is defined as his think tank), analysts argue that an innovative economy and political stability cannot be attained or maintained without competition of ideas and actors, that is, without liberalization of the party system, among other things.

One question remains, however, and it is whether the regime as a whole is prepared to lose total control over the party system and the electoral process, as this would open up a window of opportunity for the opposition. Something unexpected might happen as a result. We might also ask whether it is possible to liberalize only to a certain extent, or whether the liberalization would lead to further liberalization in all spheres of life, and whether this would inevitably lead to the collapse of the current political system.

The opposition – exclusion of too many groups from public politics?

As argued above, so far the exclusion of part of the population from public politics has not led to any major dissatisfaction (excluding political apathy) or massive demands for real interest representation. Still, a political opposition does exist in Russia. In addition to the Communist Party, the only opposition party having seats in the State Duma, there are a number of small groups (parties, movements) both to the left and the right of the ideological vector, including their extremes (such as the extreme right *Movement against illegal immigration*, DPNI, demanding Russia for Russians). What unites these groups is their opposition to those in power and the system of the power vertical, so they represent a systemic opposition. It has been widely argued that these groups enjoy very little authority or

popularity among Russians (partly because of the extremism of some oppositional groups). Based on this evaluation, it is unlikely that these groups could replace the current parties or become the driving force in replacing the current regime, although this cannot be ruled out entirely. In addition, whenever we rely on public opinion polls on the popularity of a given political group, we must also remember that most Russians receive their information from state-owned or controlled TV channels, and country-wide only 20 per cent regularly access the Internet, which would offer alternative sources of information.

The opposition includes groups which do not have official party registration or even seek as much, such as Garry Kasparov's *United Civil Front*, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov's *People's Democratic Party*, Eduard Limonov's now banned *National Bolshevik Party*, and also registered parties such as the *Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko*. Since late 2006 there has also been an umbrella organization called *Other Russia*, under which so-called dissidents' marches have been organized. In addition, the democratic side of the anti-regime opposition mobilized itself under the name *Solidarity* in late 2008. The anti-regime opposition has also formed an alternative parliament, the so-called *National Assembly* of the Russian Federation, which demands, among other things, the dismissal of the government and dissolution of the parliament.

If the opposition gains strength, the ruling power may give some leeway to some of its representatives in order to avoid its radicalization. If the current leadership refuses to engage the oppositional actors in dialogue – for example, the representatives of the opposition are claiming that the ruling power uses violence and the threat of violence against it (such as the recent allegations of aggression against communists made by the Communist Party against governors and local United Russia politicians during the 1 May demonstrations) – this might lead to undesirable political instability.

A moderate liberalization of the party system

If the economic crisis does not turn into a serious political crisis and Medvedev stays on as president, we can expect that the party system with most of the current political parties will last for a couple of years.

However, a gradual moderate liberalization of the party system will also develop. This would require amending the party and electoral laws once again so that more political parties would be able to register and compete for seats in the parliament. Thus, we can expect competition between ideas and wider public discussion in the future. After the next elections in 2011, or at least after the elections in 2016, Russia might have a more fragmented State Duma with the participation of a few smaller parties as well.

It is extremely difficult to predict which political parties will play a role in the future party system. It is possible that none of the existing ones will make it. If they do, they will have to modernize themselves. This has implications for the Communist Party, for example, which will have to attract a younger electorate too. However, the Communist Party is among the current parties which have some potential for the future, either in a more social democratic or in a more nationalist form. A more competitive system might also signal an end to United Russia, but United Russia's and Just Russia's politicians may serve as a basis for a new party of power (again a party from the right (centre) rather than a party from the left). Then again, United Russia may transform itself into a more ordinary political party. If surveys on the political orientations of Russians are anything to go by, in addition to a leftist party, there would certainly be a demand for a nationalist party, a 'centre' party for the middle class (national conservative, social democratic or moderate liberal) and a smaller liberal party.

Alternative scenarios to the moderate liberalization of the party system also exist: they assume no liberalization at all. One line of reasoning is that we may expect the status quo to continue for many years to come, either because the state manages to keep the masses and the elites happy and there will be no demands for more pluralism, or because Putin will hang on to the supreme power and it will not be in his (or his circle's) interests to change anything, including the party system.

Another way of seeing things is that there is sufficient evidence from the past to conclude that the party system cannot be adapted unless the whole political system changes. The current system – the power vertical – and the current pseudo-party system go hand in hand, and unless the current political system is replaced by another, nothing will change in the

party system either. But this logic implies that we should not rule out the total collapse of the party system together with the collapse of the regime of the power vertical. The latter cannot be totally excluded.

Despite the characteristics of the Russian party system and the political parties described above, it would be extremely advisable to maintain or establish relations with Russian political parties, organizations and movements, both loyal and disloyal to the regime. New significant political actors may rise from within these ranks, especially if the parties and the State Duma play a stronger role in the long run.

This Briefing Paper is based on expert opinions (in printed media and personal interviews from leading Russian research institutes such as the INDEM foundation, Centre for Political Technologies, Moscow Carnegie Center, statements by the president and the leaders of the presidential administration, leading politicians of different parties, public opinion polls by Levada Centre, Foundation of Public Opinion (FOM) and VTsIOM, and news materials from various media sources.

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ISBN 978–951–769–228–1
ISSN 1795–8059

Cover photo: Dmitry Azovtsev
Language editor: Lynn Nikkanen
Layout: Mari Pakarinen/Juvenes Print
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs 2009
www.upi-fia.fi