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Dollbaum, Jan Matti

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Party Politics in Russia: Two and a Half Scenarios

Jan Matti Dollbaum (University of Bremen)

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The conditions for institutionalized political competition in Russia have further deteriorated in recent years. Since 2021, the Russian regime has been on a trajectory from an “informational autocracy” (Guriev/Treisman 2022) to a more classical, repressive authoritarian regime. In a broad campaign that began before the full-scale invasion, the authorities have dismantled or outlawed oppositional organizations and the remaining independent media, have imprisoned or driven into exile virtually all prominent politicians of the non-systemic opposition, and have effectively introduced war censorship. Harnessing advanced technological solutions, the authorities in Moscow have created one of the most sophisticated systems of facial recognition, and the Kremlin recently pushed through “Fan ID,” a contested system of digital profiles of football fans, who had been one of the last uncontrolled organized collectives. Further to these general restrictions and increases in surveillance, the authorities have done much to undermine Alexey Navalny’s Smart Voting project, an idea that might have come to the rescue of party politics, as it increased the value of campaigning under a clearly identifiable opposition-party brand. Finally, the introduction of electronic voting has increased the potential for electoral falsifications to a whole new level.

Of no less importance are the signals that parties themselves have been sending to show that they have understood the signs of the times. All parliamentary parties except for “New People,” a pro-business party with purported Kremlin connections, have joined the choir of extreme nationalism, routinely spreading anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda, and moving domestic politics, where they have more scope to criti-

cize the government, to the back burner. Leonid Slutsky, leader of the LDPR since Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s death in 2022, has even suggested merging all opposition parties into a “party of victory” that would support “the implementation of the president’s sound instructions.” Gennady Zyuganov has made similar comments about a “Party of Russia” to which all “patriotic” forces would belong. Given all of the above, one might legitimately ask: is there room for any kind of party politics in Russia’s future?

Scenario 1: GDR-ization

The first scenario, as recently outlined by journalist and political observer Andrei Pertsev (2023), might be called “GDR-ization.” In this scenario, the parties would retain their formal labels (Putin has often criticized the single-party character of the Soviet regime) but would lose any trace of real—and, importantly, self-professed—autonomy, instead openly presenting themselves as a unified force of support for Putin and the state. In Pertsev’s short outline, the party system would have to be understood as a single political organism composed of actors that (profess to) represent different segments of the population but do not—even formally—engage in competition. In this scenario, elections are not focal points of contention or even a façade thereof, but rather moments of demonstrated societal unity.

A clear sign of such GDR-ization is that Putin himself seems to view it this way. In his address to the Federal Assembly in February 2023, he thanked all parliamentary parties for putting their disagreements behind them and helping the “patriotic movement,” including by providing supplies for the front. The model also

exists outside Putin's head. Supporting the statements of party leaders above, Pertsev cites a *Kommersant* piece noting that Duma's main task is the "legislative accompaniment" of the Ukraine invasion, with Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin declaring: "Regarding the special military operation, colleagues, we are in full agreement." A real change in the party system (for which GDR-ization may or may not be an appropriate term) would require more than a collection of statements. But it may well be that something *is* changing, and it is a fruitful task of empirical research to systematize this change.

Scenario 2: Reignited Party Competition

Even if not very likely at this point, there is a counter-scenario to the ever-closer union of Russian parliamentary parties. This argument comes from the path-dependent incentives generated by established party structures—however hollow they might be at the moment—in an overall volatile situation. Suppose that the overbearing dominance of President Putin begins to fade, perhaps because military defeat or economic decline erode people's willingness to tolerate him, or simply because he decides to step down. As is common in such situations, elites will begin placing their bets on a potential successor. If, in this process, they turn to the public arena in their attempts to establish new "pyramids" of power (Hale 2014) or to reshuffle existing ones, it would be rational for them to seek to capture parties and their established organizational structures.

It is difficult to provide evidence for this scenario because it relies upon a counterfactual: a decisive negative turn in Putin's ability to be an effective projection screen for the public and the central arbiter of elites. However, there is ample historical precedent for this in 1990s Russia, and some instances of party capture by

regional elites still occur (in the current context, however, without much consequence). Moreover, the fact that Evgeny Prigozhin has recently signaled interest in taking over the St. Petersburg branch of Just Russia—For Truth shows that to individuals with political aims, parties may appear as appropriate vehicles—just in case they might be needed in the future.

Conclusions

In the short term, a middle ground between these scenarios is the most likely. Full-fledged GDR-ization seems unattractive both for the regime and for the opposition parties. As long as subnational elections are being held, federal parties cannot fully assimilate if they want to retain some credibility and room for maneuver in their regional races. Meanwhile, for the regime, a party like the KPRF, which votes against the government from time to time, is likely preferable to a fully controlled one because its seeming independence makes its patriotic utterances appear more genuine.

Fundamental change in the direction of scenario 2 is, however, also unlikely: Putin's hold on power has not yet been endangered, despite all predictions that the war would spell "the beginning of the end of his regime." Indeed, sanctions have tied business even more closely to the state, while Putin has so far managed to thwart horizontal elite coordination by exploiting and furthering mutual mistrust, thus exacerbating their collective action problem. Consequently, parties might well continue to exist in their half-autonomous state, as nobody has the incentive to change a system that is still running. As Prigozhin's example suggests, however, some people might already be preparing for the future. As soon as things start moving, therefore, they might move quickly.

About the Author

Jan Matti Dollbaum is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Bremen. Starting in October 2023, he will lead a junior research group on party politics in post-Soviet Eastern Europe at LMU Munich.

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