

From 'Feckless Pluralism' to 'Dominant Power Politics'? The Transformation of Russia's Party System

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The transformation of Russia's party system demonstrates a trend towards a decrease in party competition since the establishment of the party of power, United Russia, which claims to have become the dominant party. These developments are unique among post-Soviet countries, which merely attempted to create personalist, rather than party-based, monopolies of ruling elites. Why have Russia's elites opted to build a party-based monopoly and what are the prospects of this enterprise? The formation of the ruling group's party-based monopoly is explained with the help of a part-contingent model of an interrelated chain of causes and effects: (1) open electoral conflict among elites; (2) forced instrumental use of political parties as tools by the elites, in this conflict; (3) elite conflict turned into a zero-sum game; (4) a set of incentives for the ruling elite to make further instrumental use of the party of power; (5) an effective constellation of ideological and organizational resources of the party of power. The article also analyses the benefits and risks of the dominance of the party of power and its possible role in the consolidation of a non-democratic regime in Russia, along lines comparable to the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico.

Key words: hybrid regimes; dominant party; party system; Russia; post-communism

Russia's Party System: Swings of the Pendulum

The formation of Russia's party system in the 1990s was part of the story of the country's protracted regime transition. This process, which includes multiple political and economic crises and intra-elite conflicts, has deeply affected major features of Russia's party system, namely, party fragmentation and electoral volatility. In a comparative perspective, party fragmentation is conventionally measured by the effective number of parties (and/or candidates), which can be seen as a quantitative indicator of supply on the electoral market.¹ Electoral volatility, in its turn, is an indicator of the stability of voter demand in an electoral market, and is measured as half of overall net change in support for political parties at parliamentary elections.²

A summary of the findings of several studies would show that Russia's party system in the 1990s demonstrated several distinctive features in comparison with post-communist party systems in Eastern Europe. First, Russia's party system was greatly fragmented, because all segments of Russia's electoral markets were

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over-supplied.³ Second, the high level of electoral volatility demonstrated great elasticity in voter demand, notwithstanding some trends towards the formation of clear party identification.⁴ Third, non-partisan politicians who possessed resources other than party support (mainly backed by regional and/or sectoral interest groups) also played a major role in national and especially sub-national electoral markets.⁵ For these reasons, Russia's party system is correctly regarded as unconsolidated. After the 1999–2000 national elections, some observers expressed the hope that the impact of institutional changes (the adoption of a law on political parties, the installation of mixed electoral systems in regional legislative elections), as well as the intensification of coalition politics, would help lead to a decrease in party fragmentation and electoral volatility in Russia's party system.⁶

The reality turned out differently. Although after the 2003–2004 parliamentary and presidential elections party fragmentation in Russia did indeed decrease, its political consequences went too far. Hyper-fragmentation and high competition in Russia's electoral market were replaced by trends towards a monopoly of the ruling elite. According to the data cited in Tables 1 and 2, the effective number of candidates in the 2004 presidential elections was 1.89, and effective number of legislative parties dropped to 1.97. This is a clear sign of the lack of meaningful competition or alternatives to the president and his electoral vehicle – the 'party of power'. In other words, all other parties and candidates taken together do not have enough potential to form a real alternative to the pro-governmental parliamentary majority and to the incumbent president. With this in mind, Russia's ruling group (which means the president and his Kremlin 'inner circle') has become a dominant actor in the country's politics, and the political regime has become mono-centric.⁷

TABLE 1
EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF PARTIES IN RUSSIA, 1993–2006

| Year | Electoral parties | Parliamentary parties |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1993 | 7.6 | |
| 1994–1995 | | 8.53 |
| 1995 | 10.7 | |
| 1996–1999 | | 5.7 |
| 1999 | 6.8 | |
| 2000–2001 | | 7.8 |
| 2001–2003 | | 4.7 |
| 2003 | 5.4 | |
| 2004–? | | 1.97 |

Notes: Electoral parties are calculated on the basis of party list voting. The effective number of parties and/or candidates is calculated as $N = 1 / \sum v_i^2$, where v is the share of votes (or seats) for each respective party and/or candidate. The effective number of electoral parties is based upon the results of respective State Duma elections, and the effective number of parliamentary parties is based upon the actual composition of parliamentary parties in the State Duma in respective years. In 2001–2003, after the establishment of UR, four parliamentary parties – Unity, Fatherland–All Russia, Regions of Russia and People's Deputy – are calculated as a single party.

TABLE 2
EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF CANDIDATES IN PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA, 1991–2004

| Election year | Effective number of candidates |
|---------------|--------------------------------|
| 1991 | 2.71 |
| 1996 | 3.89 |
| 2000 | 2.69 |
| 2004 | 1.89 |

In-depth analysis of the 2003 parliamentary election results in single-member districts demonstrates similar trends.⁸

As for the dynamics of electoral volatility, the increase in the 1990s was the result not of shifts in voter preferences but for the most part was due to permanent changes in the menu of political parties competing in elections.⁹ Because of this, changes in voting for 'party families' – ideologically similar parties forming different segments of Russia's electoral market – might be a more informative indicator of these changes. Scholars of Russian politics have conventionally defined four 'party families': liberals, nationalists, the left (Communists), and the party of power.¹⁰ Table 3 clearly shows that in the 1990s all segments of Russia's electoral market demonstrated a lack of stable electoral support. However, by 2003 the party of power had stabilized its nationwide electoral support, while in all other segments the instability of electoral support had even increased since the 1999 parliamentary elections.

Thus, the developmental trends in Russia's party system are similar to the swings of the pendulum. After the equilibrium of Soviet one-party rule, the party system changed to hyper-fragmentation and high volatility and then to hypo-fragmentation

TABLE 3
VOTING FOR 'PARTY FAMILIES' IN STATE DUMA ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA

| | Left | Liberals | Nationalists | Parties of power |
|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| 1993 | 20.3 | 34.3 | 22.9 | N/A |
| 1995 | 32.2 (+11.9) | 18.3 (–16.0) | 18.1 (–4.8) | 11.2 (N/A) |
| 1999 | 26.5 (–5.7) | 14.5 (–3.8) | 6.0 (–12.1) | 37.8 (+26.4) |
| 2003 | 16.5 (–10.0) | 8.3 (–6.2) | 20.5 (+14.5) | 40.7 (+2.9) |

Notes: Parties calculated on basis of party list voting. Figures are in percentage terms. Percentage change in votes for the party family compared with previous elections included in parentheses. Parties that received less than 1% of votes in party list voting are not counted.

Left parties: 1993 – KPRF, APR; 1995 – KPRF, APR, Communists – Working Russia – for the Soviet Union, Power to the People; 1999 – KPRF, Communists, Workers of Russia – for the Soviet Union; 2003 – KPRF, APR.

Liberals: 1993 – Russia's Choice, Yabloko, RDDR, PRES; 1995 – Yabloko, DVR-OD, Forward Russia!, PST, Pamfilova – Gurov – Vladimir Lysenko; 1999, 2003 – SPS, Yabloko.

Nationalists: 1993 – LDPR; 1995 – LDPR, Great Power, KRO; 1999 – LDPR (Zhirinovskii Bloc); 2003 – LDPR, Motherland.

Parties of power: 1995 – NDR, Ivan Rybkin Bloc; 1999 – Unity, OVR, NDR; 2003 – United Russia, PVR-PZh, NPRF.

and relatively high volatility against the background of the monopoly held by the party of power. These pendulum-like swings can be described within the framework of analysis of 'hybrid' regimes, which differ from both democracies and non-democratic regimes.¹¹ Following Carothers, a useful distinction can be drawn between two types of such 'hybrid' regimes, namely, 'feckless pluralism' and 'dominant power politics'.¹² In the former, the political regime is highly competitive, but its institutions are inefficient, mass support is lacking, and the regime (including its party system) is largely unstable. In the latter, political competition is low, and the ruling group permits open electoral contests as long as it does not challenge the positions of the dominant actor (who keeps strict control over state resources), while elections are unfair. In this respect, the transformation of post-communist Russia's party system is a typical case of movement away from the 'feckless pluralism' of the 1990s to 'dominant power politics' since then.

What might be the cause of these political changes? To some extent they were context-bounded. The failure of liberal parties, SPS (Union of Right Forces) and Yabloko to overcome the five per cent threshold in the 2003 parliamentary elections, as well the refusal of some potential candidates to run in the 2004 presidential elections, contributed greatly to the decline of competition on Russia's electoral market. However, the general trend was more systemic rather than a by-product of specific circumstances. Therefore, a more detailed search for explanations of the dynamics of Russia's party system is necessary.

Voters, Institutions, and the Electoral Market

In comparative studies, the emergence of various types of party systems is usually explained through the lenses of sociological or institutional theories. Sociological theories employ Lipset-Rokkan's concept of the key role of societal cleavages between different social groups in the process of party system formation. The 'freezing' of these cleavages reproduces a certain format of party system, depending upon the major lines of electoral conflict.¹³ Institutional theories focus on the effects of electoral systems¹⁴ alongside other elements of institutional design (such as the separation of power and territorial organization of the state).¹⁵ According to institutionalists, how these elements are arranged is basically responsible for the party system format. However, the discriminating power of both theories is insufficient to explain the dynamics of Russia's party system.

First and foremost, research based on survey data tells us little about the electoral cleavages among Russia's voters. Despite sociological theories, the effects of structural cleavages on voting behaviour are relatively insignificant. It is hard to identify the stable societal bases of several parties and/or candidates among certain social groups.¹⁶ Experts on Russia's electoral geography conclude that the centre-periphery cleavage is a fundamental conflict of electoral politics in Russia,¹⁷ but even this cleavage is unstable and has not led to the creation of regional bases for various segments of Russia's electoral market. For example, in the 1990s, Russia's main 'centres' heavily supported Boris Yeltsin and the liberal parties, while the periphery formed the social base for left and nationalist parties. Nevertheless, in the 2000s, regional

support for Vladimir Putin and the party of power came largely from the 'periphery'; the 'centres' demonstrated an increase in electoral support for both liberal and left parties, and later, in 2003–2004, in support for nationalist parties and candidates.¹⁸ The problem of sociological theories of party systems lies beyond empirical evidence. In fact, these theories are based on an analysis of distinctions between different types of party competition. At the same time, they cannot explain why in some countries newly emerging party systems became irreversibly competitive, but in other countries (including Russia) party competition might be about to disappear.

In contrast, institutional theories have been successfully applied to the analysis of Russia's party system of the 1990s. Although the impact of the electoral system on the party system during the parliamentary elections between 1993 and 1999 was far removed from theoretical expectations,¹⁹ the institutional effects of presidentialism²⁰ and federalism²¹ generally explained the trend in the party system. Such theories were useful for the study of several processes occurring in Russia's electoral market, such as coalition politics²² and the formation of various parties of power.²³ But since the 1990s the format of Russia's party system has changed dramatically, under pretty much the same set of political institutions (some institutional changes, such as the replacement of a mixed by proportional electoral system, have not yet come into force). Thus, the pendulum-like swings of the party system cannot be explained exclusively through the prism of institutional theories. At least, political institutions in Russia do not serve as an efficient 'filter' that can stabilize the emerging party system and just as important make political competition inevitable.

Some scholars (mostly Russian) tend to explain the problems of Russia's party system by reference to a peculiar 'legacy of the past' – one that is not conducive to political competition. According to this view, the tradition of Russian history has formed 'the Russian system', which reintroduced itself despite attempts of liberalization and democratization.²⁴ From this perspective, the political reforms of the 1990s might be considered as a temporary deviation, while the changes of the 2000s represent a return to a historically embedded norm. Certainly, the role of the 'legacy of the past' in the formation of party systems cannot be ignored. For example, in a comparative study of party politics in Eastern Europe in the 1990s the effect of the communist legacy has been analysed as a crucial variable explaining the difference in party development between, say, Poland and Bulgaria.²⁵ This argument, however, is less convincing in a comparative analysis of party systems among the post-Soviet states. Although Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have shared much of the same past history, the party systems in these three countries are now widely different. Belarus since 1994 has shown patterns of personalist authoritarianism, weak institutionalization of the party system, and a total lack of a party of power.²⁶ The Ukrainian party system was also highly fragmented *à la* 'feckless pluralism' by the time of the 'Orange Revolution' in late 2004.²⁷ However, electoral conflict among Ukraine's elites not only led to the denunciation of fraudulent presidential elections in 2004 but also brought about subsequent institutional changes, most notably a shift from presidential to parliamentary government.²⁸ Due to the institutional limits of 'zero-sum' elite conflicts, the chances for the formation of a competitive party system after the 2006 parliamentary elections in Ukraine are more hopeful

than in both Russia and Belarus. Thus, there are no reasons to consider the transformation of the party system in Russia (or Ukraine or Belarus) as being solely due to the effects of the 'legacy of the past'; at least, it is necessary to provide some alternative explanations for the similarities and/or differences among post-Soviet cases.²⁹

The model of electoral politics in Russia as an emerging political market seems to offer a more useful framework for analysis of the dynamics of Russia's party system. This model was used first in early studies of party competition³⁰ and applied to studies of party system formation in the United States³¹ as well as in Russia.³² In stable competitive party systems (that is to say, developed political markets) political parties and/or their coalitions are major suppliers who compete for voter demand. But the situation is less clear in emerging political markets, including Russia's.

First, these political markets face great uncertainty nearly by default. Political parties, candidates, and voters cannot predict the consequences of their actions, and their time horizons are very short. This leads to a certain increase in party fragmentation and electoral volatility.

Second, alternative non-partisan providers of electoral goods (economic interest groups, regional elites and so on) have operated rather successfully in emerging electoral markets, and have undermined competition among parties.³³ The proliferation of independent candidates without any party affiliation in Russia's national and sub-national elections is a typical manifestation of this.

Third, in developed political markets, unfair electoral competition (such as cartel-like deals between political parties, or state-induced preferences to certain parties) is usually prevented, while on the contrary it is typical of emerging political markets. It is no wonder that the outcome of electoral competition in emerging political markets depends not only on the attractiveness of political parties and candidates, or even on their marketing strategies. Rather, it depends upon the conditions of electoral competition, how far they deviate from free and fair elections, and how deeply the state officials encroach into electoral contests.

From this viewpoint, the transformation of Russia's party system resulted from the monopolist consolidation of its political market. Different actors in the electoral politics (minor parties, independent candidates) were pushed out of the market or were acquired by the dominant party of power, which gained a political monopoly. This process is heavily influenced by the constellation of institutional and political factors. On the one hand, 'super-presidential' government in Russia³⁴ provides few incentives for a competitive party system and reproduces the 'winner-takes-all' outcomes of electoral politics.³⁵ On the other hand, in the 'war over Yeltsin's legacy' during the 1999–2000 national elections, intra-elite electoral conflict was resolved as a 'zero-sum game'. This led to a decline in elite differentiation and increased elite integration in Russia,³⁶ thus establishing the monopoly of the party of power.

This explanation offers a plausible basis for comparing party system developments in Russia and Ukraine. Although the institutional design in these countries was similar, the indispensable conflict of elites and the proliferation of political 'clans' in Ukraine prevented the successful formation of the party of power, and greatly contributed to the 'Orange Revolution'.³⁷ Similarly, the lack of electoral conflicts among elites as such (for example, in Uzbekistan, with its non-competitive

elections)³⁸ is even less conducive to the emergence of a party of power. But in several other post-Soviet states, even the combination of super-presidentialism and zero-sum conflicts among elites has not created a monopoly for a party of power (for example, in Belarus or in Kazakhstan). Although at least some institutional incentives for building parties of power³⁹ are also visible in these cases, the authoritarian regimes in most of the post-Soviet countries are personalist and non-partisan by nature. Political leaders retained their monopoly on the electoral markets of these countries due to 'hard' state-led coercion that restricts electoral competition, including forcible suppression of the opposition.⁴⁰ The political support of ruling groups in these countries is primarily based upon clientelist networks. In Russia, by contrast, the party of power performs as a key agent of the ruling group's monopoly, and coercive intervention in electoral competition is usually 'soft', reflecting the biased conduct of elections. A search for explanations of these distinctions requires an in-depth analysis of the party of power in Russia.

The Party of Power in Russia: A Success Story?

The story of the successful establishment of the party of power's monopoly in Russia has been widely documented. Early attempts at party-building during the 1993 and (especially) 1995 parliamentary elections had failed. Parties of power at this point were not only unable to garner a parliamentary majority but they could not even become veto actors, and went into decline after heavy losses at subsequent parliamentary elections. During the 1999 parliamentary elections two claimants for the role of the party of power competed with each other: the coalition Fatherland – All Russia (FAR), established around regional governors, and the Kremlin-backed bloc Unity. The latter was relatively successful (23.3 per cent of votes, against 13.3 per cent for FAR); due to political manoeuvring in the legislature (the State Duma), Unity first isolated FAR and later acquired it in the manner of a hostile takeover. Unity and FAR established a majority coalition with 235 out of 450 State Duma seats, and in late 2001 transformed into a single party, United Russia (UR).⁴¹ This party was the major winner of the 2003 parliamentary elections, primarily due to the strong endorsement from the popular president, Vladimir Putin. Together with latent coalition politics with minor parties and independent candidates in single-member districts this led to unexpected results: UR received only 37.8 per cent in party list voting but in the State Duma achieved more than two-thirds of seats, and thus formed the 'manufactured super-majority'.⁴² All these reincarnations of the party of power share major common features: (1) they are established by the executive branch in order to get a majority in legislative arenas; (2) they lack any definite ideology; (3) they shamelessly use state resources for campaigning and are captured by top state officials.

Beyond parliamentary politics, the role of the party of power remains rather limited. During the 2003–2005 regional legislative elections UR was successful mostly in those regions where its local branches were under the strong control of influential governors.⁴³ The presence of UR in the cabinet was merely symbolic: Although in Mikhail Fradkov's cabinet three members of the government⁴⁴ joined UR, the party's impact on governmental policies was minimal. At the same time,

the party of power pushed governmental policy through the State Duma and was forced to take up the challenge of political responsibility for unpopular policies, such as social benefits reform in early 2005. In fact, the high approval rating of Vladimir Putin continues to be a major resource of the party of power.

In the mid-2000s, the ruling group initiated serious institutional changes that aimed to preserve the party of power's monopoly on Russia's political market.

First, entry barriers into this market were increased. The structure of political opportunity greatly diminished the chances for new parties to form and for a coalition politics among existing parties (based on the principle of a negative consensus against the party of power). Registration of new parties became more difficult: minimal requirements increased from 10,000 to 50,000 members, with regional branches in two-thirds rather than half of the country's regions. The formation of electoral coalitions (blocs) was prohibited, and the electoral threshold in State Duma and regional legislative elections was increased from five per cent to seven per cent.

Second, the electoral market itself has been restructured due to the use of mixed and/or proportional electoral systems in regional legislative elections (since 2003) and proportional electoral systems in State Duma elections (adopted in 2005).

Third, in 2004–2005 Vladimir Putin initiated the abolition of popularly elected regional governors and proposed the appointment of representatives of parties that had won regional legislative elections to these posts. In fact, this also enhanced the positions of the party of power.⁴⁵ Some other innovations such as the installation of an imperative mandate (deputies who leave their party would also lose their parliamentary seat), the use of electronic vote counting during elections, and the minimization (if not total elimination) of the role of independent electoral observers in the polls, are also aimed at the same goal. The formation of party-based (rather than personalist) rule became a visible tool of maintenance of the monopoly of Russia's ruling group. But why have Russia's elites continued to use this instrument?

The answer to this question is to some extent connected with the role of the party of power during the 'war over Yeltsin's legacy', in the electoral conflicts of 1999–2000, and the subsequent maintenance of the 'imposed consensus' of elites.⁴⁶ The very formation of parties of power as electoral machines of Yeltsin's potential successors during the 1999 parliamentary elections was institutionally defined due to the electoral timetable. Since the election cycle in Russia implies the logic of counter-honeymoon elections (parliamentary elections precede presidential elections),⁴⁷ the prospective winner of State Duma elections had a major advantage in subsequent presidential races. Therefore, any claimant for Yeltsin's succession was forced to use political parties instead of other tools of political struggle.⁴⁸ If the electoral timetable were reversed (first presidential and then parliamentary elections), the contest almost inevitably would become purely personalist, and the role of political parties during and after the electoral conflict would be minimal. This was the case with electoral conflict in Belarus. During the 1994 presidential elections there, Alexander Lukashenko won in a zero-sum conflict without meaningful party support, and after his victory he had no further need for political parties.⁴⁹

The successful use of Unity in the 1999 State Duma elections (FAR lost, refused to nominate a candidate for the 2000 presidential elections, and backed Vladimir Putin)

opened opportunities for its further use as a political tool by the Kremlin and its policies in the parliament and beyond. The Kremlin needed a disciplined parliamentary majority for the consolidation of the new political regime and for the adoption and implementation of major policy reforms.⁵⁰ UR definitely undermined the left opposition in the State Duma before the 2003 parliamentary elections.⁵¹ It also played a key role in the adoption of Putin's federal reforms of 2000–2001, which limited the autonomy of regional elites and increased the capabilities of the party of power itself. UR also helped to squeeze through major Kremlin bills on economic and social policy (such as a new labour law and laws on pensions and taxation), which during Putin's first term in office broadly followed a neo-liberal course of minimizing state intervention in the economy and associated state guarantees to Russia's citizens.

In all these instances, the Kremlin greatly reduced its transaction costs, due to the use of UR instead of other instruments. Otherwise the ruling group would have had to maintain elite unity either through the regular use of force and permanent purges or by individual bargaining with separate deputies and special interest groups.⁵² Both ways would be very costly in political and economic terms. Thus, after the Kremlin's regular use of UR, investment in new projects for 'parties of power' became less profitable. During the 2003 parliamentary elections the Kremlin rather than become reliant on UR both gave its strong endorsement to UR and also backed a UR satellite, the People's Party of Russian Federation (NPRF), which was unable to become a real junior partner of the party of power.⁵³ The NPRF achieved a mere 0.63 per cent of the votes in party list voting, and 16 out of its 17 deputies elected in single-member districts joined UR faction in the State Duma.⁵⁴ Even an attempt to divide UR into left-wing and right-wing factions failed, in 2005. In sum, the costs of possible changes of the ruling group's political strategy (for example, toward personalist rule or toward replacing UR with another party of power) are much higher than the costs of the maintaining the status quo.

It is important to note that Unity, rather than FAR, provided an effective basis for the formation of the party of power. Besides the unanimous personal loyalty of Unity leaders to the Kremlin (not the case for FAR), the organizational features of party construction also played a role. Unlike FAR, more or less a conglomerate of regional gubernatorial 'electoral machines',⁵⁵ Unity was formed purely from the top down. On the federal level, party governance was external and independent from its official leaders and/or its clients. In this sense, Unity had better chances to establish a strong centralized and vertically integrated party of power, penetrating all levels of government. If FAR could have defeated Unity during the 1999 electoral conflict, the party of power would likely have had few chances to form a disciplined parliamentary majority. Rather, it would become a loose coalition of regional and sectoral lobbyists.⁵⁶ Alternatively, the organizational model of Kremlin-based external governance of the party of power was much more likely to succeed. While UR party officials (easily replaced by the Kremlin from time to time) were in charge for everyday party management, the key officials of the ruling group (or extra-party rulers) controlled strategic decision-making. The major distinction between the two organizational models of the party of power is similar to differences between a cartel of family firms and the component of a multi-sector holding company. Achieving and maintaining monopoly on the market is more difficult in the first case than the second.

Contrary to the widespread view, the lack of ideology of the party of power⁵⁷ was an asset rather than a liability, and contributed to its success. Against a background of decline in transitional uncertainty, the role of ideology as a product on Russia's electoral market has shrunk.⁵⁸ An analysis of the programmatic rhetoric of Russia's political parties in the 1995–2003 parliamentary elections demonstrated the trend for policy positions to converge.⁵⁹ Under these circumstances, UR enjoyed the merits of the 'median voter' policy position.⁶⁰ In other words, UR is located near the zero point on the left–right continuum between pro-statist and pro-market parties. This is also true for any other ideological axis (e.g. pro-Western versus anti-Western parties, etc.). This ideology (or lack thereof) gave UR wide room for political manoeuvring that was not available to the disunited segments of the opposition. The large policy distance between these parties⁶¹ creates major obstacles for the formation of a negative anti-regime consensus coalition, which would include, say, the KPRF (communists) and Yabloko (social liberals), not to mention the SPS (market liberals).

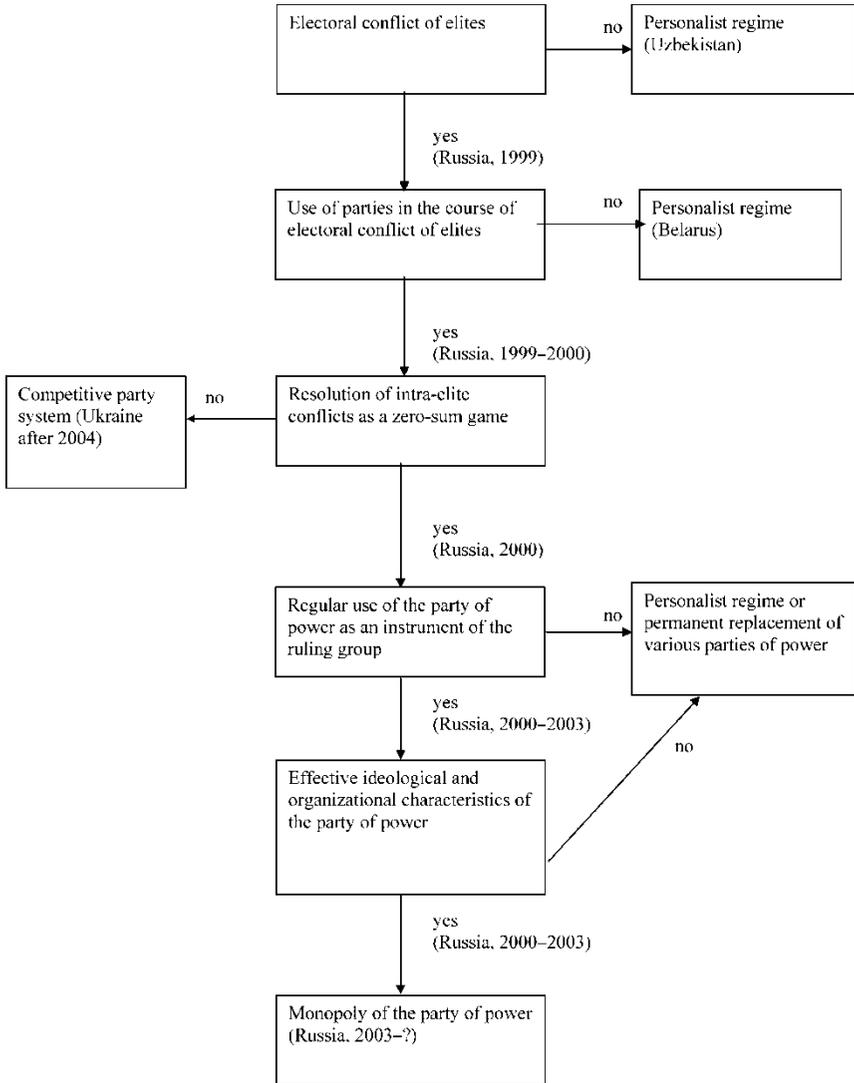
Therefore, the formation of the ruling group's party-based monopoly can be explained with the help of a part-contingent model of an interrelated chain of causes and effects.⁶² Its starting points are as follows: (1) open electoral conflict among elites; (2) forced instrumental use of political parties as tools by the elite, in this conflict; (3) elite conflict turned into a zero-sum game; (4) a set of incentives for the ruling group to make further instrumental use of the party of power; (5) an effective constellation of ideological and organizational resources of the party of power. Deviations from this path at stages (1) or (2) lead to the formation of personalist regimes. Deviation at stage (3) leads to the formation of competitive party systems.⁶³ Deviations at stages (4) or (5) might also lead to the formation of personalist regimes or to an irregular, ad hoc use of parties of power which replace each other during every new cycle of parliamentary elections. This path-contingent model is presented in Figure 1.

The constellation of factors of the party of power's monopoly on Russia's political market has been unique in the post-Soviet area. The recent institutional changes are likely to preserve UR's monopoly, at least during the next election cycle of 2007–2008. The chances for, and the likely political consequences of, the strengthening of this monopoly merit further consideration.

Concluding Remarks: Prospects and Challenges

Among non-democratic governments, one-party regimes are usually the longest-lived in comparison with personalist and military regimes.⁶⁴ In this respect, the strategy of monopolistic dominance by the party of power in Russia is very rational in the long haul, by comparison with personalist regimes. Although the establishment of a monopoly by the party of power (unlike personalist regimes) required a significant amount of political investment with uncertain benefits at the start, it might now bring long-term and large-scale benefits to the ruling group. In contrast, the establishment of personalist regimes in other post-Soviet countries required almost no investment, but the ruling groups have since been unable to secure long-term benefits, and sometimes have faced heavy losses, if not political bankruptcy as happened in the revolutions

FIGURE 1
THE FORMATION OF THE MONOPOLY PARTY OF POWER AND ITS POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES



in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). In the final analysis, personalist regimes are very vulnerable in terms of the problem of leadership succession, and rarely survive the death of the ruler. Although, in the post-Soviet space, Azerbaijan has avoided this trap so far,⁶⁵ regime continuity is more problematic, say, in Belarus after Lukashenko or in Kazakhstan after Nazarbaev. Are these threats less relevant to the monopolist rule of the party of power?

In her comparative analysis of strategies of parties of power, Regina Smyth focuses on two possible options to preserve their monopolies, assuming their possession of state resources. The first is based upon the distribution through party channels to voters of various goods that could gain electoral support. This strategy has been typical for ruling parties' democracies (ranging from Sweden's Social Democrats to Italy's Christian Democrats) and implies the preservation of the party of power's monopoly by effective marketing, which is necessary within a competitive political environment. Another strategy is based upon suppression of the opposition and preserving the monopoly of the party of power by unfair political competition (as in the case of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI), or eliminating competition (like in the Soviet Union). Smyth argues that in the case of Russia's party of power the Kremlin has used almost exclusively the latter solution, because the ruling group desperately needs to raise short-term 'profit' (during one election cycle) under conditions of relatively low investment in the process of party-building.⁶⁶

This strategy was successful for UR and might become a dominant strategy (a permanent solution, regardless of exogenous factors), but its costs for the ruling group would depend upon the policy choice. The implementation of neo-liberal reforms will undermine voters' loyalty to the party of power. The negative public reaction to the reform of social benefits in Russia in early 2005 was a first call of that kind. Yet, a succession of policy failures could turn the party of power into a victim of unpopular government measures. But given the current trends of extra revenues of the Russian government from oil and gas exports, the exclusive use of the oppressive strategy will be unlikely. Rather, the Kremlin obtains more resources for the purpose of buying the voters' support for the sake of dominant party-building in the same way that the populist policies of President Lazaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) greatly contributed to the institutionalization of the party of power, PRI, in Mexico.⁶⁷ Due to these circumstances, the Kremlin might combine both of these strategies at different stages of the election cycle: oppression of the opposition during the campaign, with simultaneous bribery of voters before the elections, in spite of the 'political business cycle' model.

In the worst-case scenario, UR might be unable to maintain both its organizational unity and the continuity of the Russian elite, due either to internal struggles between the various cliques and interest groups or to external pressure from world markets and globalizing forces (or both). In this respect, the party of power will have to choose between three options: (1) opening up the political regime, and thus turning to competitive electoral politics; (2) preserving a non-competitive regime at almost all costs, in a fairly authoritarian manner; and (3) attempting to preserve the status quo. The last option is risky due to the possibility of a crisis in the electoral market. Voters could prefer the 'exit' choice and not attend non-competitive elections, or even prefer protest voting in various forms. Although the latter threat might be minimized through Kremlin support of puppet-like quasi-opposition (such as LDPR), the merits of this approach are doubtful.

First, the costs of control (including the loyalty costs of satellite parties) are high and sometimes unreasonable. Second, the decline of mass support for the party of

power might also contribute to intra-elite conflicts. Third, if elite conflict became open and intensive (as it did during Gorbachev's reforms in the late 1980s), the political opportunity structure for the real opposition might be expanded, and its chances in electoral market (including negative consensus coalition building) will increase.⁶⁸

As yet, the degree of institutionalization of the party of power is not very great. UR does not serve as the major channel of political recruitment, and has not played a role as a major tool of ruling group dominance. But the major problem of UR's monopoly on Russia's electoral market is connected with the political strategy of the ruling group for organizational continuity of the regime. If the party of power becomes indispensable and a party-oriented strategy for the survival of the ruling group replaces personalist strategies, then the principal-agent problem will emerge. In its current stage, the party of power is nothing but an agent of its principals – the top state officials, who keep strict control over its activities and do not permit party autonomy in terms of key decision-making. However, the further organizational development of the party of power could change the constellation: the party of power will abuse state resources more and more to increase its political influence, while state control over the party will become more costly. The principal-agent problem is typical for dominant parties in other countries, where it was solved either by competition between agents through organized factions within the party of power (like Japan's Liberal Democratic Party) or due to informal bargaining within the party of power and/or between the party and the state (like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union).⁶⁹ The latter solution might lead to the politicization of the state: its apparatus could maintain the party of power's monopoly at the expense of governmental performance. In this case, the party of power will capture the Russian state in the same way as the oligarchs captured it in the 1990s.⁷⁰ In the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, this threat was avoided thanks to political competition on the electoral market.⁷¹ In contrast, in Russia the emergence of a non-competitive political environment could make this scenario more probable.

The transformation of Russia's party system from 'feckless pluralism' to 'dominant power politics' has challenged political development in Russia, which exchanged one problematic condition for another. In the 1990s, the fragmentation and instability of the party system created major roadblocks to the formation of an efficient political market. Political parties failed to link elites and masses, to represent society's interests, to perform on the level of decision-making, and to provide government accountability. These features of Russia's party system, although widely criticized, need not prevent the transformation of 'feckless pluralism' into a more open competitive party system as in the Ukraine following the 'Orange Revolution'. But a turn in the opposite direction to 'dominant power politics' in the form of a monopoly for the party of power is more dangerous for the party system. This monopoly will lead to the extinction of political opposition, an undermining of incentives for mass participation, and the politicization of the state. Unlike 'feckless pluralism', which might be viewed as the protracted growing pains of nascent party systems in new democracies, the monopoly of the party of power is a symptom of a chronic disease. Once established, this monopoly could reproduce itself as long as exogenous factors do not affect the political market and as long as elites are able to maintain their

organizational unity. The experience of one-party regimes in communist Russia and in Mexico tells us that these monopolies could survive for many decades – but not forever. At some point in the future, it will be clear whether or not attempts to re-establish one-party rule in Russia have achieved their goals.

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NOTES

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