

Analysis

The Regional Dimension of Russia's 2007–2008 Elections

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Abstract

The key to Russia's presidential and parliamentary elections lies in the regions. The March 2007 regional elections show that United Russia will continue to dominate, but that it will face new challenges from the rapidly rising Just Russia. The new party could help stimulate the fracturing of the regional elite. If the governors are willing to take risks, they may have increased influence over the course of the 2007 parliamentary elections. Moreover, the rise of Just Russia could make it difficult for the center to maintain control over the regions.

Understanding the Regional Dimension

While Russia's parliamentary and presidential elections are sometimes lacking in surprises, there is no shortage of intrigue to the campaign battles on the regional level. In the parliamentary race, the domination of the current "party of power" over the last two electoral cycles was forged in Russia's regions. Unity made its surprising gains in 1999 by contesting the provincial seats traditionally taken by the Communist Party (CPRF). In 2003, United Russia's (UR) federal party list contained just 4 names, while the rest of its 117 mandates went to regional party lists. In the upcoming elections, the regional effect has been strengthened by President Vladimir Putin's post-Beslan reforms to transform governors into Kremlin-appointed officials, and to eliminate the State Duma's single member districts. Voting for regional party lists provides an indicator of the relative strengths of Russia's national parties heading into the parliamentary campaign season. The composition of regional assemblies provides an additional indication of the cohesiveness (or fragmentation) of regional elites, which will determine parties' expectations and tactics for December 2007, while Putin's governors play a crucial role in mobilizing support for the "party of power" and managing conflicts among regional elites.

The regional dimension of national elections is equally significant in the presidential race. In the run up to 1996, Boris Yeltsin's realization that the opposition's support was located outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg led him to court the governors with a spate of bilateral power-sharing treaties. Putin's victory in 2000 depended upon Unity's success in meeting the challenge posed by Fatherland-All Russia in the regions – despite the latter's strong cohort of governors – in order to sink Yevgenii Primakov's presidential aspirations. In the 2004 election, the Kremlin relied upon the governors to ensure that Putin's vote matched, if not exceeded, the vote for United Russia in December

2003 and, most importantly, to come up with creative ways to ensure sufficient turnout and avoid a runoff.

Regarding both parliamentary and presidential elections, one must recall that Russia's "political technology" industry does not simply spring in and out of existence every four years. The art of campaigning and manipulating election outcomes is crafted in regional political contests. Those who are successful in running regional campaigns in federal elections often find their way into regional government or are positioned in territorial branches to exercise *kontrol'* (oversight) in regional administrations and assemblies. And, once in power, they are expected to deliver the vote for the "party of power" in the next round of federal elections.

Yet the regional campaigns can also be a source of uncertainty and distress for the Kremlin. Russia's provinces provide a laboratory (sometimes a lightning rod) for various kinds of legal and political experimentation. They can pull the center in unanticipated directions, compel a response when the center would rather not intervene, or otherwise require the Kremlin to rein in over-zealous federal agents in territorial branches of the federal government. In other words, the strengthening of the "ruling vertical" and the "dictatorship of law" in the regions do not protect the center from the law of unintended consequences.

In the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, those consequences are less related to popular choice than to the dynamics of elite competition in the regions. If UR has relied upon its monopoly position to guarantee the cohesive backing of regional elites, the upcoming electoral cycle threatens to diminish that position by pushing hidden conflicts among political and economic elites into the open. The Kremlin clearly expects Russia's governors to prevent this from happening and to lead the campaign for the "party of power" in the regions, just as they have led regional party lists in elections for regional legislatures.

Yet latent ambiguities and contradictions in the governors' relations with the Presidential Administration, as well as ongoing tensions in center-regional relations, may disrupt their position in relation to the regional elite and inject a degree of uncertainty in the process. Consider, for instance, the transformation of Russia's governors from elected to appointed officials. Now that the governors are appointed by the Kremlin, they also represent a significant source of political and material patronage that significantly raises the stakes in presidential elections. Russia's next president will have the power to hire and fire governors across all of Russia's regions, and one would expect that Putin's designated successor will continue the current practice of leaving incumbent governors in place as long as they stay loyal and maintain stability in the provinces. But the power of appointment may help other candidates to punch above their weight by linking up with regional elites seeking a change of governor (particularly where mayors of regional capitals or speakers of regional assemblies oppose incumbent governors). This could create incentives for presidential candidates to compromise with competing elite factions, complicating the ability of Putin's designated successor to achieve a first round victory.

The Lessons of March 2007

Just as elections for the State Duma traditionally serve as primaries for Russia's presidential elections, regional elections are often viewed as dress rehearsals for the parliamentary elections. The results of the regional assembly elections in March 2007 (see Table) suggest that UR will continue its domination, but with a slightly different supporting ensemble. Across 14 regions comprising one-third of the electorate, only UR and the CPRF managed to compete and win party list seats in every region. UR led in all but one region, averaging 44 percent of the party list vote. CPRF averaged 16 percent of the vote, but only managed a second place finish in half of the contests. Just Russia (JR) averaged 15 percent and won seats in 13 regions, while the Liberal Democratic Party brought up the rear with just over 9 percent of the vote and winning seats in 11 regions. One liberal party, Union of Right Forces, managed to compete in nine regions, though it was barred in Dagestan, Vologda Oblast, and Pskov Oblast (it was initially barred in Samara, though the decision was overturned by the Central Electoral Commission). Though the party did surprisingly well in crossing the 7 percent threshold in 5 regions and narrowly missing in a further 2 regions, it poses no clear threat to the main parties. Out of the remaining 9 parties that competed in various regional campaigns,

only 3 managed to win seats in one or two regions: the Agrarian Party in Dagestan and Vologda Oblast, Patriots of Russia in Dagestan, and the Greens in Samara Oblast.

Table: March 2007 Regional Assembly Elections

Party	Average Vote (Party List)	Number of Regions Competing	Number of Regions Winning Seats
United Russia	44.05%	14	14
Communist Party	16.04%	14	14
Just Russia	15.53%	14	13
Liberal Democratic Party	9.62%	14	11
Union of Right Forces	7.14%	9	5

The critical intrigue emerging from the March 2007 elections involves the rapid rise of the newly created Just Russia, which already commands significant resources and the tacit support of the Kremlin. The three parties that merged to form JR (Party of Life, Pensioners' Party, and Motherland) started to show their collective muscle in the October 2006 regional elections, gathering 50 percent more donations than they managed individually in 2005. In March 2007, JR's campaign funds (400 million rubles) were second only to UR (600 million rubles). These are impressive sums when one considers that the total accumulated for *all* parties over the March and October 2006 elections was 624 million rubles. This marks, in part, an influx of new regional elites from the business world seeking to establish a foothold in regional politics. The party's pro-Kremlin orientation yielded additional benefits in terms of insulation from the exploitation of "administrative resources" to deny it a chance to compete: of the four parties that competed in all 14 regions last March, only UR and JR did not suffer any difficulties in securing registration.

The appearance of JR as a pro-Kremlin opposition party potentially threatens UR's hold over regional elites. Though governors led most of UR's party lists in past campaigns, the intervention of the party's central organs in the compilation of regional lists meant that warring factions within regional branches were incorporated into the same party list, effectively papering over internal divisions and driving conflicts among regional elites into UR's regional branches. If support for UR in 2003 was understood as unequivocal support for Putin (and therefore mandatory), the appearance of JR means that regional leaders can safely back an opposition party without opposing the Kremlin. The potential danger for UR was vividly illustrated in Lipetsk Oblast last October, where Sergei Mironov (now head of JR) secured Putin's permission

to use the president's image during the campaign. The situation put the Lipetsk branch of UR in a particularly awkward position since its list included the governor, the speaker of the legislative assembly, and the mayor of the regional capital. As the December 2007 elections draw near, dissatisfaction within UR should directly benefit JR by transforming conflicts within the "party of power" into an inter-party competition. One tangible consequence is that UR and JR are likely to become engaged in a bidding war for the support of the regions, as evidenced by Mironov's recent suggestion that gubernatorial elections could be restored and the various proposals by UR to grant governors the power to directly appoint mayors.

The performance of JR thus provides a measure of (and stimulus for) fragmentation among regional elites. In regions where the elite unite behind UR, the role of JR will be limited to picking off smaller parties. By contrast, regions with fragmented elites are likely to feature direct competition between the two parties. One can already find instances of this effect where the availability of JR provides opportunities for mayors in capital cities to oppose governors in their regions. Stavropol Mayor Sergei Kuzmin formed a weighty JR faction with the aim of eventually forcing the region's unpopular governor out of office, dealing UR an outright defeat in the region's March 2007 election. Other mayors of regional capitals may seek to back the opposition given the possibility that the State Duma may eliminate mayoral elections in exchange for the governors' support of UR. There is no small bit of irony in this, given Putin's record with gubernatorial appointments. In regions where elites are relatively divided, he has appointed political outsiders that are unable to stand independent of the Kremlin's support. Insofar as this has resulted in a number of weak governors in the more developed and significant regions, JR may derive added value from their vulnerability.

These factors combine to put Russia's governors in an interesting position. On the one hand, there are no clear sanctions to supporting JR. The Kremlin has not made extensive use of its power to sack governors, and further sackings are unlikely as the elections approach. It has not articulated clear limits to its tolerance for JR's electoral success, aside from the prediction by the deputy head of the Presidential Administration,

Vladislav Surkov, that UR would remain the leading party in parliament until 2011 with JR in a supporting role. Unlike the 1999 and 2003 campaigns, the performance of either party in December 2007 does not appear to be implicated in Putin's choice of a successor or his electoral prospects. As a result, the governors potentially have the most autonomy to influence the conduct of the national parliamentary campaign since the 1999 campaign.

At the same time, the governors tend to be risk averse. If they detect uncertainty in the Kremlin's mandate, their response is likely to be continued support for UR rather than a crusade on behalf of JR. While this might appear to be a safer approach, it potentially leaves them in an even weaker position in regions where the political and business elite are seeking alternatives. Even if this results in a diminished vote for UR, however, such an outcome might still work to the Kremlin's advantage in facilitating the turnover of the regional elite and the identification of new or potential partners within the regions.

Conclusion

Assessing the regional dimension of the upcoming electoral cycle points to hidden fault lines in Russian politics that could provide short term surprises with longer term consequences. There is little doubt that United Russia will remain the largest party in the State Duma, though the nature and extent of its victory will be determined by the battles in provincial trenches. And while it remains uncontroversial to assume that Putin's designated successor will meet with little resistance in 2008, the end game concerns the new president's ability to mobilize the support and compliance of the regions. The Kremlin's attempt to fashion a loyal opposition in the form of Just Russia offers a means to incorporate new and existing members of the regional elite that are dissatisfied with the current "party of power." This could translate into significant gains for JR over its performance in March 2007 such that it would become the second largest party in the State Duma. In the long run, however, the tactic of exploiting divisions within the regions may undermine the levers of central control over the regions, even threatening the elite consensus supporting the present regime.

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