

Institutional Engineering in a Managed Democracy:

The Party System in Russia's Regions Since 2003

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Abstract

After a decade of near-total relegation to the political sidelines in regional governments, political parties in Russia's regions became prominent actors following reforms under President Vladimir Putin. President Putin's reforms were directed at both the supply and demand side of the electoral market. By mandating that 50% of regional legislative seats be reserved for political parties, political parties became viable electoral vehicles for politicians. Concurrently, Putin regulated the supply of parties by raising membership requirements. As a result of these reforms, the face of the party system was altered significantly, bringing about the end of independent candidacy, and eliminating small and regional parties in favor of large, national organizations, while the essential features of an electoral authoritarian regime continue to restrict fair inter-party competition. In light of proposed reforms to the party system, the present study examines changes to the party system from 2003 to 2011.

Introduction

In consolidated democracies, political parties are crucial elements of the political system and civil society. Through parties, politicians and citizens coalesce around shared values, and through elections translate public preferences into policy, thereby creating linkage between the public and state institutions. In societies transitioning from authoritarian governments with underdeveloped civil institutions, political parties assist in forming the foundation of newly independent civil societies. During periods of political uncertainty, parties bolster system legitimacy in transitional phases. (Pridham & Lewis, 1996).

Parties have a normative impact on both government officials and the public. They assist in developing and consolidating the values and institutions necessary for building and maintaining a democratic government. Indeed, parties weigh so heavily on democratic processes that they are considered perhaps the most critical measure of democratization (Pridham, 1990). In a democracy, elections have to be considered by politicians as the only “game in town.” Parties are the ideal contestants. Repeated interaction between political parties, politicians and the polity encourages greater political responsiveness on the part of representatives; builds systemic credibility; and develops civil institutions in nascent democracies.

Given the positive normative impact of political parties on the development of democratic governments in transitioning societies and on political systems, the lack of a viable multi-party system will undermine the development of democracy. “Democratic parties can create democrats. But just as equally, weakly institutionalized parties and party systems can allow authoritarianism to take root” (Ross, 2002, p.97). There is also evidence that functional multi-party systems have a stabilizing and unifying effect on federal systems. Without a party system at the sub-national level, it is more difficult to proceed past the early stages of federal-democratic development (Chebankova, 2010). A structurally and politically integrated party system helps build effective center-regional relations leading to greater policy cooperation and coordination. These relations in turn assist in the creation of a unified political, legal and economic sphere. The cohesiveness that party systems provide is particularly critical during periods of decentralization and devolution of administrative powers.

In the two decades following the dissolution of the highly centralized Soviet system, Russia experienced federal-regional instability and lacked a national party system. These two features compounded one another. Political space became fragmented, stunting party development and the weakening the party system and further impeding the consolidation of a federal democratic system at the national level (Sakwa, 2008). In the absence of parties, the establishment of democratic governments was stunted in Russia’s regions (Moraski, 2006). Given the relationship between these two phenomena, it was proposed that the emergence of a nationwide party system could facilitate future center-regional stability and, eventually, a more democratic system in Russia (Stoner-Weiss, 2002; Chebankova, 2010).

Attempts at building some semblance of a cohesive and stable party system began in earnest under President Vladimir Putin in 2001. Through a series of federal laws, the Putin

administration took steps to alter both the supply and demand side of Russia's party system. The intention of the laws was to increase the presence of parties in the regions and undermine "regional fiefdoms" under the control of local political machines (Sakwa, 2008, p. 143). Perhaps predictably, Putin's party, United Russia, was expected to benefit enormously (Hale, 2006). Opposition leaders, too, expressed hope that they would benefit from reforms to the party system (White, 2006).

Primarily through the 2001 "law on parties" and the 2004 "law of parties", sizeable reduction in the number of registered parties occurred. From the 197 parties registered before the 2001 law, only seven parties remain registered today. By mandating that parties have membership of at least 10,000 and then at least 40,000, and requiring party organizations to be established in a majority of Russia's regions, parties were forced to become national in scope, or to deregister or become a public organization. By exerting this new external pressure, Putin imposed internal reorganization on political parties, as well. If political parties were to successfully reregister, adaptive strategies to grow in size would have to be undertaken in order to meet legal requirements.

Through institutional engineering of regional state structures, President Putin simultaneously increased the demand for party membership by politicians in Russia's regions. By mandating the adoption of mixed proportional representation in regional legislatures, political parties automatically became more viable options for election to regional legislatures. As a result of these reforms, parties are almost certainly guaranteed greater utility for political actors as an effective way of getting elected, instead of, but not necessarily at the expense of, party substitutes like local political machines, the advantages of independent candidacy, or "administrative resources."

The extremely limited usage of proportional representation had been a significant hurdle to political parties in Russia. Because a number of reforms over the last decade have specifically targeted regional institutions and their electoral systems, the focus of this paper will be largely on the institutions of regional state power and the party system. Since 2003, after a period of steady decline for political parties, a relatively large number of political parties have reversed this trend and managed to win seats regional legislatures. If this change reflects a turning point in the development in the development of political parties in Russia, it may also represent a positive development for democracy in Russia. It should be stressed that a party system alone is not sufficient to build a democratic state, but a federal, democratic state without parties is unlikely to develop.¹

Before discussing the current party system in Russia, it is necessary, as a point of reference, to examine the system in place prior to the reformation of the party system. In contrast to the current system, which is designed to ensure some degree of partisan representation in regional legislatures, the previous system design, with its reliance on single-member districts, disadvantaged parties (Moraski, 2006). As a consequence, a number of deleterious features became ingrained in regional politics. Among these were: the strength of independent candidacy and incumbency at the expense of political parties; the proliferation of short-lived and unsuccessful “floating parties”; and the depression of citizen identification with and support for the party system as a whole (Rose et al, 1999).

By studying election returns from the period 2003-2011, it is possible to measure changes taking place in the spheres of partisan competition and representation in regional governments.

¹ Although reforms to the party system may be related to the reformation of Russian federalism and therefore may positively or negatively impact the development of federalism in Russia in the future, this paper will not attempt to ascertain the impact of reforms on federal-regional relations.

In the case of Russia, electoral returns are perhaps the best measure of progress on the path either toward or away from building a party system. Elections are one of the few public outlets remaining for parties to reach the public because of the increasingly small “political space” within the Russian system for parties (White, 2006). Because of limited institutional space for party activities, election returns play the following roles: they serve a dissemination function; reflect organizational capacity; measure a party’s social base and relationships with other parties and with the regime (White, 2006.)

The number of parties contesting elections and winning seats in regional legislatures is of particular import for this study. In contrast to the previous period, party stability, as demonstrated by a consistency to contest elections across multiple regions and in multiple election cycles, could be a positive development for the party system. In transitional, post-authoritarian societies, the consolidation of individual political parties reflects, to some degree, the consolidation of party system itself (Kulik & Pshizova, 2005). Stability, of course, does not guarantee good governance. The parties themselves play a pivotal role in the development of a party system, and therefore merit individual study. In addition to PR list returns, a study of independent candidates, what were most prevalent actors in regional politics, will serve as a measure of how completely political parties have replaced the former, dominant political actors.

After examining election returns, I will qualitatively measure changes to the Russian party system. Although increasing the number of seats allotted to members of national political parties guarantees a greater partisan presence in regional legislatures, it does ensure more representative and democratic governance in Russia’s regions. The quality of political representation may have declined significantly or remained mediocre to poor although the quantity of partisan deputies has increased. It may, in fact, be the case that the relatively small

number of political parties reflect and represent the various social cleavages and interests groups in Russia. Furthermore, by their ability to reregister or inability thereof, we can discern changes to Russian political parties in terms of their size and scope.

There are a number of methodological shortcomings with the present study. Russian political institutions, including electoral commissions, remain corrupt (Transparency International *Corruption Perceptions Index, 2011*). In fact, there is evidence that corruption is on the rise rather than on the decline two decades after independence. This trend makes the study of election returns problematic. In short, fraudulent numbers will present a fraudulent picture. It is highly likely that election fraud occurred in a number of regions used in this study, and will skew the data. There is a second and equally problematic shortcoming of the present study. In the absence of a field study, a near complete reliance upon electoral results will provide an obtuse picture of political developments in Russia's regions. By making the party and deputies the smallest unit of analysis, this paper will undoubtedly overlook more nuanced developments of regional politics in Russia.

The trends examined in this paper are overarching trends the entirety of Russia. Local political issues and regional institutions are more complex than the present study can explain. This study contains limited data on elections for single or multiple member mandates, a highly influential part of regional politics in the past. Moreover, because of the length of time covered, spanning nearly a decade, a relatively large number of political actors appear in the data. To only provide a general analysis of the policy positions of each of the 74 parties and blocs that appear in the data is not undertaken here. In the absence of such an effort, this study will instead provide a brief description of only the major and minor political parties in Russia.

II. Regional Electoral Systems: State Institutions and Party Substitutes

The initial institutional choice by regional governments in Russia greatly influenced political developments in the two decades that followed. Following the constitutional crisis of October 1993, President Yeltsin substantially altered the structure of regional legislatures and electoral rules. From an average assembly size of 250-300 seats, regional legislatures were reduced in size to between 15 and 50 deputies. Russia's 20 ethnic Republics were permitted to have larger assemblies, and the majority of the republics retained a larger number of deputies. Yeltsin decreed that regions adopt first-past-the-post, single member or multiple member districts. After the elections of 1993-1994, most newly elected assemblies retained structures that favored non-partisan systems (Moraski, 2006). By 2000, only a few regions had substantially altered their electoral systems, with regional politicians choosing to keep their systems intact (Hale, 2006).

Given that new systems were formed in each of Russia's 89 regions, the high level of electoral system uniformity is somewhat striking: the majority of regions (60) chose to rely solely on single member district, plurality vote systems rather than mixed SMD-party list system or full PR systems. Only three regions initially chose to distribute a portion of seats based on party-list PR voting (Moraski, 2006). By 2000, only four regions provided for some allocation of seats through PR elections (Hale 2006).

By not using PR systems, the great majority of regions selected electoral systems did not specifically provide an institutional role for political parties. Rather than building a new political system in which political parties would be a central component, single-member districts

institutionally disadvantaged parties in Russia's regions (Moraski, 2006). With the widespread implementation of electoral systems that disadvantaged parties, a number of negative and mutually reinforcing features within regional politics became entrenched. In the relatively vacuous civil society of the early 1990s, soviet-era elites were best positioned to marshal political resources and secure their election to regional legislatures. Thus patronage networks occupied the space that political parties filled in a number of former eastern bloc states (Moraski, 2006; Chebankova, 2010). For regional politicians, buttressed by "administrative resources" and political connections, the resources offered by political parties could not match the resources of independent candidates (Goloso, 2003). These alternative sources of support functioned as party substitutes (Hale, 2003). This confluence of decidedly negative factors depressed demand for parties for politicians and a skeptical public alike. In this setting, parties effectively became non-entities in regional politics for almost a decade.

A. Party Substitutes: The Role of Regional Elites

The selection of mostly single-member, majoritarian electoral systems favored Soviet era political elites, and allowed them in many cases to maintain positions of political power in the new political systems. Incumbency and political networks became the greatest resource for legislators and governors (Hale, 2003; Goloso 2003). For example, it was not until the mid 2000s that former soviet officials held less than 50% of regional governor posts (Hale, 2006). The effect on the development of the party system and Russian democracy was decidedly negative. Goloso (2007) contends that the lack of elite competition and turnover is the major difference between Russia and other new democracies. Intra-elite competition in transitional systems encourages the development of political parties (Goloso, 2007). The lack of political

parties formed by competing regional elites reflects the low level of political competition between regional politicians. The lack of political competition had a decidedly negative impact on the party system in Russia's regions. With little intra-elite competition, few regional politicians joined parties or made attempts to build parties (Moraski, 2006; Golosov 2007).

In the exceedingly rare cases when regional elites split into opposing camps competing to win regional political dominance, sustained party competition occurred. Sverdlovsk Oblast is an instance of this phenomenon (Golosov, 2007). Sverdlovsk had two crucial elements that encourage competition between parties. Sverdlovsk had institutional incentives for parties to form because of its mixed SMD and PR system. Around the region's two principal and opposed regional political factions, two large, stable local parties formed and consistently contested elections for the regional legislature and governor's office between 1996 and 2002. With neither faction's leaders able to score a decisive blow and consolidate political power, parties became a valuable resource of electoral support. In addition to the two largest local parties, at least three other local parties developed strong local support, as well. Local parties consistently outperformed regional branches of national parties, including the KPRF, Yabloko, and LDPR.

B. Floating Parties and Floating Voters: Public Support and Organizational Weakness

Although political parties were institutionally disadvantaged in most regions, parties were nonetheless abundant in Russia in the 1990s. Between 1991 and 1997, over 5000 political parties and more than 60,000 public organizations registered with the Ministry of Justice (Ross, 2002). What developed is known as a floating party system. The central feature of such a system is the sheer volume of political parties in the political arena. Most of these parties had little public support and achieved little electoral success. The chaotic pattern of party formation and

dissolution that characterized the 1990s predictably hurt public support for political parties as an institution. Russia's political parties "floated", and voters "floated" along with them (Rose et. al, 1999).

Two types of floating parties characterized the Russian party system: *divan* parties and "parties of power." The former negatively impacted systemic development as a result of their lack of electoral success and short-lived existence. The latter did so by virtue of their strength, outsized influence and their top down formation (Ross, 2002). These parties often had short life spans, as well. Most floating parties were of the *divan* variety. These small parties lacked clear platforms, and lacked the resources and organizational capacity to consistently field candidates in multiple elections.

With the exception of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), which inherited much of the resources its predecessor party, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, few national parties achieved significant "saturation" at the regional level. Few parties maintained organizations in multiple regions, competed in multiple regional elections and even fewer won seats in one or more regions (Golosov, 2007). The few parties that fielded candidates or, more rarely, won seats, failed to develop accountability with voters because parties were often defunct by the following election (Hale, 2006).

Given the fleeting nature of political parties, Russian voters did not support parties with their vote or by joining parties. In 1994, during a period in which a large number of *divan* parties and civic organizations formed, only 3% of the population was a member of a political party. This already low percentage dropped to 1% in 2003. By 2007, after a series of mobilization drives in order to meet registration requirements under the new laws on parties, the percentage again rose to 3% (Sakwa, 2008). Russians simply had little confidence in the parties themselves.

The World Values Survey conducted in 1995 and 1999 found that over 90% of respondents expressed “Not Very Much” or no confidence in political parties as an institution (World Values Social Survey, 1995 & 1999).

C. Political Parties in Regional Legislatures 1993-2003:

With weak public support for parties, and limited utility for politicians, Russian political parties were largely absent from executive and legislative bodies in the regions. Golosov (2007, p.3) describes party politics in Russia’s regions from 1993-2003 as being “excessively fragmented and excessively volatile,” even as a more stable national party system developed during the same period of time. Ross (2002, p. 133) writes, “One of the most striking patterns of local politics in Russia is the almost total partyless nature of regional election campaigns and the dismal representation of political parties in regional assemblies.”

Between 1993-1995, 24.9% of candidates on the ballot for regional legislatures were members of a party, while only 18.6% (635/3,481) of deputies were members of a political (Ross, 2002). By 2001, only 8.7% of candidates were party members and only 8.4% of deputies were (CEC, 2001; Hutcheson, 2003; Ross, 2002). Even during periods with a high percentage of partisan deputies, political parties were still a marginal force in most regional assemblies. In January 1998, 17 assemblies had no party affiliated deputies. In only five assemblies did party affiliated deputies constitute a majority; however, no single party held a majority in any of Russia’s 89 regions (Ross, 2002). Besides the KPRF, no party could claim membership of even 1% of deputies in regional assemblies, and no national political party could consistently contest elections in every region, or even multiple regions. (Ross, 2002).

D. The Influence of Regional Executive Branches on the Party System: 1993-2003

Regional executives were the most dominant political actors in the regions. Regional executives in the regions had a decidedly negative impact on the development of political parties at the regional level (Golosov 2007; Sakwa, 2008.). Because regional executives were both more powerful than the legislative branch and possessed resources independent of political parties, the relegation of political parties to the margins of regional politics was near total in regional executive branches. Like regional legislators, regional executives relied on independent political resources and institutional arrangements that discouraged the development of viable and influential political parties. The promotion of political parties in gubernatorial elections “was almost never a concern” for executives (Hale, 2006).

Because of their independent political strength and institutional powers, incumbent regional executives remained insulated from political parties. In the period from 1995-1997, 70 gubernatorial elections took place. In these contests, there was an average of five candidates on the ballot. Only 100 of the 4000 candidates had a party affiliation, and only 10 out of the 70 victors were party members. In the 2000-2001 cycle, 53 gubernatorial elections were held. Only nine out of 300 candidates had party affiliations, and only three out of 53 victors were party members (Ross, 2002; Hutcheson, 2003).

Even governors with partisan political affiliations relied more on the administrative advantages provided by incumbency than from party labels. Between 1999-2003, governors ran for reelection under major party labels only five times. Only two of these candidates succeeded in winning reelection (Hale, 2006). The independent political strength of regional governors comes into sharper contrast when one considers their continued non-partisan stance of regional

executives after the meteoric rise of United Russia in 2003, in which it won an overwhelming majority in the Duma. In elections for regional executive offices in 2004, of the ten contests that occurred, United Russia did not field a single candidate. It only fielded one candidate the year before. The election strategy of governors to parties appears to be perfectly rational. With the exception of the KPRF and Yabloko, party labels were found to have a strongly negative impact on a candidate's election chances (Hale, 2006).

III. Reforming Russia's Institutions

In light of the state of the stunted party system in the regions, Vladimir Putin proposed a series of reforms designed to bolster the position of national political parties in the regions. Beginning in 2001, a series of federal laws significantly altered regional and federal political institutions. Putin rewrote the "rules of the game" by providing a significant institutional boost to political parties in the regions. The 2001 and 2004 "laws on parties" drastically decreased the number of political parties and affected an increase in the membership rolls of the few remaining parties. The structure and electoral rules governing regional legislatures and regional executives were significantly reformed. The former were required to implement partial party list proportional elections for at least 50% of legislatures. The latter became an appointed official of the presidential administration.

A. Laws on Parties and Public Organizations

The first significant alteration to the registration of political parties occurred in 2001 with the signing of the "Law on Parties" (Law No. 95-F3) Coming into effect in 2003, the key provisions of the 2001 law are:

- Parties must have at least 10,000 members nationwide.
- Parties must have at least 100 members in at least 45 regions.
- Parties must have at least 50 members in the remaining regions.
- In order to secure state financing, parties must win 3% of PR vote in Duma elections, 12 SMD seats, or win 3% of presidential vote

The law was immediately successful in its intended purpose of decreasing the number of small political parties. Upon implementation, three quarters of 197 registered parties and civic organizations de-registered, leaving 56 parties. (Sakwa, 2008).

One year after the 2001 law came into effect, Putin signed the 2004 “Law on Parties.” Like its predecessor, one purpose of the law was to slim the pool of small parties by increasing membership requirements. The 2004 also restricted politicians by preventing public organizations and interest groups from fielding their own candidates. The 2004 Law on Parties came into effect in January 2006. Key provisions of the 2004 law are:

- Parties must have 40,000 members nationwide
- Parties must have 500 members in at least 45 regions where the population exceeds 500,000.
- Parties must maintain branches with no fewer than 250 members in the remaining regions.
- Parties *must* contest elections at the federal, regional level, and municipal levels.
- *Only* political parties may contest elections. Civic organizations can join electoral blocs, but cannot propose their own candidates.

The 2004 law successfully trimmed the size of parties even further. By October 2006, 35 parties had managed to register, while 20 parties did not reregister. By 2007, only 17 of the 35 parties previously registered managed to meet the membership requirements (Sakwa, 2008).

B. Reforming Regional Assemblies, Executive Offices, and Election Laws

Structural reforms were also passed. In 2002, President Putin signed a law mandating that at least 50% of regional legislative seats be elected from party lists by July 2003 (Law No. 67-F3). Heretofore, the majority of regional assemblies elected officials in single-member, majoritarian elections. In 2003, the direct election of governors was eliminated. In the place of direct elections, federal officials overseeing Russia's seven "super-regions", submit a list of gubernatorial candidates for consideration and approval to the respective regional legislatures.

IV: Regional Legislative Elections: 2003-2011

By studying the elections taking place between 2003 and 2011, it is capable to measure changes to the regional party system in relation to prior era. The seven regional elections held in 2003 mark the first round of elections in which at least half of all legislative seats were reserved for political parties. Three years of elections took place with these rules before the 2004 law on parties went into effect in 2006. By studying this particular set of elections, three distinct stages of systemic development in the regions are discernable: eform, the first period of reform, and the current system in place now.

The adoption of PR systems is particularly critical for political parties at the regional level. Now that there is a portion of the political sphere reserved for political parties, the institution of political parties has moved from its near-total relegation on the political sidelines to

being firmly in state institutions. In contrast to period from 1993-2002, national political parties now have a stable presence in regional legislatures. In absolute terms, the number of political parties represented across all Russian regions and the absolute number of seats held by political parties has grown dramatically in comparison to the previous decade.

Although the absolute number of registered parties decreased between 2003 and 2011, regional elections became more competitive and more politically diverse, if only for a brief period of time (Chebankova, 2010). In the first years in the present study, adaptive electoral strategies on the part of opposition parties blunted the massive gains by United Russia. Smaller, but ideologically similar political parties consolidated into new parties or formed electoral blocs. In the first three years in this study, political parties entered into electoral blocs together in order to win a greater share of seats. Liberal, free market parties united with social-democratic parties. Leftist and nationalists competed together. A second form of inter-party cooperation occurred, as well. In regions where Union of Right Forces and Yabloko party organizations could not agree to join together in an electoral bloc, one party would instead choose not to compete against the other (Chebankova, 2010).

Other positive trends occurred, as well. Freed of dependence on executive resources, regional assemblies increased their legislative autonomy from regional governors (Chebankova, 2010). What had often been the domain of regional executive party machines now became a battleground for regional and national parties. In effect, federal reforms standardizing competition in regional legislative elections encouraged some political independence from the national parties and from regional executives.

A. Russian Political Parties

Before examining election returns in the regions, it is necessary to briefly describe the major and minor political parties that currently exist in Russia today, and also those minor parties, which no longer exist as a result of either deregistration or party mergers. The changes that have occurred in regional politics are, of course, not only changes to laws and regional institutions of the state. At the heart of this study is the form that political competition between parties has taken over the last decade. To ignore the principal actors, the party themselves, would render the figures presented as isolated numbers separate from the actual political impact resulting from different parties winning or losing elections. As such, I will provide some basic distinctions between political parties in Russia. These parameters will primarily categorize the parties in terms of their size, ideological stance, and current status.

The terms major party and minor party will be used to describe political parties in this paper. For reasons that will be explained in greater depth below, these terms encompass a number of aspects that do not necessarily center upon whether a party is technically an opposition party. The major parties in Russia are those that consistently contest a majority of national and regional elections. In short, the capacity to contest a number of elections simultaneously is possible because they possess the resources to do so. I have chosen to qualify Kremlin sponsored project parties such as Rodina and Just Russia as major parties. Major party status does not necessarily depend on whether a party holds seats in the federal State Duma. A number of minor political parties had deputies in the Duma during the period studies, but do not qualify as being a major party. Yabloko, the Union of Right Forces, Patriots of Russia, the Agrarian Party, the Party of Pensioners, and host of other parties fall into this category. These parties typically have a limited organizational reach, fewer resources and less public support than the major parties.

There are further pertinent distinctions between Russian political parties. These categories reflect, to a certain degree, qualitative measures of the parties. Richard Rose identified three types of prominent parties in Russian politics. “Program” parties are ideologically and organizationally consistent. They have some form of inner-party democracy and hierarchy. Their platform is clear to the electorate. A second type of party, a project party, is notoriously prominent in Russian politics. Project parties are created in order to divert votes away from ideologically similar opposition parties. The nominally leftist party Rodina and its successor, Just Russia, fall into this category because they were intended to split the left vote, thereby depriving the KPRF of support. The most powerful party type in Russia today is the “party of power,” also known as the regime party. The executive branch in Russia has organized several regime parties in order to give it support in the legislature. The largest party in Russia today, United Russia, is a regime party and has been the most successful party of power to date.

The seven remaining political parties appear to represent the left-right, liberal-conservative political spectrum and suggest an encouraging degree of political pluralism in the Russian system. Yabloko and Right Cause are liberal, free-market minor parties. The Liberal Democratic Party is a nationalist major party on the right end of the political spectrum. The KPRF, a major party, and Patriots of Russia, a minor party, are on the left. United Russia fashions as a center-right party, while Just Russia is fashioned as its center-left, major party counter-part. Given the destabilizing and detrimental effects of the floating party system that existed in Russia in the 1990s, the existence of seven large, ideologically diverse parties appears to be a step in the right direction. For reasons that will be discussed in greater depth below, the existence of a number of political parties has not translated directly into equal gains or equal competition.

Party longevity is one of the most notable and potentially positive features of the Russian party system today. Yabloko, KPRF, and LDPR have each existed for nearly two decades. Various incarnations of Just Russia, United Russia and Right Cause have existed for more than a decade under various names. Party stability and longevity has potential to bode well for the future of Russian political parties. Hale (2006) found that Russian voters had clearly begun to identify with parties on the basis of their policy positions concerning issues in Russia and performance. Voters also identified with parties on the basis of socio-economic status. Given the nominal ideological diversity of the parties in Russia today, a number of parties seemingly possess the “ideational” capital to reflect the political preferences of the population (Hale, 2006).

Recall that in order to be registered to compete in elections, a party must have 40,000 members and maintain a minimum number of members in all of Russia’s regions. This is, of course, no small feat, especially when one considers the aforementioned distrust of political parties by the Russian citizenry. Consequently, a large number of parties that participated in elections in this study are no longer political parties. Some of these were deregistered as parties and became public organizations (a legal distinction that prevents the advancement of political candidates), or disbanded entirely. Still others merged into larger parties. Given the number of parties in this study that no longer exist, it is perhaps not surprising that the platforms, level of public support, resources, and electoral success of the many deregistered or defunct parties varied widely. The fact that the seven parties discussed below have legal status means that they possess a national political organization.

A.a.: The Major Parties: United Russia, The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, The Liberal Democratic Party, and Just Russia

There are four major parties in Russia today. These four parties are currently the only parties represented in the Duma. If the LDPR, KPRF and Just Russia are major parties, it is perhaps more accurate to describe the largest party in Russia today, United Russia, as a super major party. Riding on the popularity of President Putin (and, many critics point out, election fraud and unfair elections), the party has a majority of seats at the federal and regional levels. Although it has “lost” six regional elections between 2003 and 2011, even its defeats are limited. Its last regional electoral defeat occurred in 2007 to its political ally, Just Russia. Out of the 3,447 regional PR seats won between 2003 and 2011, United Russia won 2,018 of these. United Russia is the only party to have competed in every regional election in this study.

An outgrowth of Unity, the party was founded in 1999 as a vehicle to secure the executive office for Yeltsin’s handpicked successor, Vladimir Putin, in the 2000 presidential elections. A “party of power” or “pseudo-party”, Unity was formed with the support of the Kremlin, 25 regional executives and a significant portion of the federal bureaucracy. In 2001, it merged with another gubernatorial “pseudo-party”, Fatherland-All Russia (OVR). United Russia, with its roots in the Kremlin and its electoral consistency, is a *program-regime* party. Sakwa (2008) contends that United Russia is transitioning from being strictly a *regime party* into an institutionalized, program party.

United Russia recently merged with several minor parties that appear in this study. Of the three parties that merged with United Russia, the Agrarian Party was the largest by a wide margin. The Agrarian Party of Russia, as its name suggests, was originally formed as a political lobby on behalf of Russia’s agriculture interests (Sakwa, 2008). The party drew its support mostly from older, poorer voters. In regional politics, its presence was notable, though negligible compared to the major parties. Up to the point of its merger with United Russia in 2007, the

party competed in 34 PR regional elections, and won at least one seat in 19 elections. Its seat total (62) was the fifth largest after United Russia, LDPR, KPRF, and the Party of Pensioners. United Russia also joined with the Party of Social Justice and the Socialist Unity Party. Combined, these parties only competed in eight regional elections, with the Party of Social Justice winning five seats in one region.

Founded in 1993, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) is the second largest party in Russia. It is a program party (Sakwa, 2008). Although the party maintains a national political presence, the party's prominence has significantly waned since 1999. From its peak in 1999 when it won 24% of the seats in the national legislature, the party has seen its electoral support steadily decline since then. The KPRF maintains a strong regional organization, however. It competed in 135 regional elections and won seats in 130 elections. It has the second largest share of regional legislative seats (563 out of 3447 PR seats). Still, victory over United Russia has proven elusive, with the party managing to beat United Russia outright in only two regional elections.

The KPRF, too, has drawn in a number of smaller parties that are now defunct. As evidence of the party's leftist-nationalist platform, two nationalist parties endorsed the KPRF after being unable to maintain their status as political parties. The Party of Revival of Russia and the Party of National Revival (Narodnaya Volya) were both minor organizations. The latter competed in 15 elections, winning only two seats in one region, while the former competed in three elections without winning a seat.

The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia is also a *program party*. Like the KPRF, its support has declined steadily since the 1990s. Nevertheless, it still possesses the organizational resources needed to compete in most elections. Founded in 1991, it was the first nominally

independent political party in the Soviet Union after the repeal of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, which made the Communist Party of the Soviet Union the sole legal political party. It has contested elections every year since then, with the height of its success and national profile occurring in the early 1990s. The party is nationalist, xenophobic and socially conservative, and is headed by its controversial leader, Vladimir Zhirinovsky. It is the third largest party in the State Duma and currently has the fourth largest share of seats regionally after United Russia, the KPRF, and Just Russia. Between 2003 and 2011, it competed in 136 elections and won seats 130 of those. Its 269 seats over nine years were the third most.

Founded in 2006, Just Russia is the fourth largest party in Russia. It is politically center-left, but maintains close ties to the Kremlin and supports the policies of Vladimir Putin. For example, its former leader and co-founder, during the 2004 presidential elections, in which he was also a candidate, declared his support for Vladimir Putin. Just Russia was formed with Kremlin support, qualifying it as a *regime-project* party from its conception. In a bid to seemingly weaken the strength of an increasingly dominant United Russia, the Kremlin directed the creation of Just Russia as a center-left alternative (March, 2009). Sakwa (2008) writes that the creation of Just Russia has prevented United Russia from becoming a hegemonic party, an outcome that has split United Russia's leadership. It is also considered a *project* party because it was created to take votes away from the KPRF and the LDPR.

Just Russia's history is exemplary of the minor party merger trends that have occurred over the past five years. Just Russia is the result a merger of two minor parties, the Party of Life and the Party of Pensioners, and a project party, Rodina. The regional organizations of Rodina and the Party of Pensioners provided an immediate regional presence to the new party. Rodina competed in 48 regional elections, winning 51 seats in 16 different contests. The Party of

Pensioners competed in 28 elections, winning 64 seats. The Party of Life also competed in 28 contests, winning 30 seats in nine regions. A fourth organization, the Ecological Party “the Greens” merged into Just Russia later. Its achievements were much more modest than any of the other parties in Just Russia. It won only one seat in the ten elections in which it partook.

From the amalgamation of a number of relatively small and relatively unsuccessful parties, Just Russia has far surpassed the achievements of its predecessors. Having only been in existence since 2006, Just Russia competed in the fourth most elections (75) of any party in this study; won seats in the fourth largest number of elections (62); and won the fourth most seats (206). The importance of its political closeness to the Kremlin should not be understated, though it, too, has faced pressure from the authorities, seeing its official support quietly drawn back after early electoral successes (March, 2009).

A.b.: Russia’s Minor Parties and Former Parties:

Most of the parties competing in the regions, though, fall into the minor party category. Three of the seven remaining parties in Russia today are minor parties. Yabloko and Right Cause are both small liberal parties, while Patriots of Russia is a nationalist-leftist party. While Yabloko has remained independent, Right Cause and Patriots of Russia have merged with other small parties since 2003. Despite having different economic platforms, their platforms are similar in a number of ways. Anti-corruption, protection of citizens’ rights, and reform of the political and economic system characterize each party. They also share a lack of electoral success and an inability to contest most regional elections.

The Russian Democratic Party Yabloko has been in decline since 1993. In the context of systemic party weakness of the 1990s, Yabloko’s decline is consistent with larger anti-party trends in Russia. As the party system developed in the 2000s, Yabloko continued to be

increasingly marginalized. Parties of power, such as Unity, and its successor, United Russia, and A Just Russia have managed to consistently field and win candidates, as have leftist and nationalist parties like the KPRF and LDPR. Programmatic, liberal opposition parties, on the other hand, like Yabloko continue to lose ground. As Russia shifted into a power-opposition party system rather than a typical left-right continuum, LDPR, KPRF, and Just Russia, have coalesced around the state power structures, Yabloko has chosen to remain in opposition (White, 2006).

Noting Yabloko's weakness at the federal level, White (2006) predicted that the party's problems would similarly plague it and fellow opposition parties in the regions, as well. Indeed, regional political victories have proven as elusive for Yabloko as national victories. Although Yabloko competed in 29 regional elections, it won only seven seats (.2% of the total) in three elections, making it the smaller of the two major liberal parties in Russia.

Right Cause succeeded the liberal right minor party, Union of Right Forces. Union of Right Forces merged with two other minor parties, Democratic Party of Russia and Civil Force. The Union of Right Forces was the largest, most successful and had the largest political profile of its founding parties. It competed in 39 regional elections, winning 31 seats in 13 elections. The Democratic Party did not win any seats in the nine elections in which it competed. Since the party's creation, Right Cause has competed in six elections, winning a total of 11 seats in two regions. The party calls for a reform and restructuring of the bureaucracy and justice system, while improving and increasing the social welfare system.

Patriots of Russia is a nationalist-leftist party. Calling itself the "only genuine opposition and independent political force," Patriots of Russia calls for a redistribution of wealth in order to restore Russia's socio-political "destiny" of greatness. Its claim to independence is rather

dubious, it seems, given its leadership's closeness to President Putin's *siloviki* clique (Sakwa, 2010). There appears to be a small degree of legitimacy to its claims of political independence, as evidenced by its denial of registration in a number of regional elections, a problem Yabloko and Right Cause have faced, as well. Similar to Yabloko and Right Cause, Patriots of Russia devotes a considerable portion of its party platform to corruption and "arbitrary justice" in Russia. "Social protection for all" is the foundation of Russia's economic and political future, according to its party program.

B: Regional Election Results: Party Lists 2003-2011

One hundred and forty elections took place between 2003 and 2011. In these elections, 3,447 seats were reserved for political parties. In all, 45 political parties or electoral blocs won seats. Average turnout was 50.22% over this time period. In the absence of a clear methodology for excluding elections with abnormally high turnout, the data include all elections.

The spoils of reform have been decidedly in favor of national parties over regional parties, though there have been exceptions in a number of regional contests. Of the 3,447 seats reserved for parties, 3,348 went to national political organizations, the rest being won by local electoral blocs. For the most part, the gains have been lopsided in favor of the presidential party, United Russia. Of the 3447 seats apportioned by party list elections, United Russia won 2018 seats. Its closest competitor, the KPRF, did not win even half the number seats that United Russia secured, winning only 563 seats. With 269 seats over the eight-year period, the LDPR was the third most successful party. Having only existed since 2006, Just Russia, closed the seat gap with the LDPR, winning 206 PR apportioned seats. Totals for selected parties are in the table below.

2003-2011	Elections	Won Seats	Seat Total	Percentage of
Totals:	Contested		(3,447)	Total
	(140)			
United Russia	140	140	2,018	58.54
KPRF	135	130	563	16.33
LDPR	136	100	269	7.8
Just Russia	78	73	206	5.97
Yabloko	29	3	7	0.2
Union of Right	45	15	44	1.2
Force/Just				
Cause				
Agrarian Party	34	19	62	1.79
Party of	28	23	64	1.85
Pensioners				
Patriots of	46	9	30	0.8
Russia				

2003-2011 Data Compiled from <http://www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>

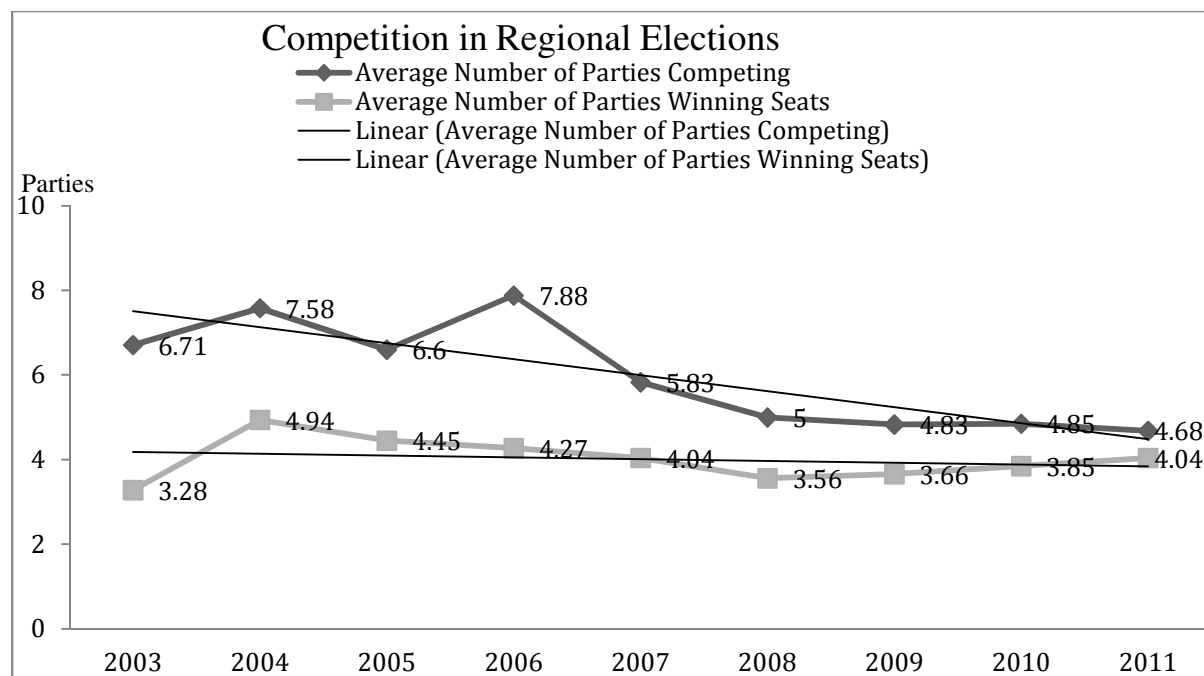
As is suggested by the number of seats held by the large national parties, regional politics have achieved a degree of stability on the supply side of the electoral market. By 2009, seven parties met the requirements to be registered and compete in regional elections, down from 47 that competed in elections in 2003, 35 registered in 2006, and well over 100 in the late 1990s. The absolute number of parties registered and participating in regional elections had been

steadily trending downward with each electoral cycle. The total number of parties and parties winning seats is contained in the table below.

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
(Elections)	(7)	(17)	(20)	(18)	(24)	(16)	(12)	(14)	(12)
Parties	15	43	31	20	16	11	7	7	6
Competing									
Won	9	26	18	12	9	6	5	4	6
Seats									

2003-2011 Data Compiled from <http://www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>

After 2006, the number of parties competing for PR seats begins to drop rather precipitously. As the system displayed a high degree of change, at least in absolute terms, the number of parties competing and winning seats per election on average reflects a lesser degree of change, though the downward trend in the total number of parties competing is still apparent. On average, 6.7 parties contested elections, with an average of 3.28 parties winning seats in 2003. In 2004, forty-three parties and blocs contested elections, with an average of 7.58 competing in each regional election and 4.94 winning seats. During the elections in 2005 and 2006, the average number of parties competing in regional elections fell to 7.21, with the average number of parties winning seats also slipping to 4.36. These downward trends continued, excluding a slight uptick from an average of 4.83 competing parties in 2009 to 4.85 in 2010, until reaching an seven-year low of 4.58 parties competing and 4.08 parties winning seats in 2011. These trends are graphed below.



2003-2011 Data Compiled from <http://www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>

In seven regional elections in 2003, turnout was a respectable 55.9%. Twelve parties and three blocs fielded candidates. Eight parties and one electoral bloc won seats in at least one region. The organizational capabilities of the participating political parties are reflected by the ability of political parties to contest elections across multiple regions. Six parties were able to contest more than half of the regional contests, although only United Russia contested all seven elections. Although United Russia won by far the largest share of seats in the seven regional contests (110 seats out of a possible 165), a cross spectrum of political parties appeared on the ballot and won some share of seats. For example, in the Republic of Ingushetia, the presidential party, United Russia, a nationalist bloc, For Frolycha, and the liberal, reformer party, Yabloko, in addition to a number of smaller, nationalist-leftist parties won seats.

The regional elections of 2004 saw greater participation by a large and relatively diverse group of parties. Forty-three parties and blocs competed in seventeen regional contests.

Surprisingly, for a presidential election year, turnout in 2004 (44%) was more than 10% lower than the previous year. Even more surprisingly, given that President Putin won a first round presidential victory, United Russia lost two regional contests and only received on average 34% of the vote in regional elections. That being said, United Russia proved to be organizationally superior to any other party. It managed to win 60 of the 195 PR list seats available. It was the only party to contest and win seats in every election, although the nationalist party LDPR also managed to field candidates in all 17 elections. The large number of elections seems to have stretched the resources of the nation-wide Russian parties, as only three parties managed to contest more than half of the seventeen contests. United Russia, the KPRF and the LDPR were the most capable organizationally, winning the most, second and third most seats of any parties.

The 2004 elections marked a high point of electoral success for regional electoral blocs. Twenty-three blocs competed in one region alone. Of these 23 blocs, 15 won at least one legislative seat. A KPRF-Agrarian-Workers' Movement electoral bloc in Altai managed to win more seats than United Russia. This victory was blunted by the fact that a pro-presidential bloc "In Support of the Policies of the President" managed to win enough seats to secure a majority for United Russia and its allies. A second, more lasting trend in regional politics is notable in the 2004 elections: the emergence of a Kremlin backed "project" party. Rodina managed in its second year to contest five elections and win the fifth largest number of seats.

Only nine electoral blocs formed the following year for the 20 regional elections in 2005. Eight of these blocs won seats, though none won more than four seats and none competed in more than one region, suggesting that the political conditions conducive to forming blocs were not present outside of a few unique regions. For example, in Amur, the electoral bloc, For Our Amur, managed to defeat United Russia, the sole instance of electoral defeat for United Russia in

2005. United Russia won 47.8% of all seats, averaging 39% of the vote, earning 178 out of the possible 372 seats. Once again United Russia was the only party able to contest all 20 elections. Four other parties, the KPRF (18), the LDPR (19), Rodina (14), and the Union of Right Forces (11) contested more than half of the elections, although none of these parties managed to win even half the total number of seats that United Russia secured.

The 2006 elections marked a sea change of sorts for regional politics in Russia. In the 18 elections that year, no election bloc formed consisting of either regional or national parties. This development was a result of a change in the electoral laws, which previously permitted groups of two parties and public organizations to run together on a ticket. Partially as a result of this strategy no longer being a factor, United Russia managed to increase its share of the regional seat total (51% of all seats) compared to 2005 (48%), and win the most seats in all eighteen regions. In Altai, where a regional, leftist-nationalist electoral bloc defeated United Russia in 2004, the leftist-nationalist share of seats was instead split between four different national parties, giving United Russia an absolute majority of seats.

In the absence of regional political parties forming election blocs, only large or moderately large national parties contested the 18 elections held in 2006. Of the twenty parties that competed, none were regional parties. The remaining parties displayed their organizational capacities and national reach, or lack thereof, by their ability to contest multiple elections across twenty regions. With some level of national organization, seven parties managed to compete in more than half of the regions, though of these seven only four managed to win seats in at least half of the contests in which they fielded candidates. Twelve out of 20 competing parties managed to win seats, although only United Russia managed to win more than 20% of the 385 seats available. Only five parties manage to win seats totaling in the double-digits. Of the

thirteen parties unable to field candidates in at least half the regional elections, four were deregistered by the end of the year for failing to meet the requirements of the second “Law of Parties” that increased membership requirements to 40,000 members.

There were 24 regional elections in 2007. Although there were more contests than the previous year, sixteen was the fewest number of parties since fourteen parties and blocs competed in 2003. In 2007, Just Russia quickly became the fourth-largest party in regional politics. Just Russia competed in more contests (22) than the LDPR (16), and won a larger percentage of the vote, though it took fewer seats by a large margin (10 to the LDPR’s 49). Only the KPRF and United Russia fielded candidates in all 24 elections. In all, five parties fielded candidates in at least half of the contests, and the liberal party Union of Right Forces managed to get on the ballot in 11 contests and won seats in five regions. On the surface, the results in 2007 seem to reflect some positive trends. Nine parties won seats, including two liberal parties. The left, right, and center of the political spectrum won seats, although the results were typically lopsided for United Russia.

Significant success for parties other than United Russia should not be exaggerated. United Russia won its largest share of the regional seats yet, winning 409 of the 687 PR seats available in 2007. Its next closest competitor, the KPRF, only managed to win 112 seats, good for 16% of the total, but dwarfed by United Russia’s 59.5%. If one adds the seats won by Just Russia, an ally of United Russia, UR and its political allies won 71.3% of the seats in 2007. The only liberal parties competing, the Union of Right Forces nine seats and the Green Party’s one seat combined accounted for only 1.4% of the total seats available. Yabloko did not win any seats, even in its traditional areas of support in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The electoral woes of Russia's minor parties of any stripe continued in 2008. Yabloko again failed to get on any PR list ballots in 2008. Three liberal parties (Union of Right Forces, Civilian Power, and the Green Party) were on the ballots in one, three and one regions respectively, but failed to win seats in any regions. 2008 was a presidential election year in Russia and United Russia's candidate, Dmitry Medvedev, was popular. Perhaps not surprisingly, 2008 marked the highpoint of United Russia's political power in the regional legislatures. The party won 317 of the 445 seats available in the 16 regional elections in 2008. The field shrank even further, with only 11 parties competing. Of these, only six managed to win seats. With the exception of the four major parties (United Russia, KPRF, LDPR and Just Russia), two minor parties, Patriots of Russia and the Agrarian Party, won only 10 seats combined, or 2% of the total. The four major parties clearly separated themselves from the pack of smaller parties in terms of their organizational capacity. United Russia, the KPRF and LDPR fielded candidates in all 16 contests, and a Just Russia managed to compete in 15 regions.

The twelve elections in 2009, in many ways, looked very similar to the previous year's elections and those that followed in 2010 and 2011. United Russia, against an even smaller field, managed to win 70.6% of the seats available (263 out a possible 372). Seven parties competed in at least one region. United Russia and the KPRF were the only parties to compete and win seats in every election. The LDPR and a Just Russia also fielded candidates in every regional election, managing to win seats in eight and seven regions, respectively. The liberal "left" Yabloko and liberal "right" Right Cause did not win any seats, not even in what one would expect to be more liberal Moscow city elections, and only appeared on the ballot in two regions apiece. The only other party to win seats, the socialist party, Patriots of Russia, won seven seats in two regions for 1.8% of the total seat share.

The final two election years in this study look remarkably similar. The four major political parties fielded and won more candidates than the three minor parties by a large margin. More than ever, the long, steady decline of the liberal parties in Russia appears to be terminal. Combined, the two remaining liberal parties combined to compete in only six elections out of a possible 26 and won only one seat out of a possible 607 seats (0.1% of the total). In 2010 and 2011, the three minor parties competed, on average, in 3.6 elections and 2.3 elections per year, respectively. The four major parties were on the ballot in 24 out of 26 contests and won 98% of the available seats.

In both years, all seven remaining legal parties in Russia competed in at least one region, although the three minor parties did not field candidates in even half of the regions in either year. The four major political parties managed to win every seat in 2010 (287 seats out of 287 seats) and the overwhelming majority in 2011 (309 out of 320). Russia's minor parties, on average, received less than 2% of the vote in 2010 and less than 5% in 2011 and only won seats (11) in 2011. In only one region, Chelyabinsk, did all seven parties compete in the same election. In this election, as in almost every other election in 2010 and 2011, only the four largest parties won seats.

United Russia did match the level of near total dominance that it achieved in 2008 and 2009. Its share of the seat total slipped from 70% to 58% in 2010 and 57% in 2011. The KPRF surged to 20% of the total in 2010, though it slipped to 17% in 2011. The LDPR received 10% of the seats in both years, while Just Russia increased its share from 12% to 13%.

B.a.: Electoral Trends in Regional Legislatures

In many respects, the political changes that occurred in regional politics after 2002 are a complete reversal of the period that preceded it. As intended when the new laws on political parties were passed, the regions have been integrated into the national political arena *vis-à-vis* the party system. Given the scope of the two laws on parties, this was, to a large degree, unavoidable. The question, then, became not whether a party system would gain a foothold in the regions, but rather what type of party system would develop in terms of which political parties would fill the institutional space provided for them, and to what degree. Recall that in 1998, no party could claim to hold a majority of seats in *any* regional legislature. In only five regions were the majority of seats held by deputies of any political party, and only the KPRF had the organization capacity to consistently contest elections across multiple regions.

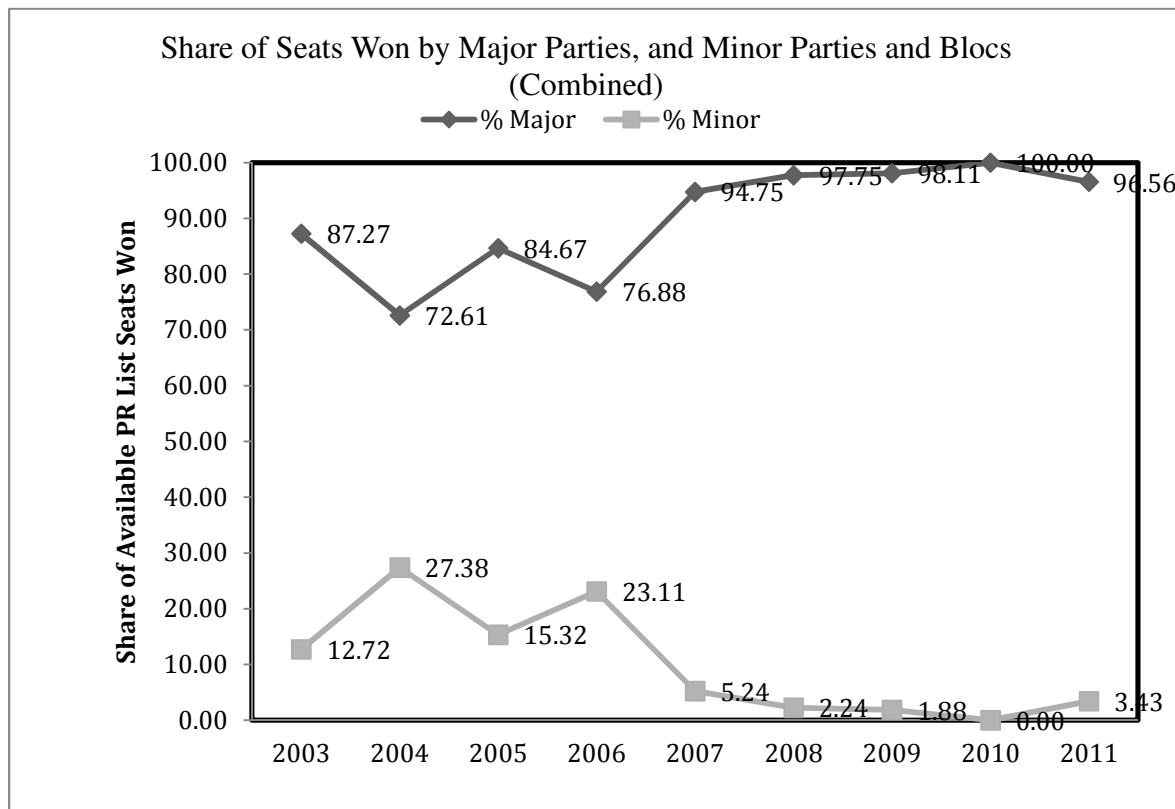
By 2011, one party held a majority of PR seats in the great majority of Russia's regions. The KPRF and LDPR have adapted and found more success in the regions because of it. The minor parties have found relatively little success, but can be said to have been no less successful than before the reforms went into effect. At the very least the minor parties have been more successful in the regions than at the federal level over the same period. From the near total absence of national parties in the early 2000s, four parties compete in nearly every regional election and a host of minor parties field candidates in multiple region. Over the whole period of this study, six parties (United Russia, KPRF, LDPR, Just Russia, Agrarian Party, and Party of Pensioners) managed to win more 1% of the total share of PR seats in years in which they competed. For comparison, data from the third election cycle before reform is included in the table below

	United Russia	KPRF	LDPR	Just Russia	Yabloko	Patriots of Russia	Just Cause
2003-2011 Elections Contested (%)	100	96.42	97.14	93.58	20.71	38.01	15.78
2003-2012 Won Seats (%)	100.00	96.29	73.52	82.19	17.24	19.56	33.33
Third Election Cycle Contested	17.1	56.6	40.8	N/A	21.1	N/A	17.1
Third Election Cycle Won Seats	14.5	38.2	2.6	N/A	5.3	N/A	2.6

2003-2011 Data Compiled from <http://www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>. Third Election Cycle (Golosoov, 2003).

Changes to the broader system are perhaps illustrated best when one divides the time period of interest into two distinct periods. The major shift is from regional parties and minor national parties competing regional contests and having some success to the total control by the major parties. This former part consists of the 62 elections that took place from 2003 to 2006. During this first period, 63 major and minor parties and blocs competed across a large number of regions and a relatively large number of parties and blocs (42) managed to win a share of seats. Although the major parties won the most seats every year, the minor parties and electoral blocs managed to secure a respectable percentage of the available seats. In 2003, the percentage was low, only 12.7 %, compared with the 87% won by the major parties. In 2004, minor parties increased their share to a respectable 25.7% versus 74.2% by the major parties. The minor party share decreased to 15.8% in 2005, but increased in 2006 to 23.1%.

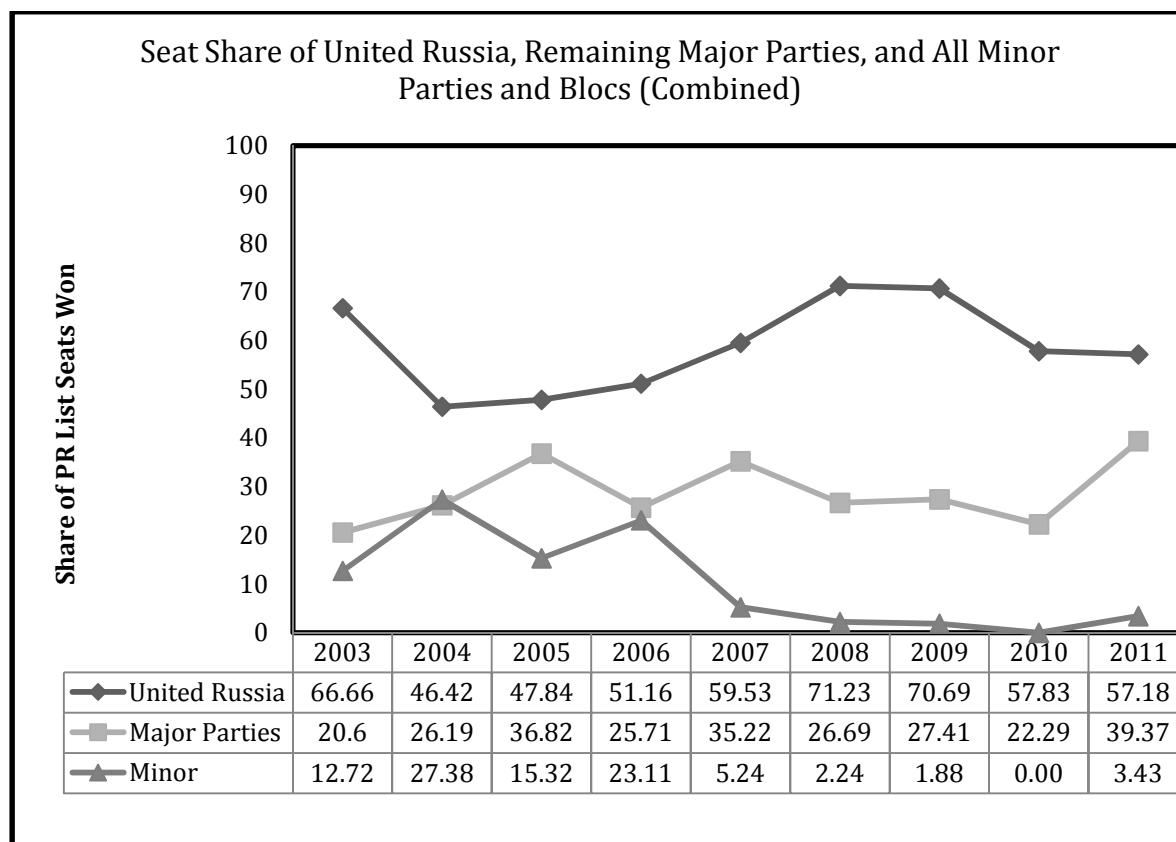
Beginning in 2007, however, after the pool of parties contracted significantly, the share of seats won by the major parties ballooned. The percentage of seats held by minor parts dipped to 5.2%, while the major parties secured 94.7% of all regional seats available that election year. Each of the three years that followed resulted in an increase in the percentage held by the major parties in regional elections. The 97.7% of all seats won by major parties in 2008 increased in 2009 to 98.1% of all seats and climbed further still in 2010 to 100% of regional seats. Although the percentage of seats won by the major parties could only decline from there, in 2011 the four parties still managed to win 96.5% of the seats that year. These trends are graphed below.



Data compiled from <http://www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>

To group the four major parties together drastically understates how lopsided the share of seats controlled by United Russia is. If the minor parties lost out to the major parties, then the

party of power has just as equally defeated the KPRF, LDPR and Just Russia. In every year, United Russia's share of the seats won by the major parties never constituted less than when it secured 56.5% of the major party seats in 2005. In 2003, 2008, and 2009, United Russia won more 70% of all the seats won by the major parties. In both 2010 and 2011 its share of the seats won by the major parties dipped below 60% for only the second and third time in the current study. This trend is graphed below.



Data compiled from <http://www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>

B.b.: Single Member Districts

United Russia's dominance in the regions extends into single member district elections, as well. In fact, for the seats that were once most securely held by independents, United Russia

has been more dominant in SMD contests than it has been in for PR seats. Complete SMD returns were not available on the Central Election Commission's online database; therefore the data below is drawn from 31 elections between 2008 and 2010. Over the same period, 42 elections were held in all.

Coupled with United Russia's share of PR seats, the lopsided state of regional politics comes into fuller focus with the addition of their SMD seats. Independents as a group perform better than the remaining parties, but their status as the most notable feature of regional politics in Russia, if not also the most powerful group, is clearly at an end. It may be that many formerly independent politicians joined United Russia and there has been relatively little political turnover in the regions. This is not clear from the data, however. SMD totals are in the table below.

	Elections	Total	UR	Independents	LDPR	KPRF	Just Russia	Yabloko
	SMD							
2008	12	300	229	47	4	4	9	4
2009	7	194	156	29	1	6	8	0
2010	12	234	210	11	2	7	4	0

Data compiled from <http://www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>

Note that minor parties are conspicuously absent and unsuccessful competing for SMD seats. Patriots of Russia, Yabloko, Union of Right Forces, Right Cause, and a host of other small parties have had little to no success in SMD contests. In this regard, the percentage of seats that the minor and major parties, with the exception of United Russia, has markedly dropped compared to the third election cycle. These parties rarely compete in SMD contests, seemingly for good measure given assured victory of United Russia's candidates. Another trend is clear,

though, from the Central Election Commission's candidate lists. In the rare event that minor parties attempt to compete for SMD seats. Along with numerous independent candidates, minor party candidates are commonly struck from the ballot. Yabloko's candidates were struck from the ballot in three contests; Patriots of Russia's in five contests; and Union of Right Forces/Right Cause's three times. Given that the minor parties combined won only four seats, all of those in one region for Yabloko, they are actually more likely to be disqualified than win even a single seat in SMD contests.

Conclusions:

The purpose of this paper is not to ascertain whether Russia is or is not a democracy. It is not, although it contains many formal elements of democracy. At best, the Russian system walks a fine line between democratic window dressing and electoral authoritarianism, and fully developed, closed authoritarianism. At worst, Russia is and has been an authoritarian state with some surface elements of democracy. What I did not expect to be measure, more than very roughly, is voter behavior using vote returns as a measure of public opinion. The presence of voter fraud, sometimes blatant, but more often subtle, seems to severely limit any accurate connection between election returns, voter behavior, and public opinion. On the contrary, the most important data in this study are seat totals because, even though they do reflect perfectly reflect the will of electorate, they do reveal the structure of political power in Russia today.

In the past, party substitutes took the place of parties. Now, it seems, that controlled parties are substitutes for meaningful democratic institutions. If democratic window dressing is constant across the whole study, then its form, at the very least, seems to have changed in a number of ways since 2003. It is not immediately clear which feature of Russia's regional party

development will have more detrimental effects in the long-run: floating parties or managed parties. In effect, the Russian party system has become top-heavy with a few parties with nothing to support them, whereas before it simply had very little in the way of parties left to lose. If United Russia ceases to be a viable vehicle to support the presidency, going the way of former parties of power, and loses financial and political support, a huge political space will be left in regional and political politics. Will the “left leg”, Just Russia, be able to fill that political space? It seems doubtful with its position already undermined by the federal authorities (March, 2009)

An outline of the system’s imperfect elements can give us hints as to the range of future possibilities. Optimistically, Russia could go the way of a number of former electoral authoritarian systems like Mexico, Taiwan, and Senegal. What we see now may be a harbinger of potential future changes to Russia’s political system. Recall that two of the four major parties (the KPRF and the LDPR) existed prior to the creation of an independent Russian state. If Russia undergoes further transformation, it is not unreasonable to expect these and other parties in Russia today to play a role in any future system. Moreover, just as the soviet political elites had an outsized influence on the construction of the current system up to the current era, so, too, the parties in power now might be in a position of power to shape any future changes.

The very possibility of this occurring seems to suggest an underlying weakness in the managed system in Russia today. What is the cost to systemic credibility in exchange for short-term systemic stability? Assuming the system is stable now, how long will this stability last? And if the system collapses, will it be from within, with factions of political elites vying for power, or will it be from without, from a public that tires of the “stable”, but inherently non-democratic system in Russia today? Petrov, Lipman and Hale (2010) discussed this tension before the protests the following year. They noted that while the system in Russia today seems to

have “successfully” addressed the problems of the previous decade, the inflexibility of the system could lead to an inability to address changing societal interests in the future. Still, the authors concluded that change was unlikely in the short term because of, “energetic and highly skilled manual control of the system... and the absence of major to society or need to for major changes of policy course”, but only so long as Putin’s and Medvedev’s personal popularity stayed high.

It would seem that not only has their collective popularity slipped considerably, but so have their management skills. A sizable societal shock in the form of mass protests has occurred since 2010, as well. Distrust and dissatisfaction with the system was on the rise *before* electoral fraud resulted in massive protests across Russia in 2011 and 2012. One of their proposed responses, currently in the Duma, is to relax registration requirements for parties. Given the relatively large number of parties that were able to compete until the second law on parties came into effect, if the new reforms go through, the number of parties may very well balloon once again.

The effects of such a change would be numerous and mixed. The number of registered parties could approach numbers pre-2003. Politics at the regional level may turn move “outside the ring road” again. Parties may float once again and any popular support for the party system today may erode further. If direct elections of governors were reinstituted, this reform would likely have an equally sizeable and unpredictable influence on the future of the party system. Regional governors will likely retain the lion’s share of regional political authority and power. Co-opting local party branches of the national parties, the creation of their own local parties, or local elite competition resulting in the formation of competing political parties have previously occurred in the regions, and may well occur again (Golosov, 2003).

Whether there is a sea change ahead in the regions is unclear as of yet, although there is evidence that the parties most active today will be involved in any future system. If it is from within, it is probable that the principle actors could come from the seven parties remaining in Russia. Following the protests in Russia in late 2011 and early 2012, members of Just Russia opposed United Russia members in local elections, some winning (for example, in Yaroslavl mayoral elections) and others have lost, sparking further accusations of fraud and protest (as in Astrakhan, in which Just Russia's mayoral candidate protested the results by going on hunger strike against supposed election fraud). Whether these are signs of legitimate inter-party competition developing and as serious harbingers of change remains unclear as of yet. Russia is in fact on the cusp of systemic change, the party system will play a crucial element, either because its level of development had the seeds of democratic change, or because it did not.

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