



Roundtable Summary

Russia's Party Politics

Vladimir Gel'man, European University, St Petersburg

6 June 2008

Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to government or to any political body. It does not hold opinions of its own; the views expressed in this text are the responsibility of the speaker. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the speaker and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the event.

While Chatham House aims to provide a fair summary of the speaker's words we cannot take responsibility for any minor inaccuracies which may appear.

The 1990s saw a boom in political pluralism. Russian politics during this period was extremely competitive, but not party based. The trend has now reversed. Party politics has developed, and four key posts in the Russian Government are held by members of the main political party, United Russia. Over the same period, however, political pluralism has all but disappeared. United Russia dominates the political scene at all levels and uses state power to maintain its dominance. This is typical of electoral authoritarianism, examples of which exist in elsewhere. What is atypical of the Russian case is that this system emerged after ten years of highly competitive politics.

There are several different types of authoritarian system: personalist, military and party-based regimes. Comparative studies suggest the most enduring of these systems is party authoritarianism. Coloured revolutions brought down

the personalist regimes in Georgia and Ukraine, whilst in Russia the party-based system has survived.

Why did this situation arise? How can we explain the survival of Russia's authoritarian model? The experience of the 1990s is crucial here. The open conflict within the elites which emerged in 1999/2000 over the leadership succession was critical to Putin's strategic decisions. During his time in power he has done all he can to avoid a similar rift occurring again. The regime is extremely concerned about stability, and wants to ensure its long-term survival regardless of performance.

Putin's strategy for shaping Russia's politics was defined by three key considerations: to monopolise political control; to prevent alternative coordination of elites and co-opt all independent political entities (the experience of the coloured revolutions was particularly important here).

There were two means of survival open to Putin. He could have built a personalist regime along the lines of Belarus and Turkmenistan. However, this approach would have been costly, both in terms of maintaining the powerful means of coercion necessary, and also in terms of international standing. Putin had no desire to become an international pariah along the lines of the Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko.

The second route, the one adopted, was a soft authoritarian model that would bring more long-term benefits. It would enhance the legitimacy of the regime through effective management and the outward trappings of democracy; it would be non-ideological; and it would maintain and consolidate its power through the steady recruitment and co-option of elites.

This model was implemented in a very effective manner. United Russia was established in 2001 through a takeover of the Fatherland, All Russia party, which in 2000 had been a vehicle for an attempted challenge to the Presidential succession, and its MPs were co-opted into the new party. Even before the 2003/4 electoral cycle, the Party enjoyed a dominant position in the Duma. After this point United Russia established a constitutional majority in 2003 and again in 2007. A package of reforms abolished the popular election

of regional governors and 65 out of 83 regional heads were co-opted into United Russia.

United Russia is not a typical political party. Political parties are generally created to get people into power. United Russia was created by those in power to consolidate their position over elites. Parties are generally run through a managerial apparatus, or some system of corporate governance. The management of United Russia, however, lies outside the party – in the Kremlin. Also atypical is the lack of clear ideology. United Russia can and does change its policy preferences to maintain its popularity. The involvement of the lower level membership in making policy is very low. In the long-run, the lack of ideology could be dangerous for the Party, as it means it cannot develop any long-term loyalty.

The USSR was run by a Party-State, which effectively controlled all aspects of government. United Russia, by contrast, operates as a State-Party, where the executive holds huge influence over the policy course of the Party.

The opposition, which flourished in the 1990s, was unable to deal with the challenges posed by the super-presidential system and the imposed compliance of elites. The Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Yabloko have become virtually extinct. The Communist Party remained inert and passive to these developments.

Vladislav Surkov, the main architect of these developments, has argued the establishment of a dominant party is comparable with the situation in Sweden and Japan. The defining feature of the current system, however, is not United Russia's dominance, but the means used to maintain this dominance. No opposition is tolerated unless it represents absolutely no threat. Russia's current system might thus be more accurately compared with the one-party state of the GDR, or the decades of one-party rule in Mexico.

Dominant parties cannot survive forever. The question remains, however, whether opposition will return under Medvedev.

Question and Answer

What might lead to the collapse of United Russia, or the return of political pluralism?

Collapse will not come soon. The regime in Mexico lasted six decades. The Mexican experience indicates that an economic slowdown can quickly undermine the ruling party. The regime was toppled when the political opposition, Left and Right, were finally able to coordinate their efforts. In Mexico the rise of competitive politics coincided with the return of formal institutions which for years had been little more than a façade for the sake of legitimacy.

In Japan, the Liberal Party is dominant, but there are several factions within it that debate and contribute to policy. Could factions develop under the umbrella of United Russia as a substitute for interparty competition?

United Russia would like to prevent the development of institutionalised factionalism. Instead, they have party 'clubs' which in theory are meant to create policy in different sectors. In reality, however, all major decisions are made outside the Party. Organised factionalism could lead to the break-up of the Party. Instead, the regime is attempting to follow the Mexican model whereby interest groups are organised around various economic sectors. This is similar to the USSR in the 1960s, when an attempt was made to divide factions into agrarian and industrial sectors.

How concerned is the regime by the issue of legitimacy?

Political legitimacy could be compared with businesses taking out insurance – it acts as a guarantee against losses. The experience of the 1990s has taught elites the importance of legitimacy. The regime takes this very seriously. This is why it invests so much in 'great nation' identity building and media control.

There was recently an attempt in St Petersburg to bring together disparate groups into some kind of united opposition. Do you see much prospect for this in the near future?

The problem at the moment is that the two main opposition groups – liberal parties and the Communist Party – would both prefer the status quo to the alternative the other is proposing. Liberals cannot countenance a return to mass state ownership, whilst the Communist Party do not want privatisation and the free market to be extended any further. Again, a similar scenario occurred in Mexico. The Left and Right didn't begin to cooperate until the major economic crisis occurred in the 1980s. In Russia, as was the case in Mexico, the opposition also has very little institutional means to act.

You mentioned a comparison with the GDR. The GDR collapsed despite an extremely efficient secret service and powerful means of coercion. Is the calibre of today's politicians in Russia higher than in East Germany?

The Russian leadership knows that the cost of repression is extremely high, and also that the people most at risk in a repressive system are elites themselves. In Turkmenistan people pay bribes in order *not* to be appointed to senior posts because they know how high the risks are! Russian leaders have no interest in applying the level of repression which existed in the GDR.

To say that opposition is declining because elites have been co-opted is misleading. Would elites act any differently if they remained outside United Russia?

The regime enjoys widespread support, but it is very superficial. They enjoy specific support as opposed to diffuse support. Diffuse support implies that, within limits, the regime has support regardless of how it acts. Putin's personal popularity is high, but trust of all other officials is very low. Thus the only way for elites to garner support is to ally themselves with the state.

To what extent can we view the current political system as the product of a grand strategy; do you think, for instance, that Surkov really intended to destroy the SPS?

The choice of a party-based authoritarian system over a personalistic one was definite strategic decision. It is possible that not all the details were filled in immediately, certainly at the beginning. In 2003 Surkov said that the political task of the SPS was exhausted and the party was no longer needed.

How important is the Presidential Administration in this system? According to Olga Kryshтанovskaya, the Presidential Administration has over 2000 employees. What does it do, and what are its prospects?

The Presidential Administration had a big role in institution building and in the funding or non-funding of parties. The members of the Presidential Administration perceive themselves as king-makers, who manipulate politics and control the media. It remains to be seen how effective it will be in the long-term.

Russians come low in international comparisons in terms of holding democratic values. Why is this the case? Is it simply the trauma of the 1990s, or because it is associated with outside influence? One can't simply attribute it to a low level of experience of democracy.

One has to ask what one means by democracy. Russians believe they have only two choices – to live without democracy, or to live in a democracy, with very uncertain results. For many, democracy is what happened in the 90s, and they don't want to repeat that experience. In the long run there will be a demand for democracy amongst ordinary Russians. The major challenge facing the regime is inequality. Whilst the level of economic prosperity is high the middle class will continue to support authoritarianism.

The coloured revolutions showed that authoritarian regimes are at their most vulnerable during the time of leadership succession. The question is, can United Russia promote young and ambitious politicians in order to replenish itself? Can United Russia create a situation where it is impossible to build a career outside the Party?

Do you think Putin regrets destroying political pluralism?

No, Putin did his best to demolish party opposition by removing the popular election of governors, exerting more control over the media, and raising the qualifying barrier for representation in the Duma from 5 to 7 per cent of the vote.

The tendency in the West is to assume that opposition to the regime in Russia will be liberal and democratic, but the centre of Russian politics is to the left. That is where the real opposition could come from. Is it not the case that support for the Communist Party of Russia has actually increased marginally amongst the young recently?

The Communist Party is still important in Russia, but it remains a relic of the Soviet period, run by second order bureaucrats who have avoided making any major changes. The slogan 'back to the USSR' is unattractive to younger voters. The Communist Party's relative electoral success is not due to its popularity, but because it is the only alternative available. The social basis of the Communist Party is public servants, but they are now more attracted by United Russia. Just Russia's relative success shows there is a certain demand for left-leaning ideas.

Does the regime appreciate the forthcoming problems? Beneath the Great Power veneer, there are a lot of dangers to the system.

Russia's rulers are quite aware of the challenges they face. They do not, however, have any clear answers on how to deal with them. Now the succession has been accomplished, the rulers have started to think further ahead. But there are no solutions yet.

Is there any prospect of regional mobilisation against the ruling elite, as occurred in the 1990s?

In the 1990s many sub-national authoritarian regimes developed which acted more or less independently of the federal Centre. Instead of destroying these, the Centre has co-opted them. The deal is, you deliver the national vote, and we guarantee your survival. Governors are dismissed for failure to provide an adequate vote share for United Russia, not because of poor economic performance. In the 1990s the regional governors were not able to co-ordinate their activities. The Kremlin adopted a divide and rule approach. There are very few organisations which could coordinate a united opposition coming from the regions.