



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime

Citation for published version:

March, L 2009, 'Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime: Just Russia and Parastatal Opposition', *Slavic Review: Interdisciplinary Quarterly of Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies*, vol. 68, no. 3, pp. 504-527. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25621653>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Slavic Review: Interdisciplinary Quarterly of Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

© March, L. (2009). Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime: Just Russia and Parastatal Opposition. *Slavic Review*, 68(3), 504-527.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime: Just Russia and Parastatal Opposition

Author(s): Luke March

Source: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Fall, 2009), pp. 504-527

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25621653>

Accessed: 03/02/2014 06:03

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Slavic Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime: Just Russia and Parastatal Opposition

Luke March

Contemporary Russia is not a democracy. This is hardly a contentious statement outside Russia itself, where the consensus view (as shown most starkly by Freedom House's reclassification of Russia as "not free" since 2005) is that under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia moved from a "hybrid regime" (an amalgam of democratic and authoritarian elements occupying the "gray" zone between liberal democracy and outright dictatorship) to something approaching full-scale autocracy.¹ Nevertheless, the nature, salience, and future of the democratic potential within Russia is still very much debated, even as the Russian authorities (most recently with their promulgation of the concept "sovereign democracy") rebut criticism ever more insistently.²

In parallel, an increasing emphasis has been placed on viewing the United Russia party (Edinaia Rossiia) as illustrating the paradoxes of Russian party politics. On the one hand, the Kremlin claims to be creating a modern party system. On the other, United Russia is a "party of power" that has produced the kind of "dominant power politics" that recalls "hegemonic party systems" such as those in Mexico, Taiwan, and South Korea.³ There has, however, been far less focus on the increasingly diminished political opposition.⁴ This is a mistake: as Robert Dahl notes,

1. Some early examples of this view are: Larry Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 21–35; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 51–65; and Graeme Gill, "A New Turn to Authoritarian Rule in Russia?" *Democratization* 13, no. 1 (February 2006): 58–77.

2. For some notable exceptions to the view that Russia is not a democracy, see "Russia Profile Weekly Experts Panel: Russian Presidential Election—Affirming Democracy or Confirming Autocracy?" at www.russiaprofile.org for 7 March 2008 (last accessed 15 May 2009). Richard Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International Politics," *International Affairs* 84, no. 2 (March 2008): 241–67 insists that Russia's democratic potential is still rosier than its bleak international image suggests.

3. An excellent account of recent reforms to the party system can be found in Kenneth Wilson, "Party-System Development under Putin," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22, no. 4 (October–December 2006): 314–48. Studies of United Russia and its antecedents before this volume include Hans Oversloot and Ruben Verheul, "The Party of Power in Russian Politics," *Acta Politica: International Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 123–45; Regina Smyth, "Building State Capacity from the Inside Out: Parties of Power and the Success of the President's Reform Agenda in Russia," *Politics and Society* 30, no. 4 (December 2002): 555–78; Zoe Knox, Pete Lentini, and Brad Williams, "Parties of Power and Russian Politics: A Victory of the State over Civil Society?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 1 (January–February 2006): 3–14; and Andrew Konitzer and Stephen K. Wegren, "Federalism and Political Recentralization in the Russian Federation: United Russia as the Party of Power," *Publius* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 503–22.

4. A notable exception is Vladimir Gel'man, "Political Opposition in Russia: A Dying Species?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 3 (July–September 2005): 226–46.

the symbiosis of opposition and regime means that studying the former inevitably illuminates the latter.⁵

My focus here is on the party Just Russia: Motherland/Pensioners/Life (Spravedlivaia Rossiia, hereafter Just Russia) as a case study of the problems and issues confronting opposition in Russia. A self-proclaimed “new socialist” party, Just Russia was established on 28 October 2006 through the merger of three smaller left-leaning groups, Motherland (Rodina), the Russian Party of Life (Rossiiskaia partiia zhizni), and the Russian Pensioners’ Party (Rossiiskaia partiia pensionerov).⁶ In the Russian Duma elections of 2007, Just Russia gained 7.7 percent of the vote and 38 seats—last place but still one of only four parties currently represented in Russia’s parliament.

Just Russia’s nature is poorly understood: skeptics viewed it initially as a Kremlin pocket opposition (“the opposition of the master’s maid to the master’s butler”), entirely fake and designed essentially to fool the electorate.⁷ More optimistic analysts believed that Just Russia was a more serious alternative “party of power,” possessing the potential either for greater (albeit limited) multipartism and opposition or serious elite level conflict.⁸

In the event, during the December 2007 election campaign, neither view was confirmed; contrary to optimists, Just Russia never challenged United Russia’s hegemony as a “party of power” and serious elite conflict did not openly erupt. Contrary to pessimists, Just Russia limped into parliament, despite widely reported Kremlin indifference.

My aim here is threefold. First, to understand why Just Russia emerged. Why, unlike previous disastrous attempts at forming a moderate left opposition, did it attain (however modest) success in 2007? Second, to examine what Just Russia illustrates about the role of opposition within the Russian party system. Does it indicate greater pluralistic potential or merely a greater imitation of it? What does Just Russia reveal about the way the Kremlin “manages” opposition and its success in doing so? Third, to reflect on the role of opposition parties in “electoral authoritarian” regimes: how are they manipulated or even manufactured; how much “opposition” can they even profess?

The answer to these questions will show that both optimists and pessimists are partly right. Certainly, Just Russia can be understood as a regime-created “parastatal party” aimed at providing limited competition for the main “party of power” (United Russia). Contrary to the most skeptical

5. Robert Alan Dahl, ed., *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* (New Haven, 1966).

6. “Just Russia” is preferred to some other translations (e.g., “A Just Russia,” “Russia of Justice”) by analogy to “United Russia” and to others (e.g., “Fair Russia”) because its slogan “social justice” is a recognized, if disputed, left-wing term.

7. Vladimir Pribylovskii, quoted in Nabi Abdullaev, “New Party Says Kremlin Knows Best,” *Moscow Times*, 30 October 2006. Two other analysts holding this view are Boris Kagarlitskii and Boris Makarenko (partly).

8. For examples, see Georgy Bovt, “A Test-Tube Party,” *Russia Profile* 4, no. 1 (27 February 2007): 10; Alexei Makarkin, “Election Speculations,” *Russia Profile* 4, no. 8 (3 September 2007): 7–8. Vitalii Tretiakov and Igor Bunin expressed similar views.

analyses, however, while Just Russia is a heavily manipulated “virtual” opposition, it is not simply a fake designed to dupe the electorate but represents long-term Kremlin strategic interests in channeling opposition and thus stabilizing the political regime. Moreover, it has an identifiable, ideological position (left-wing social democratic) and electorate, which it, albeit imperfectly and partially, represents.

As the optimists argued, Just Russia’s evolution indicates the pluralism of competing Kremlin interests and the potential for elite conflict. Although this conflict was effectively contained in the 2007–8 elections, Just Russia is illustrative of the fundamental paradox of a “managed opposition” for a regime that needs an opposition as a legitimation of its authority to govern. If that opposition is too stage-managed, it ceases to become an opposition in any meaningful or visible sense; if it is too oppositionist, it can rapidly evolve from a management problem into an unmanageable problem.

“Parastatal” Oppositions in “Electoral Authoritarian” Regimes

Although parties are a necessary feature of democracy, they are far from a sufficient element. Analysts have noted that the rise of democracy as “the only game in town” has been accompanied by the rise of “pseudodemocracy,” whereby multiparty systems and organized oppositions exist in regimes that are substantively undemocratic.⁹ “Pseudodemocracies” range from “feckless pluralist” semi-democracies, with (imperfectly) competitive party systems and civil liberties, to “electoral” or “competitive” authoritarian regimes.¹⁰ The latter demonstrate “hegemonic party systems” embodying “dominant power politics” whereby “an institutionalized ruling party makes extensive use of coercion, patronage, media control, and other tools to reduce opposition parties to decidedly ‘second-class’ status,” and the “licensed opposition” cannot challenge for power.¹¹ The precise degree of a regime’s democracy is difficult to ascertain, because nondemocratic regimes have become expert at pretending to be democratic, and almost none would admit that they rule in defiance of the demos. Nevertheless, because of increased Kremlin control over political life, there is every basis for saying that Russia is precisely such an “electoral authoritarian” system, where “by placing elections under tight authoritar-

9. Larry Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 3 (July 1996): 20–37, and Diamond, “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” 21–35.

10. On “feckless pluralism” and “dominant power politics,” see Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (January 2002): 5–21. On “electoral authoritarianism,” see Andreas Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 36–50, and Andreas Schedler, “From Electoral Authoritarianism to Democratic Consolidation,” in Russell Crandall, Guadalupe Paz, and Riordan Roett, eds., *Mexico’s Democracy at Work: Political and Electoral Dynamics* (Boulder, Colo., 2004), 9–38. On “competitive authoritarianism,” see Levitsky and Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism.”

11. Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” 25. For the concept of “hegemonic party systems,” see Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge, Eng., 1976), 230–38.

ian controls [elites try] to cement their continued hold on power. Their dream is to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty."¹²

Many analysts note that under electoral authoritarianism, opposition parties are "permitted to exist largely to shore up the perception of the dominant party's right to govern," that is, their principal role is to provide external and internal legitimacy.¹³ For all but the most dictatorial regimes, opposition is more than a mere façade, however, and indeed fulfills several important functions: responding to the public, providing elite recruitment and training, and stabilizing the regime.

For example, hegemonic party systems encounter the contradiction that the "part" cannot democratically or effectively encompass the whole. A party cannot incorporate all national interest groups and policy platforms without losing its internal ideological and organizational cohesiveness: accordingly, there arises the need for "a mechanism by which regime perpetuation can be reconciled with some degree of political pluralism."¹⁴ Regimes such as Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) before 1988 and Putin's Russia therefore developed an interest in "managing" but not destroying political competition, guaranteeing opposition groups "a limited voice in public affairs, including a degree of independent political space in the public square, in return for abiding by the rules set down by the government."¹⁵ "Competitive" multiparty elections that the regime invariably wins reinforce its own legitimacy, and simultaneously allow mobilization of and responsiveness to public demands, thereby preempting potential problems.¹⁶

Similarly, limited competition acts as an antidote to the centralized and bureaucratic tendencies of a single ruling party. It offers lower-level party cadres alternative career paths and thus limits the risk of defections from the regime, while co-opting opposition elites into regime-sanctioned activity and marginalizing extra-systemic opposition. Overall, it bolsters regime stability by reducing (particularly electoral) unpredictability, hard-wiring competitiveness and responsiveness, and combining openness with control. Unsurprisingly, hegemonic party systems are the most durable form of authoritarianism.

"Managed opposition" is as paradoxical as a "one-party democracy," however, and electoral authoritarian regimes have evolved a panoply of methods to prevent the paradox from becoming too blatant, many of

12. Schedler, "Menu of Manipulation," 36–37. I prefer the term *electoral authoritarian* to terms such as *managed pluralism* because it highlights that elite authority and control rather than pluralism are the driving rationales of the political regime and also embeds Russia within a rich comparative literature. This is, however, not at all to assert that an authoritarian Russia is a "USSR-lite" or has no democratic potential.

13. Dorothy J. Solinger, "Ending One-Party Dominance: Korea, Taiwan, Mexico," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 1 (January 2001): 31.

14. Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Mexico and Russia: Mirror Images?" *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 493.

15. Ibid.

16. Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins, eds., *The Awkward Embrace: One-Party Domination and Democracy* (Amsterdam, 1999).

which have been employed simultaneously.¹⁷ At one extreme are coercive methods, such as harassment, intimidation, or assassination of opposition candidates. More subtle and hence more widely favored are administrative methods including rigging ballots; bribing, compromising, or otherwise co-opting opposition candidates; and inducing party splits. Much used (because they are formally legal and predictable) are strict registration requirements that allow undesirable parties to be banned or otherwise pressured or electoral systems that strongly favor the governing party.¹⁸ Overall, hegemonic parties practice what might be called a “syncretic hegemony,” whereby through cultural norms and co-optative practices they successfully represent themselves as national leaders and delegitimize the opposition as disloyal.¹⁹

The understudied facets of party hegemony of particular relevance to Just Russia are direct attempts to form “parastatal” parties (that is, those partially or completely controlled by the state) that mimic opposition and attempt to channel it in regime-supporting directions, particularly used by regimes during times of political change. For example, in authoritarian South Korea the Chun Doo-hwan regime from 1980 to 1987 banned opposition parties and created loyal opposition parties in order to co-opt opposition activists.²⁰ More durable were Mexico’s opposition parties under the PRI regime. In addition to the partial co-optation of the principal opposition National Action Party (PAN), the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM) and the Party of the Cardenist Front of National Reconstruction (PFCRN) were archetypal parastatal parties. They always endorsed PRI presidential candidates and mostly served as mechanisms for leaders to get congressional seats and enrich themselves on the basis of their parties’ registrations.²¹ They acted as “electoral scabs” whose electoral participation undercut PAN’s inclination to boycott.²²

More blatant still was Nigeria’s contribution to party building. In 1996, General Abacha allowed five parties to register, which then “independently” all endorsed his (unopposed) presidential candidacy.²³ This might have seemed absurd if his predecessor General Babangida had not founded two pro-regime parties in 1989, one “a little to the left” (the Social Democratic Party, SDP) and one “a little to the right” (the National Republican Convention) as part of a “transition” to democracy. With identical headquarters and near-identical party programs and regime fund-

17. For example, see Schedler, “Menu of Manipulation.”

18. Gvosdev, “Mexico and Russia.”

19. The term *syncretic hegemony* is my own but cf. Giliomee and Simkins, eds., *The Awkward Embrace*.

20. These parties included the Democratic Korean Party, the Democratic Society Party, and the Korean People’s Party. Youngmi Kim, e-mail communication, 6 March 2008.

21. Steve Wuhs, e-mail communication, 21 February 2008.

22. José Antonio Crespo, “Party Competition in Mexico: Evolution and Prospects,” in Kevin J. Middlebrook, ed., *Dilemmas of Political Change in Mexico* (London, 2003), 57–82.

23. Festus O. Egwaikhide and Victor Adefemi Isumonah, “Nigeria Paralyzed: Socio-Political Life under General Sani Abacha,” *Africa Development* 26, nos. 3–4 (2001): 219–41.

ing, the parties were mocked as the “Yes Party” and “Yes, Sir Party,” respectively.²⁴ Yet, as a warning to democracy managers everywhere, the parties took on a life of their own, becoming vehicles for “moneybags” to unite around clientelistic and ethnic rather than programmatic cleavages. The army refused to recognize the victory of the SDP candidate Chief Abiola in the 1993 elections, arrested him, and suspended the transition.

Moreover, it is often forgotten that many communist regimes were (theoretically) “hegemonic party systems” where the ruling party led a “popular front” government of noncommunist parties. In East Germany, for example, parties such as the German Liberal Democratic Party and National Democratic Party had very circumscribed roles in candidate selection and election campaigns but had guaranteed parliamentary representation.²⁵ These “parties” acted as “transmission belts” to integrate and monitor influential social groups that the Communist Party could not completely subjugate (for example, the Christian and peasant strata). Putin’s KGB service in Dresden in the 1980s means he was surely aware of the “Dresden party system” and the “constructive” role played by parastatal multipartism.²⁶

“Virtual” Opposition and Regime in Russia

What relevance do such examples have to Russia? Until Putin came to power, most observers would have answered “little,” but this has begun to change. Only belatedly have analysts started to move beyond a conceptualization of the Russian party system as a quasi-European one with recognizable ideological party families (usually “liberal/reformist,” “nationalist,” “communist/left” and “centrist/party of power”).²⁷ The centralizing tendencies under Putin have led to increased attention being paid to Kremlin management of the party system and far greater analysis of the notion of the “party of power” (*partiia vlasti*).²⁸

Some state that the “party of power” is an entirely sui generis post-Soviet phenomenon.²⁹ This is untrue. It has strong similarities to hegemonic parties like the PRI in terms of both presidential control over the party and the dominance exercised through parastatal mechanisms and

24. Julius O. Ihonvbere, *Nigeria: The Politics of Adjustment and Democracy* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1994).

25. Ghita Ionescu, *The Politics of the European Communist States* (London, 1967).

26. Vladimir Ryzhkov, cited in Vladimir Gel'man, “The Transformation of Russia’s Party System,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 19 (17 April 2007): 12–14.

27. For example, Stephen White, *Russia’s New Politics: The Management of a Postcommunist Society* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), and Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000* (Washington, D.C., 2003).

28. Wilson, “Party-System Development under Putin”; Oversloot and Verheul, “The Party of Power in Russian Politics”; Smyth, “Building State Capacity from the Inside Out”; Knox, Lentini, and Williams, “Parties of Power and Russian Politics”; and Konitzer and Wegren, “Federalism and Political Recentralization in the Russian Federation.”

29. For example, Knox, Lentini, and Williams, “Parties of Power and Russian Politics.”

clientelistic arrangements. The crucial difference between the party of power and other hegemonic parties is that whereas the latter have mass membership, coherent structures, and consistent ideologies and are the central conduits for policy making and patronage, in the former, the source of authority lies entirely outside the party (in presidential structures). Moreover, the party of power is never completely “in power” but simply a disposable component of broader regime-type relationships—that is, a “hegemonic bloc” in the Gramscian sense—used instrumentally by those already in power to remain there. Only under Putin has the party of power assumed a more PRI-like form in which United Russia professes a liberal-conservative program, but the political elite (above all Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev) refuse to subordinate themselves completely to party membership, indicating United Russia’s still-disposable status.

Of course, the Russian authorities’ managerial efforts are not confined to the party of power, and this is increasingly reflected in Russia-watchers’ conceptualizations of the party system as a whole. For example, Henry Hale identifies “ideocratic” (single-issue and protest parties), programmatic parties (with consistent, identifiable ideologies), and “clientelistic parties” including the parties of power.³⁰ Richard Sakwa identifies a similar constellation, although tilted somewhat more toward pro-regime parties: “programmatic parties” (with a clear ideology adopted by intra-party democracy), “project parties” set up soon before elections as some short-term elite machination, and “regime parties,” including the party of power, “established to manipulate and shape political space.”³¹ Such characterizations are useful as parsimonious general ideal-types but do not get us especially far with understanding *particular* parties such as Just Russia (which has program, project, and regime/clientelistic elements).

Hans Oversloot and Ruben Verheul focus more explicitly on pro-regime parties and provide some relevant typologies for our study here: the “adjunct/alternative party of power,” which is ideologically identical to a “party of power” but designed as a sparring partner to keep the elite on its toes and test new personnel, and a “favored opposition party” (parties such as Rodina in 2003 that are “professional double crossers and fakers” who channel opposition to support the elite).³² These typologies provide a range of elite options that makes Mexico and Nigeria’s parastatal parties look amateurish, but they remain static, with little attempt to analyze the dynamic interaction between regime parties. The most significant such attempt is undoubtedly Andrew Wilson’s concept “virtual politics.”³³ Wilson argues that the Leninist “culture of deceit” with its “organized victories,”

30. Henry E. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism and the State* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006).

31. Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice*, 2d ed. (London, 2007), 101–2.

32. Hans Oversloot and Ruben Verheul, “Managing Democracy: Political Parties and the State in Russia,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 22, no. 3 (September 2006): 383–405.

33. Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, 2005). On the concept of virtuality, see also Oksana Gaman-Golutvina, “Politika: Partii i vlast’,” *Svobodnaia mysl’* 21, no. 9 (2004): 85–92.

fake plebiscites, and satellite parties infiltrated by double agents has led to a falsification of the entire electoral process whereby parties (and politics in general) are manipulated by the elite to monopolize power and the competition for it.³⁴ The aim of the elite is simultaneously to avoid real politics and to mimic it, a process in which “designer parties” play a great role.

Wilson’s approach can be criticized: it assumes that post-Soviet political culture is, *sui generis*, ignoring instances of manipulation practiced elsewhere; it assumes a greater degree of coordination and control than the Kremlin has managed (especially in the El’tsin era), and (as shown above) the degree to which a limited amount of genuine “healthy competition” is necessary for regime survival. Moreover, it can give too much credence to unverifiable rumor.³⁵ Nevertheless, the approach is illuminating. Wilson does not argue that all politics is faked but that it is multidimensional.³⁶ Indeed, even the mimicry of public politics is itself deeply political—“virtuality” indicates that the political stakes are extremely high. Leninist practice of *kto-kogo* (“who beats whom”) is echoed in the emphasis on ends justifying means and the elite’s unscrupulousness in deliberately blurring the distinction between real and fake in the service of a genuine political contest.³⁷

Virtual politics is of great utility in understanding the origins and evolution of Just Russia, in particular its multidimensionality and how real and virtual are combined. The party is not simply a Potemkin party. On one level it is a left-wing social democratic programmatic party appealing to paternalist voter sentiment; on another, an “alternative party of power” designed to spar with the elite while representing a careerist project for elements of that elite; on yet another it is a “project/favored opposition party” designed to marginalize more independent opposition (particularly the communists). During its short life to date, the party has vacillated between these three facets and this explains why it has arguably failed to achieve any of its principal aims.

The Regime’s Left Leg? Why Just Russia Emerged

That Just Russia is a Kremlin creation is no secret. The project was initiated by deputy presidential chief of staff Vladislav Surkov. With remarkable candor, Surkov stated to a conference of the Russian Party of Life on 24 March 2006: “The problem is that there is no alternative to the large-scale party; in society there is no ‘second leg’ on which to step when the first has gone numb. This makes the system unstable . . . the task of the

34. Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, 38.

35. As just one example, Wilson’s allegation that communist leader Gennadii Ziuganov took money from “father of *perestroika*” Aleksandr Iakovlev is scarcely credible (they were political enemies), and its source is anticommunist *kompromat*. See Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, 224.

36. *Ibid.*, 46.

37. For example, Andrew Wilson, “The Putin Succession” (unpublished paper, 2008).

coming political period is to bring into being a political force that can, at some point, replace the now dominant party.”³⁸

The main surprise of this statement was its audience. The Russian Party of Life was an archetypal “favored opposition project” that had shown anything except life and looked poor timber for such a “second leg.” It was known, if at all, for vaguely populist and ecological platforms (including the protection of the Russian muskrat) and saw itself as “neither left nor right.”³⁹ In 2003, it had gained a meager 1.96 percent of the vote in alliance with the quasi-socialist (and similarly platitudinous) Party of Russia’s Rebirth (*Partiia vrozhdeniia Rossii*). For the Kremlin, the undoubted advantage of the Russian Party of Life was the complete loyalty of its leader, Sergei Mironov, speaker of Russia’s upper house, the Federation Council. Mironov had known Putin since 1994 and proved his worth (and lack of presidential potential) in 2004 when he ran an “insurance” campaign in support of Putin, coming in last.⁴⁰

The Kremlin’s intention to form a “left leg” of the party system has been proclaimed for a long time and was first signaled in 1995 when then speaker of the State Duma Ivan Rybkin headed a left(ish) alternative to the main party of power Our Home Is Russia (*Nash dom—Rossiia*). Rybkin’s efforts were a fiasco, gaining a mere 1.1 percent of the December 1995 vote and succeeding only in giving the term *Rybkinizatsiia* (betrayal followed by oblivion) to the Russian language. The project failed for several reasons. First, it was simply too public (the name “Ivan Rybkin bloc” laid bare its artificiality). Second, it was premature. In 1995, the electorate was still too polarized and the left brand “too closely associated with antisystemic opposition [that is, the communists] for the voters to back ‘loyal’ reds.”⁴¹ Third, it was poorly executed: the El’tsin-era elite was too ambivalent about and incompetent at party building to create one party of power, let alone two, and key elite figures joined neither.

After the 1996 presidential elections crowned the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) as the principal opposition, the Kremlin dropped the idea of forming an independent left, focusing instead on trying to coerce, co-opt, and corrupt the communists into assuming the role of “His Majesty’s loyal opposition” in a two-party system. Communist

38. Surkov’s statement at “Vstrecha gruppy deputatov ot Rossiiskoi partii ZHIZNI s zamestitelem Rukovoditelia Administratsii Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii—pomoshchnikom Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii V. Iu. Surkovym,” at the Web site of Russian Party of Life, www.RPVITA.ru (accessed 22 May 2007; no longer available). This announcement was allegedly not for public consumption, see “Goszakaz na partiui budushchego,” 16 August 2006, at www.lenta.ru/articles/2006/08/16/surkov/ (last accessed 15 May 2009).

39. “Mironov, Sergei,” *Lentapediia*, 19 December 2007, at www.lenta.ru/lib/14159448/full.htm (last accessed 15 May 2009). See also www.mironov.info/Publications/6226.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

40. For more on the Russian Party of Life, see Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, 93.

41. Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, 94. See also Knox, Lentini, and Williams, “Parties of Power and Russian Politics,” and Laura Belin, “Ivan Rybkin: An Insider Falls Out,” RFE/RL special report *The Russian Federation Votes 2003–04*, at www.rferl.org/specials/russianelection/bio/rybkin.asp (accessed 14 March 2008; no longer available).

opposition became increasingly compromised and “cosmetic.”⁴² Nevertheless, it was only with the advent of Putin that the attempt to “tame” the communists really accelerated. Putin consistently challenged the KPRF to reform (into a modern social democratic organization) or die, even suggesting they rename themselves the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party.⁴³

Furthermore, the experience of elite splits in the 1999 Duma elections “scared the Kremlin straight” into realizing the necessity of a united party of power. This centralization placed increasing administrative pressure on the communists (most notably through the Kremlin-created Rodina bloc in the December 2003 elections that helped halve the communist vote).⁴⁴ The KPRF had proved unwilling and unable to become a fully constructive opposition, but they were losing any braking capacity over such an attempt. According to Rodina leader Dmitrii Rogozin, Putin told him in 2003: “Instead of the communists sooner or later a serious and modern-thinking left party must arrive. And that will be good for the country.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Putin cannot be taken at his word: the Kremlin has seemed concerned to keep the communists “in the box,” marginalized but manipulable at key moments (such as in 2004 presidential elections and the 2005 Moscow city Duma elections, when they were exploited to attack Rodina), and has repeatedly shied away from replacing the communists altogether with a potentially more unpredictable opposition.

As Kremlin strategists (reported to be assiduous students of public opinion) undoubtedly realized, the KPRF’s decline did not result in the elimination of opposition sentiments but rather in a “huge unfulfilled niche of left-statist orientation.”⁴⁶ In post-2000 conditions of fast increasing but unevenly distributed national wealth, it is unsurprising that various opinion polls showed an increase in voters’ redistributionist sentiments. In polls conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (Vserossiiskii tsentr izucheniia obshchestvennogo mneniia, VTsIOM) in March 2007, 46 percent of respondents said they supported “socialism” (although only 10 percent of those considered it feasible in Russia).⁴⁷ Mikhail Khodorkovskii’s expectation of an electoral “Left Turn” may have been an exaggeration, but nevertheless, spontaneous public demonstrations against the government’s mishandled monetization of benefits reform of 2005 and strong regional performances for Rodina and the Russian Pensioners’ Party thereafter indicated that leftist rhetoric had potential. These two anticommunist projects increasingly took on an

42. Luke March, “The Russian Communist Party in 2000: A Cosmetic Opposition,” *Analysis of Current Events* 12, no. 7–8 (December 2000): 15–19.

43. Anna Nikolaeva and Elena Rudneva, “Urok predannosti,” *Vedomosti*, 29 June 2007, 2.

44. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia?* 229.

45. Dmitrii Rogozin, *Vrag naroda* (Moscow, 2006), 380.

46. *Putevoditel’ po vyboram: Politicheskaiia Rossiia-2007* (Moscow, 2007), 211.

47. “Press-vypusk no 656: Sotsializm v Rossii: Vozmozhen li on? I nuzhen li?” at wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/4243.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

autonomous momentum and aspired to more than the 1–2 percent niche envisaged for them by the Kremlin.

Electoral arithmetic encouraged a renewal of Kremlin attempts to monopolize the left electorate, but shorter-term concerns with the post-Putin succession made this a priority. As Surkov's comments about United Russia's "numbness" indicated, there was deep Kremlin dissatisfaction with the main party of power. United Russia was seen as electorally inert, polling consistently far short of Putin's personal rating. Moreover its unerringly disciplined voting in the Duma made its bureaucratism and the "complete paralysis of political life" all too public, at the same time as its center-right profile (for example, support for a flat-rate income tax and its lax attitude toward business corruption) made it ill-equipped to tap moderate leftist voters (perhaps 30 percent of the population) who supported Putin personally but not his government's neo-liberal social policy.⁴⁸ Unsurprisingly there had been discussions about splitting United Russia into left and right wings in order to inject a modicum of dynamism.

United Russia's inertia was a particular problem given the Kremlin's adoption of a proportional representation system for the 2007 elections. As intended, this gave the Kremlin greater control over regional candidate nominations, but it also meant that United Russia would need approximately 66 percent of the vote to attain the same number of seats (approximately 300) it had after 2003, when it had dominated single-mandate district races. Hence an urgent need arose to tap those Putin supporters at the "electoral periphery" of United Russia, who were prone to drifting toward more opposition-minded projects like Rodina.⁴⁹ As Kremlin-connected commentator Sergei Markov declared, the idea of Just Russia "was to have Putin's influence spread all over the political field."⁵⁰ In this way, Just Russia was very much an "alternative party of power," forcing United Russia to campaign more vigorously without threatening its dominance.

Simultaneously, Just Russia was intended to act as an official "opposition" that channeled and neutralized social protest, ever more important with the KPRF's decline. As Surkov told the Party of Life in March 2006: it is "better that the electorate that is opposed to all forms of administration is attracted to you than to destructive forces."⁵¹ Indeed Just Russia quickly helped streamline the party system as the Kremlin had long advocated, "vacuuming up" defunct projects. Just Russia promised to become the "center of the [left] solar system," absorbing parties such as Gennadii

48. Quote from Georgy Bovt, "Competition from Above," *Russia Profile* 4, no. 2 (19 March 2007): 13. For other discussion, see Aleksandr Buzgalin, "Pokhorony KPRF okazalis' prezhdnevremennym," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 16 March 2007, 3, and Aleksei Kiva, "Po modeli 'suverennoi demokratii,'" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 10 (14–20 March 2007), at www.lgz.ru/archives/html_arch/lg102007/Polosy/2_1.htm (last accessed 15 May 2009).

49. Aleksei Makarkin, vice president of the Center of Political Technologies, interview, Moscow, 16 April 2008.

50. Markov quoted in Dmitry Babich, "Another Vote, Same Results," *Russia Profile* 4, no. 3 (April 2007): 7–8.

51. Surkov's statement at "Vstrecha gruppy deputatov."

Gudkov's People's Party and Vasilii Shestakov's Socialist United Party of Russia.⁵² This is an indication of the project's virtuality—the latter was perhaps Russia's most misnamed party, having had four leaders and as many splits since 2003, whereas the former's authoritarian social policy had earned it the label the "Party of Death," a strange ally indeed for the Party of Life!

Clearly, Just Russia was also intended to buttress the Kremlin's legitimacy in the outside world and rebut western protests about the unfairness of the electoral race. As Surkov stated in March 2007: "Just Russia competed confidently in these elections, showing that the ferocity of [the] political battle is not waning. . . . Any democracy is characterized by a steady list of primary players . . . that four parties ran successfully shows that the political playing field has basically been formed."⁵³

Nevertheless, Just Russia's development was more contentious than this implies: the Russian press portrayed the demise of one of its predecessors, Rodina, as due in part to a conflict between Surkov and Igor' Sechin's *silovik* clan in the Kremlin. Surkov had envisaged a limited aim for Rodina of harassing the communists but not threatening his favored United Russia. The Sechin group in contrast intended for Rodina under Rogozin to become a real contender for power.⁵⁴ Elements of a similar conflict were present in Just Russia's emergence. Its leader Mironov often echoed the concerns of the *siloviki* as a centralizing "third-term" lobbyist (repeatedly calling for the president's term to be extended). According to many, Surkov was pressured by the *siloviki* to create Just Russia, which was to act as a vehicle for restraining United Russia and to guarantee the *siloviki* a position in the post-Putin firmament.⁵⁵

Such characterizations are both simplistic and unverifiable. More accurate would be to see Just Russia as a compromise between Kremlin elites, better characterized as shifting "factions" than as rigid "clans," that was created for a multiplicity of reasons.⁵⁶ Mironov's relationship to the *siloviki* is ambiguous. Some see him as Sechin's confidant, others deny this, but no one questions his closeness to Putin.⁵⁷ Just Russia reflects the

52. Sergei Mironov quoted in Dmitrii Vladimirov, "Otkrytie solnechnoi sistemy: Mironov gotov ob'edinit' vsekh levykh, krome kommunistov," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 13 April 2007, at www.rg.ru/2007/04/13/mironov.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

53. Jonas Bernstein, "Russia: Kremlin 'Parties of Power' Sweep Regional Ballots," 13 March 2007, RFE/RL Web site at www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/03/9ac0ed04-a263-43e3-bc5c-f31176f51c3a.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

54. See Alexei Titkov, *Party Number Four: Rodina: Whence and Why?* (Moscow, 2006).

55. For an overview of different scenarios, see interview with Aleksei Ziudin, "Novaia 'Zhizn' v polutorapartiinoi sisteme," at Politkom.ru (accessed 10 September 2006; no longer available).

56. Sakwa, *Putin*, 81.

57. For example, Andrei Smirnov, "Tatar Treaty Suggests Dissent Inside Kremlin on Regional Policy," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 4, no. 33 (15 February 2007), at [www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=32494&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=171&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=32494&tx_ttnews[backPid]=171&no_cache=1) (last accessed 15 May 2009), and "Sergei Mironov-lichnost' neordinarnaia," *Vechernaia Moskva*, at www.vmdaily.ru/article.php?aid=43665 (last accessed 15 May 2009). Aleksei Makarkin sees the *siloviki* as fundamentally disinterested in party building and skeptical towards Just Russia. Just Russia originated largely due to Mironov's personal ini-

economic protectionism attributed to the siloviki but (unlike Rodina) not their nationalism. Surkov clearly supported Just Russia under the condition that it merely criticized but did not “spar with” United Russia, and, although it used Putin’s image in some regional contests (for example, in Lipetsk) Surkov forbade it to use “administrative resources.”⁵⁸ Moreover, Putin admitted he helped create Just Russia and repeatedly supported it as part of a constructive opposition in a normal multiparty system.⁵⁹ A Just Russia leader, Shestakov, was Putin’s judo trainer and his cousin Igor’ Putin (director of Samara Reserve factory) reportedly switched to Just Russia from United Russia. Yet Putin also sought to limit Just Russia’s ambitions, stating on 1 February 2007: “This political battle is good as a matter of principle, and the fiercer the competition, the better. I hope . . . that it will be an intense political battle that does not resort to . . . mudslinging, insults and so on.”⁶⁰ The problem of simultaneously encouraging and limiting Just Russia was to plague its development, like so many regime projects before it: as Surkov indicated, “I fear a battle among our own.”⁶¹

Organization and Political Profile

After Surkov gave the green light, Just Russia quickly coalesced. A major sign of Kremlin coordination was that Rodina and the Pensioners’ Party were thoroughly “worked over” prior to merger: their independent leaders (Rogozin and Valerii Gartung) were replaced and they were deregistered from the majority of regional election campaigns in March 2006. Once “tamed,” their new leaders met with Putin and, in October 2006, decided to merge with the Party of Life, although each party ran separate regional campaigns that month.⁶² However, the Party of Life competed directly with the Pensioners’ Party in four regions, which can be seen as an attempt to increase its “brand” value prior to merger. The effect of Kremlin support was immediate—the Party of Life (previously rarely polling more than 5 percent) “came to life,” gaining 33 percent in Tuva and defeating United Russia’s mayoral candidate in Samara.

Just Russia formally united around the most nationally developed and centralized party, Rodina, adopting its statutes. The Party of Life and Pensioners’ Party transformed into public movements. The three main constituent parties shared leading posts equally, with Mironov (Party of Life) as chairman, Aleksandr Babakov (Rodina) as secretary of the presidium of the central council, and Igor’ Zotov (Pensioners’ Party) as central council

tative; he succeeded in persuading Putin and thereby Surkov. Makarkin, interview, Moscow, 16 April 2008.

58. Surkov’s statement at “Vstrecha gruppy deputatov.”

59. For example “Vstrecha s Uchastimami Mezhdunarodnogo Diskussionnogo Kluba ‘Valdai,’” at www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/09/144011.shtml (last accessed 15 May 2009).

60. “Transcript of Press Conference with the Russian and Foreign Media, 1 February 2007, Round Hall, Kremlin, Moscow,” at www.kremlin.ru (last accessed 15 May 2009).

61. Surkov’s statement at “Vstrecha gruppy deputatov.”

62. “Partiinyi peredel,” 15 August 2006, at lenta.ru/articles/2006/08/15/party/ (last accessed 15 May 2009).

secretary. This “shotgun wedding” remained contentious, however, and intraparty rivalries hindered Just Russia in the March 2007 regional elections. After the 2007 Duma campaign, it was suggested that the Party of Life was attempting an intraparty putsch, with Mironov favoring his protégés such as Nikolai Levichev (who replaced Babakov as fraction leader). The ongoing ill-feeling between Babakov and Levichev and the particular prejudice directed against Pensioners’ Party personnel complicated party performance.⁶³

Nevertheless, the party organization crystallized, ultimately claiming almost 500,000 members by November 2008, a million short of United Russia, but dwarfing Rodina and the KPRF (both with approximately 180,000). The party inherited the majority of Rodina’s Duma fraction with additions from independents and United Russia defectees, numbering 33 by mid-2007. In early 2007, the party also formed three youth organizations: Pobeda was the “official” organization aiming to link the youth wings of parties such as the Social Democrats and People’s Party; Ura! (based on the former Rodina youth movement) appealed to more radical elements of the electorate opposed to official youth movements such as Nashi; finally, Liga spravedlivosti played a political technological and agitational role.⁶⁴ Although Just Russia also made attempts to court trade unionists, the main unions remained unswervingly loyal to United Russia.⁶⁵

Certainly the party swiftly attracted sponsorship; by March 2007 its campaign funds (\$17 million) were second only to United Russia’s (\$25 million).⁶⁶ Influential donors included former Rodina members Aleksandr Lebedev, president of the National Reserve Bank, and Babakov (whose wealth comes from the communications sector).⁶⁷ Mironov’s power base, the Federation Council, included six dollar-billionaires and a dozen dollar-millionaires, although the extent to which these individuals supported Just Russia was unclear.⁶⁸ According to Natal’ia Morar’, Gaz-

63. “Spravedlivaia Rossiia’ snova stanovit’sia Partiei zhizni,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 11 December 2007, at www.ng.ru/politics/2007-12-11/3_esery.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

64. Natal’ia Kostenko, “Spravedlivaia Rossiia’ organizuet molodezhnyi front,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 15 October 2007, at www.ng.ru/politics/2007-10-15/3_esery.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

65. Igor’ Romanov, “Partiitsy rvut chlenov profsoiuzov na chasti,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 26 April 2007, at www.ng.ru/printed/77801 (last accessed 15 May 2009).

66. Andrei Riskin, “Pod raznymi znamenami na meste shagom marsh,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 12 March 2007, at www.ng.ru/ngregions/2007-03-12/13_region.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

67. “A Just Division,” *Moscow News*, 5 July 2007, at www.mnweekly.ru/politics/20070705/55260906.html (last accessed 15 May 2009). Babakov is also former chair of the board of directors of TsKA football club. Lebedev’s personal fortune is estimated at \$3.6 billion, while another prominent party supporter was Andrei Molchanov, former head of LSR, the largest construction company in northwest Russia, with a personal fortune estimated at \$660 million. By 2008, Lebedev had split from Just Russia.

68. Dmitry Shusharin, “Nationalism Gives Way to Social Promises in Russia,” *RIA Novosti*, 13 March 2007, at en.rian.ru/analysis/20070313/61934418.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

prom and the presidential administration also made contributions to Just Russia to the tune of \$50–100 million.⁶⁹

On the other hand, the party did soon develop a clear, if inconsistent, ideological profile. By early 2007 (with a view to combating the communists) Just Russia pitched itself as a catch-all *socialist* rather than social democratic party, while still using slogans such as “New socialism, social democracy and humanism,” “Socialism 3.0,” and even the “third way.”⁷⁰ Party documentation was replete with leftist terms like *solidarity*, *social justice*, even *exploitation*. The party also offered a more radically redistributionist (even revanchist) profile than modern social democracy, rejecting the idea of “equality of opportunities.” It proposed progressive taxation alongside windfall taxes on luxury goods and profits from 1990s privatizations and suggested using the Stabilization Fund to redistribute private companies’ super-profits, raise pensions, and subsidize social utilities and welfare.⁷¹ The party promised a market economy but not a market society and pledged to combat large-scale capital.⁷² Its radical image was reinforced by the tendency of the press to refer to its members as the “Esery” (SRs), implying continuity with the prewar left-populist Socialist Revolutionaries.

Just Russia was also strongly populist, both in the sense of “cheap” promises to all and sundry, and in its marked anti-establishment ethos, which was directed at the corruption and bureaucratism of local elite and United Russia functionaries, or at the “state of elites and clans” in general, but rarely at the federal government and symptomatically never at the president. It attacked local bureaucrats as nothing more than criminal swindlers, while simultaneously presenting itself as the unsullied defender of democratic freedoms trampled on by central (ist) *diktat*. Hence its complaints about the exclusion of candidates from elections, restrictive electoral legislation, and the nonelection of governors. Just Russia explicitly sought to tap the protest vote (especially those who might have voted “against all” before this option was removed from the ballot in 2006) while attempting to mask its own origins in the bureaucracy with an image of being the “party of working people” planning to give “ordinary Russians” a greater role in decision making.⁷³

69. Natal’ia Morar’, “‘Chernaia kassa’ Kremliia,” 10 December 2007, at newtimes.ru/magazine/issue_44/article_7.htm (last accessed 15 May 2009).

70. “Predvybornaia programma: ‘Doverie vo imia budushchego,’” at www.spravedlivo.ru/information/section_11/section_54 (last accessed 15 May 2009).

71. “Programmnoe zaiavlenie partii ‘Spravedlivaia Rossiia: Rodina/Pensionery/Zhizn,’” at spravedlivo.ru/about/documents/section_371 (accessed 1 March 2008; no longer available); and “Politicheskaia platform partii,” at www.spravedlivo.ru/about/documents/section_599 (accessed 1 March 2008; no longer available).

72. Boris Makarenko and Tatiana Stanovaia, “Sotsializm vmesto sotsial-demokratii,” at Politkom.ru (accessed 10 March 2007; no longer available).

73. For example, see the interview with Mironov: “My nakhodims’ia v oppozitsii k politicheskomu monopolizmu,” at www.spravedlivo.ru/press/section_326/564.smx (accessed 13 February 2007; no longer available); “Sergei Mironov: Sotsialnyi ideal i sovremennoi politike,” at www.spravedlivo.ru/press/section_326/1427.smx (accessed 25 February 2008; no longer available); and the party manifesto, at www.spravedlivo.ru/english?action=articles&id+3 (accessed 25 February 2008; no longer available).

Clearly Just Russia intended to compete with United Russia and the KPRF simultaneously, although its competition against the communists became increasingly important. It attacked the communists (unironically!) as an obsolete “pseudo-opposition,” and its proposals to merge the left were designed to paint the communists as the main obstacles to left-wing unity. More brazen still was its appropriation of Soviet style and symbolism. Even the KPRF did not have a Politburo or Orgburo like Just Russia, although these were reconstituted (as the Presidium and Central Council) in March 2008. In April 2007, Just Russia successfully lobbied Putin to prevent United Russia from removing the hammer and sickle from the Victory Banner (the flag of the Russian Army).⁷⁴

Although Just Russia was a strongly programmatic party, it remained a strange and inconsistent amalgam. In July 2008, the party joined the Socialist International as an observer, rather than the European Left Party as some of its radical policies implied. Nevertheless, its support for Russian “family values” (rejecting tolerance for same-sex marriage and drug legalization) made its accommodation to the more libertarian family of European socialists problematic. Furthermore, its socialist principles were impossible to square with its leadership by multimillionaires, and, as a result, parallels might be drawn to the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (United), an oligarchic vehicle alleged to have as much relation to social democracy as a Mercedes to a tractor.⁷⁵

Electoral Promise and Predicament

Although Just Russia has continually denied that it is in any way the regime’s “sparring partner,” it has already become obvious that its “regime” and “project” facets are of more importance than its “programmatic” elements. The question was not whether this was a party of power but of “how much power”? How able was it to challenge United Russia’s near monopoly, and how able was its pseudo-opposition stance of becoming a real opposition?

In the March 2007 regional elections, Just Russia threatened to become just such a real opposition. It finished among the top three in 12 out of 14 regions, came in third in 6, second in 5, and first in 1 (Stavropol’), gaining 15.53 percent of the party list vote and 11.7 percent of seats, a narrow third to the communists (see table 1).⁷⁶ This exceeded the combined performance of Rodina, the Party of Life, and the Pensioners’ Party in 2003 (13.99 percent). The performance was certainly patchy, exceeding the 2003 level of its three predecessors in 6 regions, stabilizing in 4, and seeing its vote fall in 4 regions, and Just Russia was far less successful when its local organizations were not co-coordinated and the party lacked local notables. Nevertheless, given that the full merger of three parties had

74. Ivan Iartsev, “Esery podniali znamia pobedy,” at Politkom.ru (accessed 26 April 2007; no longer available).

75. Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, 134.

76. Data from Russian Central Electoral Commission, at www.cikrf.ru/cikrf/actual/regbiory_110507.jsp (last accessed 15 May 2009).

Table 1
Just Russia's Electoral Performance

Region	Date	Result	Region	Date	Result
Dagestan	11-03-2007	10.68	Kalmykia	02-03-2008	4.99
Komi	11-03-2007	15.49	Sakha	02-03-2008	14.56
Stavropol	11-03-2007	37.64	Altai K	02-03-2008	7.70
Vologda	11-03-2007	20.91	Amur	02-03-2008	5.62
Leningrad	11-03-2007	20.94	Ivanovo	02-03-2008	10.27
Moscow	11-03-2007	8.86	Rostov	02-03-2008	5.13
Murmansk	11-03-2007	16.18	Sverdlovsk	02-03-2008	6.26
Omsk	11-03-2007	4.83	Ul'ianovsk	02-03-2008	7.77
Orel	11-03-2007	12.60	Iaroslavl'	02-03-2008	deregistered
Pskov	11-03-2007	15.68	Zabaikal'skii	12-10-2008	9.29
Samara	11-03-2007	15.14	Irkutsk	12-10-2008	8.12
Tomsk	11-03-2007	7.90	Kemerovo	12-10-2008	5.51
Tiumen	11-03-2007	8.78	Sakhalin	12-10-2008	8.50
St. Petersburg	11-03-2007	21.90	Chechnia	12-10-2008	9.20
Krasnoiarsk	24-04-2007	12.40	Kabardino-	01-03-2009	12.26
Buriatia	02-12-2007	11.96	Balkariia		
Mordoviia	02-12-2007	1.56	Karachaevo-	01-03-2009	5.02
Kamchatka	02-12-2007	deregistered	Cherkesiia		
North Osetiia	02-12-2007	8.92	Tatarstan	01-03-2009	4.83
Udmurtia	02-12-2007	12.94	Khakasiia	01-03-2009	7.18
Penza	02-12-2007	7.04	Arkhangel'sk	01-03-2009	17.84
Saratov	02-12-2007	13.52	Briansk	01-03-2009	8.61
Smolensk	02-12-2007	13.55	Vladimir	01-03-2009	8.84
State Duma	02-12-2007	7.76	Volgograd	01-03-2009	13.34
Bashkortostan	02-03-2008	3.46	Nenets	01-03-2009	12.70
Overall average:					10.96

Sources: "Russia's Party System and the 2007 Duma Election," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 31 (27 November 2007); "Partiia regional'noi vlasti," *Kommersant*, 04 March 2008, at www.kommersant.ru/daily.aspx?date=20080304, and "Rezultaty regional'nykh vyborov v sravnenii s resul'tatami vyborov v Gosdumu 2 dekabria 2007 goda," *Kommersant*, 14 October 2008, at www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1040899 (last accessed 7 May 2009); www.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom (accessed 15 April 2009; no longer available).

only occurred on the eve of the election, the results at least indicated Just Russia's potential as a national force.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, the March 2007 elections were also the party's high-water mark. It succeeded best where it was able to capitalize on disaffection within the elite and to capture the protest vote (as in Stavropol', Vologda, St. Petersburg, and Samara). Its Stavropol' sensation (the only election where United Russia lost) was achieved where United Russia governor

77. For details on the 2007 elections, see Boris Makarenko and Aleksei Makarkin, "Regional'nye vybory-2007: Presentatsiia 'Spravedlivoi Rossii,'" at Politkom.ru (accessed 12 March 2007; no longer available).

Aleksandr Chernogorov was deeply unpopular. Just Russia exploited his acrimonious divorce with slogans such as “Sell the Bentley, pay the Alimony.”⁷⁸ This was a potentially disastrous scenario for the authorities. As one Kremlin official noted: “The most dangerous thing . . . would be to tear administrative resources apart and pit one part against another.”⁷⁹ Just Russia’s successes involved real, dirty conflict with a lot at stake. It was emerging as a “second party of power” and was rapidly attracting disaffected members of the elite either in current conflict with United Russia or sensing their exclusion from the post-Putin landscape. New adherents included elected mayors in conflict with appointed United Russia governors, disgruntled ex-governors, those far down on United Russia’s party list, deputies from single mandate districts or minor parties facing electoral oblivion (such as Iabloko, Union of Right Forces [Soiuz pravykh sil, SPS], and even the KPRF’s youth wing).

On the positive side, Just Russia was acting as intended, solving the problem of “vertical mobility” caused by United Russia’s relative electoral inertia, bringing different elite groups into the spoils system and allowing disaffected elites to engage in opposition without being seen as outright “traitors.” On the other hand, Just Russia faced the same dilemma as Rodina before it. According to experts, it appeared to be able to take votes from all other parties.⁸⁰ In order to compete effectively with the communists, however, it would need to outbid them in “oppositionness.” Yet since the communists had already been pared down to their core vote, any electoral expansion was disproportionately likely to occur at the expense of United Russia. Moreover, where elite conflict discredited both United Russia and Just Russia, as in Krasnoiarskii krai and the Volgograd mayoral elections, the communists were the main beneficiaries.⁸¹

Even this limited competition was threatening as the Kremlin contemplated life after Putin, threatening divisive elite conflict akin to 1999 rather than a seamless succession. With Kremlin figures warning that Just Russia had “gone too far,” a truce was reached after the March 2007 elections. Mironov and United Russia governor Valentina Matvienko agreed not to act as the “locomotives” for their party lists in St. Petersburg (which would have brought elite heavyweights into head-on conflict). United Russia agreed to support Mironov as St. Petersburg assembly representative to the Federation Council, removing threats to his speakership, while the United Russia and Just Russia fractions in the St. Petersburg assembly

78. Carl Schreck, “Dirty Tricks Popular in Campaign Battles,” *Moscow Times*, 9 March 2007, at www.themoscowtimes.com/stories/2007/03/09/011.html (last accessed 15 May 2009). Chernogorov never recovered his authority after this defeat and resigned in April 2008.

79. Cited in *Johnson’s Russia List*, no. 217 (28 September 2006) at www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/default.cfm (accessed 25 March 2008; no longer available)

80. Olga Korotkova, “General’naia repetitsiia vyborov v Gosdumu: Rossiia opiat’ polevela,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 13 March 2007, at www.kp.ru/daily/23868.7/64403 (last accessed 15 May 2009).

81. On the success of 31-year-old communist Roman Grebennikov in Volgograd’s mayoral election on 20 May 2007, see “Volgogradskaia bitva,” 21 May 2007, at www.lenta.ru/articles/2007/05/21/red (last accessed 15 May 2009).

pledged cooperation.⁸² Mironov later emphasized Just Russia's role as a constructive opposition that concentrated on the communists as its chief opponents.⁸³

Just Russia's 2007 Duma campaign revealed both the Kremlin's concern to keep it within manageable bounds and its increasing disinterest in the project. True enough, the Kremlin refused to register the "Great Russia" party in 2007 despite its party statutes being modeled exactly on Just Russia's. Great Russia was formed by ex-Rodina nationalists who had been excluded from Just Russia and was formed with probable support from siloviki disappointed by the lack of influence over Just Russia's platform and policies. Dmitrii Rogozin's appeals to former Rodina members to defect to his party represented a real danger.⁸⁴ However, the continued existence of two left-wing "spoiler parties" that threatened to set up an alternative left-wing party indicated Surkov's desire to limit Just Russia's maneuvering room. The "Patriots of Russia" were headed by Gennadii Semigin, a longtime Surkov confidant; the Party of Social Justice (Partiia sotsial'noi spravedlivosti) was led by Aleksei Podberezkin, one of Medvedev's analysts and a former Kremlin "agent of influence" within the KPRF.⁸⁵

Moreover, Just Russia lost momentum and electoral support as the December 2007 election approached. Significantly, as the party's electoral lists were drawn up, "politically interesting" personalities (such as left-wing economist Sergei Glaz'ev and Aleksandr Lebedev, the party financier who had fought a fierce Moscow mayoral campaign in 2003) were excluded, allegedly under Kremlin pressure.⁸⁶ Heading the party list with Mironov were Svetlana Goriacheva, an ex-communist Duma deputy, and Sergei Shargunov, leader of the Ura! youth movement, both of whom had radical anti-establishment images but negligible national political influence. Shargunov was dropped from the party list once it was revealed he had formerly been a member of the radical National Bolshevik Party and a Putin critic, and Ura! was disaffiliated.⁸⁷

The biggest shot across the bow was Putin's September 2007 decision to head the United Russia party list, which instantly destroyed Just Russia's *raison d'être* as the true presidential party trying to protect the Good Tsar from the "evil boyars" (in United Russia). The Kremlin had finally decided to avoid all risks in "operation successor." We can sum up the Kremlin's thinking about Just Russia in table 2. The Just Russia project

82. Ivan Iartsev, "Piterskaia partiia-edinaia i spravedlivaia," at Politkom.ru (accessed 21 March 2007; no longer available).

83. "Vystuplenie Sergeia Mironova na Tsentral'nom sovete partii 'Spravedlivaia Rossiia,'" (12 April 2007) at www.spravedlivo.ru/about/section_10/section_297/1805.smx (accessed 14 February 2008; no longer available).

84. Igor' Dmitriev, "Patriocheskii gambit," *Moskovskie novosti*, 6–12 July 2007, at www.mn.ru/issue/2007-26-7 (accessed 19 March 2008; no longer available).

85. Andrei Kamakin, "Operatsiia 'S Novoi Dumoi,'" *Itogi*, 8 January 2007, at www.itogi.ru/Paper2007.nsf/Article/Itogi_2007_01_06_1534.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

86. Tat'iana Stanovaia, "Sud'ba 'Spravedlivoi Rossii,'" at Politkom.ru (accessed 29 October 2007; no longer available).

87. Kseniia Veretennikova, "'Ura!' Tovarishchi," *Vremia novostei*, 22 October 2007, at www.vremya.ru/2007/193/4/189654.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

Table 2
Just Russia in the Kremlin's Calculations

Advantages	Risks
Semblance of competition	Real competition
Co-optation of elite and social opposition	Incentivizing opposition
Marginalization of communists	Martyring communists
Guarantee of pro-Kremlin parliamentary majority	Weakening of United Russia within parliament
Jolt for United Russia	Discontent within United Russia
Increasing Putin's/successors' room for maneuver	Unclear relationship to Putin/successor
Party campaigns for successor	Opposition becomes visibly fake

initially offered many advantages: “managed” opposition and limited elite turnover, the potential to marginalize the communists and to provide a “sparring partner” for United Russia during the campaign. In addition, it could increase the pro-Kremlin deputies within the Duma, limiting risks during the transition to a successor and providing an alternative presidential party (or at least electoral cheerleader). Just Russia simply offered too many risks, however: elite sparring threatened to spill over into real competition (whereby the communists, as the only semi-independent opposition, might benefit as “martyred outsiders”). Still worse, effective elite competition potentially threatened not only the positions of individual United Russia deputies and regional leaders but the very dominance of United Russia within the state Duma as the guarantor of the stability of “operation successor.” The more effective Just Russia was, the more it risked an elite split as in 1999, but the more controlled it was, the more it looked simply fake. In these circumstances there was little prospect of alternative scenarios, whereby for instance the two parties of power might have supported rival presidential successors, or Just Russia might have become the main presidential party behind a successor candidate. Instead, as soon as it was no longer useful, Just Russia was simply dropped—indicating the profound risk-averseness of Putin’s Kremlin, and suggesting that, until the last, there was most likely an array of Kremlin plans for the succession rather than one long-term project. Ultimately, turning the election into a plebiscite on Putin’s record maximized United Russia’s reliance on him and his control over parliament and party and minimized the risks of unexpected elite conflict or defection represented by projects like Just Russia.

After being abandoned by Putin, Just Russia floundered badly, trying unconvincingly to present itself as the only force guaranteeing Putin’s nonparty “national leader” status. In 2003 Rodina had possessed enough “virtual” independence and elite support to pull off a successful regime-sponsored “anti-elite” campaign. In 2007, Just Russia lacked charismatic leaders, consistent regime support, and distinct campaign messages (with several parties claiming to profess “social justice”). It hemorrhaged

members and funders, already disaffected by the leaders' personnel choices but apparently dismayed that Putin had not decided to head what was self-evidently (to them) his true party, with its regional branches splitting in Voronezh, Sverdlovsk, St. Petersburg, Kirov, and Kamchatka.⁸⁸

Just Russia's eventual result, squeaking over the 7 percent barrier to become the fourth Duma party, was a far cry from its expectations of second place, but under the circumstances a success of sorts. Fraud cannot be ruled out entirely, although it is notable that both pre- and post-election polls corroborate Just Russia's vote share.⁸⁹ The authorities did not abandon Just Russia entirely—for example, Kremlin consultant Vadim Konovalov was appointed to head the party's Duma *apparatus* during the election campaign.⁹⁰ Apparently, although Just Russia had lost its tactical utility for the Kremlin in terms of "operation successor," the longer-term project of a "relevant left" had been confirmed. Yet perhaps the simplest explanation for why Just Russia survived at all is that it (albeit minimally) preserved its main function of representing center-left voters too moderate and too pro-Putin for the KPRF and too distrustful of its bureaucratic, monopolistic tendencies to vote for United Russia. In addition, its continued emphasis on pension issues may have preserved some residual loyalty from Pensioners' Party voters.

Moreover, under Medvedev's presidency, Just Russia preserved a fragile niche. Initially, the omens were not promising. The decision by the party to support Medvedev's candidacy in December 2007 (along with three other parties) was purportedly a spontaneous democratic decision reached through party discussion of Medvedev's "social" credentials. This remarkably Abacha-esque group "coronation" made Medvedev's eventual election a *fait accompli*, however, and as communist leader Ivan Mel'nikov noted, made an absolute mockery of intraparty democracy.⁹¹ Although this decision was logical in terms of providing Just Russia immediate visibility and the promise of favors returned, it was a self-defeating maneuver for the party *qua* party. In the 2 March 2008 regional elections, Just Russia scraped to a poor fourth, averaging just 7.31 percent in ten regions,

88. For example, Aleksei Ziudin, "Ataka na Mironova," *Moskovskie novosti*, 26 October–1 November 2007, at www.mn.ru/issue/2007-42-7 (accessed 19 March 2008; no longer available); by the end of 2007, Just Russia was only the fifth best-funded party with assets of \$14.98 million, see www.cikrf.ru/politparty/finance/rashod.jsp (last accessed 15 May 2009).

89. For allegations that Just Russia's result was artificially inflated, see Nikolai Petrov, "The Consequences of the State Duma Elections for Russia's Electoral System," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 32 (14 December 2007): 5–8. For Just Russia compared with electoral forecasts, see "The Results of the Duma Elections," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 32 (14 December 2007): 10.

90. Igor' Romanov, Ivan Rodin, and Natal'ia Kostenko, "Eseram dali dobro: Novaia Duma skoree vsego okazhetsia chetyrekhpartiinoi," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 29 November 2007, at www.ng.ru/politics/2007-11-29/1_esery.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

91. Ksenia Veretennikova and Andrei Denisov, "Natsproekt 'Dmitrii Medvedev': Vladimir Putin nazval tret'ego prezidenta Rossii," *Vremia novostei*, 11 December 2007, 1–2, at www.vremya.ru/2007/227/4/193865.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

failing to surpass the 7 percent barrier in half of these (see table 1), and losing the protection from administrative pressure it had earlier enjoyed. Just Russia could not combine full support for Medvedev as president at a federal level and opposition to United Russia in the regions, and its failure to present its own presidential candidate contrasted poorly with the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (Liberal'no-demokraticheskaia partiia Rossii) and KPRF.⁹²

Yet in the longer term, Just Russia regained its elite patronage. At the April 2008 congress (held in the Kremlin) its populist rhetoric and communist style receded in favor of a left-wing social democratic program dressed up as “new socialism” that promised an emphasis on individual democratic and social rights, progressive taxation, and high social spending.⁹³ In the October 2008 and March 2009 regional elections it marginally improved on its December 2007 performance with an average vote of 9.37 percent (see table 1). More significantly, the party was not debarred from any contest (even Chechnia), and placed third (ahead of the Liberal Democratic Party). Both Surkov and Medvedev spoke favorably of Just Russia's central role within the party system, and there were even suggestions that Medvedev was patronizing Just Russia directly. Certainly, when Podberezkin's Party of Social Justice joined Just Russia in September 2008 (shortly followed by the Russian Ecological Party “Greens”—Rossiiskaia ekologicheskaiia partiia “Zelenye”), Just Russia gained closer links with both Medvedev and Surkov, and a certain, circumscribed, distancing of Just Russia from Putin was observable (for example, the party opposed the 2009–11 budget on first reading, and its 2008 program promised a significant reversal of Putin-era centralization).⁹⁴ An indication of Just Russia's possible centrality to Medvedev's calculations was indicated in a June 2008 report to Medvedev's think tank, the Institute of Contemporary Development, which envisaged a gradual state-directed liberalization of the political system over two electoral terms. In this, Just Russia could potentially become Russia's second party (after United Russia), providing its ideology and personnel were renewed and that the authorities stopped using “administrative resources” against it.⁹⁵ At the time of writing, though, such liberalization remains fictional: Medvedev's November 2008 proposals to decrease party registration requirements and to delink Duma elections from presidential elections were positive developments offset by the two-year increase in the presidential term. Perhaps a more telling indicator of “business as usual” under Medvedev was that Just Russia was deregistered from the 26 April 2009 mayoral elections in the Olympic city of Sochi.

92. “Partiia regional'noi vlasti,” *Kommersant*, 14 March 2008, at www.kommersant.ru/daily.aspx?date=20080304 (last accessed 15 May 2009).

93. *Programma Partii “Spravedlivaia Rossiia”* at the Just Russia Web site, www.spravedlivo.ru (last accessed 15 May 2009).

94. Especially proposals for an elected Federation Council and the restoration of the pre-2007 Duma electoral system.

95. *Demokratiia: Razvitie Rossiiskoi modeli* (Moscow, 2008), at newtimes.ru/Files/111/democratic.doc (last accessed 15 May 2009).

A 77 percent victory for the United Russia candidate (without even campaigning) was Putinism in microcosm.

Just Russia emerged in 2006–7 as the coincidence of several factors. Principal among these were the Kremlin's long-term wish to provide more predictable competition for United Russia. Just Russia would function as an "alternative party of power," testing United Russia's electoral and policy responses while providing an outlet for the opposition. Simultaneously, Just Russia was seen as a "favored opposition party" continuing the long-term aim of marginalizing the communists. Shorter term aims were to provide for stability during the post-Putin succession period, maximizing Putin's support over the electoral field while incorporating competing elites into the policy process and adding to domestic and external electoral legitimacy. In this way, Just Russia directly parallels parastatal parties in countries like Mexico and Nigeria.

This project achieved mixed results. Unlike previous regime-led "moderate" socialist opposition, Just Russia gained a niche in parliament. Part of the reason is simply increasingly effective Kremlin management of the party system. Backed by astute use of electoral technology and a popular president, the Kremlin is able (within limits) to conjure parties to order. Putin's personal popularity was vital when upwards of 30 percent of the electorate declared they would vote for anyone of Putin's choice. The prospects for a managed opposition are far better when the manager himself is popular (unlike for much of the El'tsin period). The 1999 elections had already shown that the "Putin effect" could be shared by more than one party (Union of Right Forces and Unity), so the ability of his endorsement to boost two "parties of power" is undoubted. By the same token, the limits to Just Russia's growth were defined by the Kremlin, and increasing regime concern with the destabilizing potential of the project led to its near-abandonment.

Although Just Russia is an entirely manipulated party, it is not entirely manufactured: its survival after the Kremlin withdrew its explicit blessing appears to be because its socialist(ic) platform reflects long-term electoral realities: the decline in support for the communists alongside the persistence of moderate leftist anti-establishment tendencies. Given a freer and fairer electoral environment in Russia, such a socialist party might conceivably perform better *without* the Kremlin's interference, and the 15–20 percent of the vote promised by its March 2007 showing is not inconceivable.

The trajectory of Just Russia reveals several things about Russian politics. This article endorses the view of contemporary Russian politics as a virtualized realm, where public politics is heavily distorted and manipulated to provide an imitation of pluralism and democracy within an authoritarian regime. The "virtuality" of Just Russia is evident in several paradoxes; an "insider" party claiming to be an "outsider"; an anti-elite party with millionaire backers; Mironov's Pauline conversion to socialism; United and Just Russia's mutual enmity and their leaders' mutual friend-

ship; and most graphically, Just Russia's sudden support for a presidential candidate it had never previously even acknowledged.⁹⁶

Virtual politics is not fictional politics, however. Just Russia has a real existence, a concrete structure, members, supporters, it even has Duma members (such as Goriacheva and Oleg Shein) who are convinced socialists, but to an overwhelming degree it operates within constraints imposed from above. Similarly, pluralism in Russia is not entirely imitational, even in the party realm, and the emergence of Just Russia revealed significant elite competition within the Kremlin (over the function and role of opposition) and at the local level (over office and material incentives). The party maps only partially onto popular conceptualizations of Kremlin "clans" with support by the Sechin group and its reputed loss of influence only part of the explanation. Rather, Just Russia's rise and (near) fall indicates shifting constellations of short-term elite interests, with several Kremlin groups supporting its emergence in 2006 and losing interest in 2007. Its genesis certainly indicates deep elite tensions behind-the-scenes and a near-paranoid Kremlin concern with preventing opposition mobilization in the public realm. Just Russia also indicates the limits of virtual politics: even this "tamed" opposition threatened, briefly, to escape its masters' control. The Kremlin may create parties to order but it cannot always order them to behave.

Just Russia is another indication that some regimes have become very skilled at imitating multiparty democracy. The party has precedents in communist "popular democracy" where plebiscitary support rather than informed choice was the operating electoral principle. Moreover, it has close parallels in other parastatal "opposition" parties that play an understudied but important role in regime survival and "democratic" legitimacy. Undoubtedly Kremlin technologists would abhor any comparison to Nigeria, but Russia's parastatal parties (the latest being Right Cause [Pravoe delo], a shotgun marriage of three liberal parties clearly modelled on Just Russia) serve basically similar functions to presidentially decreed party systems: furthering ostentatious multipartism while controlling elite mobilization and access to spoils. Arguably the differences are not in kind but in degree: Kremlin elites are simply better (more imaginative, more sophisticated, and more subtle) than Nigerian dictators at managing their opposition. The parallel is not heartening: in 2007–8 the highly choreographed Russian election campaign looked ever less like a democracy ("sovereign" or not) and ever more like authoritarianism. It is clear that elite circles are now discussing managed political liberalization. Nevertheless, the Kremlin's democratic pretensions can be taken seriously only when it manages its opposition far less.

96. On Boris Gryzlov and Mironov's friendship, see "Mironov, Sergei," *Lentapediia*, 19 December 2007, at www.lenta.ru/lib/14159448/full.htm (last accessed 15 May 2009).