unlikely authoritarian elections would provide enough legitimacy to compensate. Ultimately, there were only two choices: either a government that rested on the consent of the governed, or a government that maintained itself by force. The Putin leadership, it appeared, was attempting to find a path between them. It was not yet clear that one existed.

Chapter 5

Russia’s Political Parties and their Substitutes

HENRY E. HALE

Many observers expected Russia to develop a competitive party system rapidly after the USSR broke apart in late 1991. Russia was democratizing, the argument went, and the experience of Western countries had given experts little reason to question Max Weber’s classic aphorism that democracy was ‘unimaginable’ without parties (Weber 1990). Russian developments quickly challenged this view, however. A plethora of parties did spring up during the 1990s, with as many as 43 appearing on the parliamentary ballot in 1995 alone, but by the end of that decade their growth had stalled. Independent politicians continued to dominate the country’s most important posts. For example, only 3 per cent of Russia’s regional leaders, when running for re-election, chose to do so as party nominees between 1995 and 2000. Likewise, President Boris Yeltsin himself consistently declined to join any party after leaving the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1990.

In the 2000s, Russia’s party system did finally begin to take shape, but with a major twist. Putin instituted a series of reforms that weakened the most important pre-existing parties and corralled a majority of the most influential independent politicians into a new pro-Putin organization called the United Russia Party. Since the late 2000s, the party has commanded majorities not only in the national parliament but also in nearly all regional legislatures, and virtually all governors have been affiliated with it. Despite this, United Russia’s growth has never quite reached the point of complete dominance, even in the government. Current President Vladimir Putin agreed to serve as party ‘chairman’ 2008–12, but even during this period refused to call himself a party ‘member,’ preferring to keep his distance and periodically criticize it even as he often praised it. Some have asked, how strong can a party be if its own top patron will not fully commit himself to it? Moreover, there is evidence that the Kremlin (that is, Russia’s president and his close associates) continues to keep a stable of other parties and party-like organizations ‘in
The building blocks of Russian parties

Why would any politician ever bother joining a party in the first place? One short answer is: a politician will join a party when that party gives the candidate a greater chance of getting elected than he or she would have as an independent. Parties in Russia, and arguably everywhere, generally offer candidates at least two kinds of advantages. First, they can provide a candidate with money, organization, connections, and other resources that can be used to campaign or otherwise win office. Second, they can connect a candidate with a set of ideas that the party has a reputation for pursuing, helping a candidate reach out to people who may support the party’s ideas but who may not know anything about the candidate. Politicians who are rich in either resources or reputation, therefore, tend to be particularly successful party builders because they have something that other ambitious politicians want. These things, resources and reputation, are thus the building blocks of parties.

What building blocks were available to would-be party builders in Russia upon the USSR’s demise? The only pre-existing party with any claim to have stood the test of time was the CPSU, but in the wake of the August 1991 coup attempt it was banned along with its Russian branch. Even in its heyday, it was mostly an instrument of control rather than a party geared for actually competing in free elections. Moreover, by 1991, its central Marxist ideas were widely discredited and it had been losing members since CPSU leader Mikhail Gorbachev started seriously reforming the Soviet system. Nevertheless, the party did leave behind some significant networks of true believers and people who had forged important personal connections that could eventually be reactivated for organizing a party.

Once Gorbachev began reforming the Soviet political system in earnest, and even before parties other than the CPSU were formally legalized in early 1990, a huge number of ‘informal’ organizations sprang up to promote various political causes. Flush with the opportunity to publicly pursue almost any political agenda openly, these associations were extremely diverse and generally small, often focusing on the pet issues of all and sundry politicians. Some of these grassroots groupings did begin to coalesce into larger associations, with the most prominent being Democratic Russia. During the late perestroika period, Democratic Russia looked like it could successfully rival the Russian branch of the declining CPSU and was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in some of Moscow’s largest streets rallies ever. But this was an extraordinarily motley movement, united almost solely by a common desire to end communist dictatorship. Once the USSR broke apart, it splintered and left little in the way of reputation and resources for future party builders to utilise.

By far the most important source of building blocks for Russia’s first party system was the Soviet state. In fact, almost every non-communist politician who has built a truly successful Russian party gained his or her primary fame or other party-building resource through some connection with the state structures of the USSR or the Russian Federation. Upon reflection, this is not surprising: the Soviet state penetrated nearly all aspects of life in some way and explicitly sought to own or at least control all the means by which someone could accumulate political influence, including mass media, social organizations, and, as Marxist ideology dictated, economic resources (including all enterprises and banking institutions). Even after political liberalization removed most controls over political activity, the state remained overwhelmingly the greatest source of money, organization and media attention, which are among the most valuable building blocks for parties. Even after Yeltsin’s governments privatized the bulk of Russia’s economy in the 1990s, business (including the media it controlled) still remained highly dependent on aspects of the state for its profitability. All this meant that people within or connected to the state had major advantages in building the first non-communist parties. It also meant that people within the state continued to have tremendous resources that could be used against party-building projects that they did not like or to support parties that served their purposes.

The next section shows how this particular array of building blocks translated into the party system that dominated Russia in the 1990s as a necessary step for understanding United Russia’s rise in the 2000s and the party system as it exists now in the 2010s.

The veteran parties: those first emerging in the early 1990s

Researchers have found that the outcome of a country’s first multiparty elections, often called ‘founding elections’, can have a disproportionate long-run impact on how its party system develops (O’Donnell and
Schmitter 1986: 61–2). This is because the parties that win the visibility, opportunities to impact policy, and access to resources that political office brings. These gains, in turn, can be ploughed back into the party-building project, giving the initial winners a great advantage in future rounds. Winners also gain an advantage just for being seen as winners: voters and potential donors generally do not want to risk wasting votes or money on parties that will not be able to ‘pay a return’ on the investment by holding office (Cox 1997).

The specialists who initially authored Russia’s current constitution in 1993, empowered after Yeltsin unilaterally abrogated the old constitution and called early elections late that year, were well aware of research on the importance of founding elections. They were also aware of other research indicating that the results of such elections would depend heavily on the election rules that they themselves chose. They thus chose the rules strategically in order to pursue certain concrete goals. One of these goals was to buttress the power of Yeltsin and his allies; another was to promote the development of a multiparty system. A complex set of compromises ultimately produced a system that was expected to have mixed effects on the party system (Hough 1998; McFaul 2001). It was to be dominated by a strong president, and here no special advantage was given to candidates who wished to run as party nominees.

The constitutional drafters did, however, plan for the parliament to spur party-system development. While an upper chamber (the Federation Council), as we have seen, was to represent regions on a largely non-party basis, half of the lower chamber (the State Duma) was to be elected through a competition between nationwide party lists with a 5 per cent threshold. This effectively reserved at least half of the Duma’s seats for parties capable of winning this proportion of the nationwide vote. The other half of the Duma was to be chosen in 225 districts, with one deputy elected per seat. While parties could compete for these seats too, in fact independents frequently won them. Regional authorities were left the freedom to determine election rules for regional and local elections. This basic setup remained in place until the 2007 elections.

Since the first presidential election to take place under the new constitution did not occur until 1996, observers at the time saw the 1993 Duma elections as potentially being a founding election for Russia’s post-Soviet party system. The passage of time reveals that these elections did have something of a ‘founding’ effect, but only in a specific sense: parties that failed to clear the 5 per cent threshold in the first or subsequent Duma races have almost all proven unable ever afterward to make it into parliament. The only parties capable of breaking into the Duma for the first time after 1993 have been those with the unusually strong backing of the state authorities. There are only two of these state-backed ‘upstarts’ in the parliament as of the start of 2014: the United Russia Party and the ‘A Just Russia’ Party. At the same time, success in 1993 proved no guarantee of long-term success. In effect, subsequent Duma elections served as what might be called ‘weeding elections’, successively winnowing down the field to the two veteran parties that are in the parliament today: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The following paragraphs tell the story of the veteran parties, those first gaining traction in the founding elections of 1993. After that, we turn to the upset parties. Readers are directed to Table 5.1 for summary information on Russia’s most important parties from 1993 to 2014.

One-hit wonders

Among the eight parties to win official delegations (‘fractions’) in the party-list Duma elections of 1993, four were never able to repeat the feat on their own: the Agrarian Party of Russia (APR), the Women of Russia bloc, the Democratic Party of Russia (DPR, an early breakaway from Democratic Russia), and the pro-Yeltsin Party of Russian Unity and Accord (PRES). These all either disappeared or merged into other pro-Kremlin parties during the 1990s or 2000s.

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation

It is a common mistake to regard the CPRF as the direct continuation of the CPSU in Russia. In fact, Yeltsin banned the Russian branch of the CPSU in 1991 and confiscated its property. Even when the Constitutional Court effectively reinstated it at the end of November 1992, there was no longer any organization in place to reclaim its mantle. Instead, there was a wide variety of small Communist organizations that were led by little-known former officials that had formed after the ban, all now competing for at least a share of the inheritance. Moreover, it was a decidedly non-communist idea (at least, according to Karl Marx) that enabled a little-known former CPSU official, Gennadi Zyuganov, to wind up as the heir. This idea was nationalism. During 1991 and 1992, he crafted a distinct ideology of nationalist socialism that helped cement a broad alliance of former communists and hard-line non-communist Russian nationalists that proved able to mobilize tens of thousands in street protests. Such impressive displays of support, combined with fears that communism alone might not be potent enough to win many votes after the USSR’s break-up, led key former CPSU leaders to hitch their wagons to Zyuganov’s locomotive. This, then, was the origin of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which officially emerged in early 1993
after the Constitutional Court had ruled it would be legal. The CPRF gained a surprisingly high 12 per cent in the party-list vote in the snap 1993 Duma election and became the only leftist party to clear the 5 per cent barrier. This consolidated its position as the primary heir to the CPSU legacy, and it quickly reintegrated many of the CPSU networks that had fallen apart in 1991.

The party reached the pinnacle of its influence in 1996, when Zyuganov took Yeltsin to a second round in the presidential contest of that year and failed only after Yeltsin's allies resorted to media manipulation and other methods of machine politics to achieve their patron's victory. The party also captured a large share of governorships and controlled many regional legislatures, especially in the 'red belt' of Russia's southwest. Then as now, the party was no longer calling for a return to full-blow communism, accepting a significant role for private enterprise and making democracy a central element of its platform. Rather ironically, the CPRF has actually been the primary source of political competition in Russia since the mid-2000s. Despite having its support nearly halved by a negative media campaign in the 2003 Duma campaign, it remained the only party with a large and independent following that had a hope of standing up to United Russia. Thus in the Duma and most sub-national legislatures, the CPRF is the party with the second-most seats. While in the 1990s it drew significant financing from big business, which hoped to minimize its losses should the CPRF happen to win, since the mid-2000s it has come to rely mostly on modest funding allocated formally or informally by state officials and on donations of time and money from its still-large pool of dedicated (if aging) members (Morar 2007).

The Liberals: divided and marginalized

Yeltsin's supporters repeatedly urged him to lead a party that could withstand the revival of the communists, but Yeltsin consistently refused, fearing that leading a party would alienate other voters and limit his room for political manoeuvre. That did not stop him from backing efforts by his key loyalists to build parties to support him, his market-oriented reforms, and his relatively pro-Western foreign policy orientation. In 1993, the new Russia's Choice party became the first 'party of power', backed by the administrative resources of the Russian presidency. Initially expected to win a large majority in the glow of Yeltsin's 1993 victory over 'hardliners' in the defeated Congress, its party list netted a shockingly low 16 per cent due to dissatisfaction with the ongoing economic collapse and Yeltsin's violent suppression of the parliament. Yeltsin effectively cut the party loose and it splintered, dropping out of the Duma altogether in
1995. It returned in 1999 by combining with a few fresher faces under the label Union of Right Forces (SPS) and by openly supporting the highly popular Prime Minister Putin for the presidency. The SPS ultimately flew too close to Putin’s sun, however. Once Putin had adopted many of the market reforms the party had been pushing and the economy started actually to grow, it was the most clearly Putinites party, United Russia, that claimed and won the credit in voters’ eyes and that also won the benefit of Kremlin election resources. It thus failed to repeat its 1999 success in 2003, and ultimately it dissolved, split between one group who chose to work with the Kremlin and another group, which either left party politics or joined various liberal microparties that have enjoyed little to no electoral success, even at the local level. The most significant is currently the Republican Party of Russia—Party of Popular Freedom (RPR–PARNAS), whose nominee in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election netted an impressive 27 per cent of the vote. But this success has not been repeated elsewhere and owed mainly to the fact that its nominee, Aleksei Navalny, was a charismatic politician. And Navalny does not plan to become a member of this party, instead leaning to becoming leader of a new one.

The Yabloko party followed a similar trajectory after 1993, though still exists as the largest liberal party (which is not saying much). It was founded by economist Grigori Yavlinsky, who gained fame as a market reformer in the Yeltsin government just before the USSR’s breakup. After Yeltsin abandoned Yavlinsky’s reform plan for Gaidar’s, Yavlinsky united pro-market, pro-Western and pro-democracy politicians who thought that Yeltsin had actually undermined these ideals by his methods, with the 1990s economic collapse being important evidence. These stands and Yavlinsky’s personal appeal to highly educated voters helped earn Yabloko (an acronym for the party’s founders that literally means ‘apple’) representation in every Duma between 1993 and 2003, winning 5–8 per cent on each occasion. Its undoing was its complicated relationship with the oligarchs, the Kremlin, and other liberal parties. Opposing the Kremlin, it softened its critique of Putin to avoid banishment. Opposing the oligarchs, it had to take money from some of them (including Yukos chairman Mikhail Khodorkovsky) to finance a viable campaign. Opposing Yeltsin’s reforms and hence other important liberal parties, the latter responded by simultaneously attacking it and calling Yabloko the main obstacle to integration of the ‘democratic’ camp in Russia. Khodorkovsky’s dramatic arrest on the eve of the 2003 election not only exposed Yabloko’s relationship to this controversial figure, but also eliminated its main source of funding. The party has not recovered and can claim only a handful of loyalists as of 2014, though it did win a delegation in the St Petersburg legislature, its most visible political platform, and won enough votes (just over 3 per cent) in the 2011 Duma race to qualify for some limited state funding.

The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) of Vladimir Zhirinovsky

Vladimir Zhirinovsky first burst on to the national political scene in June 1991, during presidential elections for the Russian Republic of the not-yet-disintegrated USSR. The fact that someone could win 8 per cent of the vote and come in third place with his radical nationalist rants, calls for territorial expansion and authoritarian tirades shocked observers both inside and outside Russia. These observers found themselves even more shocked when Zhirinovsky’s party, the famously misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, actually won the party-list Duma elections of 1993, scoring 23 per cent of the vote and humiliating the second-placed Russia’s Choice.

While the LDPR might seem to be an example of a party rising up independently of state resources due to a charismatic leader, some research suggests that the party (the first non-communist formation to officially register in the USSR) was actually the product of a KGB attempt to use Zhirinovsky to discredit the whole idea of democracy and electoral politics (Wilson 2005: 23–6). Remarkably, in the Duma itself, the LDPR frequently votes with the Russian government despite its seemingly radical opposition rhetoric, leading to widespread speculation that it gets financial help from the Kremlin along with the dues and corporate donations it publicly acknowledges. This has not prevented the party from winning roughly 10 per cent of the party-list vote in every Duma election after its 1993 victory (most recently, 12 per cent) except 1999, when it still got 6 per cent. Its organization and brand are almost entirely centred on the personality of Zhirinovsky himself, whose brazen antics (from tossing a glassful of orange juice on to his reformist opponent during a televised debate to tugging on a female deputy’s hair in parliament) are designed to entertain and grab attention more than to persuade. Disavowing both communism and liberalism in the process, he has proven consistently able to mobilize the support of both nationalists and people (especially poor males in small towns) who just want a way to register their dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in Russia — meaning that they do not vote for more independent opposition parties.

Party substitutes

The building blocks available to party builders were also available to people who had no intention of actually building parties, but still wanted to influence political outcomes in Russia. Thus alongside the 1993-vintage parties there quickly appeared what might be called ‘party substitutes’ (Hale 2006). These were types of political organizations whose...
bosses generally wanted to avoid the strings that would come attached to party membership (such as the need to adhere to an ideology or party rules that could limit one’s room for manoeuvre), but who still wanted to get ‘their people’ elected to key state posts.

Regional political machines

One key type of party substitute was the regional political machines run by powerful governors. Russia’s reform process gave regional authorities a great deal of latitude to design their own provincial state institutions and to influence the way local firms were privatized, if they were privatized at all. Many of the original ‘governors’, as they are widely called, used this opportunity to make sure that their bureaucracies or their cronies gained ownership of former Soviet enterprises during the 1990s reforms. These governors also set up extensive licensing and inspection procedures for firms not owned by their close associates, and very often also established effective control over local police, courts, election commissions, and other state bodies. The result was a series of regional political machines that had great power to get candidates that it favoured elected, by hook or by crook. While such governors during the 1990s would frequently pay lip service to political parties supported by the Yeltsin administration in order to secure subsidies, the vast majority acted very independently, almost always running for office themselves as non-party candidates. To win an election in Russia in the latter half of the 1990s, in fact, a candidate was usually better off gaining the support of a regional political machine than a party, though parties did win many battles.

Oligarchic corporate conglomerates

Another important sort of party substitute was a set of mega-rich and politically connected corporate conglomerates, led by figures popularly known as ‘oligarchs’ due to their influence on affairs of state. Corporations in virtually all countries engage in politics, usually by lobbying government or contributing to campaign budgets. What made these politicized financial-industrial groups (PFIGs) special was that they often went straight to the electorate, recruiting their own candidates for office and supplying these candidates with their primary campaign organization and resources. This was profitable for PFIGs because the candidate once elected could be counted upon to vote for the corporate interest when needed, and this was most reliable when the candidate was not beholden to any party that might impose other claims on their loyalties. Thus major Russian firms like Gazprom and the Alfa Group, not to mention corporate groups with less than national scope,

also provided ways for ambitious politicians to win office without having to bother joining a party.

The Kremlin

One might even interpret the Kremlin itself as being ‘the ultimate party substitute’ in Russia. Much like regional political machines could powerfully influence local politics, so could the Russian president and his administration have a major impact on national politics. In part, it could do so by putting pressure on regional political machines and PFIGs to support candidates backed by the president. For example, many PFIGs depended for their wealth on cushy deals with the government, and the president also had a great deal of control over budgetary and non-budgetary financial flows that could be directed toward or away from particular regional political machines. Moreover, the Russian state continued to own or otherwise control the two most-watched television networks during the later 1990s, which meant it could influence how elections were covered. This effect was greatest during presidential elections, when no individual PFIG or regional machine was big enough alone to guarantee a candidate’s victory and when the Kremlin was likely to be most aggressive in mobilizing its resources. Yeltsin’s presidential victory as an independent over the CPRF’s Zyuganov in 1996 was a pivotal moment in the development of the Kremlin as a party substitute. The Kremlin could also strongly intervene in regional-level elections to significant effect, though it was often unsuccessful when working against the vital interests of the local political machine. What this has meant is that incumbent presidents have at their disposal many resources for re-election that do not depend on any party. They thus prefer to maintain maximum flexibility by keeping some distance even from parties that support them, including United Russia. No Russian president has ever sought to be an actual member of any party while in office.

One consequence of all of this is that Russia’s parties failed to dominate the political system in the 1990s not so much because they were objectively ‘weak’, but because they faced very strong competition from extremely powerful independents backed by regional political machines, PFIGs, and the Kremlin itself.

Parties originating in the Putin era: United Russia and A Just Russia

The most important party to appear in the Putin era, United Russia, might actually be thought of as a conglomeration of these party substitutes,
increasingly tightly harnessed during the 2000s to Putin and the broad programme he advocated. This ‘administrative’ path to party development is not as abnormal as one might think, even in democracies. American Senator Martin Van Buren founded the Democratic Party in the United States, for example, largely by cobbling together a coalition of state political machines and recruiting Andrew Jackson to lead it and win the presidency in 1828 (Aldrich 1995).

In Russia, events took a different twist. Its Van Buren was Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who recruited the popular former Prime Minister Yevgenii Primakov and successfully organized many of Russia's strongest regional political machines and corporate representatives under the label Fatherland-All Russia (FAR) in August 1999. But Luzhkov, unlike the original Van Buren, lost his struggle to capture the presidency for his team and himself personally. The battle in 1999–2000 was all the same so hard-fought and so close that it had the effect of terrifying Kremlin insiders who feared losing power.

The main lesson Kremlin insiders learned – one that still guides them today – is that while they want to maintain flexibility by being independent of parties, they ultimately needed a party of their own to defeat challenges from coalitions of party substitutes like FAR. In 1999–2000, the party that saved them was the Unity bloc, the precursor to United Russia that was formed less than three months before the December 1999 Duma election in a last-ditch effort to prevent what initially looked like a certain FAR victory. Contrary to a common perception, Unity was not initially created to be a true party of power. The first party of power, Russia's Choice, was seen as a failure, as was the second, the Our Home is Russia (OHR) party formed by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin after Yeltsin abandoned Russia's Choice. OHR won only 10 per cent of the vote in 1995 and lost almost all of its support after Chernomyrdin was sacked as prime minister in 1998. Kremlin insiders thus did not at the time expect a new party of power to have much chance of success, especially since Yeltsin was as unpopular as ever and the newly appointed Prime Minister Putin's ratings were still in single digits as of the late summer of 1999.

Instead, as the Kremlin official most directly responsible for overseeing the Unity project later admitted openly, Unity had only one purpose at its creation, an extraordinarily narrow purpose that was limited to a single election: to counter the campaign of FAR (Shabdurasulov 2008). It was mainly to be a diversion, a ‘decoy party’ designed to muddy the electoral waters, to make governors and oligarchs think twice before joining forces with FAR, and to provide an alternative framework in which governors left out of FAR (or leaving it) could publicly express this in return for Kremlin favours. While positioning itself as slightly to the right-of-centre ideologically, it mimicked FAR’s emphasis on competence and pragmatism and included the well-respected Emergencies Minister (now Defence Minister) Sergei Shoigu atop its party list. Its platform was strikingly similar to that of FAR, one of whose representatives called it the ‘purest plagiarism’ (Segodnya, 4 October 1999). The governors who nominally supported Unity tended to come from regions that were the least successful and most dependent on the central government, and even they generally delegated only mid-level associates to appear on its party list (Hale 2004a).

Imagine Unity's creators’ surprise when the party not only cleared the 5 per cent hurdle, but also got far more votes than FAR and came within one percentage point of the first-place CPRF! The party’s informal Kremlin curator, Igor Shabdurasulov, could not contain his glee, calling Unity's performance a ‘colossal breakthrough’ and a ‘revolution’ (The Moscow Times, 21 December 1999). Between its last-minute creation in early October and the December balloting, Putin’s popularity had soared after decisively sending troops into the rebellious Chechnya republic in retaliation for a series of terrorist bombings in Moscow and other cities, and state-controlled television had out-competed pro-FAR television and done severe damage to the reputations of Luzhkov and Primakov, tarred as corrupt and old. Both Luzhkov and Primakov then dropped out of the presidential race as it became obvious that Putin would win handsomely in a completely fair contest.

Almost immediately after the December 1999 elections, state officials began encouraging the transformation of Unity from a one-off campaign tactic into a fully fledged party of power. A first step was to develop the party’s formal organization and reputation. This began with the formation of Unity’s official Duma delegation, which soon joined forces with a large number of independent deputies (and even some from other parties) who had been elected in the Duma’s district contests. Interestingly, FAR’s representatives, elected primarily as pragmatists who had planned on benefiting from a close association with those in power, were quick to do an about-face and join the new Unity-led coalition in the Duma. Indeed, Putin and his top Kremlin aides (especially deputy presidential administration chief Vladislav Surkov, emerging as the party’s main strategist) were happy to extend this offer even to Luzhkov personally (who accepted) since FAR governors controlled some of the most powerful political machines in Russia. In early 2002, the merger between FAR and Unity was formally consummated under the new name of the United Russia Party.

As part of the same process, the Kremlin went about corralling Russia’s party substitutes into the new party of power structure and reducing their ability and incentive to ever again organize a collective challenge to the
incumbent authorities. Putin first stripped governors of most of their political autonomy through a variety of reforms (see Chapter 9), ultimately replacing gubernatorial elections for the period 2005–12 with a system whereby the Russian president nominated a candidate who then had to be confirmed by the local legislature, usually dominated by United Russia. Putin also moved decisively against the oligarchs to end their days as more or less autonomous political actors. Thus during his first term his prosecutors targeted two of the most prominent, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, effectively forcing them to leave the country and give up their control of key television networks to corporate owners more tightly under Kremlin control. Even more important was the demonstrative arrest in October 2003 of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, owner of the Yukos oil company and Russia’s richest man, who on some interpretations had designs on the presidency himself and had been launching a large informal slate of Yukos candidates to run as independents in the 2003 Duma election. That arrest capped a major campaign to coordinate the political activities of both big businesses and regional political machines, directing their efforts to support United Russia candidates rather than to acting as party substitutes. Since that time, few big businesses have dared to give substantial backing to any party without the Kremlin’s OK, and United Russia has had by far the biggest OK.

Putin and his supporters also made a series of changes in law during the 2000s that gave United Russia a tremendous advantage over its rivals. Only organizations that were officially categorized and registered as national ‘political parties’ were allowed to nominate candidates in Duma and party-list regional legislative elections, and the registration requirements were made increasingly strict. Whereas there were over 40 parties registered in 2003, by the end of the 2000s this number had dwindled to only seven. Other rules were explicitly intended to sift smaller parties out of elections: parties were barred from running together in coalitions for the Duma; state financing for parties was given out in proportion to their election performance; and the time for televised election campaigning was reduced to less than a month for parliamentary and presidential elections, benefiting parties that were already in government because their activities were covered by media as ‘news’. As we saw in the previous chapter, Putin also replaced the mixed system of Duma elections with a party-list-only system, which increased the power of central party authorities relative to regional ones and eliminated the opportunity for party substitutes to compete directly in election. The threshold for winning seats in that competition went up from 5 per cent in 2003 to 7 per cent starting with the 2007 election. Another rule change reserved a significant portion of regional legislative seats for national parties, helping lead to United Russia’s dominance in most regional legislatures.

The Kremlin has also helped ensure United Russia’s rise by manipulating the set of available alternatives. Partly, this has been through pressuring or spreading damaging information about the party’s true opposition. For example, a blistering documentary film ‘Anatomy of Protest 2’ shown on the NTV channel in October 2012 presented images of what it said was one small opposition party leader (Sergei Udaltsov) plotting with a Georgian politician to destabilize Russia (Polit.Ru, 17 October 2012). The authorities have also used less conventional means, including the establishment of what Andrew Wilson (2005) has called ‘virtual parties’, which the Kremlin intends to play the role of a ‘loyal opposition’ that will help create an appearance of contested elections and take votes from real opposition parties while not actually acting against the interests of the incumbent administration. Virtual parties are not a Putin-era invention. Some were created under Yeltsin, such as (reputedly) the Pensioners’ Party, which first ran for the Duma in 1999 and is thought to have targeted the CPRF’s base of loyalists. As hinted above, some say the LDP is in fact Russia’s oldest virtual party, though its leader argues otherwise.

The most prominent virtual party appearing in the Putin era is A Just Russia, one of the four parties that have official delegations in the Duma as of 2014. It has its roots in the Motherland bloc that was formed in 2003 through an alliance between the Kremlin and disgruntled CPRF allies who hoped to use the authorities’ support for their own political gain at the Communists’ expense. At the same time state media was depicting the CPRF as losing touch with true socialist values by accepting corporate money, as described above, these same media broadcast relatively positive portrayals of Motherland as a more authentic heir to communist ideals. Thus not only were CPRF voters given reason to doubt their old party, they were supplied an alternative that did contain some credible leaders, including the genuinely popular leftist economist Sergei Glazyev and the nationalist Duma deputy Dmitri Rogozin. The results were dramatic: during the final week of the campaign, the CPRF’s ratings plummeted and Motherland’s soared, surprising even its Kremlin supporters by reaching 9 per cent of the Duma vote. Once in the Duma, both Rogozin and Glazyev proved less than loyal to the Kremlin and were pushed out of the Motherland leadership. The new leaders then merged the party with the Pensioners’ Party and a minor party founded by a close Putin associate, Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov. Mironov, not known for either leftist or nationalist views, then assumed the leadership of the new ‘A Just Russia’ party and tallied 8 per cent of the officially counted votes in the 2007 Duma election and 13 per cent in 2011. Some speculate that it is part of a Kremlin plan to eventually engineer a two-party system in Russia, with A Just Russia potentially waiting in the wings to capture leftist votes should United Russia’s popularity decline.
Of course, the true opposition’s difficulties should not all be blamed on Kremlin manipulation. For one thing, it would be a mistake (though a common one) to dismiss United Russia as being solely an administrative product that represents no ideas and has no genuine popular support. Independent surveys show that as many as 26 per cent of the population could be considered loyal to the party in 2004 and that this figure had grown to 30 per cent by 2008 and 32 per cent by 2012, despite a major crisis the party faced in 2011 (described below). Thus while there is strong evidence of at least some ballot box fraud – for example, an improbably high number of precincts reporting turnout figures corresponding to round numbers in the parliamentary elections of 2007 and 2011 – this is not the main story of its rise (RFE/RL Newsline, 29 February 2008; Shpilkin 2011).

Its popularity derives first and foremost from its close association with Vladimir Putin. The Unity and then United Russia factions in the Duma have always characterized themselves as wholly supportive of Putin’s agenda, and this was clearly a winning strategy since Putin has retained majority approval ratings throughout his eight years in the presidency. Survey results also provide strong evidence that Russian citizens tend to credit United Russia (as well as Putin) for improvements in the economy. Indeed, economic growth and popular presidents normally strengthen parties associated with incumbents and weaken opposition parties (Erikson et al. 2002). But the party does also stand out in voter minds for certain kinds of stands on important issues. It has been associated with a market economic orientation, opposition to communism, a guarded pro-Western foreign policy, and a tough stance on rebellious minority regions like Chechnya. Voters who support such positions, the survey evidence suggests (Colton and Hale 2014), have been significantly more likely to vote for United Russia than for other parties. It remains to be determined exactly how much of United Russia’s success is due to the coercive power of Russian authorities and how much is due to the same kinds of things that make parties popular everywhere, including association with a successful leader, a growing economy, and widely supported policy positions. While Russia’s shift to a more authoritarian system in the 2000s has clearly worked to United Russia’s advantage, one could also argue that people would not have tolerated this authoritarian shift had there not been genuine popular support for Putin and his favourite party. Russian opposition parties have also made some serious strategic mistakes, as when Yabloko and the SPS seemed to spend more effort attacking each other than Putin in the 2003 Duma campaign in bids to become the dominant liberal party (Hale 2004b).

All this made possible another United Russia step toward reaching its peak of dominance in 2007–08: for the first time the party began to play an official role in presidential politics. Having previously never run as its nominee, outgoing President Putin agreed to head the party’s list in the 2007 Duma campaign, an unprecedented move in Russian politics, ensuring that it won a huge majority of over two-thirds of the seats. Putin declined his Duma mandate after the election, electing to become prime minister instead. Second, Putin’s choice to succeed him as head of state, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, then ran for president as a United Russia Party nominee, something neither Putin nor Yeltsin had ever done. Third, immediately after Medvedev succeeded Putin in office, Putin acceded to the post of United Russia chairman as well as prime minister. But despite all these moves, neither Putin nor Medvedev has yet proven willing to fully affiliate themselves with, and thus fully lend their authority to, United Russia by becoming ‘members’. Their hesitancy indicates both that United Russia is not yet close – even after having existed for over a decade – to having the status of the old CPSU and that Kremlin insiders themselves see risks to their own power in taking this final step. They want, it appears, to make sure that the party remains an instrument of their personal leadership rather than an institution with its own interests and authority that could one day part ways with theirs or compromise their reputation.

**United Russia beyond the 2011–12 political crisis**

United Russia’s rapid growth in authority plateaued after the 2007–08 election cycle. Especially with the major economic crisis of 2008–09 (see Chapter 11), the party’s popular support started a gradual trend of decline, culminating in a noticeable drop in 2011. Rather than double-down and concentrate efforts on supporting United Russia, Putin and some of his strong supporters announced the creation in May 2011 of an ‘All-Russian Popular Front’. While some speculated that Putin might be preparing to change party horses, the Popular Front was used instead as a loose umbrella organization that would simultaneously work closely together with United Russia at the same time that it drew in Putin supporters who for one reason or other were not part of United Russia. It did, however, serve as a bet-hedging mechanism, ready to be turned into a pro-Putin party quickly should support for United Russia utterly collapse. And this undercut United Russia’s authority as Putin’s primary political vehicle.

The crisis for United Russia came to a head in late 2011 (Hale 2011). The primary catalyst came when Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev effectively botched the announcement on September 24 that the tandem-mates would trade offices, indicating that something like
this had been planned all along and thereby making many voters feel like dupes. Both Putin and Medvedev suffered. The hopes many had nurtured that Medvedev was becoming an independent politician were crushed, and his authority was badly damaged. And not long afterward, Putin himself appeared actually to have been whistled at (booed) when appearing on a live-television sporting event, signalling to many a major crack in his political Teflon. The pair’s ‘casting’ (as it became widely known in Russia, referring to the chess term) also caused some technical campaign difficulties for United Russia: the party’s campaign planning had been based on the idea that Putin would lead its party list as he had done in 2007, but the casting deal meant that the new party leader would be the politically emasculated Medvedev. Making matters worse, various officials attempted to salvage a strong election result for United Russia by resorting to various forms of manipulation, but these were often clumsy and blatant, causing a further decline in popular support. And with many party governors unpopular, in some regions party representatives were given permission to campaign against them, generating mixed incentives in the political machine. The label ‘Party of Swindlers and Thieves’, coined by opposition blogger Aleksei Navalny, stuck to it in the minds of many voters, sometimes involved by opposition and even virtual parties. Strikingly, even A Just Russia began attacking United Russia during the campaign. On the heels of scandal after scandal, the party stunningly failed even to claim a simple majority of the officially counted votes, netting just 49 per cent, and there was evidence that even this modest tally reflected fraud. Within a week of the election many tens of thousands were on the street protesting (see Chapter 7), launching a major movement that continued to rally large numbers of people well into 2012.

These events prompted the Kremlin to initiate a series of reforms that remain in place up to the present. These reforms have greatly changed the form of the party system, though its essence (domination by United Russia with minor roles for the CPRF, A Just Russia, and LDPR) remains the same. One reform was to greatly relax registration requirements for political parties. By late 2013, the Justice Ministry’s official website listed 74 registered parties (Ministry of Justice 2013). While representing an advance in political freedom, this reform has nevertheless helped United Russia by facilitating the division of its opponents (Golosov 2012). The vast majority of parties registered under the new rules have been non-factors in the regional elections of 2012 and 2013. The Civic Platform Party organized by major businessman Mikhail Prokhorov (owner of the Brooklyn Nets NBA basketball team and the third-place finisher in the 2012 presidential election) shows some potential to win a significant number of regional and perhaps national parliamentary seats, though it remains too early to tell. Another post-2011 reform was to restore some kind of direct gubernatorial elections, though the Kremlin’s candidates have won all of them and not significantly altered the balance of power among parties. The parliament has also restored a form of district-based elections for the Duma, which could lead to the return of party substitutes and other non-party candidates in the future, but how this will affect the party system will depend heavily on exactly how any such reform is designed. In the end, United Russia wound up weathering the storm just fine, retaining nearly a third of the Russian population as self-professed loyalists and close to 2 million members (Colton and Hale 2014; Moskovskii Komsomolets, 28 May 2013).

Conclusion

Russia has come a long way in forming a party system since the USSR disintegrated in 1991, but its development was not what observers initially expected. While a set of parties did emerge and grow during the 1990s based largely on political resources and reputation gained through connections to the state, their growth was stunted as Yeltsin-style privatization and overly strong executive authority led to the rise of party substitutes that often managed to out-compete parties for both candidates and votes. After Kremlin authorities nearly lost power to the Fatherland-All Russia coalition of party substitutes in 1999–2000, the newly elected President Putin began to transform Russia’s party system by both reducing the power of party substitutes and organizing them around one increasingly dominant party, United Russia. As these efforts were all linked with a growing economy and a popular president, and as state-controlled television could ensure that voters made this link, United Russia reached a point of near-dominance in the political system that it has sustained into 2014.

At the same time, Putin has remained reluctant to tie his personal authority too closely to any party (even United Russia) since his mighty Kremlin power base has given him a great deal of room for political manoeuvre and which a strong party might limit. He thus prefers to be above the partisan fray, seen as the president of all the people rather than of any one party. Russia’s political system is therefore not yet fully a party system, even a fully ‘dominant party system’. There is even speculation that the authorities might still one day try to engineer a two-party system, perhaps pairing United Russia with either A Just Russia or the All-Russian Popular Front, though to date they have shied away from allowing other parties to challenge United Russia too vigorously.
for fear of fostering dangerous splits in the political machinery that keeps them in power. These calculations could change, however, should United Russia's support in the population take a nosedive. Russia's party system thus remains in flux and could take on quite different directions in the years ahead.

Chapter 6

Voting Behaviour

IAN McALLISTER

This chapter examines patterns of voting behaviour in Russia, using public opinion surveys to trace how these patterns have evolved over time. Early studies relied on the model of voting behaviour that dominated the first wave of democratization in the late nineteenth century. This model emphasizes stable parties competing around major social cleavages, with electoral choice being shaped by high levels of mass partisanship. It soon became clear that this 'group memberships' model of voting was not readily applicable to Russia, and that other factors were more important in shaping electoral choice. Accordingly, later voting studies have examined performance evaluations and the importance of political leadership as factors that shape voting choice. The picture of Russian voting behaviour that emerges is a complex one, with elements of group membership combined with performance evaluations, often mediated by political leadership.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section examines patterns of electoral participation since the early 1990s, while the second section covers the inheritance of authoritarian values among the electorate, reflected in nostalgia for a return to communism among the older generations. The remaining three sections cover the main explanations for voting behaviour, namely social group memberships, evaluations of performance, and political leadership. Confirming other research, the conclusion is that voters are motivated by making performance evaluations based on economic prosperity, with these evaluations being closely associated with the leadership of Vladimir Putin.

Electoral participation and dissent

As we saw in Chapter 4, election turnout in Russia and the other republics during the years of communist rule was consistently high, and much higher than in the same period in the established democracies (see, for example, Blais 2000; Franklin 2004). This was due, in part, to a desire on