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Another Russia?

PUTIN'S INVENTED OPPOSITION

Stephen Sestanovich

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Can genuinely competitive, pluralist politics be regenerated in Russia? Let me add to the answers that others have given to this question by telling two stories—one, now distant; the other, close at hand.

The first is about a ruling party that began—less than twenty years ago—to lose the highly repressive political monopoly that it had exercised for decades. I have in mind, of course, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). When Mikhail Gorbachev took his first step toward open elections at the nineteenth CPSU conference in 1988, many experts expected him to have little trouble controlling this limited experiment in popular representation. I remember at the time listening to a well-known Sovietologist explain to American television viewers how the modernized Soviet system was going to work: One-party rule would continue, he believed, but reformist and antireformist factions of the CPSU would now be able to debate alternative policy proposals. To my mind (we were on the same news program), Gorbachev was actually taking a huge risk. Once you legitimized the idea of political competition, people would want the real thing, not a phony substitute.

Sure enough, *perestroika* failed for just this reason. The elite was too divided for its differences to be easily contained. Organizations and movements that wanted to do more than merely reform the system were actively mobilizing. Acute social and economic problems legitimized the idea of radical change. And perhaps most importantly, elections soon gave opponents of the old order a place inside the country's political institutions. They were no longer just protesting from the street.

This record casts an interesting light on the Kremlin's current effort to "manage" Russian democracy, and it brings me to my second story. Like

the Sovietologist who thought Gorbachev could keep a domesticated, in-house opposition from becoming too democratic, Putin and his advisors seem to think that they can make the current system more stable by sponsoring an approved alternative to United Russia, the so-called “party of power.” A pure one-party system, they sense, does not seem like real democracy. Perhaps they even recognize that it encourages complacency and corruption, generating little energy and few ideas for addressing Russia’s many problems. Hence the appearance of the new Just Russia party, an amalgamation of three small groupings that the Kremlin obviously instructed to unite. In his 1 February 2007 press conference, Putin “welcomed” the formation of Just Russia, saying it would give voters with social-democratic leanings something to vote for.

This new party is clearly designed to crowd out others that might create a genuine opposition not controlled by the Kremlin. But will the experiment work as planned? Already we see evidence that attempts to create phony political competition may end up encouraging the real kind. Consider the bizarre case of the October 2006 mayoral election in the little town of Shchyolkovo (described in the January–February 2007 issue of the magazine *Russia Profile*): The United Russia candidate, finding herself behind in the polls, went to court to get the candidate supported by Just Russia removed from the ballot. The latter had, it seems, violated intellectual-property rights by appearing on billboards with a picture of a local monument (featuring an old MiG fighter jet)—without getting the monument designer’s permission to do so. The court obligingly disqualified him.

United Russia’s ability to win elections by such astonishing means confirms its strength, but the story may not be over. The local activists of Just Russia were reportedly infuriated by this open fraud, and are now determined to find new allies and new avenues for winning future elections. To do so, some of them may yet come knocking on the door of The Other Russia.

The Kremlin’s invent-your-own-opposition strategy shows that it has real confidence in its ability to orchestrate every aspect of the democratic process. Yet it is a sign of anxiety too, and not the only one. When people at the top of a deeply corrupt regime feel the need to talk about their efforts to stamp out corruption, they are calling attention to one of their great vulnerabilities. (Perhaps they remember how, twenty years ago, a headstrong politician named Boris Yeltsin made a name for himself by speaking out at a CPSU congress about how all the delegates had coupons in their pockets that gave them special privileges.) The ruling party’s intermittent flirtation with xenophobia is a further sign of its uncertainty about how to respond to popular dissatisfaction. Both United Russia and its invented rival are also relying more and more on welfare-oriented appeals and promises. Plainly neither believes that it is safe to let real opposition parties monopolize populist politics.

Despite all their difficulties, today's Kremlin political operators probably calculate that they will be able to protect themselves against the forces that undermined Gorbachev's reform project in the 1980s—elite division, grassroots mobilization, intractable national problems, and new electoral rules that gave the regime's opponents a huge opening. Mr. Putin and his helpers do seem in a stronger position than Gorbachev was. And yet they cannot be completely secure as long as they are constrained by these same electoral rules. Running a one-party state is easy enough if you can set the rules yourself and break them at will. But keeping up democratic appearances means taking risks that can empower your opponents.

Most foreign observers despair of having any influence on Russia's political evolution, and it is easy to see why. After all, Russia's leaders have adopted a slogan—"sovereign democracy"—that openly rejects the idea that outsiders have any right to judge whether the country is a democracy. But democratic legitimacy cannot simply be asserted. It also has to be accepted, at home and abroad, and our readiness *not* to accept it is a continuing form of leverage. We should recall that, a year before its collapse, the Soviet Union took on the obligation to follow internationally agreed-upon norms for, among other things, the conduct of free and fair elections. It recognized that there was—and is—no other way to claim to be a democracy. Insisting that Russia take this obligation seriously is no mere ideological debating point. It may be the one thing we can do to get the Kremlin to play by rules that will, someday, prove its undoing.