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### Engineering Victory: Institutional Reform, Informal Institutions, and the Formation of a Hegemonic Party Regime in the Russian Federation

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# Engineering Victory: Institutional Reform, Informal Institutions, and the Formation of a Hegemonic Party Regime in the Russian Federation

Regina Smyth, Anna Lowry, and Brandon Wilkening<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Political scientists examine Vladimir Putin's efforts to ensure political control within a regime structure that is formally democratic. Methods for managing factional infighting, concentrating political resources in the "party of power," United Russia, and to limit electoral competition are specified. A Monte Carlo electoral simulation leads to counter-intuitive conclusions about the impact of proportional-representation rules on electoral processes and outcomes. Conclusions are drawn about the effectiveness of efforts to institutionalize an authoritarian regime in which shared power is vested in a hegemonic party.

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*"The task of the 'United Russia' party is not just to win the election in 2007, but to think about and do everything to ensure the domination of the party over the next 10 to 15 years, at a minimum, and to do everything possible to achieve this."*

—Vladislav Surkov, Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>From his February 22, 2006 speech entitled "Russia Is an Independent Subject of History: Our Russian Model of Democracy Is Called Sovereign Democracy," given to students at the United Russia party school and quoted in "Surkov: In His Own Words," *Wall Street Journal* (December 19, 2006).

President Putin's planned exit from elected office in 2008 marks another transition in Russian politics. For seven years, Putin's personal appeal has been the basis for political stability, ensuring voter support and, critically, cementing alliances within the ruling elite. His exit would deprive these alliances of their guarantor, opening the door to a protracted succession crisis and renewed political conflict. An observer in the nationalist newspaper *Zavtra* described the danger of the succession in dire terms: "In practice, these trends could result in chaotic processes—up to and including bloodshed as a result of social and interethnic clashes—depending on the imaginations of those who see themselves as deprived" (Tukmakov, 2007).

The underlying challenge faced by Putin and his supporters is that of moving the state from a personalist regime based on the president's popularity and networks to an alternative that both preserves the ruling order and provides for effective collective leadership.<sup>3</sup> We argue that this transition began in earnest prior to the 2003 parliamentary elections. It was characterized by formal institutional changes that insulated the ruling faction from internal challenges and external threats and transformed the United Russia (UR) party into an invaluable tool for maintaining stability and power. Together, formal institutional changes and an institutionalized hegemonic party can remedy a key shortcoming of personalist systems: a lack of institutions that compel unity among political elites.

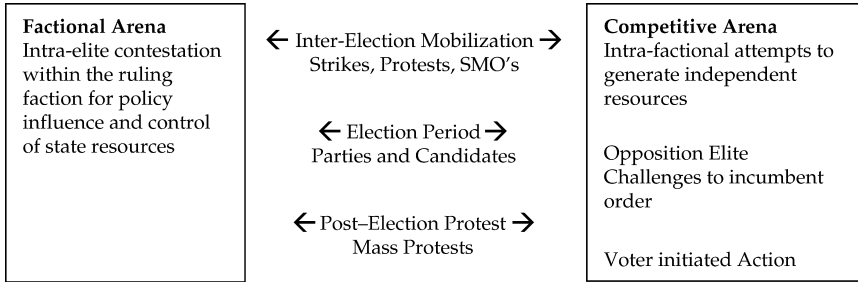
As the article in *Zavtra* suggests, the 2007–2008 electoral cycle provides politicians and voters with two sets of incentives. For those who perceive themselves as losers under Putin's rule, succession is an opportunity to challenge the ruling order. The winners, for their part, have every incentive to transform the system in such a way as would forestall a return to the inchoate system of the Yel'tsin period. Successful transformation would result in a single-party state that not only controls elections but also is invested with decision-making powers. We argue that the formal institutional changes and increased reliance on coercive informal institutions that marked the Putin era generate strong incentives for elites to invest in building an entrenched hegemonic party, both to perpetuate stability and to remove the threat of future succession crises.

## RUSSIA'S COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

In Putin's first term, Russia moved squarely into a category of countries in the "grey zone" between democratic and authoritarian regimes, aptly labeled "competitive authoritarianism" (Carothers, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2002; Ottoway, 2003; Way, 2005). Competitive authoritarian regimes are democratic in structure but fall short of democratic gover-

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<sup>3</sup>Throughout this article, we use the term "hegemonic party" rather than "dominant party" to describe UR because the increasingly closed nature of the system suggests that political manipulation will sustain party support and therefore it will not be democratic in nature.



**Fig. 1.** The interaction between the factional and competitive areas under semi-authoritarian rule.

nance, largely due to the reliance on non-democratic informal structures that bias electoral contests (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004).

At the core of these concepts is the notion that there are two arenas of political contestation governed by two different sets of rules. The first is the public or competitive arena, which is controlled by a set of formal institutions set out in the constitution, legal code, state regulations, and institutional by-laws. The formal rules are based on norms of representation and competition designed to ensure free and fair contestation for power. The second venue of contestation is the factional arena, comprising backroom politics where a small set of leaders use coercive informal institutions to undermine competitive politics. Informal rules embody the opposite goals of formal structures: exclusion of opposition and the protection of incumbents.

The distinction between democratic and semi-authoritarian systems can be understood in terms of the relative influence of each arena on the overall structure of politics. While the two are present in all political systems, semi-authoritarian systems are defined by the increasing dominance of the factional arena and the decreasing influence of the competitive arena, where mass publics are decisive. This mode of governance stands in sharp contrast to true democracies, where factional politics are relegated to subsidiary tasks such as coalition bargaining or internal party governance.

Unlike the case in democratic or authoritarian regimes, in semi-authoritarian regimes the organizational logics and goals of the two arenas are in contradiction. This incongruity is the essence of such hybrid regimes. They institutionalize the political uncertainty inherent in democratic governance by putting electoral competition at the center of contests over power and influence, but seek to control these contests through coercive informal institutions. Torn by this contradiction, incumbents struggle to maintain stability and office in the face of electoral uncertainty.

The two-venue model depicted in Figure 1 illustrates how hybrid regimes are vulnerable to myriad threats from the two venues and from

the interactions between them. It also identifies the strategies that regime opponents might employ to challenge the ruling elite at different periods of the political cycle. Elite rivals may vie for power within either venue, or may link the two of them in an effort to create a new popular base from which to launch challenges. In the factional arena, opponents can defy the ruling coalition by incorporating new actors into their ranks or provoking divisions within existing coalitions. They can also reach into the competitive arena, generating new political resources by mobilizing publics through populist movements or political parties. Citizens' initiatives can give rise to social movement organizations, riots, and terrorist acts that reveal state weakness and provoke elite defection.

Staving off these threats requires controlling challenges from the two arenas and from any interactions between the two. The key features of hybrid systems—managed elections and judiciaries, limited media access, and puppet legislatures—constrain adversaries in both the factional and competitive venues by narrowing the opportunities to contest power within the formal structure of politics and limiting their access to essential political resources. Yet, in relative terms, these features are inevitably less effective at controlling conflict among ruling coalition members within the factional arena since formal institutions have limited reach and there is shared control of coercive informal institutions.

The contradictions between informal and formal rules, and the problems arising from them, are evident in the evolution of the Russian Federation. The 1993 constitution established a competitive arena in the form of a super-presidential, federal system. In the early stages, these underdeveloped and incongruous structures had little bite. To compensate for this weakness, the scope and strength of informal rules increased significantly over time. Elections emerged as a nexus in which informal and formal institutions converged to preserve Yel'tsin's advantage in the presidential races as the Kremlin's spin doctors successfully adapted these informal institutions to pull off a miraculous win in the 1996 presidential elections. But Yel'tsin continued to face significant opposition in both the factional and electoral arenas through the end of his tenure. Decentralized control of informal institutions and the myriad opportunities for competition through formal rules limited the efficacy of both types of institutions as tools to reclaim state power and build stable parties.

Despite the increasing intervention in electoral politics, prior to the transformation of the formal regime structure beginning in 2000, there was nothing inherently undemocratic about the Russian state. Throughout the Yel'tsin period, federalism, mixed electoral laws, a depoliticized court system, and multipartism provided important incentives and openings for opposition elites to contest for power. In the formal arena, weak presidential parties, combined with a multi-party system, a judiciary, and strong federal structures, checked the president's capacity to deploy the considerable formal powers vested in his office. In the informal arena, protracted competition between political and economic elites and recalcitrant regional

officials limited the president's capacity to deploy informal coercion to govern (Remington, Smith, and Haspel, 1998; Stoner-Weiss, 2006).

As term limits compelled Yel'tsin to leave office, the 1999–2000 election cycle was marked by an ever-greater reliance on coercive informal structures to avert a succession crisis. The looming succession, ineffective government, and the 1998 economic crisis prompted significant elite defection. Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov mounted a challenge that was backed by prominent governors. State resources, the resolute deployment of federal troops in Chechnya, and media control helped create a Putin upset that defeated the Luzhkov-Primakov team (Oates, White, and MacAllister, 2002; Oates and White, 2003). While the outcome was outwardly decisive, the uncertainty leading up to the elections and the nature of the victory drew attention to the Kremlin's vulnerability and demonstrated the fickle nature of an electorate that abandoned its early favorites in favor of the younger, more vigorous Putin.

## ESTABLISHING AND PROTECTING A NEW POLITICAL ORDER

In the period immediately after Putin's accession, most observers held very low expectations for Russia's new and obscure president. Archie Brown (2001) characterized Yel'tsin's legacy as "weak president, powerful interests." To overcome this legacy, Putin's administration brought informal institutions to bear on consolidating presidential power. He used this newly-secured base methodically to alter the regime structure, strengthen the state, and bring formal and informal institutions into alignment. The formal reform program was astonishing in its breadth and depth. The new institutional architects weakened certain key institutions, such as the prime minister's office and the regional executives, while strengthening hitherto-subordinate ones, such as the president's regional administrators, the *polpredy*, and the presidential administration. Institutional reform carried into the internal workings of both houses of the legislature. The new rules changed the relationships among institutions, centralizing power and generating institutional capacity to monitor and sanction lower-level officials within a well-defined hierarchic structure.

The institutional reform program transformed a very permissive formal structure, which had led to political fragmentation and a weak central state, into a mechanism to forge cooperation among elite actors, as well as between voters and the executive. These changes had two main implications for political contestation in elections and within government. The first was a limitation of political competition caused by the narrowing of the number and types of actors allowed into the political system. The second was that such competitors as remained were deprived of access to independent political resources.

Although the reform program considerably enhanced the Kremlin's power to shape electoral competition, it could not guarantee that the

succession would not trigger new crises, as elites engage in a struggle for mastery over formal and informal powers previously the preserve of a single individual and his allies. Nor could the new state structures prevent a new president from following Putin's example and eliminating the old power-base in favor of his own team. In order to resolve these problems, the Kremlin needs what Mr. Surkov has suggested, a hegemonic party that institutionalizes incentives for elites to collaborate within the party structure, rather than battle it out in elections or in very public elite conflicts.

### **THE SOLUTION FOR THE MEDIUM TERM: THE EMERGENCE OF A CADRE PARTY REGIME**

A hegemonic party consigns elite conflict to intra-party disputes, supplies strong incentives for elite coordination, and generates mechanisms for sanctioning defectors. Yet it is also a risky strategy, as it must overcome two collective action problems: elite cooperation and voter coordination. The first problem involves binding elites to the state party organization and prompting investment in building the party's institutional structure; the second, in creating stable vote support for the party. Hegemonic-party leaders must solve both problems because they are interactive—failure to solve one problem will lead to failure to solve the second.

Comparative analysis provides guidance about the conditions favoring the consolidation of a durable hegemonic party. Angelo Panebianco (1988) argues that such parties are formed from within the state structure and expand outward to mobilize voters. This model suggests, in other words, a developmental sequence in which the elite collective action problem is solved by strong state structures, and then extended outwards to the mass arena. The persistent failures of the Russian parties of power that preceded UR demonstrated that the open structure and underdeveloped nature of the post-Soviet state made this solution unviable prior to Putin's institutional reforms. The center could not ensure elite loyalty, as regional and economic leaders banded together just long enough to ensure that Yel'tsin and later Putin retained office, and then turned once more to reinvigorated open competition to enhance their own influence.

Sidney Tarrow's (1977) model, based on the emergence of the Christian Democratic organization in Italy in the post-War period, suggests a model of party development that is rooted in the interaction between mass and elite actors. He argues that single-party rule is built on four factors: access to state patronage resources, an interclass coalition among the hegemonic party and its friendly opposition, a constituency that will accept redistribution in terms of particularized benefits, and an appealing and coherent ideology.

It is notable that all of these conditions exist in Russia today with the exception of the presence of a mobilizing ideology that can solve the mass-electorate collective action problem. Stephen Hanson (2006) argues that this deficiency is ultimately the death knell of United Russia. In Hanson's



argument, ideology resolves both the elite- and mass-collective action problems by lengthening time horizons and provoking coordination around the party organization. Voter support for the party on the basis of ideology enhances its value as a political resource. Mass support thus creates incentives for elites to affiliate with, invest in, and build the party organization in order to pursue common goals defined by the ideological vision. Historically, revolutionary ideology was at the foundation of the majority of democratic single-party regimes, including the Congress Party in India, the Social Democratic Party in Sweden, the Labor Party in Israel, and even the PRI in Mexico. Most recently, revolutionary ideology provided the impulse for the consolidation of power under the African National Congress in South Africa. While many of these organizations outlived the logic of their founding, there is no question that ideology was at the root of their initial successes.

Absent the glue of ideological cohesion, generating voter support and subsequent elite cooperation is difficult—an observation that is borne out by the persistent volatility in post-Communist party systems. Alternative mechanisms for drawing in vote support are time-consuming, require significant resources, and are vulnerable to the scandals and shocks common to democratic transitions. In lieu of either coherent ideology or mobilized electorates, leadership becomes the critical mechanism to build support for the party. In many regimes, personalist politics, where the leader plays the role of “founding father” and provider of stability, can replace a coherent vision of regime change or a mobilizing ideology.

A number of scholars have pointed out that personalism is risky, regardless of the nature of its appeal. Leaders are vulnerable to scandal, illness, or death, while term limits clearly prescribe the bounds of the leader’s rule. Comparative research shows that while personalist regimes are among the most vulnerable form of authoritarian governance, single-party authoritarian systems tend to be relatively stable (Geddes, 1999).

As Putin’s appeals demonstrate, one alternative to ideology is for a leader to foster coordination around the party based on the pragmatic concerns of voters. This strategy is especially promising when targeted at an electorate that endured deprivations such as those that followed the dual transition from Soviet-style communism. Pragmatic appeals were at the center of Putin’s project from the start: order, stability, fighting the demographic crisis, and strengthening Russia’s international security. The focus on pragmatism recalls Tarrow’s (1977) discussion of the requisites of dominant party formation, as well as Hanson’s (2006) argument about the trade-off between ideology and pragmatism in party formation.

The transition under way in Russia involves a kind of transubstantiation of Putin’s reputation and leadership, from his person to the party structures of United Russia. The packaging of Putin was an important tool in the initial phases of construction of a hegemonic party. Indeed, Elizabeth Wood (2006) has drawn historical analogies to the cult of personalities of past Russian leaders from Peter the Great to Lenin and Stalin, all of which rested on the spontaneous praise of citizens and the appeal to create a

strong state. More recently, the UR website has described Putin as the moral leader of the party and extolled his leadership in engineering Russia's national rebirth. The party claims that its own political program will be to fulfill Putin's program. Putin himself increasingly refers to his central role in the party's founding and asserts a kinship with the party. Public opinion data reveal that the population perceives the party as Putin's and has supported it on the basis of that association. This existing connection should facilitate Putin's shift from president to a ceremonial role as purveyor of a Russian New Deal or father of the new Russia with the party as the mechanism to implement policy—a transition that is aided by the growing authoritarian nature of the regime, which relies on coercion to engender cooperation within the party structure.

### **Creating Loyal Voters: Building Success at the Regional Level**

While Putin's reputation is one part of UR's appeal, the Kremlin has devised a multi-faceted strategy for winning durable vote support. The political machine rooted in the presidential administration clearly understands the importance of issues and political position-taking. President Putin's mantra of continued stability is an appealing message for voters and elites who suffered through the chaos of the Yel'tsin period. As a recent observer wrote, this focus alone may be enough to secure voters' support: "... if stability is maintained, the Kremlin's party will always win. And this, in turn, is a reliable guarantee that stability will be maintained—thus ensuring a win for the Kremlin's party in the subsequent election" (Kamakin, 2007, p. 1).

The pragmatic strategy for binding voters to the party is rooted in the deployment of state budget resources. Studies of the emergence of single-party systems in Italy, Mexico, and Japan cite the combination of fiscal centralization and state patronage as a key element of eliminating voter support for opposition organizations (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast, 2006; Golden, 2003; Scheiner, 2005). Notably, these two factors were key elements of Russia's institutional reform program. Because state transfers can be targeted at specific constituencies, the state can selectively punish opposition voters by withdrawing funds. As a result, voters support the dominant party to secure critical goods and services rather than because it reflects their policy preferences.

This model of voter coordination is particularly compelling in the Russian electoral landscape, where few parties have coherent programmatic messages or alternative visions of political organization. Absent programmatic initiatives from other parties, the lure of material benefits is strong. There is some evidence of this mechanism at work in Russia. Writing about the Yel'tsin period, a number of scholars have documented the state use of funds to buy votes, the manipulation of individual transfer payments, and the allocation of tax credits and other substitute mechanisms to ensure support (McFaul, 1997; Popov, 2004; Treisman, 1998). While

these efforts do not quite map to the punishment model articulated above, they could, together with the reform of federal and fiscal institutions, make it possible to employ a targeted punishment strategy across regions and over time.

The merger of the state budget and party organization evolved since 2000, when the Kremlin began in earnest to distribute state resources through a variety of mechanisms. One strategy is to build support among easily mobilized constituencies. Under the Putin administration there has been extensive growth of the state bureaucracy—creating a pool of loyal voters. Likewise, significant salary increases for the security agencies generate regime support. In all, the share of the budget designated to maintain the state increased by 50 percent in 2006.

Monies are also lavished on broad social groups. In 2005, the Kremlin widened its pork-based appeals and launched popular national projects aimed at developing center-regional cooperation to solve social problems. These projects focus on key issue areas—healthcare, education, housing, and agriculture—and are carried out at the regional level. The choice of foci is interesting since they usurp the central tenets of rival parties' programs and demonstrate state responsiveness to salient issues. The reliance on governors to implement the programs provides the government, and, in particular, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, a scapegoat for failed projects. While all of the programs are flawed, they are relatively popular given the low expectations held by Russian citizens.

The recent regional elections stirred the party to take on the job of delivering patronage in the regions. A poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation in key electoral regions showed that UR's growth in popularity is linked to party actions such as road repair, playground refurbishment, and other services (Runyantsev, 2006). In a number of cities, the party has set up hotlines for citizens to report problems, and the party itself has been responsive. While none of these strategies can ensure continued support for the party, they have bolstered the initial efforts to attract voters. There is almost universal agreement among analysts that UR will dominate the next election cycle. And there is reason to believe that this support is durable.

Formal institutional changes maximized the party's gains at the regional level. In 2002, a new electoral law was passed that substituted parallel electoral systems for the plurality systems that had existed in most regions. As the largest party organization, UR benefited from vote-to-seat formulas that disproportionately reward the largest vote getters (Goloso, 2006a). The new law also altered the timing of regional elections, limiting them to two days (one in May and one in October). UR's substantial resources provided a significant advantage in simultaneous elections (Slider, 2006). As was true at the national level in 2003, the state-patronage basis of the party system ensured that UR would also garner substantial seats in the plurality portion of the race. The party attracted candidates who had previously run as independents, relied on governors or regional

elites to mount their campaigns, and had very little trouble co-opting independent deputies in the post-election period.

The newly established link between national parties and regional elections has turned these contests into an index for gauging the strength of national parties. And so far, UR has dominated the field. Given the high threshold bonus, UR consistently won dominant pluralities or majorities in the PR portion of the races, in the face of extremely divided oppositions. In March 2006, UR secured an average of 35.7 percent of the vote in the party list races. Not satisfied with this showing, UR leader and Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov declared a goal of no less than 45 percent of the vote in October elections. The party slightly surpassed Gryzlov's goal in the next round of elections, averaging 46 percent of the vote across nine regions. UR repeated this performance in March 2007, winning majorities in 13 of 14 regional legislatures with an average of 60 percent (45 percent of the party vote) of the seats up for grabs.

### **SOLIDIFYING SUCCESS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

Consolidation requires that the party win similar levels of support at the national level, a goal that is facilitated by adoption of new proportional representation (PR) electoral rules. At first glance the Kremlin's preference for PR is puzzling because it embodies an apparent paradox: under PR, UR is likely to control fewer seats in parliament. We argue that this choice is perfectly consistent with a hegemonic-party strategy since it will lead to predictable outcomes and a more disciplined party. The following statistical experiments illustrate the argument.

Under the old system, UR's legislative delegation consisted of three types of deputies: deputies elected on the national list, UR-affiliated deputies elected in districts, and independents or rivals who affiliated in the legislature. By 2003, UR candidates won 102 of 225 districts and attracted the post-election support of many candidates who had run as independents or with minor parties. As a result, UR parlayed its plurality support into more than two-thirds of the seats (for background, see Clem and Craumer, 2004).

Under the new rules, UR is not likely to control such a large legislative delegation. To illustrate the difference, we can estimate UR's future support in two ways. The most basic approach is to interpret the 2003 results through the lens of the PR system. Table 1 reports the results of such an exercise. If we assume the same field of competition and distribution of votes, UR would receive even more seats in the PR race but significantly fewer seats overall. The party would fall far short of the constitutional majority it has held since 2003 but would secure a bare majority of seats. This outcome reflects the loss of support from district candidates and the high electoral threshold that generates a considerable seat bonus for large parties.

These estimates are illuminating, but they do not capture either the real changes in the party system between 2003 and 2007 or the uncertainty

**Table 1.** Predicting the Effects of the New Election Law

	Actual 2003 results		Simulated 2007 results	
	PR votes	Total seats (PR+SMD)	PR votes	Total seats
UR	37.6	224 (49%)*	37.6	239 (53%)
KPRF	12.6	52	12.6	80
LDPR	11.5	36	11.5	74
Rodina	9.0	37	9.0	57
Other	30.2	104	0	0

\*With defections from other parties, the UR faction controlled 69 percent of the seats in the post-election period.

**Table 2.** Results of the Monte Carlo Simulation: Estimates of Key Party Support, December 2007

	Electoral scenario					
	Low uncertainty (sigma = 1000)		Middle uncertainty (sigma = 500)		High uncertainty (sigma = 1)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
United Russia	45.58	.0004	45.59	.0006	45.56	.0009
Just Russia	15.31	.0002	15.53	.0004	15.53	.0011
KPRF	13.92	.0003	13.92	.0004	14.05	.0009
LDPR	12.69	.0003	12.68	.0003	12.69	.0009
Yabloko	4.76	.0002	4.76	.0003	4.77	.0006
SPS	4.30	.0002	4.38	.0003	4.38	.0005

that is endemic to any electoral contest. In order to evaluate both factors, we ran a series of Monte Carlo experiments based on precinct-level data from 2003.<sup>4</sup> Table 2 presents the results of the simulation.

We organized the data to reflect our best guess at the structure of competition in 2007—a guess that is possible because of new party regis-

<sup>4</sup>The data consist of 2719 precincts that vary dramatically by numbers of votes cast: only 77 votes were cast in the smallest precinct while 238,470 votes were cast in the largest precinct.

tration rules and the exclusion of pre-election coalitions. We eliminated parties that were not successfully registered as well as “votes against all” and accounted for the party merger that formed the unified “Just Russia” party. The potential limitation of the analysis is that we cannot account for last-minute pre-election changes such as the *de facto* merger of several smaller parties under one name or the rebranding of smaller parties in an effort to increase vote support.

The experiments calculate the expected vote for each party at the national level based on the variation in vote totals at the precinct level. The precinct-level data capture the distribution of actual vote totals for each party. For example, UR received an average of 59 percent of the vote in each precinct, with a standard deviation of seven percentage points.<sup>5</sup> The simulation uses this distributional data to calculate the range of possible vote totals for each party, along with the likelihood of each combined outcome. Using random variables generated from a Dirichlet distribution, we repeated the simulations to further refine our estimates of the likelihood of different outcomes.

The experimental design also allows us to introduce electoral uncertainty, or the degree to which actual vote totals may fluctuate, into our calculation. In essence, for each party the analysis takes the actual distribution of vote totals across precincts and uses the variance in the distribution to characterize uncertainty at the national level. A low uncertainty scenario can be modeled by introducing a small amount of variation into the national-level analysis. Conversely, higher levels of uncertainty can be simulated by introducing more of this natural variation into the national analysis.

The table presents the mean and standard deviation of the predicted vote for each party under different conditions of uncertainty. Under a scenario of medium uncertainty, the experiment predicts that UR would gain the support of 45.59 percent of the electorate, with a standard deviation of .0006. The standard deviation represents the range of possible outcomes given the natural variation in the 2003 election data. The new organization Just Russia averaged 15.53 percent of the vote, surpassing its actual support in the March 2007 elections by four percent. These estimates are within the margin of error of vote support for parties as reflected in public opinion polls conducted six months before the election. Taking into account the seat bonuses suggested by these data, UR would win a total of 210 seats and Just Russia would win 72 seats. Together this total provides the Kremlin with a *de facto* coalition of 282 deputies, or 62 percent of seats.<sup>6</sup> The most remarkable result of the experiments is the unwavering stability of UR support under varying levels of uncertainty. Overall, the experiment

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<sup>5</sup>These figures underscore both the variation in precinct size and the fact that UR did extremely well in small precincts and also the very largest precincts.

<sup>6</sup>This total includes support from both Just Russia and United Russia and reflects significant seat bonuses for each party.

suggests that controlled PR produces very predictable outcomes for the UR party organization. In other words, the new rules trade seats for certainty, defined as stable and predictable vote support.

State control is heightened by the advantages accruing to the largest party. Under the new rules, parties are the sole gatekeepers for ballot access since all candidates must be nominated by party organizations. The state controls the party registration process. As a result, the new system affords the center an even greater indirect control over the electoral process, since regional influence will have little effect on the national outcome. In addition, all electoral resources must now be channeled through parties to gain political influence, and funders are unlikely to invest in sure losers as a means to pursue political goals. Since the state has a near monopoly over political resources it can deprive serious opposition organizations with the means to mount a credible national campaign. The new system even precludes a more modest showing in key districts. Importantly, the PR system also prevents prominent opposition figures from forming shadow parties to win single seats in the Duma and acquire a political platform from which to challenge the ruling order. But the greatest benefit from the point of view of the hegemonic party is that party discipline is assured, since the party's label becomes critical for re-election.

In short, while controlled PR is likely to decrease the size of the UR faction, it will also eliminate many of the threats inherent in the current political system, and it has the potential to increase support for the party. Moreover, the PR system reinforces an already broad constituency that extends across regional, class, and ethnic cleavages. These findings suggest that the rules will reduce electoral uncertainty, making the party an important resource for ambitious elites and provoking elite cooperation.

### **THE POTENTIAL FOR SOLVING THE ELITE COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM: THE STAG HUNT ANALOGY**

Durable voter support is critical to provoking elite coordination for a number of reasons. Mobilized electorates tied by the party's brand-name label are the most valuable resource available to politicians who must win elections to stay in office. In addition, in Russia parliamentary elections are widely perceived as clarifying the vote strength of presidential contenders—a *de facto* primary (Shvetsova, 2003). This mechanism is the basis of an inevitable political link between the party and president that provokes elite coordination to ensure access to presidential resources and power.

Electoral successes are not, however, altogether sufficient to guarantee the continued dominance of the UR party, since fragmentation at the highest levels of the government and presidential administration are possible. The first step in solution was the creation and installation of an elite leadership network that is loyal to the president. Yet this strategy is limited because of the expansion of the size of the factional arena that operates

outside of the constraints of state structure. The widening of the ruling network necessitates institutionalizing mechanisms that compel elite cooperation (Reuter and Remington, 2007). The second step in the remedy was the merger of the state and party that we observed in the United Russia organization through the 2003 election cycle (Smyth, 2002). The final step is the most problematic: the construction of internal party institutions to manage factional conflict, monitor and sanction recalcitrant elites, and accommodate conflicting political ambitions in the allocation of leadership positions.

The single-party cadre regime provides a number of important benefits to ruling elites. Most importantly, it insulates its members from the vagaries of elections. The party scours critical junctures—in the form of succession elections or unexpected crises—from the political landscape. If the point of succession involves no more than a transfer of reins from one party leader to the next, the threat of a critical election or focal point for action is excised and the regime is insulated from an important source of cycles of mass protest (Tarrow, 1991). As such, a hegemonic party becomes a collective good for its members. The party replaces the president as the guarantor of political bargains by lengthening time horizons, providing political jobs and career paths, and ensuring shared access to the spoils of office. Mechanisms such as term limits for presidents can ensure that elites remain loyal to the party, since their continued access to politics and its perks can be sustained only through the party.

In summary, the shift in power from the leader to the party implies a dispersion of influence among actors and a decreased reliance on the popularity or health of an individual. It also implies an institutional framework for monitoring and sanctioning elites. Yet the shift does not put at risk existing benefits from patronage, and does threaten the use of selective coercion against potential rivals.

The party can also extend its largess beyond its members in order to cement support. As Geddes (1999) argues, the emergence of a hegemonic party allows the leader to co-opt potential opponents—including economic elites and those from the power ministries—within the hegemonic party, because the party organization itself becomes a mechanism to ensure long-term cooperation. Since membership in the party is conditional on upholding the goals and the party and meeting specific obligations, the party can ruin a politician through expulsion.

The analogy of the game theoretic form known as stag hunt, modeled on Rousseau's famous conundrum, illustrates the dilemma of hegemonic party formation. The game form illustrates the obstacles in the initial stages of institutionalizing the organization, particularly the need to demonstrate elite loyalty. Hunting a stag requires cooperation among hunters but the payoff is large. The alternative is for each hunter to abandon the quest for the stag in favor of securing a rabbit. Rabbit is less filling (the payoff is lower) but it also does not require cooperation among players. The worst payoff comes to the player who cooperates in the face of his rival's defec-



		Player 1	
		Cooperate	Defect
Player 2	Cooperate	10,10	0,8
	Defect	8,0	7,7

Fig. 2. The stag hunt analogy.

tion. As the figure shows, there are two solutions to the game: either the players cooperate in pursuit of the stag or both defect and settle for rabbits. The only logical reason to settle for the lesser payoff is if a player perceives that the other player will defect.

Under Yel'tsin, Russian politics could have been characterized as a rabbit hunt—that is to say, devoid of cooperation. Since 2000, elites were pushed into uneasy cooperation and became dependent on Putin's capacity to decrease the risk for key actors. The logic of the game suggests that the presidential succession could threaten cooperation if elites feel a risk that their rivals will defect. To maintain cooperation, the party must assume Putin's role: diminishing the risk of defection at the point of succession and constraining individual leaders in the future. The mechanisms to eliminate risk are varied: (1) diminished capacity for defection; (2) decreased payoffs from defection; and (3) increased payoffs from cooperation. We have discussed in previous sections how the growth in the use of informal penalties as well as formal institutional reforms embodies all three of these mechanisms.

Yet the danger of elites abandoning the UR party-building effort persists, since the most likely point of defection is the moment at which President Putin anoints his successor. According to the polls, this unnamed person is the frontrunner in the presidential race, a sure winner. The speculation in the press is that the president will alienate whomever he does not choose, along with that individual's faction, prompting conflict and triggering challenges to the successor.

The game-theoretic juxtaposition of cooperation versus defection underscores how the outcome depends on the nature of the existing cleavages and coalitions among elites, since these are what shape potential rivals' expectations about each other's behavior. If they share common backgrounds and policy goals, then trust is more likely. Similarly, if the competitors are defined as two relatively equal groups, then the calculation about the payoffs from defection is difficult to make, but is certainly better than if the defection were carried out by only one of many competing interests. If one faction dominates, and is relatively coherent, then the outcome is clear.

Characterizing factional differences within the Kremlin is difficult, but new data, memoirs, and careful study of behavior reveal an interesting picture. There is clearly a good deal of commonality among ruling elites, although the picture is more variegated than is usually given by the depiction of a cadre of *siloviki* ruling the country. Rivera and Rivera (2006) not only argue that the power of the *siloviki* has been overstated, they also demonstrate that there has been an even more significant influx of economic actors into state structures. Similarly, Renz (2006) finds that the *siloviki* are divided in their outlooks and goals. Bremmer and Charap (2007) argue that the strongest faction, which they call the *siloviki*, competes with two other factions, the liberals and the technocrats. They note that the *siloviki* are bound less by their background than by a worldview based on a strong Russian state with increased international influence. Consistent with other studies, they argue that the group is internally divided by a hierarchic structure and that inter-group relations are marked by considerable conflict. The overall picture that emerges from these studies is one of competing groups of elites—increasingly dominated by those closest to Putin—who share some important policy goals and positions but are divided by personal ambition and nuanced differences in strategies.

Given the considerable shared interests and the fact of an anointed successor with a near-lock on the presidency and its attendant resources, it is unlikely that there would be mass defection from the loose coalition that defines the Putin era. Even elites who are closely allied with the disappointed contenders face a critical risk calculation about the likelihood of successful defection versus the sure benefits of remaining loyal. Given the new structure of formal and informal institutions surrounding electoral competition, it is unlikely that any disappointed rival to the official successor could credibly guarantee that he or she would be able to win the presidency and maintain political stability.

There is also the possibility that the new president would desert the party and its elite foundation. After all, Putin himself cleaned house after his election. The changes in regime structure have, however, also limited the degree of presidential autonomy. The mobilization of new elites into the ruling elite, a key part of Putin's strategy, has been closed off by the melding of the political and economic elite described by Rivera and Rivera (2006), and by the taming of regional leaders. Both the OECD and World Bank have released reports describing increased state ownership of major assets and the consolidation of economic interests. The result is decreased competition in the economic realm that has stifled conflict and deprived opposition figures of access to critical resources to mount a challenge to the ruling order. While it is far too early to make serious analogies to the South Korean chaebol or Japanese keiretsu that supported dominant parties in both states, the fusing of economic and political interests is a notable development that tends to restrict presidential autonomy vis-à-vis the hegemonic party.

In an institutionalized hegemonic party, moreover, executive term limits become a tool of credible commitment rather than a liability. If future

presidents know they will return to the party's collective leadership in four or eight years, they are unlikely to renege on their promises. These incentives are reinforced by the fact that the new election law makes it extremely difficult for the hegemonic party to obtain a two-thirds majority faction in the legislature, decreasing the likelihood of future constitutional amendments at the whim of a future president. Likewise, proportional representation rules, together with regulations prohibiting party switching after elections, render the incumbent deputies dependent on the party for securing re-election. Thus, they have strong incentives to resist presidential attacks and guard the integrity of the party.

These mechanisms—a strong electoral party, a dearth of opportunities to compete for power, and controlled access to presidential resources—make a hegemonic party an attractive solution to the potential succession crisis. The nature of the existing factions, the closed opportunity structure, and the sustained popularity of Putin himself all make it difficult for independent or small groups of elites to seize power. In short, both the personal and political bonds among key actors and the disincentives for defection are likely to generate perceptions of unity that will lead to elite cooperation within the dominant party framework.

## CONCLUSIONS

While there is a clearly marked effort to build stronger ties between Putin's reputation and UR, there are also competing claims to this reputation, as the president himself hedges his bets and maintains a wide-ranging set of exit strategies. There is a strong consensus that neither his potential political rivals nor we will know his true intentions until very late in the game. Just as Yel'tsin did before him, Putin will reveal his plan at the last possible moment. The logic of waiting is inescapable. Since the presidential frontrunner is the focal point of parliamentary elections, it makes sense that Putin will not announce his choice until after these elections, leaving the disappointed factions very little time to organize prior to the presidential vote, scheduled to take place only three months later.

Our findings imply that the hegemonic party scenario is likely in the near term. Putin's incentives to invest in a hegemonic party are high since the party can deliver continued stability, insulation from electoral uncertainty, and the enhancement of presidential powers. As Weldon (1997) argues, the last point is critical to the sustained success of the party: the synergy between the PRI and Mexico's super-presidential system is what sustained the regime for seventy years.

We have argued that the Kremlin's reform program brought formal institutions in line with coercive informal institutions, eliminating the threats inherent in competitive authoritarian systems. In doing so, these institutional reforms have pushed the system over the brink and into the realm of authoritarianism, with a fig leaf of elections to preserve legitimacy. Whether we call Russia's political system managed- or sovereign democracy, or something else, the fact is that both formal and informal institutions

have closed all within-system opportunities to contest for power in the competitive arena. The only venue left is the streets. As the state response to protests has shown, the Kremlin will use every tool it possesses to limit protests and raise the cost of participation.

For Kremlin-watchers the expectation of elite cooperation—even in the current environment—may seem ludicrous. Press headlines are alarmist, cautioning against a return to chaos and mass conflict. There are daily reports of infighting and intrigue among cliques in the Kremlin. Analysts debate whether or not murder is increasingly being used as a tool to fight political battles. Yet all this backroom wrangling has not spilled over into the political arena. No internal opposition figure has managed to either capture the public's imagination or build a rival party organization. The president's coalition controls key economic and media resources. The next president is likely to be a competent but lackluster leader who cannot muster popular support independent of the party. Given these conditions, it seems unlikely that the success of United Russia could be replicated by a rival faction within the span of a four-year presidency. While the draconian electoral rules cannot entirely shield elites from the uncertainty of elections, a hegemonic party can do so, giving them incentives to invest in the party.

This analysis suggests that some of the possible alternative scenarios for maintaining power are illogical within the current regime structure largely because they undermine the mechanisms that forge elite cooperation. Replacing the presidential system with a parliamentary regime would create new incentives for smaller parties to compete for office and compromise the hegemonic party's monopoly over state funding, appointments, and decree powers. These changes would in turn undermine the clientelist logic that shores up hegemonic party dominance in the electorate and among elites. Likewise, constitutionally eliminating presidential term limits would only postpone a succession crisis, while eliminating an important check on the power of future presidents. This analysis suggests that the best role for ex-President Putin may be the simplest, to remain nominally independent while working behind the scenes, the only figure in the political landscape with significant popular and elite support.

Finally, our analysis also points to important areas for future research. The hegemonic party framework suggests that the success or failure of the party will hinge on the development of internal party institutions that enable the party to legislate and implement policy and constrain party elites from capturing the gains of office. Such mechanisms are essential to maintain the economic growth that fueled the party's success and translate this growth into increased living standards. To make UR successful in the longer term, party leaders must curb corruption and rent-seeking among elites, and actively develop investment programs beyond the energy sector. Historically, high levels of corruption have been the Achilles heel of hegemonic regimes, a point that is particularly salient in Russia given the growing popular concern about corruption reflected in public opinion polls. In short, UR has taken a long second step in building a successful

hegemonic party but it may well be that the most difficult tasks are still ahead.

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