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The Party of Power in Russian Politics

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Citation

Oversloot, H., & Verheul, R. (2000). The Party of Power in Russian Politics. *Acta Politica*, 35: 2000(2), 123-145.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450707>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Herbert Kitschelt, Peter Lange, Gary Marks and John D. Stephens (eds.),
Continuity and Change in Contemporary Capitalism
 Karen M. Anderson 239

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The Party of Power in Russian Politics

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Abstract

In the politics of the Russian Federation we encounter a new party political phenomenon: the so-called 'party of power'. The 'party of power' concept is frequently used by analysts of the Russian political system. However, it is in need of clarification. In this article an attempt is made to both clarify the phenomenon of the 'party of power' and to (re-)define the concept.

1 Introduction

One should probably have very good reasons for adding another concept to the already impressive catalogue of concepts, classifications and typologies currently available to describe and clarify the organization and functioning of political parties in real, pseudo- and proto-democracies. The analysis of Western European and US party organizations has yielded well-known concepts such as Duverger's 'cadre' and 'mass party',¹ Kirchheimer's 'catch-all party'² and Katz and Mair's 'cartel party'.³ These have contributed to the structuring of our thinking about what parties are and what they do. Some of Russia's parties could – within certain limits – be evaluated in terms of the work of Duverger and his successors.

Yet, we think we have good reason to add another concept to the current stock in order to elucidate the character and functioning of political parties in Russia. In our opinion, the 'party of power' (*partiiia vlasti*) differs from political parties 'as we know them' and as they are seen through the eyes of the authors cited above.

The 'party of power' concept is also used by Russian (critical) political analysts; the concept itself has a critical tinge to it. In our description of the 'party of power' we try to stay close to its 'meaning in use'. At the same time we aim to clarify the use of the concept of 'party of power' in present-day political discourse and to make explicit what is sometimes implicit and even ambiguous.

We will address the question, to what extent is the *partiiia vlasti* a party.⁴

More specifically, we will consider the following issues: 1) is the *partiiia vlasti* a party or a substitute? And 2) what are the (systemic) 'roots' of the phenomenon?

2 Is the party of power a party?

Observers of Russian politics, journalists as well as scholars, frequently use the term 'party of power'.⁵ Few of them, however, explain what they mean by the term. They seem to regard it as a self-explanatory concept, the definition of which can be taken for granted. Upon closer examination, however, this seemingly simple label is quite ambiguous. A look at the literature that deals with the party of power, reveals various definitions of the concept.

Some authors depict the 'party of power' as a specific political party. Richard Sakwa, for instance, applies the epithet to two former prime minister's parties, Egor Gaidar's 'Russia's Choice' and Viktor Chernomyrdin's 'Our Home Is Russia'. While suggesting that these parties are parties in the regular sense of the word, Sakwa notes that they are: "profoundly fragmented into various interests and concerns and lacking a sustained social or political base, other than proximity to power itself and the resources it provides for enrichment and 'empowerment'" (Sakwa 1998: 148).

Other authors suggest that the *partiiia vlasti* is a coalition of parties, each under their own label, but united by shared policy preferences and the desire to have an impact on government. For example, R.F. Turovskii of the Moscow-based Centre for Political Technology, equals the *partiiia vlasti* with Our Home Is Russia and 'all other reform-oriented blocs', such as *Iabloko*, Russia's Choice and many others (Turovskii 1998: 264-5).

Yet others approach the term from an entirely different angle. They emphasize the aspect of 'power', downplaying the 'party' component. Sergei Khenkin is among those who advocate a broad definition of the term. According to Khenkin, the *partiiia vlasti* consists first and foremost of "forces of the executive vertical: the president and his team (administration, aides, advisors and others from the 'close circles', the prime minister and his government, civil servants from the upper echelons, governors, local elites)." Its additional members are "those parliamentary factions and deputies who support the president and the government" and "economic elite groups, which often knit together with political groups, thus forming a single ruling stratum" (Khenkin 1996).

To equate the party of power concept with one specific party, the 'party in government', as Sakwa does, misses the point. Because of the loose, almost absent, link between government and parliament, as well as the ad hoc, modular organizational make-up of this party, the party of power cannot be

comprehended as such. The suggestion that it is some coalition united behind a reform programme implies a clear-cut government-opposition cleavage. It is hardly possible to draw such a dividing line. Khenkin's definition, on the other hand, is too broad. It is insufficiently focused and it departs from the party concept altogether. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine his 'forces' teaming up to contest elections as a specific organization. Elections, however, are important in Russia and the parties of power do play a role in the electoral contest.

3 Russian parties of power

3.1 Russia's Choice

We will now have a closer look at those parties that have been labelled 'parties of power' most often. The first candidate for qualification as the electoral branch of the party of power, at least during the period of approximately autumn 1991 until December 1993, is Russia's Choice (*Vybor Rossii*, VR). VR was led by Egor Gaidar, who was a member of El'tsin's government from 1991 in various capacities. In 1991, in his capacity as acting prime minister, Gaidar launched the so-called 'shock therapy', which was to drastically reform Russia's economy. Fierce resistance to these reforms from the Supreme Soviet – what was left-over from the parliament of the late Soviet era – prompted El'tsin to sacrifice Gaidar in December 1992 and to appoint a more moderate candidate, Viktor Chernomyrdin, more about whom later on.

VR was an attempt to organize a political party that aimed at providing electoral – parliamentary – support for 'the powers that be' by 'the powers that be'. It was formed in the run-up to the December 1993 parliamentary elections, which were the outcome of months of bickering and strife between President El'tsin on the one side and the Supreme Soviet (parliament) on the other. Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, both had vigorously claimed supremacy. Eventually, parliament was dissolved by the president on 21 September 1993, which prompted the need for a new constitution and new institutions. The parliamentary elections were to produce the new lower house, the State Duma.

Gaidar used his governmental contacts – and the organizational and financial means of the presidential and state apparatus – to try to mobilize support for his new party. He also used his political stance and business contacts to get (additional) financial (and other) support for VR's campaign from major Russian private bankers. To help support his own, VR's, and the president's cause, a deal was struck: in exchange for the Russian bankers' substantial support for the 'reformists', foreign banks were to be denied access

to the Russian banking sector. Furthermore, VR benefited from the network it inherited from the movement 'Democratic Russia' (*DemRossiia*). This umbrella movement had been one of the leading reform advocates during the perestroika era.

The conditions for VR's campaign were thus favourable. Its seven competitors had fewer resources at their disposal. Yet, the December 1993 election results were very disappointing for VR and the president's men. (For an analysis of VR's [lack of] electoral campaigning see McFaul 1998: 115-139.) VR won only 70 of the 450 State Duma seats. Thanks to its relatively good performance in the single-member constituencies, where half of the 450 Duma seats were to be won, VR still became the largest faction in the Duma, but not by much.⁶

Vladimir Zhirinovskii's Liberal-Democratic Party (LDPR) took friend and foe by surprise and became the second largest faction. This nationalist party collected many votes of the malcontents and won 64 seats in the State Duma. Taken together, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF, 41 seats) and the Agrarian Party of Russia (APR, 37 seats), the KPRF's ally on the leftwing, even outdid VR. Over all, Russia's first democratically elected parliament turned out to be a far cry from the loyal legislature that El'tsin and his men had envisaged. VR had not gained control over the Duma. As a result, El'tsin and his entourage lost their confidence in the institution that they had only just created. Furthermore, many VR deputies lost their interest in the party. Some of them 'deserted' to the executive or to other factions.

VR could possibly have become the governmental party if it had not been for two major obstacles, one 'accidental', the other systemic. Regarding the 'chance' obstacle; if VR had been the big winner, maybe even the majoritarian party in the State Duma after the December 1993 elections, the government's position vis-à-vis the president would have been strengthened. It then could have claimed to have a popular mandate of its own. Such an outcome might even have helped overcome the systemic obstacle, which was that the Constitution of the Russian Federation of December 1993 was framed in such a way that the government was made dependent, first and foremost, upon the president, and could operate without parliamentary approval. Only the prime-ministerial candidate has to be approved by the State Duma. Therefore, Gaidar and his successors in office could not dissociate themselves from the president, whose lead they have to follow. All of them faced a relatively subservient constitutional position. And, as will be made clear later in this article, all of them lack a source of legitimation within parliament or society at large.

VR soon lost its halo as an electoral vehicle for the 'party of power'. To appease the hostile Duma majority, El'tsin reshuffled his cabinet. Gaidar and some other like-minded ministers were replaced by less outspoken 'reformers'. Out of power, the leaders of VR could no longer claim to be power brokers. Their

response was to attempt to reform VR into a membership-based party, tightly organized, with closed and disciplined ranks. Russia's Choice renamed itself Russia's Democratic Choice (*Demokraticheskii vybor Rossii*, DVR). But this strategy did not pay off. Some representatives of the older organizations of *DemRossiia*, weary of centralized control, preferred to stick to the movement mode of organization and split off. Voters also turned their backs on the party: in the December 1995 elections, DVR fell back from 76 to merely 9 seats. Being associated with unpopular government in the early nineties, out of power and so without access to governmental and presidential, in short, to state resources, it did not even manage to cross the 5% threshold in the party-list vote.

3.2 Our Home Is Russia

A second attempt at organizing a 'governmental party' was Our Home is Russia (*Nash dom - Rossiia*, NDR). This movement was launched in May 1995 and rapidly gained the support of some of Russia's high-ranking politicians. Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was put at the helm of NDR. As had been the case with VR in the early days, NDR was able to make use of governmental and other state facilities at both the federal and the sub-federal levels, where it had been successful in enlisting heads of the *executive* branches of government (including governors). Chernomyrdin's past as a former director of Russia's powerful energy conglomerate *Gazprom*, secured additional support for NDR's operations (Belin 1995: 21-26).

NDR provided (additional) access to the central government and central governmental and presidential apparatus for local executives, and to some extent succeeded in organizing support for governmental/presidential policies in the Federation Council (the Senate).

The organization of NDR was the more successful part of a two-part scheme: the attempt to create a two-party system 'from the top'. NDR was supposed to operate in the centre-right half of the political spectrum, supportive of the government. The other party, *Soglasie*, to be led by the then Duma chairman Ivan Rybkin, was to attract and unite the centre-left forces, to bring together (local) élites and parties that would not join a (parliamentary) coalition openly supportive of the government, but who would nevertheless be acceptable as 'opposition'. Both parties were supposed to accept the constitutional set-up of 1993; both parties were supposed to accept the wide-ranging powers of the president. Rybkin was originally from the left-wing Agrarian Party (APR), but had always shown himself supportive of 'the system' and the president.

This attempt to create a 'most loyal opposition' (and to pre-empt, so to speak, the [re-]emergence of 'uncontrolled' opposition forces) failed dismally, probably for two reasons: (1) the electoral system was ill-suited to produce a

two-party system; and (2) the possibilities for transforming (parts of) the state and economic apparatus into a party organization proved to be limited.

With respect to the first reason, the Duma seats are filled by a combination of proportional representation (PR) and a majoritarian system. PR in the Russian context thus tended to be an incentive for a greater number of parties to form and address themselves to the electorate separately, rather than in coalitions. The majoritarian component is not inducive of a two-party system either, since the single-member districts are hardly controlled by parties, whose 'reach' beyond Moscow is limited. On the side of the electorate, society was deeply divided over the enormously complex problems and tasks facing the nation. For this reason, 'moderate opposition', as was expected from Rybkin's bloc, lacked credibility. As to the second reason, the experience of NDR suggests, as Grigorii V. Golosov has noted (1997: 16), that it is difficult enough to transfer "the vast political resources of the 'bosses'" to "a regular organisation capable of winning elections." It must, therefore, be even more difficult to set up and maintain an organization which is preferably not able to win a majority of seats (because NDR was to be the 'most favoured' party), but is nevertheless capable of keeping 'the others' out. Spoils are to be had for the winner, but what spoils can be distributed among 'favoured losers'?

So, in the State Duma elections of December 1995, NDR failed dismally. Like VR in 1993, NDR fell far short of what was hoped for and expected from it. NDR managed to win (only) 55 seats. As was the case in December 1993, the 'opposition' parties beat the governmental/pro-governmental parties. The KPRF was the outright winner: it won 157 seats, more than doubling its December 1993 vote. NDR was unable to form a permanent alliance with other major factions in the State Duma. NDR was more successful as an 'operator' at the regional level (and thus more successful in the Senate) – at least until spring 1998 – by cleverly supporting and co-opting certain candidates for governorships, sometimes incumbents, sometimes main opponents, some of whom were and some of whom were not formal members of NDR, but close enough to warrant the investment.⁸

The KPRF and its allies as well as Grigorii Iavlinskii's social-liberal party *Iabloko* were highly critical of the government, of Chernomyrdin, whom they considered a proxy for the president. NDR was less of a governmental party than a 'presidential party by proxy'. In this respect the NDR was, one could say, the electoral branch of the *real* party of power.⁹

Quite interesting and revealing was an interview with Vladimir Ryzhkov, the deputy head of the NDR fraction in the State Duma, conducted in July 1997 by Nikolai Zlobin, executive editor of *Demokratizatsiya* (Zlobin 1998). After Ryzhkov had stated that NDR would support "a single candidate from the parties of power" in the next presidential elections and had furthermore stated that this candidate would definitely be from NDR, Zlobin went on to ask:

Demokratizatsiya: Will it be Viktor Chernomyrdin?

Ryzhkov: Why not? We think it is conceivable that Viktor Chernomyrdin can be the most acceptable candidate for all the democratic forces.

Demokratizatsiya: Will it be his personal decision? Or will it be the decision of the Our Home Is Russia leadership?

Ryzhkov: It will be neither his decision nor the decision of our leadership. It should be the decision of the current ruling elite. It should be the decision of the president himself. It should be the decision of the leaders of the financial and banking structures, and the leaders of industrial circles as well as leading political figures in the right wing.

Demokratizatsiya: I did not understand clearly. How can the president affect this kind of decision?

Ryzhkov: The president of Russia can affect all of the decisions.

Demokratizatsiya: Yes, I understand this, but I thought that Our Home Is Russia is independent or at least pretending to be independent from President Yeltsin.

Ryzhkov: We are independent from the president, but we always take into account his position, hearing his opinion and will do so in the future.

(Zlobin 1998: 120)

NDR was critically received by Russia's more independent media, which dubbed it the *partiia nachal'stva* (bosses' party). As Vera Selivanova (1995: 3) observed in the daily *Segodnia*, NDR was presented as an effort to "politicise government". The actual result, however, was that politics – at least within the spheres of NDR – was put under "unrestricted control of the apparatus." Several occasions have been reported where NDR's regional leadership abused its position to mobilize support.¹⁰ NDR was created at a time when the regime, facing a ballot by an 'unsympathetic' electorate, was under threat. Loyalty to NDR was probably more of an expression of the nomenclature's desire to survive, than of submission to the mercy of the voter.

In March 1998, Viktor Chernomyrdin was dismissed as prime minister by President El'tsin. The reasons given for Chernomyrdin's dismissal were that a new political-economic situation required a change at the helm of the cabinet and an overall change of government, and that Chernomyrdin, absolved from his duties as prime minister, could now devote himself to leading the political party NDR and prepare himself for the presidency. One could say that Chernomyrdin's dismissal was partly guised as a compliment: Chernomyrdin was publicly qualified as 'presidential material' by El'tsin. Doubts were immediately voiced about the sincerity of El'tsin's compliment. Indeed, to dismiss Chernomyrdin as prime minister was the worst way to 'help' Chernomyrdin, if El'tsin was serious in his attempt to support 'Chernomyrdin for President'. Deprived of his power-base, i.e., a senior post in the executive branch of government, Chernomyrdin lost the means to further his candidacy and lost his attraction as a potential winner in the presidential race. Who would jump on the bandwagon now? Quite a number

of politicians immediately started looking for a better place to go. With the dismissal of Chernomyrdin, NDR lost its halo as party of power and it was immediately apparent that Chernomyrdin's leadership of the NDR would also be contested.

Neither VR nor NDR were able to pose or operate as real governmental parties because the government serves 'at the president's request'. As Neil Robinson notes:

Neither Russia's Choice nor NDR represented the whole government, so that the commitment of government resources to them was not uncomplicated. In the case of Russia's Choice, access to resources was soon further limited because of its break with government. NDR has not suffered a similar fate as yet, although relations with the government are, according to Duma faction head Sergei Belyayev, strained by the "natural conflicts" that occur between a party and government and the need to stop being the "party of power" so as to become a party in some more "proper" sense of the word (1998: 173).

Kirienko's successor, Evgenii Primakov, was accepted as a qualified and experienced no-party prime minister by the State Duma, after the Duma (and the president) had eliminated Viktor Chernomyrdin once and for all.¹¹ As prime minister, Primakov repeated time and again that he did not aspire to become president and that he had reluctantly accepted the heavy duty and responsibility of being prime minister, because he was called upon to serve his country in this capacity and he was devoted to his country. While serving as prime ministers, neither Kirienko nor Primakov tried to organize an electoral party. Kirienko served less than five months, Primakov about as long, and Sergei Stepashin, Primakov's successor, was not given much time either.¹² In summer 1999 Stepashin had to make way for Vladimir Putin.

3.3 'Fatherland' and 'All Russia'

After the 1995 Duma elections, the Russian Federation's political centre, the Kremlin, continued to experience difficulties in establishing its grip over the vast and differentiated country. Meanwhile, the leaders of its 89 constituent 'subjects' (i.e., republics, regions, provinces, and the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg) became more dominant players. Before December 1995, many of them owed their position to the president, which assured the Kremlin of their loyalty. Thereafter, all of the regional executives had become elected, rather than appointed, leaders. This independence was reflected, inter alia, in the regional leaders' autonomous – and more diverging – stance at home and in the Senate. Russia's regions were to become an important focal point for party construction.

By the time it had become clear that El'tsin would not try to obtain a new (third) term as president, Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov started preparing his bid for the succession. At the end of 1998, he launched his own party, 'Fatherland' (*Otechestvo*). This patriotic label was to serve in the December 1999 State Duma elections, and, more importantly, the presidential elections scheduled for June–July 2000. At the outset, Fatherland seemed well equipped to become NDR's successor as the new party of power. Being the unchallenged leader, the 'boss', of Moscow, one of the most influential and prosperous of Russia's regions, Luzhkov could dispose over a power base that was close to Russia's centre, yet autonomous.

At about the same time, in the absence of a federal party of power, provincial leaders (gubernatori) and presidents of RF republics, most prominent among whom were Tatarstan's president Mintimer Shaimiev and St. Petersburg's governor Vladimir Iakovlev, also set out to prepare themselves for future, federal elections, organizing 'All Russia' (*Vsia Rossiia*).

Both 'Fatherland' and 'All Russia' set out to rally the support of Russia's regional leaders. Eventually, they teamed up in the tandem 'Fatherland – All Russia' (*Otechestvo-Vsia Rossiia*, OVR), with Luzhkov as an undeclared candidate for the 2000 presidential elections. Luzhkov himself never declared he would be a candidate for presidency of the Russian Federation (although no one doubted his ambition in this direction), maintaining that he would support a candidate for presidency worthy of his support, if such a candidate should present himself. Later, Luzhkov made it clear that Primakov was the (only) candidate he would step aside for and would support. Primakov did well during his short tenure as prime minister, at least in that he scored very well in polls as the most trusted and most respected federal politician. As long as he was prime minister, Primakov maintained his posture as a non-party politician, being first and foremost a statesman. After his dismissal from the position of prime minister, Primakov teamed up with – but did not subordinate to – the OVR alliance. He did not – at least not until November 1999, as we write – declare his willingness to participate in the presidential elections. One might conclude, nevertheless, that Primakov saw in OVR his main support group for the presidential race.

Locally, major leaders like Luzhkov and Shaimiev have – or rather are – their own parties of power. Ideologically there is no difference between NDR and OVR; OVR simply appears to have more of a future and provides for a possibility to by-pass NDR leaders, who now could only hamper the 'new' aspirants. Shaimiev, who was not only the president of the Republic of Tatarstan, but also the main political and administrative force in 'his' republic, had delivered a pro-El'tsin vote by the majority of 'his' citizens-subjects in the second round of the 1996 presidential elections. That he could and did 'deliver' to the president made him useful to El'tsin to the extent that it freed Shaimiev from

any possible desire of the central authorities, notably the president of the Russian Federation, to interfere with Shaimiev's rule in 'his own' republic. Shaimiev is now undoubtedly trying to recreate this very same condition of freedom from interference by the Federal president, conditional upon his ability to 'deliver' the Tatarstan vote, by joining the party that is expected to 'produce' the next president of the RF.

In fact, OVR is a party of executives, preparing for the election of the highest executive, the president, which is clear also from the fact that none of the three leaders of OVR, Luzhkov, Shaimiev and Iakovlev, will take a seat in the State Duma. Shaimiev will remain Tatarstan's president; Luzhkov mayor of Moscow (he is the main candidate for the Moscow mayoral elections also to take place on 19 December 1999), and Iakovlev of Petersburg. Thus, the three leaders of the 'parliamentary party' of the OVR, will not give up their high executive office, which, moreover, includes membership of Russia's Federation Council.

3.4 Unity

OVR's claim to the status of party of power did not remain unchallenged. El'tsin and his entourage apparently felt uncomfortable about the efforts by Luzhkov and his regional colleagues at party building. In September 1999, with only a few months to go until the Duma ballot, a new block was launched. This block, 'Unity' (*Edinstvo*),¹³ was to neutralize OVR, to beat it by employing the same weapons. Like OVR, Unity attempted to organize regional (executive) leaders – those who had not joined OVR – as well as to convert those who had pledged allegiance to Luzhkov. Unlike OVR, the new block had a leader who was associated with the central government, the relatively unknown emergencies minister Sergei Shoigu.

The foundations for Unity were laid in the Council of the Federation. In September 1999, a group of 39 senators signed a joint declaration in which they expressed their concern with the "political hysteria", "demagoguery" and "dirty games" that surrounded the Duma election campaign. The senators offered to counterbalance this by using their "power, experience and authority", to ensure that the next parliament would be filled with "honest and responsible" deputies (*Otdel'nov* 1999: 1). Unity's programme, in fact, was hardly more than a declaration of support for the current government, led by Vladimir Putin (*Grigor'eva* 1999: 3).

Putin, prime minister since August 1999, was presented upon his appointment to the people by president El'tsin as his successor. As we write these lines, Putin does not head a political party, like the erstwhile prime ministers Gaidar and Chernomyrdin did. But it appears that Putin, the Kremlin, and 'the

federal state' are trying to strengthen their grip on those major financial-industrial organizations in which the state still has an important stake and the help of which will be required to further the cause of 'Putin for president'. In turn, the prime minister, while trying to avoid becoming too closely involved in the Unity block, which may or may not succeed on 19 December 1999, has declared that he personally prefers Unity above all other parties.

4 Presidentship à la Russe

Why did El'tsin refrain from associating himself with any particular political party?

El'tsin had not become president of Russia as leader of a political party, as a presidential candidate put forward by political parties; he had been elected president of Russia before the Soviet Union collapsed and was accepted as the (informal) leader of a reform movement. He relied on his position as head of state to maintain and strengthen his position of power within the newly independent Russian Federation. In fact, El'tsin's rise was closely connected with the demise of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a process to which he contributed.

El'tsin accepted the idea – and endorsed the ideal – of a separation of powers, but only a separation of powers *under* a strengthened presidency. He heads one of the branches of power, the executive, as distinct from judicial and (formal) legislative power, but is at the same time, as president, the 'guarantor' of the Constitution and claims a position as sole representative of 'the people's will'.

As a non-party leader it is easier for El'tsin to uphold the idea that he is above politics, above political strife. He acts as an 'elected monarch'. The effect is that there are more court-politics in Russia than one could expect to see in a genuine republic. Whatever power struggle may unfold, as long as those involved are not 'rocking the boat', the president can play his favourite role of arbiter (*Shevtsova* 1997: 4). El'tsin has proven to be sensitive to the popular sentiment, which displays a deep distrust of the institution of the political party (see, for example, *White et al.* 1997: 137). The result is also that real political parties are less important than they could be and possibly should be in a genuine republic. What counts is being 'close to the king', close to the court. Being successful as a party or as a party-leader does not necessarily give access to the 'real locus of power'. Access to the real locus of power may be provided by physical closeness to those in power – as an assistant, a bodyguard, a relative – or knowing people who know people who have close contacts and can intermediate offers of support (of very different kinds) to those in power. The 'real party of power' is formed by the more or less closely-knit group that has access to (those who have access to) 'the throne'. The

'real party of power' is not per se a registered, formal organization, but it can and does (help) set up formal organizations, such as political parties, if the need arises.¹⁴

5 The party of power – not (yet) the party of the state

The party of power is thus not simply a party, i.e., it is not an organization that selects and presents candidates for elections of state-functionaries and people's representatives. Such an organization – this 'function' of the party of power, is merely the manifestation of the party of power as it participates in the electoral process. Indeed, as we have seen above, it is in the run-up to important elections that the party of power teams up in ad hoc blocs, to form constructions that are according to the political need of the moment, and – to some extent – to the perceived mood of the electorate.

It is true that in some respects the *partiiia vlasti* does mimic an 'ordinary' party, claiming to be firmly rooted in society. In reality, its organization is fluid at best, and its structure is, in Duverger's (1959) terms, indirect, rather than direct. Rank-and-file membership and grassroots links are not particularly relevant to its functioning, and perceived as superfluous when it comes to contesting elections.

A party of power is not simply a governmental party either, i.e., it is not just an organization set up from within the government with special financial and organisational support from the government (or its apparatus) to win seats in elected bodies to help support the incumbent government.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the central party of power is associated with, and gathers around, offices in the president's apparatus and holders of office appointed by the president. The party of power is located around the president, but not necessarily headed by the president. Attempts have been made to organize parliamentary support by setting up and/or facilitating electoral parties supportive of the president and the government of the time; the president himself, however, stayed aloof and was never a member of these governmental parties. He expected his 'second-in-command' and others to help arrange parliamentary support for him. At the level of the subjects of the Federation this central arrangement is often repeated, although with interesting variations. Executive/presidential power at the regional level is also highly *personal*, with private/corporate and state institutions and private/corporate and state personnel providing the instruments of power, *bypassing* electoral parties. In other words, electoral parties are used as (ad hoc) instruments to gain, maintain or extend personal/state power; 'parties of power' are not supposed to structure policies or to limit the liberty of the 'first man' to act as he deems fit.

So far in Russia, no 'party of power' has attained its (implicit) goal of becoming a 'party of the state', as was defined by Paul Cammack (1998: 258):

a political part (or coalition of parties) that is subordinated to the executive in that it endorses and promotes the programme of the executive, rather than generating the programme to which the executive adheres and which builds political support for the government by administering or directly benefiting from the systemic orchestration of clientelism by the state.

Such a party of the state "not only enjoys de facto competitive advantage over other parties, but is known to enjoy such an advantage and makes explicit use of it in campaigning for the vote" (Cammack 1998: 258).

The parties of power share their leaders' fate. They are instruments of incumbents, vehicles for rallying electoral support for re-election or for election into other, higher offices. Incumbents are here to be understood as politicians holding office in the executive branch, at federal level, or branches, if one takes the 'territorial-administrative units' into account. Major parties in the legislative branches of government (be these the State Duma or their equivalents at the regional level) do not make, by and of themselves, parties of power. Parties of power are set up by political personalities holding office, i.e., personalities with positions in the executive branch, and these parties share the politicians' fate. A failed party of power is no longer a serious party and is also, therefore, no longer a serious contestant in the election game: it fades away. Such was the fate of VR and of NDR, and of other (local) attempts at parties of power. Parties of power are bandwagon parties in that the expectation of its success appears to be a major if not the major attraction of such a party for both minor politicians and (other) political brokers, i.e., 'people of power' (e.g., influential businessmen, managers of major companies) who can help rally and who can help 'organize' electoral support.

The paradox of the party of power is that a durably successful party of power may, no will, entail the end of democracy. On the other hand, the limited success of the party of power, its lack of durability, may be hazardous for a democratic system too. First, the fluency of the political party-spectrum does not help to install processes of party-identification: citizens are not committed to their political preference other than as voters and vice versa. Parties of power are non-committal in that they can – and are – discarded if they fail to serve the leading politicians in the way and to the extent that the politicians had hoped. Parties of power serve office seekers. The office-seeking element in Russian politics strengthens citizen's already quite cynical attitude towards political parties and politicians. The way politicians party hop may cause voters to turn away from the electoral game altogether. Moreover, parties of power do not educate young politicians, they do not recruit politically active and interested citizens. Parties of power teach aspiring young politicians another

lesson: get yourself into a position within the executive branch (go for power, show loyalty when and to whom loyalty is required), and then if need arises set up your own party or seek party cover, dump that party - discard your commitments - when furthering your career appears to require this.

The electoral branches of the parties of power as we have described them, can be qualified as *attempts at forming 'parties of the state'*. These parties of power, however, have never succeeded in encompassing the state as a whole, not even as enduring coalitions of central and local political 'grand men'. In Russia, and many other successor-states to the Soviet Union, the state itself, a central or centralizing institution, is too weak to support a state-encompassing 'party of the state'. Moreover, until now, major political leaders - at least those major political leaders who are trying to distance themselves from the 'traditional left' - have shown 'abhorrence' from 'party-ism'. The 'idea' of 'party' has indeed been very unpopular among the electorate at large, with exception of those adhering to organizations of the 'traditional left'. The 'idea of party', has been dominated by the experience with the Soviet Communist Party as the party. In the future a (re-constituted) party of power in Russia may partly succeed to transform and extend itself into a 'party of the state' - producing in the meantime, we fear, not a liberal democracy, not a state-managed democracy, but yet another pseudo-democracy.

6 Concluding remarks

The 'party of power' in Russia does not fit well within the known concepts for categorizing political parties. The party of power is both more and less than an 'ordinary' political party. Richard Sakwa's definition of the party of power as the 'party in government' is inadequate. No electoral party in the Russian Federation has ever been 'in government'.

As an electoral party, the 'party of power' is characterized by its modular set-up. It is an assembly, a line-up, of major personalities holding office in the executive branch of government. It is the very opposite of a grass-roots organization. As an electoral party it is at the same time highly dependent upon the bandwagon effect, or better still: its halo, as (the electoral branch of) the future 'powers that (will) be'. It is powerful for as long as it radiates power. Its major attraction for office-holders and for people of power in the economic, including the financial, world is that it promises participation in or at least close contact with the (future) executive branch of power, more specifically with the president. The president is not 'merely' the head of the federal executive branch of government, but the apex of the overall power hierarchy. The president of the Russian Federation both partakes in and stands above the separation of powers.

We appear to differ from Sergei Khenkin in that we do not conjecture that there is 'a single ruling stratum' whose position of power is, as it were, uncontested. Elections, including State Duma elections, are important. State Duma elections are important, not because the council of ministers and the president of the Russian Federation are directly dependent upon the State Duma, nor because the council of ministers directly reflects the 'correlation of forces' in the State Duma, but because a dominantly oppositionist State Duma can still be a nuisance to the government by producing at least some countervailing power.

Attempts by parties of power that have presented themselves as electoral parties to dominate the State Duma have, to date, failed. As we write these words, November 1999, it seems unlikely that either of the two parties (Fatherland-All Russia and Unity), which want to present themselves as (the electoral branches of) the party of power in the December 1999 State Duma elections, will succeed in securing dominance in parliament. This failure is a sign of hope for democracy within a setting of countervailing powers and probably for democracy as such in Russia.

Postscript

Since this article was submitted, the Russians have elected both a new parliament and a new president. We now know that the presidential election merely confirmed the status quo that arose at the turn of the century. As the reader will undoubtedly recall, Boris El'tsin stepped down as president on 31 December 1999, six months before his term in office was to expire. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin became 'acting president' ex officio (and remained head of the government). Thus, he entered the presidential race as the incumbent. This was, of course, a far greater asset to Putin than the outspoken support of El'tsin and his entourage in the previous months.

What is more, Putin was already enormously popular on the eve of the State Duma elections. Although he was unknown among the electorate at large when he was appointed prime minister in August 1999, his popularity rose sharply during his first months in office, probably for two reasons. Every prime minister before him - Stepashin, Primakov, and even the young and unknown Kirienko - had seen a rise in public approval after their appointment as prime minister. Every articulate person in the position of prime minister shone brightly compared to the chronically ill and wily El'tsin. The second reason was the credit Putin gained by taking charge of the war against the 'Chechen bandits', and the successes he could claim in this war were in stark contrast to Russia's dismal performance in the 1994-1996 war in the maverick republic.

The elections to the State Duma, held on 19 December 2000, were in some respects a replication of the two previous elections. Again, a great number of parties and electoral associations tried their luck. Again, only a few of them were successful: 6 out of 26 cleared the 5 per cent threshold in the party list vote. The KPRF maintained its position as the largest faction: the communists won 113 seats. Within the reform-minded sector, Iabloko got its traditional share of about 7 percent of the party-list vote (16 seats) and only a few single-member districts (4). The heir to Russia's (Democratic) Choice, the Union of Right Forces (Soiuz pravykh sil), did slightly better with 29 seats. Just as in the 1993 and 1995 parliamentary elections, independent deputies conquered half of the single-member districts (106).

At the same time, the December 1999 elections marked a break with the past. This time, the electoral 'party of power' secured a substantial share of the Duma seats. The newcomer Unity surprisingly finished in second place, remarkably close to the communists. Its pro-government programme and the declared support of – and for – the popular prime minister and acting president Putin, brought the block 106 seats. The Unity faction grew considerably once the Duma started its work. Both independent deputies, elected in the single-member districts, and representatives from 'rival' factions, joined the Unity faction. Judging from words and deeds of Unity's leadership, this faction will be the president's and the government's reliable ally in the Duma. Given Unity's size, and the possibility to coalesce with the 'satellite' faction of the Union of Right Forces and like-minded deputies, the 1999 Duma is a legislature that El'tsin could only have dreamt of. Boris Gryzlov, leader of the Unity faction, concluded that the 'partii vlasti' epithet and its unambiguous pro-government stance had helped his block in the electoral campaign (Grigor'eva 2000:1). Apparently this label, which once bore a negative connotation and which was applied by one's opponents, had now become an honorary title.

The OVR alliance left the electoral battle frustrated. The Primakov-Luzhkov-Iakovlev block secured only 67 seats. This was a disappointing performance, considering OVR's ambitions to first obtain a pivotal position within parliament, and then to become a vehicle for its own presidential candidate. Many of OVR's prominent members turned their backs on OVR. Among the first of them was its co-founder Shaimiev, who did not await the official results of the ballot and declared his loyalty to acting president Putin. Shaimiev hinted that Vsiia Rossiia perhaps would form a faction on its own, closer to Unity. Many other regional leaders followed in Shaimiev's footsteps and made their overture to acting president Putin. The Kremlin's strategy to confront the OVR bosses with its own 'party of power' – in addition to an unprecedented slander campaign against (primarily) Moscow mayor Luzhkov – had worked.

Of course, the gamble would have been avoided, if possible. In an interview to the daily *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, Sergei Stepashin shed some light on the

mechanism of party formation from above. Asked whether his failure to prevent OVR from forming a pre-electoral coalition was among the reasons for his dismissal, Stepashin replied:

I worked actively to create a so-called party of power and even proposed a name for it: 'the governors' club'. And I succeeded in getting the support of about fifty leaders of the subjects of the federation. However, on 9 August I had to resign, and my idea did not materialise. But the OVR block might as well have not existed at all (Pravosudov 2000: 1).

The governors, according to Stepashin, made their support conditional upon the premier's prospects in power. They were "prepared to organise themselves under Stepashin", but their question was: "will he remain prime minister for a long time?" (Pravosudov 2000:1).

Stepashin himself showed that loyalty in Russian politics is primarily a matter of siding with the winners. He had been co-opted by Iabloko during the State Duma election campaign. Once elected, however, he distanced himself from the Iabloko faction. Iabloko was not in a position to deliver him, after all a former premier, much more than a Duma seat. The chairmanship of the Duma, or any other key position, appeared to be out of reach (considering the compromise between the KPRF and Unity on this matter). Stepashin stated that he, in fact, was not, and had never been, a member of that party. He even expressed his preference for Putin's candidacy for the presidency, instead of Iabloko's candidate Grigorii Iavlinskii.

The 1995 edition of the 'party of power', NDR, was obliterated altogether. During the run-up to the Duma ballot, it had left its members and voters uncertain as to its strategy for the elections and its future in general. Would the movement participate on its own title, or under the flag of Unity? In the end, NDR chose the first alternative. The movement did not manage to pass the 5% barrier; only 7 of its district candidates got elected. Commenting later to his movement's demise, NDR leader Chernomyrdin said: "Our biggest mistake was that we started to build our house from the roof [krysha], and not from the foundation (Andrusenko 2000a:1)

At the end of February 2000, Unity staged a large-scale conference. Its goal was to formalize the transformation from (ad hoc) electoral bloc to (permanent) movement. In addition, it was to confirm deputy prime minister Sergei Shoigu as its leader and Vladimir Putin as its preferred candidate in the upcoming presidential elections.

In his address to the delegates, Unity's leader Shoigu outlined the movement's ambitions for the future. Since the defeat of OVR, Unity was the dominant representative of the party of power in parliament. The success at the recent Duma elections – and the subsequent influx of supporters – had shown that the movement was bound to become a powerful structure,

claiming the role of 'national political party'. Shoigu cited two models for Unity's further development: 'the party of Charles de Gaulle and the Liberal-Democratic Party of Japan'. Former president El'tsin had neglected 'party construction'. The result was that politics in Russia took place within closed 'castes' and rested only on the state apparatus. Shoigu called upon Putin to break with this practice: "Vladimir Vladimirovich! We should not miss this opportunity. The head of the state should rely on the party of power" (Andusenko 2000b:1).

Putin's response to Shoigu was rather careful. On the one hand, Putin once more declared that he supported Unity. He encouraged the block to strengthen its organizational base, so that it could become a counterweight to the KPRF, in his view still the only 'system-forming (sistemoobrazuiushchaia) party'. He did not, however, express his preference for a two-party system (or for any other configuration of the political landscape) as El'tsin had done previously.

On the other hand, Putin made clear to the Unity delegates that he would not give up his independence. He sung El'tsin's old tune that the president should rely on broad political forces (and indeed, Unity was not the only party that supported his presidential campaign). Therefore, he refrained from joining Unity. Putin warned the delegates, that "our parties of power have always turned into parties of bureaucrats. That is a mistake", and that "one of the main problems of Russia today, in the economy as well as in politics, are the people who lean against (prisoniaiuksia) power (Andrusenko 2000b:1). Thus, the designated president kept a distance.

On 26 March 2000, Vladimir Putin received his mandate. It took him only one round to defeat his opponents. Putin, relying on the benefits of his incumbency, rather than engaging in obvious campaigning, received almost 53 per cent of the vote. KPRF leader Ziuganov trailed behind with almost 30 per cent. Iabloko's Grigorii Iavlinskii (with almost 6 per cent) and nine other candidates played a marginal role in the contest for the presidency.

As to the phenomenon of the 'party of power' in Russia, two scenarios, we think, are possible. Either the 'party of power' will remain essentially unchanged, or the 'party of power' will be transformed into a 'permanent' party of the state.

To the first option, it is quite feasible that the present 'party of power' will not be consolidated. Putin has become president not as the leader of a political party. He has signalled that he deems it unbecoming to a president to accept the leadership of one particular 'real' political party. Like his predecessor in office, Putin is likely to consider partisanship an unwanted and unnecessary impediment to the free exercise of his presidential powers. He has already shown that he can profit from the support of several political parties, blocks and social organizations, if the need arises. In the daily management of state affairs, Putin might just as well continue to rely on channels within

Russia's various bureaucracies.

For the 'party of power', then, there will not be a particularly strong incentive to further its partisan basis. It will undoubtedly manifest itself at the polls to come, but in the same volatile fashion as before. Electoral parties of power, more or less reflecting the views and aspirations of people in executive power, will come and go. (The attempt at the presentation of a party of power from outside the Kremlin, such as OVR, can be contributed to the specific circumstances of having a president at the end of his final term, who was thought to have lost control.) Russia, in this scenario, may be in for a continuation of its recent party history. The people in executive power, or rather the people partaking in the president's (executive) power, may change, and so may their preferred electoral outlook. And as far as local parties of power are concerned: the story remains much the same.

As far as the second option is concerned, never in Russia's recent history has an electoral 'party of power' been so successful as Unity. Moreover, Putin's victory in the presidential elections was devastating, one could say. His competitors were overpowered to such an extent, that it will be hard for any of them to come back and try again. Whether president Putin accepts the formal leadership of the electoral branch of the 'party of power', is hardly the issue. Important is that he will use his state-executive powers to order the consolidation of that party. This party will be characterized by an increasing connectedness to state-office (which applies both to elected and non-elected positions). Party and state will be joined in such a way that it will be very difficult for any oppositional party to gain access to executive power. Only one party functions as a channel of recruitment to (high) office; and vice versa: state functionaries will be required to pledge allegiance, and offer services, to this party. The 'party of power' develops into a party of the state. As such, it becomes a cartel on its own.

It is our opinion that the first scenario is most likely to materialize.

Notes

1. Duverger defined cadre parties as a "grouping of notabilities for the preparation of elections, conducting campaigns and maintaining contact with the candidates." He characterized their organization as "decentralized and weakly knit." Mass parties, on the other hand, are based on membership. Their members provide a source of income, serve as a pool of labour that can be used for campaigning and as the basis for spreading and promoting its ideology (Duverger 1959: 64-67).

2. The 'catch-all party' developed in response to changing circumstances such as the eroding of traditional social boundaries, the resulting weakening of collective identities, economic growth and building of welfare states, and the growing importance of mass media in politics. The "catch-all party's" main characteristics are:

a “drastic reduction of the party’s ideological baggage”; a “further strengthening of top leadership groups”; a “downgrading of the role of the individual party member”; a “de-emphasis of the *classe gardée*”; and a process of “securing access to a variety of interest groups” (Kirchheimer 1966: pp. 190).

3. Richard Katz and Peter Mair argued that the traditional civil society-party-state distinction, which underlies most typologies, is no longer adequate, and as a result the need arose for a new type of party: “... the state, which is invaded by parties, and the rules of which are determined by the parties, becomes a fount of resources through which these parties not only help to ensure their own survival, but through which they can also enhance their capacity to resist challenges from newly mobilized alternatives. The state, in this sense, becomes an institutionalized structure of support, sustaining insiders while excluding outsiders. No longer simple brokers between civil society and the state, the parties now become adsorbed by the state” (Mair & Katz 1997: 106).

4. Throughout the text, Russian names and terms are transliterated according to the Library of Congress scheme (slightly adapted for typographical purposes). We have chosen to apply this scheme consistently. This means that in a limited number of cases, familiar names will appear in an unfamiliar spelling (e.g. ‘El’tsin’ for ‘Yeltsin’).

5. We do not know when the term was coined for the first time. Early references include, Malkina & Todres (1992: 2) and Gel’man (1993: 2).

6. As to the (non-)engagement of the presidential administration in the election campaign, see the interview with Filatov (1995), chief of the Presidential Administration. On p. 9, Filatov says that the administration of the President does not engage in the election campaign, but goes on to say on p. 10 that “we coordinate, facilitate.”

7. Part of the answer supposedly would be that it was envisaged that in single-member constituencies both parties would support those candidates (from either of the two blocks or parties) who had the best chance of winning the seat. (See also Abramov & Golovina 1996: 267-302). This, of course, would seriously undermine the notion of one ‘ruling’ party and one ‘oppositionist’ party. The ‘two-party-scheme’ gets blurred into a ‘one party with two party-labels scheme’.

8. At least this was the case until spring 1998, when some governors started to distance themselves from either Chernomyrdin as the leader of NDR (e.g., Samara Governor Konstantin Titov), or from NDR itself (e.g., Saratov Governor Dmitrii Aiatskov). Chernomyrdin’s dismissal as prime minister in March 1998 and El’tsin’s failed attempt to have Chernomyrdin reinstated as prime minister in September 1998 after the dismissal of ‘interim’ prime minister Sergei Kirienko in August 1998 probably did a lot to weaken NDR as a political force.

9. Cf. Korgonuiuk (1998): “[I]n reality NDR is not an independent public political organization but simply an appendage to the real ‘party of power’, a role successfully played by the executive branch of the government. Therefore, NDR’s regional branches are at the complete mercy of local authorities. Those regional organizations that enjoy the support of the local governor fare best.”

10. Tarasov (1995), for example, tells the story of the village of Krasnokamensk, which depends entirely upon its (bankrupt) mine. The employees were told by the

mine directors to join NDR, as this party could help them, provided that they would help NDR too.

11. In an unanticipated move, El’tsin nominated Chernomyrdin to succeed Kirienko. The State Duma turned down his candidacy twice, after which El’tsin choose to drop Chernomyrdin as his candidate and changed over to Primakov, as was suggested by Iavlinskii’s *Iabloko*. On previous occasions, El’tsin had taken a more provocative stance towards the Duma, by nominating the same candidate a second and even a third time, putting the Duma under pressure of dismissal if it should vote the candidate down a third time.

12. Two weeks after El’tsin’s resignation, Stepashin revealed in an interview that he had never had high expectations as to the duration of his tenure. Stepashin recalled: “When I was appointed, it was a strange situation. Initially, they wanted to make Aksenenko prime minister, but, as it turned out, I was appointed. I was told: ‘You will be chairman of the government, later on, Aksenenko will replace you. Or perhaps he will not’” (Pravosudov 2000:1).

13. The full name of the block is ‘Interregional Movement Unity’ (*Mezbrezional’noe dvizhenie Edinstvo*), which shortens to the Russian acronym *Medved* (Bear).

14. The concept of ‘party of power’ is often used to refer to the head of the executive branch at the level of the Russian Federation, while regional leaders, i.e., ‘leaders of local executive power’ are often perceived to partake in that power structure. E.g., when the incumbent ‘leaders of local executive power’ of three ‘subjects of the Federation’ (Kareliia, Krasnoiarskii krai, and Smolenskii oblast’) lost the elections in May 1998, *Izvestiia* opened its front page with ‘Partiia vlasti proigrala vchistuiu’ (The party of power finally lost), stating that:

Voters did not vote for or against specific candidates. They expressed their discontent with the vested political and power structure in the country. The voters did not vote against V. Zubov or V. Stepanov. They voted against B. E’ltsin. ... The results of the elections – especially in the krai of Krasnoiarsk [where A. Lebed’ became the governor – O&V], a donor-region traditionally supportive of the president – show that the party of power is no longer able to effectively control the development of the political situation in the country as a whole.

To which the paper adds that: “The party of power (“vlastnaia partiia”) itself has split a long time ago. In any case one of its founders, B. Berezovskii, openly supported the oppositionist A. Lebed’” (Chugaev 1998: 1).

There is some truth in Liliia Shevtsova’s statement that the concept of a ‘party of power’ has a mythical element to it. To be precise, she called the ‘party of power’ a myth outright, although in the very same article she used the concept without irony to refer to a group of people close to the president, who have been of great use to the president. The paragraph in which she dismisses the ‘party of power’ as a myth reads:

The choice of means in our politics is extremely poor, and that forces the actors to maintain several myths as a form of political influence. One of those is the myth of the existence in Russia of a “party of power”. There is no such thing, as there is no clear opposition to the regime either (Shevtsova 1998: 4).

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