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Russians and Their Party System

STEPHEN WHITE

Abstract: There are different views about the place of political parties in post-communist Russian politics. However, levels of trust and partisan identification are low, although much depends on the wording of the question and the timing of the survey. Levels of party membership are also low, at approximately 1 percent of the adult population in the author's 2005 survey. Focus groups conducted immediately after the December 2003 and March 2004 elections confirm the gulf that exists between ordinary Russians and the political parties, and the negligible presence of political parties in much of the country. The heavy influence of the regime itself on Russian party politics has made them a part of Putin's "managed democracy." As long as this is the case, authentic citizen politics is unlikely to develop.

Key words: disengagement, parties, Russia

“No bourgeois, no democracy,” observed Barrington Moore. He might just as well have said “no parties, no democracy.” No other mechanism has yet been found for aggregating the preferences of citizens, expressing them in the form of a government program, and providing a team to carry them out. More generally, parties help to engage citizens in the political process on a continuing basis. They provide a form of political education, often including the daily press, and sometimes they provide a wider network of social activities, including youth movements, sporting societies, and holiday arrangements. In the largest sense of all, they provide for the accountability of government by allowing voters to pass judgement on the performance of an outgoing team and, when they think it appropriate, to “throw the rascals out.”¹

There has been little consensus about the extent to which Russian parties fulfill these various requirements. American scholars usually have been minimalists,

Stephen White is professor of international politics at the University of Glasgow and a senior associate of its School of Central and East European Studies. A former president of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies and chief editor of the *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, his recent books include *Post-communist Belarus* (coedited, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005) and *Developments in Russian Politics 6* (coedited, Palgrave and Duke University Press, 2005). Copyright © 2006 Heldref Publications.

reflecting the nature of party politics in their own country—parties have identifiers rather than members, they are active during elections but not between them, and they raise money to buy advertising rather than rely on activists to appeal over the front doorstep. Europeans more often take a view that reflects their own experience of the mass party, a world of which the Russian Social Democrats (later the Bolsheviks and later still the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) were themselves a part before World War I. Both would agree, however, that parties are a central element in the forms of linkage that connect citizens and government, and that the extent to which a system of this kind has been formed in Russia is central to an evaluation of its postcommunist politics. Have Russians, a decade or more after the demise of the Soviet Union, overcome their antipathy to “the party” and become citizens rather than subjects? Or do they have what has been described as a floating party system, characterized by high levels of turnover, or a client party system, dominated by the Kremlin itself?²

In this article, I first consider some of the aggregate evidence that relates to these questions, drawing on a national representative survey conducted in the first half of 2005. Second, I draw on a series of focus group discussions that took place immediately after the December 2003 Duma and March 2004 presidential elections, which were intended to move beyond tick-box responses to the complexity of attitudes that relate voters and nonvoters to the parties and candidates that appeal for their support (further details are provided in the appendix). I look first at the nature of the support that Russians give—or fail to give—to their political parties, using survey evidence. Then, I turn to electors themselves. Survey evidence can tell us if individual perceptions are representative of a wider universe, but only qualitative evidence can provide us with the experience of ordinary members of the society in their own words rather than those of an outsider’s questionnaire. Exploring the ambiguities of Russian attitudes toward political parties, both are required.

Dimensions of Party Support

One direct measure of the place of parties in the Russian system is the extent to which citizens are willing to trust them as compared with other institutions. The national opinion research center has asked questions of this kind since the early 1990s (see table 1). Consistently, the church and the armed forces have enjoyed the highest levels of public confidence. The presidency went through a bad patch in the later Yeltsin years, but then recovered strongly. Local government was typically more widely respected than the central government, and the media was more widely respected than the agencies of law enforcement, which were more often associated with corruption and mistreatment than with the administration of justice. Political parties, however, have consistently come at the bottom of the list, below even the parliament in which they are represented. Indeed, the only case in which political parties have not been the least trusted civic institution, outside of the later years of the Yeltsin presidency, appears to have been when respondents were asked to express their views about the investment funds that had (for the most part) defrauded ordinary citizens of the vouchers they had obtained as a result of the privatization of state property.³

TABLE 1. Trust in Parties and Other Institutions, 1995–2005

Institution	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
President	6	10	13	2	2	45	54	61	59	62	47
Church	37	39	38	32	37	39	38	40	37	41	41
Army	26	25	28	28	35	35	33	28	27	28	31
Media	23	26	26	24	25	26	24	23	22	26	24
Security organs	13	16	19	18	20	21	23	23	23	20	25
Regional government	9	11	20	15	19	20	22	19	13	19	17
Local government	13	14	23	18	22	19	21	21	15	18	14
Courts	9	10	13	12	11	12	14	16	13	13	15
Government	4	6	10	4	8	20	22	24	16	12	14
Trade unions	6	8	11	11	9	11	11	13	13	10	12
Parliament	4	5	7	7	4	10	11	11	9	9	10
Parties	n.d.	n.d.	4	4	4	7	6	7	5	5	5

Note. "Courts" from 1997 to 1999 refers to law enforcement generally (courts, police, and procuracy); references to "parliament" from 2001 are to the State Duma. Figures report percentages who "completely trust" a given institution.

Source. Derived from All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTsIOM) and (in 2004 and 2005) Levada Centre data as reported in *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya*, various issues.

A further set of questions has asked respondents at regular intervals to choose among the parties that are currently available, also allowing them to choose "none" or "hard to say" (table 2). The figures show the strong, but weakening, base of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation; a decline in popular support for the liberal Yabloko party, led by Grigory Yavlinsky; and a low, but more stable, level of support for the right-wing nationalist Liberal Democrats, led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. United Russia, the propresidential party established in late 2001, lost some of its support in 2003, but recovered strongly to win a third of the vote in the December 2003 election and by far the largest share of popular preferences a year later. Some of these variations stemmed from differences in question wording, and still more so from the changes that took place in the politicians that were identified as the party leader. (United Russia's vote seemed to fall as a direct result of the replacement of personable emergencies minister Sergei Shoigu by interior minister Boris Gryzlov.) These minor variations hardly diminish the most striking result of all, which is the large and growing proportion of the electorate who refuse to identify with any of the offered parties.

There have been different views about the extent to which partisan identifications have developed in postcommunist Russian politics. These variations stem, not least, from the different question wordings used, and from the different time periods in which surveys have been conducted (postelection surveys are particularly likely to blur the distinction between electoral support and deeper patterns of identification). Among the most optimistic assessments are those that have emanated from the University of Iowa, extending to Russia, Ukraine, and Lithuania. Respondents are asked if there is a particular party that "expresses your views better than any other party." If the answer is yes, the next question asks which party the respondent has in mind and how close the respondent feels to that party. On this basis, "survey data collected in 1992, 1995, and 1997 reveal a significant growth in party identification among elites and ordinary citizens."⁴ In Russia

TABLE 2. Party Preferences, 1995–2004 (percentages)

Political party	1995	1999	2001	2002	2003	2004
Communist Party	7	20	18	20	18	8
Liberal Democrats	8	6	5	6	8	6
Union of Right Forces		1	4	4	3	2
United Russia			12	13	8	24
Women of Russia	5	4	3	4	3	
Yabloko	8	10	5	4	5	2
None/DK	38	38	50	46	48	49

Source. Derived from *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya*, various issues (figures are normally for May in each year; residuals relate to other parties). The question wording was, "Which of the currently existing parties and associations to the greatest extent reflects the interests of people like you?"

TABLE 3. Political Party Memberships (selected parties, 2003)

Party (date of foundation)	Claimed membership	Party cards issued	Leader
Liberal Democratic Party (1990)	600,000	475,000	Vladimir Zhirinovskiy
Communist Party (1993)	500,000	500,000	Gennady Ziuganov
United Russia (2001)	257,000	50,000	Boris Gryzlov
Agrarian Party (1993)	100,000	100,000	Mikhail Lapshin
People's Party (2001)	81,400	64,000	Gennady Raikov
Party of Russia's Rebirth (2000)	40,000	n.a.	Gennady Seleznev
Social-Democratic Party (2001)	30,000	30,000	Mikhail Gorbachev
Yabloko (1993)	26,500	n.a.	Grigory Yavlinsky
Union of Right Forces (2001)	20,000	10,000	Boris Nemtsov
Party of Life (2002)	15,000	n.a.	Sergei Mironov

Source. Derived from *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, January 13, 2003, 1–2.

alone, party identification increased from 16 percent in 1992 to 52 percent in 1995 and then “skyrocketed” to 61 percent in 1997.⁵ The question assumes that at least one of the parties reflects the opinions of respondents, rather than asking whether any of the existing parties can do so. Responses may also have been raised by the decision to show respondents a list of parties from which to make their choice.⁶

Other studies asked somewhat different questions and came to rather different conclusions. White, Rose, and McAllister, for instance, speak of the “absence of party identification,” basing themselves on the low proportion—just 22 percent—that are prepared to “identify with any particular political party or movement.”⁷ Others have objected that this assumes respondents know what it means to “identify” in this way.⁸ In a study that extended across Russia and four other postcommunist states, Miller, White, and Heywood asked respondents if, “generally speaking,” they thought of themselves as a “supporter of any political party.” No more than 26 percent did so in Russia, a lower level than almost everywhere else in the region.⁹ In his examination of the 1995 and 1996 elections, Colton used another question entirely, asking respondents if they felt that any party or political movement was “my party, my movement, [or] my association.” This broadly-worded question might have been expected to draw a positive response from a wider constituency than those who associated themselves with a formally constituted party. Nonetheless, only 14 percent were “strong” and another 15 percent were “moderate partisans.” No other respondents were prepared to identify any of the parties or movements as “their own,” although a small proportion (20 percent) were prepared to

identify one of the parties or movements as more likely to reflect their "interests, views, and concerns" than the others.¹⁰

In a different survey in the first half of 2005, my associates and I asked if our Russian respondents "thought of [themselves] as a supporter of any of the political parties." Just under 20 percent said yes. We also asked if there was a "political party whose policies were closer to you than others." Somewhat more (just under 30 percent) said there was, but 61 percent indicated otherwise, and another 10 percent did not offer a response.¹¹ Others reported even lower levels of party identification—as low as 13 percent in one study, which was lower than elsewhere in the postcommunist world.¹² Measures of partisan identification have not been uncontroversial in the established democracies, and here also much depends on the wording of the question.¹³ When we have made all allowances, it remains difficult to contest that Russia has low levels of partisanship in broadly comparative terms, still more so when compared with established democracies, such as the United Kingdom (where 86 percent have some form of partisan identification) and the United States (where nearly 92 percent identify with either of the two main parties).¹⁴

Low levels of party identification are normally associated with high levels of electoral participation and other forms of volatility. Pedersen's study is perhaps the best-known measure of total net volatility;¹⁵ nonetheless, it has severe limitations in the context of postcommunist Russia. Most obviously, it can only be readily applied to the party-list contest for half of the seats in the Duma and not to the single-member constituencies, for which no party share of the vote is officially reported (nor would a figure be meaningful, as few of the listed parties in recent years have contested as many as half of the seats). The figures that emerge from an application of the Pedersen measure to the party-list vote, counting against all as another party, are very high in comparative terms, although they have been steadily falling: 9.4 in 1993, 9.3 in 1995, 6.8 in 1999, and 5.4 in 2003. It is reasonable to expect these levels to fall further, reflecting the Kremlin's attempts to model a more stable and coherent system, but it is unlikely for some time that they will approach the levels of the established democracies (if they do at all).

The Russian system is also characterized by a remarkably high level of split-ticket voting—three times higher than in an American presidential election.¹⁶ According to the survey evidence, just 23 percent of Russian voters in the 1995 Duma election opted for the same party in the party list and constituency contests; by contrast, 38 percent voted for a different party, and 39 percent probably did so or were unable to offer a response. Ticket splitting in Russia is more widespread than in other systems; indeed, it may attain the "highest levels. . . anywhere in the world." In the United States, only a quarter of voters divided their support during the 1980s, whereas three quarters voted a straight party ticket. The main explanation in the Russian case appears to be the motivation of individual voters, as a consequence of low levels of partisanship, rather than the opportunity structures provided by the political parties; although the electoral system also contributes by allowing two distinct and unrelated choices. The evidence suggests that ticket splitting of this kind is likely to remain a "key feature of the Russian electoral system"¹⁷ for some time.

A high level of volatility has not discouraged Russians from taking part in elections. Unlike the experience of most other European countries, there has been a net increase in turnout over the entire postcommunist period, although the trajectory by the end of the period was clearly downward. The lowest point to date was December 1993, when the ratification of the new constitution required a turnout of at least 50 percent of the electorate and 54 percent was officially declared (independent sources suggested the real figure had been lower, between 38 and 43 percent¹⁸). Elections to the Duma are valid if at least 25 percent of the electorate takes part, and this has never been in doubt (turnout increased to 64 percent in 1995 and 62 percent in 1999, but then fell back to 56 percent in 2003). A higher threshold of 50 percent is required in presidential elections, but this was easily satisfied when nearly 70 percent of the electorate turned out in the first round of the 1996 contest, 69 percent in the first and only round of the 2000 contest, and 64 percent in the first and only round in 2004.

In other respects, however, the presumption of volatility is entirely justified. In part, this simply reflects a high level of turnover in the parties themselves. In all, more than eighty parties or blocs contested at least one of the Duma elections between 1993 and 2003, but only three contested all four, and only two—the Liberal Democrats and the Communists—won party-list seats in each of them. (Yabloko, the third party to contest all of the postcommunist elections, fell below the threshold in 2003.) To put this another way, all of the parties or movements that contested the 1993 party-list election, taken together, won no more than 32 percent of the party-list vote in 2003 (only five of the original thirteen appeared on the ballot paper). Conversely, parties or blocs that had not contested a single previous election won nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the party-list vote in 2003. This included two of the four parties that reached the 5-percent threshold, which between them took almost two-thirds of the seats that were available for distribution on a party basis.

The individual-level evidence also suggests that there is a greater degree of change in party support than in the established democracies—even among the parties that are on the ballot paper in successive elections. The only party to retain even half of its 1993 vote in the Duma election two years later was the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which kept 68 percent of its earlier support. The two other parties that contested the 1993 election and secured at least 5 percent of the vote in 1995 were the Liberal Democratic Party, which retained 47 percent of its earlier support, and Yabloko, which retained 43 percent. At the other extreme, just 19 percent of Russia's Choice voters in 1993 opted for Russia's Democratic Choice two years later¹⁹ (the ephemeral nature of the parties makes such calculations problematic, even across two elections). A level of volatility of this kind points to a number of the distinctive features of postcommunist politics (not just in Russia), particularly in the fluidity of social structures, popular attitudes, and parties themselves, all of which make it difficult to sustain continuing patterns of support. As a consequence, the levels of volatility in postcommunist Russia are much greater than those in western Europe, and even greater than those in other European countries at the stage of development in which their party systems were taking shape.²⁰

Russians have also been reluctant to join parties. Overall, just over 1 percent of the adult population in our 2005 survey regarded themselves as a member of one or other of the political parties. This is compared with 3 percent who were members of a cultural society or a residential association, 6 percent who were in a sports club, and 12 percent who were members of a trade union. Comparatively considered, these are very low levels of membership (see table 3). The figures made available by the parties themselves vary widely and are often problematic. Indeed, there is some evidence that parties maintain three different lists of members: one for public consumption, another for the Ministry of Justice, and a third for internal use.²¹ The Liberal Democratic Party, for instance, told the Justice Ministry it had 19,100 members, but claimed 600,000 in its public statements. The Communist Party, similarly, claimed 19,300 in its registration documents, but 500,000 in its official statements. United Russia appeared to maintain a fourth column for reporting to its Kremlin masters (it had promised a million members by the end of 2002 but had fallen short). There were specialised firms available to take care of all of these arrangements for \$200,000, including a statute and members. Many of these parties were likely to secure fewer votes in national elections than the number of members they had nominally recruited.

Independent estimates suggest a variety of membership totals. The Communist Party, by general consent, has been the largest until recently, with between 500,000 and 800,000.²² It tended to have a more elderly membership than that of other parties, but was making considerable efforts to recruit from a younger age group. In the three years leading up to 2000, more than half of its new members were aged under thirty years, many of them students.²³ United Russia claimed a membership of 300,000 in early 2003, all of whom had been enrolled since its foundation at the end of 2001. By the start of 2005, it claimed a much larger total, as many as 880,000. By the spring of 2006, it claimed a much larger total, somewhat over a million.²⁴ There were reports, however, that many had been recruited in a somewhat “Soviet” manner, on the basis of a centrally organized campaign. In a shopping complex in the Moscow region, for instance, each retail unit had been ordered to provide two members; there had been similar instructions in a Tula armaments factory, and local employees in the town of Velikie Luki were being fired or had their wages withheld unless they took out membership.²⁵ There were also much smaller “divan parties,” although they could scarcely hope to register under the law on political parties and, as a result, would be unable to contest local or national elections.

Russian Parties: The View from Below

In the rest of this article, I move on from nationally representative survey findings to the perceptions of Russians themselves, expressed in their own words. It draws on a series of focus groups conducted in the immediate aftermath of the December 2003 and March 2004 elections in a variety of central Russian locations. Each focus group involved eight or nine participants, normally of working age (a student group met separately), meeting for approximately two hours under the guidance of a moderator and following a common list of questions. Focus

groups have been employed to a very limited extent in the study of postcommunist Russian politics, although, as Kruger noted, they “tap into the real-life interactions of people and allow the researcher to get in touch with participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and opinions in a way that other procedures do not allow,”²⁶ and they are particularly appropriate for identifying “‘why’ people think or feel the way they do,” especially on “controversial, sensitive, and complex topics.”²⁷ Ideally, they allow the representative qualities of surveys to be complemented by a richness that can only be provided by direct access to the frame of reference of those who are themselves the object of study.

Focus groups certainly confirm the gulf that has opened up between Russian parties and the citizens whose interests they claim to represent.²⁸ Andrei, a Voronezh teacher in his early fifties, acknowledged that parties and trade unions were the way in which ordinary people had traditionally sought to influence the conduct of public affairs. But, at present, parties are still very weak and a Moscow phenomenon; if they did not win seats in the Duma, “there weren’t any parties at all.” Sergei, a government official in his early thirties, stated that parties “not only have no influence, they don’t even *want* to have any influence.” The Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinsky, for instance, paid them a visit. “Establish an independent television,” Sergei called out to him. “You’ll have lots of support. You can influence people.” But Yavlinsky had not noticed. “He just looked at me, and said nothing.” People, Sergei went on, expected something of party leaders. But all the leaders did was pursue their private interests. They were “happy enough just sitting in the Duma,” and had “no intention of working with ordinary people.” He liked the strength of United Russia himself, but not its “bureaucratism and lack of ideals.” He liked Putin, “but not Gryzlov.”

Elsewhere, there was little more enthusiasm. “I can say one thing for sure,” responded Alena, a Tula salesgirl. “I don’t believe in anything they say. Not Nemtsov, not Yavlinsky, not Ziuganov, nor anyone else.” Tanya, a Voronezh student in her early twenties, thought it was still too soon to form any definite opinions. The old parties were on their way out, but the new ones had not yet established themselves. “We need more time to make our choices.” Nelia, a Tula student, thought all the parties were “hopeless,” and that they did nothing to organize a citizen politics. There was Yabloko, continued Lena, with its leader Grigory Yavlinsky, “who talks a lot, and very persuasively, but never actually *does* anything.” People “just got tired of listening to him.” If there were strong parties, their leaders could make quite a difference, explained Mikhail Vasil’evich, a Syktyvkar pensioner in his midsixties, but the parties they actually had were based in Moscow and preoccupied with their internal affairs. When they came to power, as Tamara in Novosibirsk pointed out, they forgot all their promises. The main thing, a Briansk accountant concluded, was trust. There were parties that reflected her interests, but she had no confidence in their activities. “We have no trust in anyone: neither in government, nor in the parties.”

Our various participants had little hostility toward political parties in themselves, but were often disillusioned by their own experience. Igor’, a Syktyvkar entrepreneur in his thirties, had been a supporter of the left-patriotic party Rodi-

na, but had been disappointed by their disagreements after they had entered the Duma in December 2003. Indeed, he had become disappointed in all the parties. "I don't trust any of them. They're all just clans of their leaders. They don't think at all about ordinary people." Lilia, a Biisk pensioner, was another who had been disappointed by Rodina. After a good campaign, Glaz'ev was very appealing, and described as "young and clever." But then the party leaders had a falling out, apparently about money, and "now I just don't know." Valentina, in Briansk, a pensioner in her early fifties, did have a party preference, but her favored party did nothing, "just ideas." Andrei, a watchman in his twenties, had the same view: "more talk than action." Sergei, a scientist in his midfifties, thought each of the

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parties had enough good intentions, "but experience shows that when parties come to power, they forget their own program. A program and good intentions is one thing—objective reality and party funds is quite another."

Supporters of United Russia were grouped in a somewhat different category, in that they were defined by their sup-

port for President Putin rather than for the party itself (one of our younger respondents thought, quite wrongly, that Putin was actually a member of the party). In Tula, I was told, "almost everybody voted for United Russia precisely because it was the president's party. Russians love their president and don't want to go against him." It was the "presidential party," others explained, and so it was "bound to win." Many took their lead from family and friends. "So far as I can remember," Nelia told me, "my parents spoke positively about only one person, who is unfortunately not alive any more, [and that is Alexander] Lebed. I like Putin myself, in principle, so I voted for United Russia, not because it reflects my interests, but simply because of Putin." El'vira, a housewife in her early twenties, voted for United Russia "because my husband told me to—it was all the same to me." Nikolai, in Riazan' openly admitted that he had little idea what the party stood for. He simply "voted that way, because Putin asked us to." These remarks were corroborated by the survey evidence, which showed that United Russia voters were a remarkably precise crosssection of the entire population, and that little about their views was particularly distinctive.²⁹

Supporters of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation were also in a somewhat different category, and might at least be thought to share a distinctive set of political allegiances. The party's election manifesto, after all, had insisted on the need to restore soviet forms of government, and to renationalize at least a substantial part of the economy.³⁰ Liudmila Ivanovna, a pensioner in her mid-fifties with a higher education, was a straightforward Communist supporter. "There are honest people there, they want a fair society. They're against robbery,

and for equality.” Pavel, in Syktyvkar, another Communist supporter, thought his was the only one that could really be called a party. “The other ones aren’t parties, but just groups of like-minded people [*kruzhki po interesam*].” But others were disappointed in the Communists as well, once they had started to include oligarchs in their list of candidates (two Yukos representatives had taken a prominent place on the party’s central list).³¹ Mikhail, a Sytyvkar pensioner in his sixties, had been a member of the CPSU, but had no time for its postcommunist successor. “Ziuganov should have been replaced ages ago. And now we hear that at the Duma elections, the Communists included oligarchs in their party list—what can you make of that? I’d say that such a party no longer has the right to call itself Communist.” Gennadii, in Riazan’, took the same view. He would normally have voted Communist, but could not bring himself to do so with so many oligarchs and their nominees on the party list.

There were all kinds of other reasons for avoiding a direct commitment to any of the existing parties. Anna, a Bryansk housewife in her early forties, leaned toward the Liberal Democrats, because its leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, had the right ideas about politics and economics. But he would be dangerous as a leader. “There could be another genocide.” So she supported the LDPR, as none of the other parties was any better, but actually voted against all. Many voted for Zhirinovskiy, not so much for his program or activities, but for his behavior, “so that at least there was at least one comedian in the Duma.” Sasha, a Tula medical student, found none of the parties to his liking, and so he voted against all of them. “That is, there is no party whose program reflects my own opinion, but I’m not sure of my own opinions yet either.” Vladimir Matveevich, in Odintsovo, thought a combination of Yabloko and the Communists would suit him best—the market and democratic principles of the former and the social justice principles of the latter, “but not either of them separately.” Vladimir in Kolomna, a technician in his mid-fifties, was another who was pulled in two directions. He was a supporter of Sergei Glaz’ev, but not of Rodina’s other leader, Dmitry Rogozin. Nor would these differences necessarily be easy to overcome. There had been long-standing calls for the “democrats” to unite, at least for electoral purposes. But Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces were actually very different parties, insisted Alexander, in Riazan’, with the URF representing above all the corrupt oligarchs who had acquired a great deal of wealth during the later years of the Yeltsin “family.”

Self-styled democrats were particularly distraught, following the failure of either of their parties to attain the 5 percent threshold. “Not long ago we had such a powerful democratic movement!” lamented Elena, in Voronezh. “And then in one day of elections the democrats were destroyed. I don’t believe they lost the elections. It was just decided to destroy them, and they were destroyed.” Alevtina, a Syktyvkar librarian in her early fifties, was another disappointed democrat. How could they seek to influence the political process in such circumstances? In principle you could act through political parties, “but as we hardly have any parties, all that remains is money or civil war and violence. Those who have money have become scared of getting involved in politics. And violence is also unrealistic. All the same I think we could make a little progress if parties were just a bit

more active.” What, for instance, was the position with the local Yabloko organization? Its leaders told the Moscow headquarters that they were ready for action, but they had been told “What are you, children? Are we supposed to lead you all by the hand? Do something yourselves! You are leaders.” The local branch had done nothing at all. Next time around, Alevtina declared, “I won’t vote any more, or I’ll vote ‘against all,’ as there isn’t anyone I can vote for anymore.”

Many of our respondents, especially those in their forties and upward, had been active in political life in the Soviet period. At Odintsovo, in the Moscow region, for instance, Vladimir Matveevich had been in the Komsomol, like everyone else. Liudmila Ivanovna had been active in school, at the institute, and at her place of work, as well as an activist in the Komsomol and a member of the party bureau, where she had been in charge of mass-cultural work. “We had marvelous cultural activities. And then it all collapsed.” At election time, she had also served as a canvasser. “It was somehow a more interesting time to live.” Of the others, all of them in their late thirties to early sixties, Mariia Sergeevna was a Pioneer leader in school and Fedor Stepanovich was a party member, “but a passive one.” Alexander Petrovich, similarly, was a member of the party bureau and responsible for youth, and Igor’ Semenovich was a party member and a police auxiliary, secretary of the Komsomol, and then a secretary of the party committee: “I was everywhere.” Boris Yegorovich was a party member and an election canvasser. Communists, he explained, “had to show an example, to take part in everything.” And he had “always gone to meetings.” But none of them was a member of any of the new parties or of other public organizations. What was the point?

Even if they had wanted to, there was little opportunity for our various respondents to become active in a political party in their locality.³² For instance, Alexander, a Voronezh businessman, supported the Union of Right Forces, but had no idea if it would continue to exist after its Duma defeat. The branch in Voronezh was still in existence, but inactive. “It waits for instructions from Moscow, but there aren’t any instructions at all. And no money either.” There was a similar view among our focus group participants in the Moscow region. “Here in Odintsovo there’s no sign of any parties,” explained Liudmila Ivanovna, who had “her position” all the same. “They’re all somewhere in Moscow.” Mariia Sergeevna wanted to join Yabloko, “but it wasn’t clear how I could do so. Our parties in this respect leave a lot to be desired. People are ready to join, but they don’t know how. The parties are scarcely engaged with ordinary people. They shut themselves off in their Duma work, forgetting that people would like to join them. They could learn a lot from the CPSU in terms of recruiting a membership.” She helped Yabloko collect signatures at one of the previous elections and started to make contact with them, “but after the elections they all disappeared.” She would have been glad to help Irina Khakamada gather signatures for her 2004 presidential bid, “but they don’t get in touch with you. And I’ve no idea how to find their headquarters.” The parties were all busy doing deals in the Duma, but where did they exist on the ground, wondered Svetlana, a Kolomna lawyer in her early twenties. “In my opinion, on another planet.”

Conclusion

Political parties in modern Russia operate within what is perhaps a uniquely adverse environment. The long political monopoly exercised by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was scarcely an encouragement to the development of the multiparty politics provided for by the 1993 constitution. Indeed, it seemed to have discredited the word “party” itself, as was apparent in the way in which so many Russian parties found other labels to describe themselves. As we have seen, the public generally regards parties with scepticism or even hostility. There is only a loose relationship between election outcomes and party representation in the Duma. The Duma itself has little influence on the conduct and composition of government, apart from its ability to reject nominations to the premiership and to declare its lack of confidence in the government as a whole, either of which would normally lead to an early general election. Parties, moreover, have relatively few members, and they can draw on few human or material resources, apart from the covert support of the Kremlin itself.

Indeed, far from articulating the concerns of voters in their dealings with government, parties became an increasingly important part of Putin’s top-down managed democracy as his second term came to a close. Parties were given a monopoly of the right to nominate candidates under the law on political parties that was adopted in 2001. But parties could register only if they had a substantial membership drawn from a large number of republics and regions. To secure representation within the Duma, they had to secure at least 5 percent (and 7 percent, starting in 2007) of the party-list vote. From 2007 onward there would be no single-member constituencies—all seats would be allocated on the basis of a national party-list contest, which gave a greater degree of influence to their Moscow leaderships. The largest parties were also the main beneficiaries of the system of state funding that was established by the parties’ law, because payments were directly proportional to the number of votes that each party won at an election. The larger parties were still further advantaged by changes in the parties’ law itself, which was amended in late 2004 so as to require a minimum of 50,000 members—five times as many as before—for a party to obtain registration.³³

But how far, in Russia or elsewhere, could a party system be shaped from above, in the interests of the regime itself? Across Europe, there was a generalized crisis of political engagement: decline in turnouts, decrease of membership in the parties, and loss of trust by ordinary citizens in political institutions. In the former Communist countries, and particularly in the former Soviet republics, membership remained very low, parties were more distrusted than all other institutions, and substantial numbers at elections were voting against all candidates when they had an opportunity to do so or not voting at all. Russia had a number of factors that might ordinarily have been expected to encourage political engagement, including high levels of education and a substantial pool of professionals. But the long experience of Communist rule choked off the development of a civil society, and there was little sign of its emergence in the first decades of the new century. It was possible, even probable, that the con-

tinuation of a top-down approach to the development of Russia's postcommunist parties would deny them the organizational autonomy necessary to develop an authentic citizen politics.

APPENDIX

Focus groups were conducted in the following locations:

1. Tula, January 3, 2004 (seven participants aged 18–21 years).
2. Odintsovo, Moscow region, January 12, 2004 (nine participants aged 35–63 years).
3. Riazan', January 12, 2004 (nine participants aged 24–62 years).
4. Kolomna, Moscow region, January 13, 2004 (eight participants aged 19–59 years).
5. Novosibirsk, January 15, 2004 (nine participants aged 25–73 years).
6. Voronezh, April 25, 2004 (eight participants aged 21–53 years).
7. Bryansk, April 20, 2004 (participants aged 20–54 years).
8. Syktyvkar, April 29, 2004 (eight participants aged 22–64 years).
9. Konstantinovo village, Riazan' region, April 24, 2004 (eight participants aged 23–61 years).
10. Biisk, Novosibirsk region, April 25, 2004 (eight participants aged 23–71 years). The Institute of Applied Politics in Moscow, directed by Dr. Ol'ga Krysh-tanovskaia selected and briefed interviewers on the basis of a list of questions agreed in advance with the author. The second round of focus groups took account of the experience of the one before it, and we made some adjustments to the questions. The discussions lasted, on average, approximately two hours, and we provided participants with modest compensation for their attendance. We taped the discussions and then delivered them in printed and electronic formats, together with a brief evaluation by the moderator. The moderator, at the outset, explained that the exercise was being conducted as part of a program of scholarly research, and identified the participants by first name alone so that their anonymity could be protected. The financial support of the British Academy (SG-37188) and of the Nuffield Foundation (SGS/00960/G) is gratefully acknowledged.

NOTES

1. For a fuller discussion, see Alan Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Paul Webb, David Farrell, and Ian Holliday, eds., *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. For these terms, see, respectively, Richard Rose, Neil Munro, and Stephen White, "Voting in a Floating Party System: The 1999 Duma Election," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 3 (May 2001): 419–43; and Stephen White, "Russia's Client Party System," in *Political Parties in Transitional Democracies*, ed. Paul Webb and Stephen White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
3. Richard Rose, *Getting Things Done with Social Capital: New Russia Barometer VII* (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 1998), 59.
4. Arthur H. Miller et al., "Emerging Party Systems in Post-Soviet Societies: Fact or Fiction?" *Journal of Politics* 62, no. 2 (May 2000): 455–90.
5. Ibid., 462, 486; similarly, Arthur H. Miller and Thomas F. Klobucar, "The Development of Party Identification in Post-Soviet Systems," *American Journal of Political Sci-*

ence 44, no. 4 (October 2000): 667–85.

6. Timothy J. Colton, *Transitional Citizens: Voters and What Influences Them in the New Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 114.

7. Stephen White, Richard Rose, and Ian McAllister, *How Russia Votes* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1997), 134, 136.

8. Miller et al., “Emerging Party Systems,” 461.

9. William L. Miller, Stephen White, and Paul Heywood, *Values and Political Change in Postcommunist Europe* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), 170.

10. Colton, *Transitional Citizens*, 114.

11. Some two thousand adult citizens were interviewed face-to-face in their homes between March 25 and April 20, 2005, under the auspices of Russian Research. The sample was representative of the urban and rural over-eighteen population of the Russian Federation, with control quotas for sex, age, and education. The survey, and its counterpart in 2004, were conducted in association with the project “Inclusion without Membership? Bringing Russia, Ukraine and Belarus Closer to ‘Europe’” awarded to Stephen White, Margot Light, and Roy Allison by the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council under grant RES-000-23-0146.

12. Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield, “The Politics and Economics of Democratic Commitment: Support for Democracy in Transition Societies,” *British Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 4 (October 1995): 485–514.

13. See, for instance, William L. Miller and Richard G. Niemi, “Voting: Choice, Conditioning, and Constraint,” in *Comparing Democracies 2: New Challenges in the Study of Elections and Voting*, ed. Lawrence LeDuc et al. (London: Sage, 2002), 169–88; David Sanders, Jonathan Burton, and Jack Kneeshaw, “Identifying the True Party Identifiers: A Question Wording Experiment,” *Party Politics* 8, no. 2 (March 2002): 193–205; John Bartle, “Measuring Party Identification: An Exploratory Study with Focus Groups,” *Electoral Studies* 22, no. 2 (June 2003): 217–37.

14. Webb et al., eds., *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 20, 318.

15. Mogens N. Pedersen, “The Dynamics of European Party Systems: Changing Patterns of Electoral Volatility,” *European Journal of Political Research* 7, no. 1 (1979): 1–26.

16. White, Rose, and McAllister, *How Russia Votes*, 139.

17. Ian McAllister and Stephen White, “Split Ticket Voting in the 1995 Russian Duma Elections,” *Electoral Studies* 19, no. 4 (December 2000): 563–76.

18. O. G. Rumiantsev, *Osnovy konstitutsionnogo stroia Rossii* (Moscow: Iurist, 1994): 216–17.

19. Matthew Wyman, “Developments in Russian Voting Behaviour: 1993 and 1995 Compared,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 1996): 277–92.

20. Peter Mair, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 182–83.

21. *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, January 13, 2003, 1–2.

22. *Izvestiia*, August 5, 2002, 4.

23. *Spravochnyi material k politicheskomu otchetu TsK KPRF VII S’ezdu KPRF* (Moscow: TsK KPRF, 2000), 47. The Communist electorate, similarly, was not disproportionately composed of pensioners, but of those of pre-pensionable age. D. Roderick Kiewiet and Mikhail G. Myagkov, “Are the Communists Dying Out in Russia?” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 1 (March 2002): 39–50.

24. *Izvestiia*, February 20, 2003, 3, <http://www.edinros.ru> (accessed April 10, 2006).

25. See, respectively, *Izvestiia*, March 3, 2003, 1; *Izvestiia*, March 30, 2003, 3; *Novye izvestiia*, July 3, 2003, 1.

26. Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 238.

27. Lia Litosseliti, *Using Focus Groups in Research* (London: Continuum, 2003), 18, 27.

28. See, for instance, Stephen White and Ian McAllister, “Dimensions of Disengage-

ment in Post-Communist Russia,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 20, no. 1 (March 2004): 81–97; and Stephen White, “Russia’s Disempowered Electorate,” in *Russian Politics under Putin*, ed. Cameron Ross, 76–92 (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004).

29. Our own survey evidence, based on a national representative survey conducted by Russian Research between December 21, 2003 and January 16, 2004 ($n = 2,000$), found that United Russia voters were within four percentage points of the entire sample on all relevant variables except for gender (women accounted for 55 percent of the sample but 64 percent of United Russia voters).

30. *Za vlast’ trudovogo naroda! Predvybornaia programma Kommunisticheskoi Partii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, <http://www.cikrf.ru/>.

31. According to newspaper reports, Yukos paid the party \$30 million for its places on the list, and individual businessmen paid from \$1 to \$3 million for an advantageous position (*Izvestiia*, September 23, 2003, 3).

32. There are still very few studies of local party politics in the postcommunist period. The most substantial is Derek S. Hutcheson, *Political Parties in the Russian Regions* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), which focuses on the middle Volga. See also, Grigorii Golosov, *Political Parties in the Regions of Russia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

33. *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, December 24, 2004, 9.