

THE LEVEL OF COMPETITION IN RUSSIA IS DECREASING

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RJ Dear Boris Igorevich, do you think there are real competitors for United Russia in the party ideology field now?

If competition means a threat that United Russia will lose or be forced to share its power, then the answer is 'no;' there are no real contenders for United Russia at the moment, and they are unlikely to show up anytime soon. Both the electoral process and **the entire political system are built in such a way that United Russia is consistently elected by a simple or qualified majority throughout Russia on a regional and federal level.**

But there is a certain pluralism in the political field. There are structures with other programs, other ideologies; they criticize the authorities in general and United Russia in particular. These forces are not able to acquire a share in the legislative

process, let alone the presidential elections, but they can nevertheless take part in politics and contribute to the social and political debate.

The clannish interests are another parameter that weakens competition in the political field. As a matter of fact, in recent years any figure from the economic and political elite possessing any ambition and pursuing some political or career objective has only one way to go, that is through United Russia, which is in fact a wide coalition of the elite spread across the regional level. **This coalition was built from above, and now it is being controlled from above as well; nevertheless, certain freedom of motion for an individual is still possible within it.**

RJ Is this 'coalition,' as you called it, built solely on the grounds of belonging to the sphere of power?

There are two concurrent axes running through the Russian ideological and political field. One ideological and political line is, conditionally speaking, **reform – anti-reform**. Proceeding from this criterion, it is difficult to use the terms 'right – left' or 'socialism, conservatism, liberalism'. It is rather 'a forward party' and 'a backward party' comparison. The extreme 'backward party' is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and 'a forward party' may be the 'Pravoe Delo' (The Right Cause).

The second axis is the **attitude to power**, i.e. how actively the party supports or opposes those in power. Accordingly, the communists will be in the bottom left corner as the 'most backward party' with the strongest opposition, United Russia will be one-hundred percent pro-authority and right-of-center on the whole. The 'Pravoe Delo' will be even further right as a 'forward party', but lower than the UR in its support of power.

Since one of the most significant positioning criteria is the attitude to

power, any figure with political ambitions that does not run into any danger of conflict with the authorities will inevitably come to United Russia. He who seeks a personal ideological career can join the Communist Party or Liberal Democratic Party. He can become a party's sponsor, and thereby gain access to a regional or even federal parliament. In such a way he will stand up for his career, but it is impossible to unite such figures under the banner of a certain party and present it as an alternative to the current power. The ideological and political positioning of such parties is too strict. The 'Spravedlivaya Rossia' (Fair Russia) is a special case. A systemic party led by pro-authority politicians, it has become attractive for all kinds of figures, mostly mainstream ones, who do not fit with United Russia or the government's coalition of authority. It was this group that so perturbed the 'ruling party' – just look how severely they acted against the 'Spravedlivaya Rossia' and its individuals – its direct competitors – as opposed to the communists and liberal democrats.

So I do not agree with everything in the recent report by Dmitry Orlov, Dmitry Badovsky, and Mikhail Vinogradov. The report is interesting, and they make some compelling arguments. But I strongly disagree with the authors' conclusion that the party system has become more competitive.

It has not. **Elections, especially those of October 2009, showed that the level of competitiveness in the political field has decreased.** It is true that after those elections all the opposition parties became more radical. The opposition no longer saw that they could compete with the authorities and their party within the current 'rules of the election game.' Against such a backdrop the communists always get a small inflow of votes. They are supported by those people who perhaps do not

agree with their platform, who are not Marxists or Leninists, but vote for what they see as the most genuine party of opposition.

RJ *United Russia has added a thesis of conservatism to its armoury. Does this narrow its electoral basis? Will it repulse the liberal part of the electorate from United Russia?*

Firstly, United Russia has never been a catch-all party. A catch-all party in political science is quite a different thing. This party had its own ideological and political basis, defined discretely enough, and it has gone beyond its borders in the recent decades. It did not reject its old ideology, did not betray it, it just went wider. This approach was started by the left wing, socialists, labourists, and social democrats, who went beyond the traditional working class to the middle class. Their conservative opponents had to do the same, for example, fight for the top of the working class. So these parties have become catch-all parties.

United Russia has never had an exact ideological basis, nor has it got one today. **This is a dominant party that has always strove to appeal to whoever it can.** The ideological niche proclaimed here is a secondary thing.

We can take the example of the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party. It held power with confidence for many decades. It started as a social democratic party, and up to the present moment is a member of the Socintern, but in fact it has followed predominantly a centre-right policy. This is largely because such policy was dictated by the demands placed by the country's development, a concept understood by each successive president.

The term 'conservatism' within the ideology of United Russia fundamentally says nothing to the wide electorate. Most likely, **United Russia will not go to the electorate with this banner, but with its usual rhetoric of 'real acts' and social programs.**

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union really was a party that **aspired** for monopoly. At that time, the party was the main body. It was



the CPSU that made the key decisions, which were then realized by the executive authorities and formalized by the legislative bodies.

The situation is quite the opposite today: **decisions are made vertically by the bureaucratic executive, they are sent down to the party, and then the party carries them out.** Naturally, United Russia votes for the draft bill by the government and the President the way it is ordered to from above. In the recent article published in the "Rossiyskaya gazeta", Evgeny Primakov pointed out quite accurately the risks involved in a system where competition is poor (the sort of system we started with), and one where the party is controlled from above. According to Primakov, "The success of economic modernization in Russia mostly depends on the creation of a political party system that could help the authorities to avoid wrong decisions."

The theory is often repeated that economic development proceeds faster in non-democratic countries than in democratic ones. However, Western political scientists have calculated that the overall result is fifty-fifty. But they have also discovered something else: **eight of the ten most successful patterns of economic growth and the ten biggest failures have emerged in non-democratic states.** According to American political scientist Adam Przeworski, the countries where strategic decisions are made without competitiveness, pluralism, and discussion, either win big or lose big. It is clear that modern Russia cannot afford to risk a big loss with its modernization strategy. So we need democracy. ■

*Boris Makarenko was speaking to
Boris Volkhonsky*