

CHAPTER 5: UNITED RUSSIA AS THE DOMINANT PARTY

The goal of this chapter is to provide a theoretically-driven assessment of the role that United Russia plays in Russia's authoritarian regime. Since the theory in Chapter 2 specifies that dominant parties help leaders and elites reap the gains from mutual cooperation, this chapter outlines the benefits that United Russia provides to both Putin and other elites. I outline how the party helps Russia's leaders maintain elite loyalty, control legislatures, win elections, and manage political appointments. For elites, the party provides access to spoils and lobbying opportunities, and, importantly, reduces uncertainty over how those spoils are to be distributed. Following the commitment framework developed in previous chapters, I also discuss the ways that the dominant party system has helped the Kremlin and elites make their commitments to cooperate with one another credible. In particular, I highlight how Russia's leaders delegated political influence to the party, limited their ability to duplicate the party's functions, gave elites the institutional tools to solve their collective action problems, made public commitments to the party, and linked the maintenance of the dominant party system to other regime institutions. Elites made their commitments credible by linking their political machines to United Russia and giving the central party leadership the ability to sanction them for indiscipline. In addition, I discuss how the party helps leaders and elites monitor each other. Ultimately, however, Russia's leaders stopped short of granting the party direct, collective control over the executive branch. In this way, United Russia differs significantly from the CPSU. Neither Putin, Medvedev, nor most important figures in the executive branch owe their careers to the party, and the executive branch sets the political course in Russia. This places limits on United Russia's autonomy.

Nonetheless, I argue that United Russia has more institutional weight than many accounts allow. Because of the commitments that both sides made and the benefits that the dominant party system provided, both the Kremlin and other elites developed an interest in the maintenance of that system. In particular, the Kremlin came to depend on United Russia for electoral support and the maintenance of elite cohesion, while many elites came to rely on United Russia for the provision of spoils, especially in legislatures. Thus, the Kremlin was loathe to dismantle the dominant party system for fear of provoking elite discord, and elites were loathe to defect for fear of losing access to patronage. In this way, the party came to serve as a bundle of rules, norms, and agreements that structure the incentives of both sides and, in turn, made Russia's authoritarian regime more stable. Indeed, as I will argue, United Russia became, over the course of the 2000s, one of the key pillars of regime stability Putin's Russia.

5.1 United Russia's Role: Benefits to Elites

Access to Policy and Spoils

One of the primary benefits that United Russia provides elites is access to policy and spoils. The party does this primarily through its domination of legislatures at the national, regional, and local level. Beginning in the Fourth Duma, United Russia supplanted the 'zero-reading'—a consultative, pre-floor logrolling mechanism where individual deputies bargained with the government—with meetings of its faction Presidium (Lyubimov 2005). Most legislative bargaining now runs through these Presidium meetings held every week when the Duma is in session. Deputies, ministries, and lobbying groups hammer out agreements in these sessions, such that the faction votes cohesively on the floor. In order to maximize their chances of influencing legislative output deputies must be members of the faction and have a good

relationship with United Russia's legislative leadership. This conclusion is supported by a number of analytic reports produced by the Center for the Study of Business-State Interactions, a Moscow-based think-tank that consults businesses on how to lobby the Russian government.¹ These reports advise clients that the key points of legislative access in the Duma are the United Russia faction and the standing committees, the most important of which are chaired by United Russia members.² Indeed, according to data collected by the Center, only 4.5% of the 334 deputy-initiated laws passed by the Fifth Duma between December 2, 2007 and July 29, 2010 lacked a co-sponsor from United Russia.

This centrality of United Russia's role in the legislature is further demonstrated by academic case studies of the Russian legislative process, which tend to emphasize the patronage-distributing functions of the dominant party. Summarizing the conclusions of his study of rent distribution in the Fourth Duma, Thomas Remington writes:

Less widely publicized, but of no less importance for Russian politics, however, is the activity of dominant party legislators off the floor, where they have created numerous opportunities to satisfy their appetites for money and influence. Once a piece of legislation has reached the floor for a vote, members of the dominant party rarely deviate from the party line, but in order to reach agreement on the final language of the legislation, deputies in the State Duma and members of the Federation Council act as entrepreneurs, championing the causes of the agencies, firms, and industries that sponsor them.... This makes parliament an arena in which organized interests, both private and bureaucratic, compete for power over public policy by working through their allies in parliament. The result, however, is to make United Russia more at target of intensive lobbying than a source of unified and consistent policy direction for the country.

These same conclusions also apply to regional and local parliaments, where logrolling is

¹ The various reports and studies issued by this group offer a rich source of advice for businesses on how to influence legislation and specific examples of successful lobbying efforts. See, for example, Tolstykh 2007. See also 'Otraslevoye lobbirovaniye v Rossii (naibolye aktualnyye ekonomicheskiye zakonoproekty na nachalo raboty Gosudarstvennoi Dumy FS RF V sozyva. Center for the Study of Business-State Interactions. Moscow. Accessed online: <http://www.gr.ru/content/11>. October 1, 2014. The center's yearly rankings of the Duma's top lobbyists regularly includes only United Russia members. See Luchshie lobbisty Gosudarstvennoi Dumy FS RF IV sozyva, 2003–2007, special issue of Lobbying.ru journal, p. 65, available at: <http://www.lobbying.ru>.

² In the Fourth Duma, United Russia kept all leadership positions for itself. In the Fifth and Sixth Duma, United Russia has shared some leadership positions with opposition politicians in an attempt to coopt opposition parties, but it has kept the most important positions for itself (see Reuter and Turovsky 2014 and Reuter and Robertson 2015 for more discussion).

carried out almost exclusively in United Russia faction meetings prior to plenary sessions. In most regional parliaments, the party has come to structure the law-making process in a way that was unthinkable in the early 2000s when almost all regional parliaments were composed of independent deputies (Glubotskii and Kynev 2003). In interviews with United Russia faction leaders and deputies from Perm Krai, Sverdlovsk Oblast, Kurgan Oblast, Chelyabinsk Oblast, Yaroslavl Oblast³ and Kirov Oblast, nearly all respondents agreed that the key decisions on legislation were made during the faction meeting.³ One deputy in Yaroslavl explained his decision to join United Russia in the following way, “I understood very well that the faction had a majority and that all important decisions that would be discussed in the Duma would be made by United Russia. If I weren’t a member, I could still publicly announce my positions, but I couldn’t have any influence on the decisions being made like I could behind closed doors at the faction meetings.”⁴

United Russia’s control over legislation should not be overstated, however. In Putin-era Russia, the executive branch, which is largely non-partisan, sets policy direction in the Duma. The original drafts of many important bills are written by the Presidential Administration or the government, and representatives of both are present at United Russia faction meetings to ensure that the policy priorities of the executive are met. At the regional and local level, party penetration of the executive branch is much higher, but non-partisan representatives of regional and local administrations often set the policy direction at their respective levels as well.⁵ Thus, those who argue that the independent influence of Russia’s legislature has weakened since the

³ See Chapter 4 for some excerpts from interviews with legislators discussing their desire to lobby inside the UR faction.

⁴ Author’s interview with Ilya Osipov, Yaroslavl, March 3, 2010.

⁵ The dominance of the regional executive branch over the legislature would not diminish United Russia’s policy-making influence if the legislative initiatives of United Russia governors were formulated by non-state party organs. But, as I discuss below, this is rare.

1990s, when it frequently clashed with Yeltsin, are surely correct (e.g. Fish 2005, Whitmore 2010).⁶

And yet, it would be a mistake to dismiss Russia's legislative organs entirely. As an increasing number of studies show, authoritarian legislatures can be important arenas for the distribution of spoils, patronage, rents, and policy influence, even if general policy direction is set by the chief executive (e.g. Gandhi 2008, Lust-Okar 2006, Blaydes 2011, Truex 2014).⁷ And while legislatures in Putin-era Russia may appear downright impotent when compared to most democratic parliaments—the implicit frame of comparison for many studies of Russian legislatures—they appear quite powerful when compared to most autocratic parliaments. For example, it seems clear that the State Duma has more institutional autonomy than the General People's Congress under Qaddafi, which met once a year for only two weeks, or Swaziland's National Assembly, which has no permanent staff and has one fifth of its members appointed by the king.

Such impressions are confirmed by cross-national data. The Parliamentary Powers Index, a cross-national measure of parliamentary strength in 158 countries compiled by Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig, ranks the State Duma as the 88th most powerful parliament in the world as of 2007. This puts it well behind most democracies but also ahead of parliaments in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, China, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kazakhstan, and Algeria (Fish and Kroenig 2009). It is ranked as the 26th most powerful parliament among the 81 autocracies and hybrid regimes (regimes with Polity IV scores less than 7) in the dataset.

⁶ Regional legislatures also frequently clashed with governors in the 1990s, but with the rise of United Russia, such conflicts were largely put to bed. However, in the 2000s, conflict between regional legislatures and governors was much more frequent than conflict between the President and the Duma.

⁷ In Mubarak-era Egypt, for example, Blaydes (2011) illustrates how parliamentary seats translated into protection of one's business interests, access to ministers, and preferential state loans. Lust-Okar (2006) discusses how Jordanian parliamentarians use their seats to secure patronage for their constituents. Truex (2014) shows how the businesses of Chinese legislators have higher profit margins than other businesses.

Consistent with this view of Russia's parliaments as 'typical' authoritarian legislatures, several recent studies highlight the ways that Russian legislatures serve as mechanisms of cooptation and rent distribution. Reuter and Robertson (2015) find that the cooptation of Communist politicians in regional legislatures significantly reduces protest by the KPRF. Remington (2008) and Chaisty (2013) analyze how the State Duma provides a forum where powerful business interests lobby their interests and influence legislation. Indeed, the deep penetration of Russian parliaments by business interests is prima facie evidence that these organs act as fora for lobbying. For example, Chaisty (2006) calculates that 109 of 310 United Russia members in the Fourth Duma were direct representatives of big business. The representation of such economic interests sets the State Duma apart from the Supreme Soviet, where representation was based on class quotas and key economic interests were absent (Vannemen 1977).

As for regional parliaments, Chapter 7 of this book shows that most contained representatives of the region's major enterprises in the 2000s. Forty-eight percent of regional deputies between 2001 and 2010 were businessmen. And as Szakonyi (2015) shows, such representation translates into real benefits: businesses with representation in regional parliaments have significantly higher profits than those without direct legislative representation.

Studies by Russian analysts come to similar conclusions. Starodubtsev (2009) shows how in the Fourth Duma, SMD deputies used their legislative seats to extract budgetary concessions for their districts. An in-depth study carried out by the Center for the Study of Business-State Interactions concluded that lobbying the executive branch was necessary to "quickly decide a specific matter of an individual character" while lobbying the legislative branch permitted groups to defend their general, long term interests" (Makhortov 2008, 4). The report concluded that

lobbying via the executive branch was a top priority for businessmen, but at the same time, a “majority of respondents consider membership in a party a key factor in the advancement of one’s interests” (Makhortov 2008, 5). Naturally, United Russia was the most favored party among those interviewed.

Data from the State Duma indicate that deputies play a prominent role in initiating bills. As Table 5.1 shows, over one-third of the laws passed during the first years of the Fifth Duma originated with Duma deputies.

[Table 5.1 Here]

All treaty and convention ratifications are included in the list of bills initiated by the President and government, so these numbers actually overstate the legislative activity of the executive branch. When ratifications are removed from the data, it turns out that the Duma and Federation Council together account for a larger share of initiated non-treaty bills than the executive branch.

My interviews with Duma deputies and officials in the Presidential Administration were concordant with the conclusions sketched above. All recognized the substantial influence of the executive branch, but also pointed out the ways that deputies influence legislation by either initiating their own bills and or trying to influence the contents of legislation introduced by the executive branch. As Konstantin Kostin, former head of the Presidential Administration’s Department of Internal Politics, put it in a 2014 interview:

Of course the Presidential Administration takes the lead in writing many bills. But we are all on the same team. There are so many examples where the Presidential Administration takes into consideration the opinions of United Russia deputies on its own bills. A lot of consultation with influential deputies is done before bills are introduced, and then after they are introduced a whole new process of consultation is begun.⁸

⁸ Author’s interview with Konstantin Kostin, June 9, 2014, Moscow.

State Duma deputies that I interviewed had a similar view of the matter. Legislators did not report coordinating their actions with the presidential administration, and many emphasized that even bills introduced by the executive branch could be influenced and amended in the committees and in faction meetings.⁹ Prominent United Russia deputy Vladimir Pligin, admitted that the Duma and the president coordinate their actions, an outcome that he viewed as natural in a situation where the majority party in parliament and the president are allies. He added, however, that

It is probably true that the public, deliberative side of parliament hasn't been very prominent, or maybe even has become secondary, which has led society to take a fairly skeptical view of parliament. There has been fairly serious public criticism. And that criticism has probably been justified. There have been instances when parliament didn't serve its role as a public chamber for discussion. At the same time, it is also necessary to point out the behind the scenes work done by parliament on legislation. It has remained extremely significant. The texts of bills change significantly between the first reading and the final drafts, and we do serious substantive work on those bills in the committees.¹⁰

These sentiments were echoed by deputies in regional legislatures. No deputies reported that federal officials sought to directly influence legislation, but both regional deputies and regional administration officials recognized that the regional administration usually set the main policy priorities for the legislature. And yet, United Russia legislators believed that they could influence the content of legislation and even extract concessions from the governor when the opinions of legislators and the governor differed. One deputy in Yaroslavl Oblast offered the example of a controversial bill on regional privatization. Existing legislation had accorded privileges to the current renters of municipal property when it was privatized, but this privilege only applied to small and medium businesses. Businessmen from the United Russia faction

⁹ Author's interview with Evgenii Trofimov, Member of UR Faction in Fourth Duma and Vice Chairman of United Russia's Executive Committee, June, 11, 2013, Moscow.

¹⁰ Author's interview with Vladimir Pligin, June 13, 2013, Moscow.

agreed to eliminate the size requirements, but the governor objected and threatened to veto the bill. In the end, according to this legislator, an agreement was worked out that raised, but did not eliminate, the size requirements for the privilege.¹¹ This anecdote reminds that the absence of public conflict between legislators and the executive is insufficient to conclude that the former do not influence the content of legislation, since the final content of bills may be a product of bargaining between the two.

Aside from direct access to spoils via the legislative process, United Russia also offers its members an elevated platform from which to lobby their interests before other key political actors, particularly in the executive branch. Summarizing a study of lobbying by governors conducted by the Center for the Study of Business-State relations, Bogatyreva (2013) concludes:

An analysis of expert commentary...permits several conclusions about how partisanship affects the ability of governors to advance regional interests at the federal level. Among the main factors that affect their lobbying effectiveness are: good results for United Russia in federal and regional elections, successful participation of the governor in UR primaries, expansion of his influence in [United Russia's] regional *politsovet*, and his election to the party's Higher Council....Thus, the ability of governors to advance their interests can be severely undermined if there is conflict between him and the regional branch of United Russia, which would signify that the governor lacks the support of regional elites. [Bogatyreva 2013, 136].

I encountered similar sentiments in my interviews. In particular, governors without strong connections in Moscow found it useful to lobby through the party. In Yaroslavl, one of the regional administration's top advisors on relations with political parties and social organizations had this to say about why then-governor Sergei Vakhrukov was not a party member, while former governor Anatolii Lysytsin had worked more closely with the party:

[Vakhrukov] had strong relations with Moscow. He had worked with several ministers. Therefore, he didn't need any additional levers for strengthening his position in Moscow. He didn't need to lobby his interests through the party. By contrast, Lysytsin, who had fewer connections

¹¹ Author's interview with Ilya Osipov, Yaroslavl, March 3, 2010.

in Moscow worked more actively through the party in order to gain some sources of influence in Moscow.¹²

The party also helps legislators gain access to lobbying opportunities in the executive branch. Aleksander Sizov, former deputy from Yaroslavl Oblast provides an example: “In the Fourth Convocation, I went to the minister of Culture, Shvydkoi, several times to talk about the Volkov Theater [Yaroslavl’s largest drama theater] and convinced him to renovate the building and support the holding of a drama festival in the oblast. As a deputy that was something I could do.”¹³ Such lobbying activities are also carried out by Federation Council senators, the vast majority of which are United Russia members. In recent years, the Federation Council’s role in writing legislation has shrunk considerably, but senators remain important lobbyists for the regions they represent.

In the regions, the party’s informal role as a mechanism for gaining access to lobbying opportunities and high level officials is perhaps even greater. As Sergei Baburkin, head of UR’s executive committee in Yaroslavl Oblast told me, “[UR] members expect a certain level of support from and a certain relationship with the elite. Plus, they expect that those relations will continue in the future.”¹⁴ The presidium of the regional *politsoviet* includes top officials from the regional administration, the leadership of the regional legislature, the mayors of large cities, heads of important social organizations, and major enterprise directors. No other institution or gathering can claim such a concentration of regional political luminaries. Meetings of the *politsoviet*, as well as party conferences, forums, clubs, and primaries, provide an opportunity for elites of different stripes to come together, discuss regional politics, and make informal

¹² Author’s interview with Pavel Isaev, June 11, 2009, Yaroslavl.

¹³ Author’s interview, April 3, 2010, Yaroslavl.

¹⁴ Author’s interview February 21, 2010, Yaroslavl.

agreements. As one Russian political scientist describes it: "...United Russia serves as a forum for the 'meshing' of the private interests of elite groups, who now feel compelled to make agreements among themselves in the framework of internal party interactions" (Panov 2008, 105).

The National Projects, and their successor, the Special Purpose Programs (*Tselevyie Programmy*) are one example of the type of spoils for which United Russia membership helps elites lobby. These oil-funded social development projects directed hundreds of billions of federal budget dollars to the Russian regions for the construction of social infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, roads, and the like. In a January 2006 speech before United Russia Duma deputies, Putin set out the terms of the relationship between the national projects and United Russia: "The national projects are not something handed down from above—they are United Russia's projects....They were developed with your input taken into account. Your proposals and the proposals of the government form their basis....The realization of the national projects is strictly the work of the party."¹⁵ In response, special party commissions were set up created to oversee allocation of National Project funds.¹⁶ In turn, there developed fierce competition among UR deputies to see that project funds were directed toward their districts and clienteles.

Beginning in 2005, United Russia also developed its own, internally administered 'Party Projects', a series of social and infrastructure projects funding primarily by the federal budget. As of 2014, there were 43 federal and 400 regional projects that channel funds toward projects such as water purification plants, sports stadiums, school renovations, pre-schools, roads, swimming pools, drug treatment centers, libraries, church renovations, movie theaters, and

¹⁵ Accessed at <http://edinros.nov.ru/index.php?mmm=about&id=12> March 2, 2007

¹⁶ Interview with Aleksei Kopysov, Head of the Politics department in the Perm Executive Committee of United Russia, Perm, July 9, 2008. See also the report on United Russia's website "Natsionalnyie Proekty vzyaty pod control "Edinoi Rossii" 27 December 2005. <http://old.edinros.ru/news.html?id=110023>

libraries.¹⁷ Infrastructure objects completed under the project are emblazoned with the party's logo.

The total amount spent on these projects is difficult to calculate. Party officials do not make aggregate numbers public, perhaps because they are unwilling to publicize the large amounts of budget funds that are being spent for partisan purposes. However, my own rough calculations indicate that the party has earmarked tens of billions of dollars for these projects since 2006.¹⁸ It is well-known that loyalty to the party and the party's performance in elections play a key role in determining which regions receive funds.¹⁹

Several conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above. United Russia does not exercise singular and unrivaled collective control over policy-making in Russia. The executive branch usually sets the general policy direction. But in exchange for delegating national policy direction to the executive branch, United Russia members receive significant benefits. United Russia's control over legislation allows members to influence the content of legislation, which allows them to secure policy concessions and spoils. In addition, United Russia membership provides elites a privileged position when seeking to lobby their interests outside of legislatures.

Reducing Uncertainty and Securing Dependable Career Advancement Opportunities

United Russia not only provides access to spoils and policy influence but also reduces uncertainty over how those spoils are distributed. Prior to United Russia's emergence, regional

¹⁷ Information on individual projects can be found at the Projects' website <https://proj.edinros.ru/>.

¹⁸ These calculations are based on numbers provided in party documents distributed at the party's Party Project Forum on May 17, 2013. In particular, see the booklet "Partinye Proekty—Novoe Kachestvo Zhizni". Some numbers for individual projects are also given at the Party Project web portal. For an example of a funding stream directed at an individual region, see SMS-golosovanie v tseni sem' milliardov" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. 6 July 2010. For more on funding see "Edinaya Rossiya otterla ot byudjeta 'chuzhie proekty.'" *Kommersant*. 20 May 2013.

¹⁹ "Krizisnyi razvorot partii vlasti" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 21 August 2009. "'Edinaya Rossiya' otblagodarit regiony rublyem" *Kommersant* 14 October 2010.

elites could lobby for spoils on an ad hoc, bilateral basis, but the transaction costs and uncertainty associated with this method of accessing spoils were high. According to several regional legislators that I interviewed, accessing policy through the UR faction was preferable over accessing policy in a non-partisan parliament (as many regional legislatures were until the early 2000s), because operating through the UR faction reduced uncertainty about how logrolls would be decided (see Chapter 4 for citations to these interviews). Faction members know that seniority in the party helps ensure better legislative access and toeing the party line will help them keep their place in line. Party membership makes clear the rules of the accommodative arrangement and by accepting party membership, elites make a commitment to upholding that arrangement. In order to be granted access to spoils through the party, elites must agree to behave in certain ways. The author's interview respondents in regional legislatures recognized this clearly as they bemoaned the loss of autonomy they would suffer by joining the United Russia faction. At the same time, they viewed their chances of influencing policy to be contingent on the formal step of joining the party (or the faction) and maintaining party discipline.

Because United Russia regulates access to many political careers, elites may receive career advancement opportunities by joining the party. Importantly, the party also reduces uncertainty about how to secure such opportunities. Advancement through the United Russia party ranks, which is facilitated by party loyalty, seniority, and service to the party, can help make a political career in many, though certainly not all, political arenas. Elites value this reduction in uncertainty. They prefer clear expectations about the type of behavior that will be rewarded and the type of rewards that can be expected. In the absence of such guidelines, political advancement would be solely dependent on the whims of the dictator and local patrons.

The arena where UR regularizes career advancement opportunities the most is the legislative branch. Given the party's dominance in parliaments at all levels, its control over party lists and nominations gives it control over access to legislative careers. Within legislatures, leadership positions are determined by majority rule and allocated by United Russia's party organs. Seniority, loyalty, and a record of service to the party are important determinants of who receives these positions. Using data from regional legislatures in the 2000s, Reuter and Turovsky (2014) provide statistical evidence for this claim by showing that legislators who joined United Russia early in its existence, before the party had become assuredly dominant, had a higher probability of receiving legislative leadership posts than those who joined the party later. That study further demonstrates that party loyalty is a particularly important determinant of legislative advancement for those deputies that lack alternative personal resources and also shows that these findings hold when controlling for several potentially confounding factors.

Beginning in the mid-2000s, United Russia began to pay serious attention to issues of party discipline in the regions. As discussed later in the chapter, this period was marked by a series of party 'purges', in which hundreds of regional officials and candidates were expelled for the party for various forms of indiscipline. As officials were purged for indiscipline and the criteria for party membership were stiffened, party cadres developed clearer expectations about the types of behavior that would be rewarded with advancement. In my interviews, regional legislators and party officials indicated that seniority, work on the aforementioned 'party projects', adherence to the party line during election campaigns, and legislative voting discipline became important determinants of promotion to positions in both the regional party hierarchy and the legislature. In Chelyabinsk Oblast, an official in the United Russia's executive committee reported that the regional party branch tries very hard to ensure that loyalty to the

party is rewarded both in the legislative arena and at election time: “If a member works for the benefit of the party, then it is in the party’s interest to ensure that he sees some perspective in continuing to support the party. Therefore, we try to fill vacant list spots with party supporters who have not yet had their chance.”²⁰ Thus, even if a given cadre fails to achieve his or her preferred rent, policy, or career objective in the present, they have some reason to believe that continued loyalty and support for the party will result in access to these goods in the future.

To make room for upwardly mobile cadres, the party charter mandates ten percent turnover in all regional *politsovets* each year. At the federal level 15 percent of the General Council is replaced at every congress. In recent years, an increasing number of top party posts have come to be occupied by individuals who got their start in the party’s youth wing, *Molodaya Gvardia* (Youth Guard).

In the State Duma the party has also exercised a policy of rewarding party loyalty. In 2007, UR’s lists were notably more populated by United Russia functionaries than in 2003 (Ivanov 2008). For the 2011 elections, the party developed more precise criteria for granting list places on the basis of party work. According to then-Secretary of the Presidium, Vyacheslav Volodin, when deciding where State Duma deputies are included on the party list for the 2011 elections, the party took into account “the deputy’s successes in regional elections, their activity in the region, and their work in the party’s constituent service branches.”²¹ For those older UR deputies who were replaced in the State Duma by younger party functionaries from the regions, a new law was passed allowing Duma deputies to take up positions in the Federation Council.²² As of 2015, most of the party’s top leadership in the Duma, including Sergei Neverov, Sergei

²⁰ Author’s anonymous interview, July 6, 2007, Chelyabinsk.

²¹ “Edinaya Rossiya Gotovitsya k vyboram v Gosdumu: partiitsam dana ustanovka uvelichit’ rezul’taty.” *newsru.ru* 29 April 2010.

²² “Sovet Federatsii primyet na rabotu deputatov.” *Kommersant*. 28 September 2011.

Zheleznyak, Irina Yarovaya, and Andrei Isayev, owe their positions to advancement through the party ranks.

Press reports indicate that party loyalty can sometimes be an important factor in Federation Council appointments as well. News reports surfaced in 2009 and 2010 about how United Russia was pressuring newly appointed governors to appoint United Russia functionaries whom it deemed worthy of promotion to the Federation Council. One noteworthy example of this occurred in Chelyabinsk, where the new governor appointed the head of the party's youth wing, 33-year old Ruslan Gattarov. According to press reports, the sitting senator in Chelyabinsk, Evgenii Eliseev, also a party member, had fallen out of favor with the party. Upon hearing that he was being replaced by Gattarov, Eliseev wrote a personal plea to Putin asking him to reverse the decision. Eliseev expressed hope that the Prime Minister would overturn the party leadership's decision, but weeks later, Gattarov was confirmed as senator by the Chelyabinsk regional legislature.²³

In the executive branch, United Russia's control over careers is more limited. This is especially true in the federal government and presidential administration. Although about 20% of the government have been UR members since the mid-2000s, and several prominent government ministers hold (or have held) party membership—Prime Minister Medvedev being the most prominent—most important officials in the executive branch did not work their way up through the party to achieve their positions. Nonetheless, even here there are some important examples of high ranking figures who owe their position to their work in the party. The most

²³ Vice Secretary of the United Russia Presidium Sergei Neverov stated: "Mr. Eliseev has the right to appeal to the party chairman...In any case, we did not notice much activity in Mr. Eliseev's work; therefore, we proposed to the governor Gattarov, who is an active party member" "K naznacheniyu chelyabinskogo gubernatora privekli Vladimira Putina" *Kommersant*. 28 April 2010. For another example of United Russia pressuring governors to appoint party functionaries to the Federation Council see "Edinaya Rossiya formiruyet Sovet Federatsii" *Kommersant*. 6 May 2010. and "Edinaya Rossiya perestavit funktsionerov." *Kommersant*. 5 March 2009. For an earlier example, see "Astrakhanskii gubernator peremanil senator so svyazami iz Ryazanskoi oblasti" *Kommersant* 14 February 2005. "Ot polpreda k gubernatory" *Kommersant*. 27 August 2010.

prominent example of this is Vyacheslav Volodin who began his career as a Duma deputy and worked his way up through United Russia's ranks to become Secretary of the Presidium in 2005. In 2010, he became head of the government's apparatus under Putin and then became First Vice Head of the Presidential Administration when Putin returned to the presidency. Other examples include Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, who got his start in politics in United Russia's executive committee, and the current head of the Kremlin's Department of Internal Politics, Oleg Morozov, who made his name as one of UR's leaders in the Duma.

Party service has played a larger role in the selection of regional governors. Between 2009 and 2012, when governors were appointed by the president, the largest party in the regional legislature (United Russia in almost all cases) had the right to nominate the candidates that the president would consider.²⁴ In 2012, direct elections were reintroduced, but, given the fact that no regime-backed candidate has yet lost and United Russia was the nominating party for 91% of regime-backed candidates, United Russia's formal control over gubernatorial selection has remained unchanged.²⁵

While insider reports suggest that the party leadership often takes its cues on who to nominate from the Presidential Administration (Ivanov 2011), it appears that the Kremlin took party membership and service into account when making appointments.²⁶ Reuter and Robertson (2012) find that governors who were successful at mobilizing votes for United Russia were much

²⁴ The reform had been proposed four years earlier. "Strana Sovetov Edinoi Rossii" *Gazeta.ru* 3 October 2005. United Russia first implemented this procedure in October 2006, when the party nominated Aslan Tkhakushinov to the post of President of the Republic of Adygea. Presidential envoy Dmitrii Kozak consulted with the Federal Presidium of United Russia as well as party leaders in Adygea. President Putin then proposed Tkhakushinov who was confirmed by the regional assembly. "Edinaya Rossiya odobrila vybor Dmitry Kozaka" *Kommersant* Oct 11, 2006.

²⁵ Of the 43 governor races held between 2012 and 2014, 39 of the winners were nominated by United Russia. One governor, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, was a UR member but ran as an independent. Two governorships were given to in-system opposition parties and one governorship was given to an independent candidate.

²⁶ "Governors Appointed for Loyalty and Votes" *The Moscow Times* 26 January 2007. "Edinaya Rossiya" poishet zamenu chetyryam gubernatoram" *Kommersant*. 14 May 2009.

more likely to be reappointed, and, as Figure 4.5 showed, almost all newly appointed governors were United Russia members. Thirty-eight percent of newly appointed governors between 2005 and 2010 worked in a legislature—federal, regional, or local—immediately prior to appointment, and, as we have already seen, these were arenas where United Russia exercised control over careers. Prominent examples of governors who owed their promotions to party work included Moscow Oblast governor Andrei Vorobyov, who served as head of United Russia’s executive committee from 2005-2012, and Pskov governor Andrei Turchak, who gained political fame by coordinating United Russia’s youth wing.

In sum, while the pool of eligibles for high government office in Russia does not consist only of United Russia members, advancement through the party ranks has come to constitute one important path to power and influence. Early in its existence, party seniority could not provide a basis for promotion because all party cadres were new. In these early days, the party focused on coopting new members (if they would join). As the 2000s progressed, however, the party came to place more emphasis on discipline and loyalty-based promotions.

Electoral Benefits

Affiliation with the party also provides a number of benefits to elites seeking elected office. First, the party helps solve coordination problems for elites. Coordination failures at the time of elections can be costly for candidates and elites, causing them to waste resources on futile races (Cox 1997; Shvetsova 2003). In the low-information environment that characterizes post-Soviet Russia, pro-regime politicians risk casting their lot with the wrong party. The need for information about the prospects of the multiple rival parties is acute. In the 1990s, the Kremlin extended fleeting and wavering support to multiple regime parties. In turn, competition among

these parties led many otherwise viable pro-presidential candidates to lose. By sending a clear signal of support that United Russia would be the regime's main electoral vehicle, the Kremlin helped solve the coordination problem of pro-regime candidates. By affiliating with United Russia, candidates knew that they would be tying their fates to a viable pro-Kremlin electoral vehicle.

Second, affiliation with the party makes it easier to register for elections. The procedures for registering one's candidacy in Russia are onerous and complex. Capricious regional authorities use their informal influence over electoral officials to bar independent and opposition candidates from running. Such moves are often motivated by personal disputes or inter-clan conflicts. Carrying a United Russia affiliation eliminates the need to gather voter signatures—the most common method used to disqualify candidates—and provides some insurance against the unpredictable actions of regional authorities. As the former head of United Russia's executive committee in Yaroslavl put it: "...in practical terms [affiliation] provides a certain guarantee that you'll be registered. If you are an independent, you have to gather signatures and there is no guarantee that they won't be found defective. Then you won't be able to register. That type of thing has become common now."²⁷

Finally, United Russia provides candidates with a useful party brand and organizational resources. A United Russia nomination sends a signal to voters that the candidate is affiliated with the regime. And as Figure 5.1 shows, United Russia has been the most popular party in Russia since 2002.

[Figure 5.1 Here]

²⁷ Author's interview with Sergei Baburkin, February 21, 2010, Yaroslavl.

Not only is the party popular, it also has the largest base of steady supporters. Using data from the Russian Election Studies, Hale and Colton (2009) have estimated that 30% of the Russian electorate were “transitional partisans” of United Russia in 2008.²⁸ In 2012 that number had crept higher to 32%, which, as Table 5.2 shows is far higher than for any other party.

[Table 5.2 Here]

By 2014, many of these partisan attachments have become relatively long-lived (for a post-Soviet country). In a 2014 survey of 4200 respondents in 20 regions carried out by the author, 21% of United Russia’s “transitional partisans” had been supporters for 10 years or more.²⁹ A further 26% had been supporters for more than 5 years. Thus, a sizable part of the Russian electorate are United Russia partisans and have been for some time. Affiliation with United Russia gives candidates access to the party brand and, hence, to those voters. Indeed, many legislators that I interviewed cited access to the party brand as one of their motivations for joining.

In addition, United Russia gives candidates access to the extensive organizational resources of the party. With a membership of over 2 million and over 82,000 local and primary

²⁸ As they argue, transitional partisanship is an “instrument appropriate for societies new to party competition where one would not expect to find affinities as deep and time-tested as those in the United States but where emerging attachments might exist” (Hale and Colton 2009, 14). To measure this concept, respondents are asked whether there is any party that they would call “my party.” Those answering yes are asked to name that party without being presented with a list of parties. Those that do not name a party are then asked if there is nevertheless a party that represents their “interests, views, and concerns” better than others. Those answering yes are asked to name that party without being presented with a list. Those naming a real party in response to either question are considered that party’s “transitional partisans.”

²⁹ Reuter, Ora John, Timothy Frye, and David Szakonyi. (2015) 2014 Russian Workplace Mobilization Surveys [Data file and code book]

party cells, United Russia's organizational reach far outstrips that of other parties in Russia (see Roberts 2010, see also Chapter 4 of this volume).³⁰ Affiliation provides access to this army of agitators and local activists.

5.2 United Russia's Role: Benefits to the Kremlin

Ensuring Elite Loyalty and Controlling Legislatures

United Russia not only provides benefits to the elites who join it, it also provides benefits to regime leaders, including those who are not party members. Importantly, the party serves as a mechanism for coopting elites, turning potential neutrals or opponents into active allies. As the previous sections indicated, United Russia incentivizes loyalty by dependably rewarding loyalty with rents, policy influence, and career advancement. The party thus reduces uncertainty about how spoils will be shared in the future, and, thus, lengthens the time horizons of elites. Senior cadres are retired, and younger loyal cadres are promoted through the ranks in a manner that incentivizes loyalty (Reuter and Turovsky 2014). In the jargon of social science, cadres have made sunk cost investments in service to the party that would be lost if the dominant party system were to collapse (Svolik 2012).

United Russia's role in generating elite loyalty is particularly important in legislatures. Since the early 2000s, United Russia has produced stable legislative majorities for the regime in

³⁰ These membership figures may seem small compared to some European democracies, but it is important to remember that party membership in Russia often "involves an elaborate application and approval process, sometimes including a probationary period, as well as expectations for dues payments and active participation in party events" (Hale and Colton 2009, 15). United Russia is no different in this regard. Becoming a party member has become more difficult over time. In the mid-2000s the party instituted a waiting period and more stringent requirements for retaining party membership. See "'Edinaya Rossia' zakreplyaet uspekhi" *Kommersant*. 18 December 2007. In 2008, the party initiated the first in a series of mass purges, excluding from its rolls tens of thousands who had 'lost contact' with the party. See "Partiya Vlasti snizhaet massu" *Kommersant* 18 April 2008 and "Volchii partbilet" *Kommersant* 21 April 2008

most legislative organs. This is important, because, in Russia, rule by decree is more limited than commonly believed. The decree-making powers of president are limited to the establishment of law where no existing law exists and to the resolution of inconsistencies in existing law (Haspel, Remington, and Smith 2006). There are also certain policy areas that must be governed by law rather than decree.

Therefore, presidents in Russia with ambitious policy programs need to secure support in the legislative chamber, and a president whose margin of support in the legislature is insecure must bargain for support of his policy agenda, often trading off particularistic goods to build ad hoc majorities (Cox and Morgenstern 2002; Shugart 1998). Moreover, where pro-presidential parties in the legislature are weak, the opposition is in a good position to lure away disgruntled deputies, as happened in Ukraine under Kuchma (Way 2005, D'Anieri 2007).

President Putin understood this clearly. In the Third Duma (2000-2003), the Kremlin found it costly to buy a support coalition among SMD members and minority factions (Remington 2006). In addition to logrolls over specific legislation, package deals were struck over committee membership in order to forge a majority coalition (Smyth 2002). In the Fourth Duma, the Kremlin set about to ensure that it would not have to make these side payments. United Russia's majority faction has, in contrast to previous party of power projects, exercised iron-clad discipline over its members in support of the President's legislative agenda (Remington and Kunicova 2008). Perhaps the most noteworthy instance of this discipline was witnessed during voting on the 2004 bill to monetize social benefits. This reform was highly unpopular among voters—its passage sparked widespread street protests and led to a sharp drop in the regime's popularity ratings—but only 5 United Russia legislators voted against it. Thus, executive-legislative relations under Putin have resembled the situation that Jeffrey Weldon

describes in Mexico, where the wide range of informal powers wielded by the Mexican president in the period of “presidencialismo” depended upon the PRI’s maintenance of an absolute majority in both chambers of Congress and the ruling party’s firm internal discipline (Weldon 1997).

In regional legislatures as well United Russia exercises strict voting discipline. Regional legislative clerks interviewed in five Russian regions all agreed that voting discipline increased sharply when United Russia factions were created after the third regional electoral cycle.³¹ The abruptness of this increase in discipline indicates that it was not simply the preferences of the deputy groups or their loyalty to the regime that generated this cohesion but the institutional structure of the United Russia faction itself. Indeed, as one deputy in Yaroslavl put it:

We have the faction charter. And it’s written clearly there that everyone should have a voice in deliberations, but once a majority makes a decision to vote for or against, then it is also written there that every deputy has to vote that way. If you do vote against the faction, then, because it is written in the charter that every deputy should support the party position, it is clear that you have committed a violation of discipline; you have violated the charter. That makes a statement.³²

Consistent with this emphasis on discipline, a number of regions took steps in the mid-late 2000s to make roll-call voting compulsory.³³ Deputies also remarked on how party nomination in elections affected legislative discipline:

In the current convocation, this situation [concerning party discipline] has become less of a problem. If you compare the situation with the last convocation, there were a lot of conflicts there, not just between parties, but within United Russia. Especially SMD deputies, and even party list deputies, there were conflicts and disagreements among them. I want to say, and all deputies I think would say this, that in this convocation there are many fewer such open conflicts. I link this with the fact that party lists and single member district nominations have been done differently. All the deputies who were nominated by United Russia now know well that they were nominated by United Russia....Therefore, all the deputies who are in the faction now

³¹ The regions were Perm Krai, Yaroslavl Oblast, Ryazan Oblast, Ivanovo Oblast, and Nizhegorodskaya Oblast.

³² Author’s interview with Olga Khitrova, March 11, 2010, Yaroslavl.

³³ For example, “Tyumen delayet tainoye poimennym” *Kommersant*. 28 May 2010.

know that they are members of the party. SMD deputies are now actively involved in party activity. They head projects and so on. So they feel their attachment to the party.³⁴

Over the course of the 2000s, the party became increasingly concerned with ensuring discipline outside of legislatures as well. In 2008 and 2009, the party publicized a purge of regional elites who had broken party discipline during elections. The most common reasons for expulsion included running against the party's official candidate, supporting non-party candidates, or discrediting the party during campaigns.³⁵ In one of the most high-profile cases, the governor of Murmansk was forced out of office for publicly supporting a non-UR sanctioned candidate in the capital's mayoral elections.³⁶ In a similar case, the party expelled the sitting mayor of Blagoveschensk for campaigning on behalf of non-UR city council candidates.³⁷ In other instances, United Russia members, attempting to appear autonomous while simultaneously enjoying the administrative backing of United Russia, were excluded for criticizing the party during their election campaigns.³⁸ These purges coincided with a decision at the party's December 2007 congress to increase the waiting period for attaining party membership and institute stringent party service requirements for nomination to leadership positions.³⁹ According to the party's website 4% of members had been excluded by February 2008.⁴⁰

³⁴ Author's interview with Olga Khitrova, March 11, 2010, Yaroslavl.

³⁵ For just several discussions of the campaign see "Edinaya Rossiya Kompostiruyet Part Bilety" *Kommersant* 18 August 2008, «Chekisty «Edinoi Rossii» Otravilis' v problemniye regiony» *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 17 October 2008, «Edinaya Rossiya obyavlyayet chistki postoyanno deistvuyuschim mekhanismom, v regionakh nachinayut ot nikh zaschischat'sya" *newsru.ru* www.newsru.ru 18 September 2008, "Edinaya Rossiya vozvodit chistku v sistemu" *Kommersant* 29 January 2009. For some more recent examples see "Chelyabinskogo edinorossa isklyuchili iz partii" *Kommersant*. 8 October 2014 and "Vitse-premera Gornogo-Altaiya isklyuchili iz ER za nepravil'nyu agitatsiyu" *RIA-Novosti* 19 September 2013. Accessed online: <http://ria.ru/politics/20130919/964223233.html>

³⁶ "Pobedil, no proigral" *Gazeta.ru* 16 March 2009.

³⁷ "V blagoveshenske na zasedanii gorodskogo otdeleniya partii "Edinaya Rossiya" prinyato resheniye isklyuchit iz ee ryadov mera Aleksandra Migulyu" *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. 15 July 2008.

³⁸ See for example, "Partiinaya Chistka" *Zvezda*. 1 July 2008.

³⁹ "Edinaya Rossiya zakreplyayet uspekhi" *Kommersant*. 18 December 2007.

⁴⁰ Accessed on United Russia website, 10 July 2010. <http://www.edinros.ru/rubr.shtml?110112>

For the Kremlin, the upshot of all this is that the party has helped ensure elite cohesion. Since elite defections are known to be one of the primary drivers of authoritarian breakdown (Haggard and Kauffman, 1996; Reuter and Gandhi, 2011), the role of the dominant party in ensuring elite cohesion is crucial. When influential regime insiders abandon the regime to join the opposition or otherwise mobilize against the regime, the regime may find it difficult to maintain popular support or win elections.

The Putin regime has largely avoided such defections, even in the face of economic (2009) and political (2011-12) crisis. Very few high-level officials, governors, mayors, or prominent Duma deputies have defected from the regime.⁴¹ In 2012-2013, the popularity ratings of Putin and United Russia were in steady decline and the fortunes of Russia's opposition were on the rise. This led many pundits to predict elite defections, especially in the regions.⁴² And yet these predictions were not borne out in fact. There have been no cases of sitting governors defecting and I know of no cases in which a sitting mayor has defected from the regime. In regional legislative elections, United Russia continued to win by large margins (see Figure 4.2).

To examine rates of defection among regional legislators more systematically, I gathered data on the share of incumbent candidates from United Russia that defected to the opposition (or ran as independents) in contests held between 2010 and 2014. To construct this measure, I first gathered data on the number of candidates in a given election that were members of the United

⁴¹ One important exception was the 2011 resignation of Finance Minister, Alexei Kudrin. After his resignation, Kudrin repeatedly entertained offers to join the opposition. Kudrin, however, had never been a member of the ruling party. Former Moscow mayor and high-ranking UR official, Yuri Luzhkov came out against the regime in 2010, but this was after he was fired from his post.

⁴² See "Regional Elites See United Russia's Stock Falling" *Moscow Times*. 26 August 2013. "Kreml prozondiruyet region" *Gazeta.ru* 1 March 2013. "Aleksandr Kynev: Rushayetsya Traditziionniye Skhemy Politicheskogo Manipulirovaniya" *Golos Analytic Report*. Accessed online at <http://www.golos.org/news/5861>. May 28, 2012.

Russia faction in the previous legislative convocation in that region. I then calculated the number of those candidates who ran either as independents or from an opposition party in that election. To calculate the percent of incumbent candidates from United Russia that defected, I divided the second number by the first number.⁴³ As Table 5.3 shows, rates of defections have been quite low in the 2010s. The vast majority of incumbent UR candidates elected in convocations prior to the economic crisis stayed with the party in the next election (i.e. in 2010, 2011, and 2012). Consistent with some of the rumors about defections in 2012-13, there was an uptick in defections in 2013 as the regime's popularity waned, but the overall number of defections remained low and the number of defectors who were elected actually decreased in that year. In 2014, the rate of defections decreased again.

[Table 5.3 Here]

Another way of examining rates of defection is by looking at the number of opposition candidates who are former members of the dominant party. Reuter and Gandhi (2011) develop a measure of defections from dominant parties based on the number of candidates in a presidential election that were former members of the dominant party. I adapt that approach here and apply it to the Russian regions. To construct this measure, research assistants examined the biographies (using online web searches and Panorama's Labyrinth Database of elite biographies) of opposition candidates to determine if they were former members of United Russia. A candidacy was coded as a defection if that opposition candidate had been a member of United Russia (or

⁴³ This figure likely overstates the number of defections because some former members were likely expelled from the party for various infracctions. Furthermore, expulsions and defections are difficult to separate, because either can be strategic. Either way, this figure gives an upper bound to the number of defections.

held a post in the party that indicated membership) and then had left the party. Expulsions are not counted as defections.

Table 5.4 shows the frequency with which Russian gubernatorial and mayoral contests in the 2010s witnessed such defections. Rates of defection were quite low in gubernatorial contests. Reuter and Gandhi (2011) report that 19% of presidential elections in dominant party regimes witnessed such defections. Between 2012 and 2014, five percent of Russian gubernatorial elections had such defections.

[Table 5.4 Here]

The bottom rows of the table show the same data for mayoral elections in cities with populations over 100,000 in the period from 2009-2013. With only limited information on the biographies of many mayoral candidates, we were only able to gather data on 60 races during this period, but the data tell a story similar to the gubernatorial data. Rates of defection were low, both in the post-crisis period (2009) and in the period when United Russia's ratings were falling (2012-13). When defections did occur, they rarely contributed to the defeat of United Russia candidates.⁴⁴

In Table 5.5 I extend this method to look at defectors among opposition candidates in regional legislative elections between 2009 and 2014. It is infeasible to examine the biographies of each of the tens of thousands of candidates that run for regional legislative office in Russia, so in Table 5.5 I focus only on high level opposition candidates. Specifically, I look at candidates

⁴⁴ There were two instances of this. One occurred in Yaroslavl in 2012, when local opposition figure Evgenii Urlashov, who was himself a UR defector, won the election. The other possible instance occurred in Ekaterinburg, where former Duma deputy and anti-drug campaigner, Evgenii Roizman won local mayoral elections in 2013 against a United Russia candidate. One other opposition candidate in that election, Evgenii Artyukh, was a former UR member and, as such, may have drawn votes away from the UR candidate.

who occupied one of the top three spots on the regional party list of opposition parties that gained more than 2% of the vote. Since defectors in legislative elections may not be incumbents (they may be UR members in other political arenas), this table differs from Table 5.2. As the data show, this method for measuring defections also reveals a low incidence of defection: out of the almost 1000 candidates that headed opposition party lists between 2009 and 2014, only 25 (about 2.6%) were former UR members.

[Table 5.5 Here]

In sum, United Russia has helped the regime maintain elite cohesion, especially in legislatures and in the regions. In turn, elite cohesion has been one of the fundamentals of regime stability in Putin-era Russia. In the face of economic crisis, widespread anti-regime protest, and flagging popularity, most political elites remained loyal to the regime. Hence, I conclude, as others have (Way 2008, Levitsky and Way 2010), that United Russia has made Russia's authoritarian regime more robust. However, the party's lack of penetration into the Presidential Administration and government leave the regime still vulnerable to defections in the higher ranks.

Winning Elections and Mobilizing Popular Support

Finally, one of the most important roles that United Russia performs for the regime is to help win elections. In the 2000s, it did this primarily by helping the regime coopt powerful regional elites who put their political machines and personal authority to work for the regime at election time. As Chapter 3 and 4 discussed in detail, regional elites amassed significant autonomy and political resources in the 1990s and early 2000s. In turn, elites used these

resources to construct powerful political machines that they then used to win elections (e.g. Hale 2006, Sharafutdinova 2013). In the early and mid-2000s, as these elites were coopted into the ranks of United Russia, they increasingly used their patronage machines to mobilize votes for the regime.

Indeed, statistical analyses of United Russia's performance in regional elections show that the party has consistently performed best in those regions where governors have strong political machines and independent bases of personal popularity (Reuter 2013, Golosov 2011).⁴⁵ Regional elites use a range of tools to mobilize votes for the regime. Sitting at the top of complex patron-client networks, they induce their clients to deploy administrative resources against opponents, buy votes, put pressure on voters, and use their own political authority to campaign for the regime. One common tactic was to put pressure on local firms to mobilize their employees (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014). Finally, many regional elites are intrinsically popular as elected politicians. This was especially true in the early-mid 2000s. The gubernatorial corpus in place at that time had cut its teeth on direct elections that were, at times, competitive. Those who survived these contests owed much of their success to political skill.

In addition to serving as a forum for cooptation, United Russia has also proved instrumental in solving problems of electoral coordination. When pro-regime candidates compete against one another, opposition candidates stand a better chance of winning. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this occurred in the 1995 Duma elections, when as many as nine parties supporting Yeltsin were listed on the ballot. These coordination failures not only split the party list vote, but also meant that reformist and centrist candidates ended up competing against one another in numerous single member districts (Bellin and Orttung 1995, 57-58). In the end,

⁴⁵ It is not just governors that performed this role. Other work has examined how elected mayors constructed political machines and put them to work for the regime (Reuter and Buckley 2015, Gel'man and Ryzhenkov 2011).

no pro-presidential party gained more than ten percent of the party list vote, and the Communists emerged on top.

By contrast, in the 2000s, United Russia provided a single party label around which pro-regime candidates could coordinate. Furthermore, the party became instrumental as an institutional mechanism for organizing strategic withdrawals in single member district races. According to party officials in the regions, the most difficult and complicated negotiations that occur during meetings of the regional *politsovet* usually concern conflicts between two party candidates seeking to run in the same district. The Presidium of the *politsovet* resolves these conflicts by providing other career advancement opportunities, rents, and promises of future ballot access to those who agree to withdraw.⁴⁶ In turn, the party has sought to enforce these agreements by punishing defectors with expulsion.⁴⁷ Of course, conflicts over ballot access still occur and often grab headlines, but, on the whole, these measures have resulted in a level of electoral discipline that is remarkable for post-Soviet parties of power.⁴⁸ In the 43 gubernatorial elections that took place between 2012 and 2014, there were no instances of two UR candidates competing against one another. In the 60 large-city mayoral elections analyzed above, coordination failures occurred in 7 elections, which is consistent with the impression that UR has more difficulty ensuring discipline at the local level. Yet, these numbers likely overstate the true

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Sergei Baburkin February 21, 2010, Yaroslavl. For prominent examples of potential electoral conflicts that were worked out by the United Russia leadership see "Murmanskikh edinorossovo pomirila rukha Moskvu." *Kommersant*. 11 December 2006, "Edinaya Rossiya pomirila gubernatora s merom" *Kommersant* 19 January 2007, and "Aleksandr Uss ne idyot v gubernatory Krasnoyarskogo kraya po veleniyu partii" *Dela.ru* 29 May 2014. Accessed online at <http://www.dela.ru/lenta/120217/> Some officials also claimed that the system of party primaries, introduced as an internal nomination procedure in 2009 and opened up to voters in 2013, has helped legitimate nomination decisions, and thus eased conflicts over party nominations. See also "Edinaya Rossiya otbiraet kandidatov koe-kak" *Kommersant* 30 October 2009.

⁴⁷ See, for example, "Chelyabinskogo edinorossia izklyuchili iz partii." *Kommersant* 8 October 2014, "Vitse-premera Gornogo Altaya isklyuchili za nepravilnyu agitatsiyu" *RIA-Novosti*. 19 September 2013. Accessed online at <http://ria.ru/politics/20130919/964223233.html>. December 20, 2014.

⁴⁸ Some examples of these headline-grabbing exceptions include "Itogi vyborov podvodyat Edinuyu Rossiyu." *Kommersant* 25 May 2010 and "Edinaya Rossiya razdvoilas na vyborakh" *Kommersant* 14 August 2009.

number coordination failures, because in some instances loyal UR candidates have been asked to serve as ‘technical’ candidates in order to divide the opposition or to help legitimate elections by filling out the ballot when opposition candidates are barred from running. Coordination failures led to the defeat of a UR candidate in only one instance over this period (Bratsk in 2010).⁴⁹

A final electoral benefit that United Russia provides the regime is organization. As noted above, the party has a much larger mass following and grassroots organization than any other party in Russia. Particularly useful are the party’s 82,000 (as of 2013) primary party organizations. The leadership of these PPOs—mostly politically ambitious civil servants and mid-level managers—comprise the party’s activist core. At election time, these activists penetrate workplaces and civil institutions in order to facilitate agitation, voter intimidation, vote buying, and clientelist exchange. In recent years, the party has made it a priority to ensure that these activists are rewarded for their service with opportunities for political advancement. This is evidenced by the increasing representation of former PPO activists in leadership organs at higher levels in the party hierarchy.

5.3 Commitment Problems and United Russia

Russia’s Leaders and United Russia

Dominant parties are institutions that help leaders and elites reap gains from mutual cooperation. They emerge when the resources of the two sides are balanced such that both are willing to risk investment in such an institution. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the balance of resources between the Kremlin and elites determined each side’s willingness to invest in United

⁴⁹ A similar instance occurred in the 2009 elections for mayor of Smolensk. Eduard Kochanovskii, a UR legislator, was excluded from the party for running as an independent despite the fact that the party had nominated another candidate. In an exceptional display of irresoluteness the party the allowed Kochanovskii to rejoin the party after the elections.

Russia, and the foregoing section highlighted the benefits that the two sides reap from mutual investment in United Russia. But I have yet to devote much attention to how dominant party system structures incentives to keep the Kremlin and elites from renegeing on their promises to cooperate. This section does this. I begin by discussing the ways that the dominant party system functions as a commitment device for Russia's leaders.

It is perhaps best to start off by noting the limits of United Russia's role as an institutional commitment device for leaders. The ultimate commitment that Putin could have made would have been to step down as president and let a party-nominated candidate take his place. Alternatively, he could have changed the political system, perhaps by turning Russian into a parliamentary system, and put both the government and his own tenure in office under the direct control of the party collective. Or, he could have instituted reforms that elevated the party's state supervisory role, such that major policy decisions would be made within non-state party organs and then transmitted to state organs for implementation under the watchful eye of the party. This would have approximated the Soviet system, and Putin's own actions would have been controlled by the party collective.

But Putin did not do this. As scholars have noted (Gill 2012, Isaacs and Whitmore 2014, Roberts 2012), United Russia's party organs do not formulate the main political direction of the country and then dictate that direction to formal state institutions. In particular, non-state party organs have not exercised manual control over the executive branch as the CPSU once did. In fact, as is often noted, President Putin did not become a formal member of the party in the 2000s (although he was party chairman from 2008-2012 and Prime Minister Medvedev has been since

2012, a party member). In fact, most high-ranking officials in the Presidential Administration did not become party members in the 2000s.⁵⁰

In order to prevent the party from becoming too strong and challenging Putin, the Kremlin sought to place limits on the independent authority of the party. From the beginning, the federal leadership maintained close, often subservient, ties with the Presidential Administration. Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, Vladislav Surkov, though he did not hold a formal party position, met frequently with party leaders and exercised significant control over major party decisions.⁵¹ Even in the Duma, where United Russia has displayed the most autonomy, the work of the faction is monitored by the president's representative in the Duma. For these reasons, many of the Kremlin's commitments to party-based cooperation with elites have remained tenuous.

But two important points must be kept in mind concerning United Russia's dependence on the Kremlin. First, one should be careful not to overstate United Russia's lack of autonomy, for while it lacks total control over politics in Russia, it has been delegated some modicum of autonomy over spoil distribution and policy-making, especially in legislatures and the regions. And second, the party-state model, typified by the CPSU or the CCP in China, is an ideal-type that few, even the most institutionalized, dominant party regimes approximate. For example, even Mexico under the PRI, the paradigmatic example of a dominant party regime in many scholars' eyes, does not typify the party-state model. Policy direction was not formulated by party organs and transmitted to state institutions for implementation, and non-state party organs did not exercise control over the state (e.g. Rodriguez and Ward 1994, Weldon 1997). Instead,

⁵⁰ One exception to this is the Department of Internal Politics. A bridge of cadres between UR and the DIP was established in the 2000s and many members of the DIP carried UR affiliations.

⁵¹ In 2008-2012, Sergei Sobyenin, who was a party member, performed this function for Putin. Since 2012, Vyacheslav Volodin, who came up through the party ranks has performed this role for the Presidential Administration.

as in Russia, the executive branch largely kept the party at arms-length, a relationship that extended to the choice of presidents. Indeed, as at least one insider account describes it (Castaneda 2000), presidential succession in Mexico was a highly personalized process in which the outgoing president selected his successor without consulting the PRI.

In other paradigmatic dominant party regimes, as well, the party was less autonomous from state leaders than often imagined. Slater (2003) describes how Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed personalized UMNO by packing the party with his own clients. In Taiwan, Chiang Kai-Shek sought to exert control over the KMT, so he refrained from becoming a member of the party's central leadership organs. In turn, he handpicked the party leadership and required that party cadres swear a personal oath of loyalty to the Generalissimo, not the party (Dickson 1993). In Egypt and Indonesia, neither the NDP nor GOLKAR, had direct control over the president or the military (Blaydes 2010, Brownlee 2007, Slater 2010). Even in the Soviet Union, the most paradigmatic of party-states, the General Secretary often exerted immense personal control over policy direction. This was most pronounced, obviously, in the case of Stalin.

Does this mean that these dominant parties had no autonomy or institutional significance? Those who study them seem to think otherwise. Most dominant parties, like United Russia, have limited collective control over state leaders. But state leaders delegate certain tasks, such that the party regains some autonomous control over policy and spoil distribution in certain spheres. United Russia is not unusual among dominant parties in this regard. One area where this is true is in legislatures. As noted above, my interviews with legislators suggest that while the executive branch's representatives in the Duma are deeply involved in the writing of some high-profile legislation, most legislation is still written by United Russia deputies. When asked whether he

had to consult with the Presidential Administration when writing his bills, Evgenii Trofimov—vice head of United Russia’s Executive Committee (2002-2004) and member of UR Faction in Fourth Duma—answered that he had “only had to do that one time. Over the course of the whole convocation, only once.”⁵² Although, Trofimov did indicate that he thought the practice of clearing bills with the Kremlin had become more common in the Fifth Duma. Other deputies emphasized that the president and prime minister’s representatives in the Duma simply did not have the time and resources to follow and micromanage all the legislation being written by the United Russia faction.⁵³ In an interview with the author, Konstantin Kostin, head of the presidential administration’s DIP in 2011-12 agreed with this assessment, pointing out that the Kremlin delegates the task of writing most legislation to the United Russia faction.⁵⁴

United Russia has also been delegated significant control over the composition of party lists in Duma elections, as well as over the selection of the federal party bureaucracy, the Duma leadership, Federation Council senators, and regional governors. According to party officials familiar with the process of drawing up United Russia’s lists ahead of the Duma elections, the party was responsible for creating the lists of candidates, which were then cleared with the Presidential Administration. As Sergei Popov noted in an interview, these consultations with the Presidential Administration took place, but the process of creating the list was not micromanaged by the Kremlin:

The party leadership forms the lists. The president approves them—agrees, disagrees, asks questions, and so on. But the administration doesn’t personally manage the process. How could they?! Our list had hundreds of candidates. We had 5000 people participating in the primaries last year. What, is the administration going to vet all 5000?!⁵⁵

Over the course of the 2000s, the party was also increasingly delegated the task of vetting and

⁵² Author’s interview, June 11, 2013, Moscow.

⁵³ Author’s interview with Vladimir Pligin, June 13, 2013, Moscow.

⁵⁴ Author’s interview, June 9, 2014. Moscow.

⁵⁵ Author’s interview, June 8, 2012, Moscow.

making nominations to the Federation Council. This was most pronounced for that half of the senatorial corpus that is chosen by regional legislatures, but, over the course of the decade, UR governors increasingly felt pressured to choose party candidates for their nominees as well.⁵⁶

Governors were also vetted by the party. Between 2009 and 2012, United Russia was tasked with drawing up a list of candidates for governor. President Medvedev then chose a nominee from among those candidates. And while insider accounts suggest that the final decision was always made by Putin or Medvedev (Ivanov 2008), the party was given significant leeway over composing those lists.⁵⁷ With the return of direct gubernatorial elections in 2012, UR's influence over gubernatorial selection has likely only grown, since regional party organs control nominations for those contests.

The area where United Russia has been delegated the most authority, however, is in the management of regional politics. Over the course of the 2000s, the party became increasingly centralized and hierarchical. Local branches must clear many political decisions with regional branches, and regional branches must clear many political decisions with the federal leadership. Candidates for governor, mayor of regional capitals (where appointed), and regional legislative chairman, as well as the UR regional legislative faction's choice for Federation Council nominee must all be cleared with federal Presidium of the General Council. Most other important cadre decisions in the regions are made by the regional (or local) *politsovet* (or its presidium) and confirmed at regional and local party conferences (held yearly), but the federal Presidium certifies the protocols of those conferences and can cancel their decisions if they are found to

⁵⁶ See "Edinaya Rossiya formiruyet Sovet Federatsii" *Kommersant*. 6 May 2010.

⁵⁷ Author's anonymous interview with a former official in the Presidential Administration's Department for Internal Politics, June 1, 2010.

contradict the party charter.⁵⁸

In turn, the party leadership in Moscow is given significant leeway to manage its relations with the regions. In my interviews with Presidential Administration officials and federal party leaders in Moscow, I asked about Presidential Administration involvement in four main areas of party work at the federal level: writing legislation, cadre politics, the conduct of election campaigns, and relations with the regions. There was universal agreement that the party leadership was delegated the most autonomy to manage relations with the regions. Indeed, as much of this book emphasizes, United Russia's most important function has been to help the Kremlin manage its cooperation with regional elites.

This impression was confirmed by interviews with regional party officials. The head of the Yaroslavl Oblast Executive Committee reported that he was on the phone every day with his region's coordinator in Moscow but that he had never spoken to someone in the Presidential Administration.⁵⁹ The head of the Kirov oblast executive committee expressed a similar sentiment.⁶⁰

In many regions, regional administrations exert significant influence over party branches (e.g Slider 2010). To the extent that governors answer directly to the Kremlin, this limits the autonomy of the party and undermines its role as an institutional commitment device. At the same time, however, most governors have been party members since the mid-2000s. In turn, governors are frequently held accountable for the performance of the party in the regions (Reuter and Robertson 2012). Indeed, it seems unlikely that United Russia's federal leadership would have wanted strong governors to be completely detached from the party, given that the party

⁵⁸ See sections 10 and 13 of the party charter <http://er.ru/party/rules/#10>. Regional branches often bristle at this vertical hierarchy "V 'Edinoi Rossii' zakhoteli demokratii" *Kommersant* 22 March 2012.

⁵⁹ Author's interview with Sergei Baburkin, February 21, 2010, Yaroslavl.

⁶⁰ Author's interview with German Goncharov, July 29, 2008, Kirov.

depended on the help of strong governors to help it win elections.

Nonetheless, the dependence of United Russia on regional administrations should not be exaggerated. My interviews in the regions reveal more consultation, cooperation, and independence than some existing accounts would lead one to expect. As regards executive-legislative relations, governors have veto power, and their informal resources give them significant influence over the legislative process, but their control is not complete. As the leader of United Russia's faction in the Yaroslavl Oblast Duma put it to me in 2010:

Every bill that is developed in the regional administration is developed in a working group that includes our deputies. From there, it goes to the committee, which is controlled by United Russia deputies, and the committee usually introduces amendments....If we are developing our own bills, then, of course, we seek out experts from the apparatus of the regional administration for expert evaluation, but we do the main work ourselves.⁶¹

Governors play an active role in crafting legislation but must take the interests of United Russia deputies into account as well. As one empirical study of political parties in the Russian regions noted: "the absence of direct links between a governor and United Russia [this quote is describing the rare case of an opposition governor] gives the governor a certain freedom of action. He is less encumbered by responsibilities set forth by the party of power, including responsibilities to take into consideration the interests of the key elite groups that make up the party ranks" (Bogatyreva 2013, 148). United Russia governors and regional party branches usually work together, and public conflict between the two is rare. This makes it difficult (and perhaps pointless) to parse the influence of one on the other. Yet, it should be noted that in several notable instances, conflictual relations have led United Russia branches to publicly stand up to governors, and in some cases, win. For example, in Irkutsk Oblast, a series of conflicts erupted between 2006 and 2008 between local United Russia deputies and newly appointed

⁶¹ Author's interview with Vladimir Savelev, March 1, 2010, Yaroslavl.

governor, Alexander Tishanin, over sources of regional tax revenue.⁶² The conflict came to head, when the legislature, led by the United Russia faction, refused to pass the governor's budget, overrode his veto on their own budget, and passed amendments to the regional charter that required vice governors to be confirmed by the legislative assembly.⁶³ Later in 2008, the governor was removed from his post. In Kirov, the region's non-partisan governor attempted in 2014 to have his vice governor placed as head of the regional party branch, but was rebuffed by the regional party leadership, which chose one of their own as party leader.⁶⁴

In cadre politics, as well, the role of the regional administration is complicated. On the one hand, my respondents indicate that governors take an active role overseeing the process of drawing up party lists for regional elections.⁶⁵ Party lists are composed by the regional *politsovet* and presented to the governor for approval. They are then formally approved at the party conference. The active role played by the governor makes sense, given that governors often head the UR party list in regional elections and are held responsible for regional election results. By contrast, the regional elites I spoke with report that regional administrations rarely interfere in the process of making internal party appointments or legislative appointments. Regional branches are also left to manage local elections and local party appointments mostly on their own. As one of Eduard Rossel's former advisors on internal politics in Sverdlovsk Oblast put it in a 2008 interview:

⁶² See <http://tayga.info/news/2006/11/20/~65616> and <http://kommersant-irk.com/byudzhets-2008-ocherednoj-raund/>

⁶³ See "Irkutsky gubernator osparivayet v sude zakonnost byudzheta, prinyatogo zaksobranie." [regnum.ru](http://www.regnum.ru/news/985568.html) 14 April 2008 <http://www.regnum.ru/news/985568.html> and <http://tayga.info/details/2006/05/28/~89559>

⁶⁴ "Edinaya Rossiya podbiraet kirovskogo lidera." *Kommersant*. 25 November 2014.

⁶⁵ The impressions in this paragraph are drawn, in particular, from the following interviews: Andrei Krutikov, former Chairman of the Yaroslavl Oblast Duma, Yaroslavl, March 4, 2010. Sergei Baburkin, Head of United Russia Executive Committee in Yaroslavl Oblast, Yaroslavl, February 21, 2010. Alexander Luzin, Vice Chairman of Kurgan Oblast Duma, Kurgan July 24, 2008, and Aleksei Kopysov, Head of the Politics department in the Perm Executive Committee of United Russia, Perm, July 9, 2008, and Semen Mitel'man, Chairman of the Economic Politics Committee Chelyabinsk Oblast Legislative Assembly, July 5, 2007.

There are only a few of us working in this office. And we are tasked with working with all political parties and social movements. So we have to use our resources rationally. Rossel is a [UR] party member and attends all major party functions. He has influence in the party. But it is not our job [the regional department of internal politics] to duplicate United Russia's work, especially in local self-government.⁶⁶

My interpretation of this statement is that officials in the regional administration are happy to delegate the task of managing local elections to the party.

In sum, while United Russia does not directly control the executive branch, as the CPSU once did, it has been delegated some limited institutional control over spoil distribution and career advancement opportunities. While Putin undoubtedly has influence over the party leadership, neither the General Council, the Higher Council, nor the Executive Committee is chosen by him. By delegating to United Russia responsibility for managing patronage and careers in legislatures, the Kremlin limited its ability to gather information on how these goods should be distributed. Twice, the Kremlin has hinted that it might support a second party of power, Rodina in 2003 and Just Russia in 2007, though both times, in the end, it made clear that these parties were not to challenge the dominance of United Russia. This tied the Kremlin's hands because dismantling United Russia abruptly would leave the Kremlin without a way to efficiently manage the cooptation of elites.

Of course, these hand-tying moves are not without their limitations. The Department of Internal Politics duplicates many of United Russia's functions. But the DIP simply cannot perform all the tasks that United Russia does. Although exact figures are difficult to locate, it is clear that the size of the staff in the DIP pales in comparison to the size of United Russia's organization and the DIP's abilities to gather information at the regional level remained limited. As Konstantin Kostin, the former head of the DIP explained in 2014:

United Russia exists to manage all these tasks [the conversation at this point concerned regional

⁶⁶ Author's anonymous interview, July 17, 2008, Ekaterinburg.

and local election]. We didn't feel like it made sense to do something that United Russia was already doing. And even if we wanted to...the party is too large to administer by us. It has tens of thousands of branches, thousands of employees. Such a behemoth can't be controlled so easily.⁶⁷

Another way that United Russia has made the Kremlin's commitments to cooperation with elites credible is by solving elite collective action problems. Gehlbach and Keefer (2011) argue that collectively organized elites are better able to constrain leaders and impose sanctions on them for predatory behavior. This accords with the Russian experience. The Kremlin feared nothing more in the late 1990s than to see the governors solve their collective action problems and unite against the Kremlin (e.g. Shvetsova 2003, Hale 2004). Russia's leaders encouraged divisions among regional elites and were initially hesitant to create a dominant party out of fear that prominent elites would use it as a platform to challenge the Kremlin.

By sanctioning the creation of a centralized, well-disciplined party in the early 2000s, the Kremlin gave elites the institutional tools to keep themselves united. In turn, elites could use this unity to prevent Russia's leaders from impinging on the spoil sharing bargain. And if the Kremlin were to impinge on that bargain—perhaps by purging too many elites, refusing to share rents, or passing party cadres over for promotion—then elites might use their unified position to punish Russia's leaders.

Of course, United Russia has not rebelled against the Kremlin, and there is no reason to think that it will do so in the near future. But the lack of open conflict between the Kremlin and United Russia does not prove that the latter lacks the ability to sanction Russia's leaders. Russia's leaders have shared ample spoils and career advancement opportunities with party elites, and the lack of open conflict may reflect the fact that both sides have so far remained

⁶⁷ Author's interview, June 9 2014. Kostin also confirmed for me my suspicion that the party had many more employees than the DIP.

committed to the spoil sharing bargain.

Nonetheless, certain events from the 2000s speak to the dynamics sketched above. The potential for conflict between the Kremlin and the party was demonstrated early in the 2000s by public disagreements between Putin and party leaders about whether the government should be formed on a party basis (see Chapter 4). Since then, conflicts have periodically erupted between United Russia and the government. One of the first of these instances was the party's criticism of the implementation of the aforementioned law on social benefit monetization in 2005.⁶⁸ Party leaders feared that this unpopular reform would undermine their electoral base, a theme that has motivated many subsequent disagreements between party and the government. In 2006, United Russia harshly criticized the government for underfunding social programs in its draft of the 2007 budget bill.⁶⁹ The party demanded, and ultimately secured, additional funding for the National Projects, which United Russia sought to trumpet in the 2007 campaign. Conflicts between the two erupted again in 2010 when First Deputy Secretary of United Russia's Presidium, Andrei Isayev accused Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin of "putting a stick in United Russia's spokes" by advocating an increase in the pension age.⁷⁰ In response to these conflicts, United Russia proposed the creation of special party 'commissars' that would correspond to ministerial departments. According to Isayev, "Every minister should know that in the party there is a 'komissar' who is going to coordinate this work from beginning to end." In the end, this proposal remained just a proposal, and these 'komissars' never appear to have obtained any

⁶⁸ Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov was among the most vocal critics. See Makarkin, Aleksei and Tat'yana Stanova. "Edinaya Rossii: Ot partii vlasti k pravyashei partii" Politcom.ru. 28 November 2005. <http://www.politcom.ru/article.php?id=1664>

⁶⁹ "Pervaya 'obkatka.'" *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*. 5 July 2006.

⁷⁰ "Partiya vlasti v poiskakh vruga naroda" *Kommersant*. 2 July 2010 and "'Edinaya Rossiya' nashla antipartiinogo lidera." *Kommersant*. 7 July 2010. Examples of such conflicts could also be found in the 2010s. See "Duma raskritikovala zakonproekt o bor'be s finansovymy narusheniyami." *Vedomosti*. 20 February 2013.

real influence, but the initiative and the Kremlin's wariness of it are noteworthy.⁷¹

Another way that Russia's leaders raised the costs of defecting from the dominant party system was by nesting their commitments to the dominant party project inside other institutional commitments. For example, fixed election cycles meant that United Russia majorities elected in one election would, at least according to the letter of the law, be stable until the next election. This stickiness was reinforced by the introduction of imperative mandate laws that forbade national and regional legislators from switching parliamentary parties.

More generally, the early and mid-2000s saw the introduction of a series of reforms that strengthened the role of political parties in the electoral process. These reforms favored the dominant party at the expense of independents and small, regional parties. The 2001 "Law on Political Parties" and subsequent amendments increased the barriers to entry for small and regional parties by requiring all parties to be registered in at least half of Russia's regions as well as demonstrate membership of over 50,000. In 2005, electoral blocs, which many regional elites had used to circumvent the ban on regional parties, were banned as well. In 2002, amendments to the Law on Voters' rights exempted party nominated candidates from requirements to present signatures in order to register for elections. More importantly, the law mandated that at least half the seats in all elections to regional assemblies be held under PR rules. By itself, this reform created a role for parties in regional elections and was sure to increase party penetration in the regions, but when combined with the reforms prohibiting regional parties outlined above, this reform mandated a place for national parties in regional legislatures.⁷²

⁷¹ See "'Edinaya Rossiya' Obeshayet pristavit k ministram komissarov." *Izvestia*. 3 October 2008 and "Edinaya Rossiya prokontroliruyet Putin." *Gazeta.ru* 3 October 2008.

⁷² In early 2006, the central election commission sent a 'model' bill to the regions suggesting that they adopt mixed systems as well (Kynev 2006a).

The most significant of the ‘pro-party’ institutional changes was the decision in 2005 to move from a mixed to fully proportional electoral system for State Duma elections (see Moraski 2007 and Smyth et al. 2007). Further dampening the prospects of small parties, new legislation also increased the barrier of representation from 5 to 7%. Simultaneously, the Kremlin encouraged regional legislatures to increase their electoral thresholds for the party list component to a minimum of 7%. With all these reforms the Kremlin sent a clear signal to elites that it was serious about investing in a single, dominant party. These changes made it more complicated for the Kremlin, at least in the short term, to dismantle the dominant party system.⁷³

United Russia’s grassroots organization and social support base also helped increase the costs of dismantling the party. Over the course of the 2000s, the party developed a massive organization in the regions and attracted millions of party identifiers. Shifting these supporters to a new party brand—or distributing this support base efficiently among pro-regime independents—would be difficult to achieve in a short amount of time.

In addition to all this, the mere act of creating United Russia compelled Putin to make some public commitments to the dominant party system. By associating with the party, and later becoming party chairmen, he linked his name, reputation, and personal brand to the party. In doing so, he sent a signal to other elites that he was willing to accept responsibility for the party’s fate. Ultimately, a dominant party is a risk pool. By jointly committing themselves to the party, both sides become hostages to the party’s collective fortunes. Grave policy failures, an electoral catastrophe, a scandal, or other shocks could leave both the rulers and the elites worse off than if they had eschewed the dominant party project in the first place.

⁷³ Chapter 9 discusses some recent changes to these rules.

By tying himself so closely to the party, Putin raised the reputational costs of suddenly disavowing the party. Resolve is one of the traits that voters respect the most in Putin. Since 1999, the Levada Center has asked voters once a year to name the traits that they like in Vladimir Putin. Between 1999 and 2013, the number one response was his “energy, *resolve*, and *decisiveness*[emphasis added].”⁷⁴ By suddenly dissociating himself from the party, Putin would risk appearing irresolute.

Finally, it is worth saying a few words about how the party helps leaders and elites monitor their commitments and thus reduces the temptation for each side to defect (e.g. Svolik 2012). In Russia, the act of party membership has meaning. It indicates who is participating in the accommodative arrangement with the regime and who is not. As United Russia’s first party leader, Aleksandr Beshpalov put it, “We want them [governors, bureaucrats] to join so that they don’t sit on the fence, so that we know exactly who is with whom.”⁷⁵ Joining the party sends a visible sign of loyalty, and rules embedded within the dominant party system—the party charter, faction charters, party directives and norms—make it easier for actors to identify indiscipline. This likely makes Russia’s leaders feel more comfortable in knowing that they are not being abused by elites. In turn, knowing that indiscipline can be identified by leaders, elites are less likely to try to abuse leaders.

In sum, Russia’s leaders have not ventured to take the far-reaching steps—e.g. placing the party in direct control of executive branch institutions—that would constitute the most robust commitments to the dominant party system. At the same time, they have delegated certain powers to United Russia, placed limits on their ability to micromanage key political tasks, given elites a way to collectively defend their interests, devoted reputational resources to the party, and

⁷⁴ See <http://www.levada.ru/16-04-2014/vladimir-putin-otnoshenie-i-doverie>

⁷⁵ “My ne moskalskie mordy” *Kommersant* 6 August 2002.

cultivated mechanisms that facilitate monitoring. In many spheres, access to spoils and career advancement have come to depend on loyal service to the party. Party cadres have come to rely on United Russia for the dependable provision of these goods, such that their political survival depends on the continued existence of the party. And so, by dismantling or subverting United Russia, Russia's leaders could have risked elite defection or rebellion. For example, when Putin experimented in 2013 with installing non-UR governors in three regions, United Russia cadres in the regions protested and in at least one case—Zabaikalskii Krai—defected against the regime.⁷⁶ Thus, over the course of its development United Russia came to represent an equilibrium arrangement that was incentive compatible for the Kremlin.

Elite Commitments and United Russia

The inability of elites to commit to cooperating with leaders can be as detrimental to the fortunes of a ruling party as a leader's lack of commitment. As I have argued, Russian elites in the 1990s and early 2000s were reluctant to link their fates to a centrally-coordinated ruling party. This was a concern for the Kremlin. But over the course of the 2000s, an increasing number of elites took steps that demonstrated their willingness to bind themselves to United Russia. In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss how the dominant party system in Russia functions as a commitment device for elites.

First, elites made their commitments credible by joining the party and making themselves subject to sanction by the central party leadership. Legislators who vote against the party may be excluded from the faction and, thus, deprived of access to legislative spoils. Party members who run against officially-sanctioned candidates in elections may be purged from the party and

⁷⁶ See “Zabaikal'skie edinorossi razdumali podderzivat' vrio gubernatora” *Kommersant* 27 May 2013 and “Gubernatory ulozhili v srok” *Kommersant* 16 June 2014.

deprived of access to lobbying opportunities. Mayors who support non-United Russia candidates may lose the support of United Russia co-partisans in city councils. In legislatures, the existence of an imperative mandate added weight to these commitments, for if a legislator leaves his party faction, s/he also loses his legislative seat.

Another commitment step was the move by prominent elites—especially governors and mayors—to dismantle or link their political machines to United Russia. By dismantling regional parties of power—or subsuming them into United Russia—governors in regions such as Tatarstan, Chelyabinsk, Khabarovsk, Kemerovo, Sverdlovsk and others deprived themselves of autonomous political resources and thus limited their ability to defect from the party bargain.⁷⁷ For new governors who came to power after 2004—many of whom came to power through the party ranks—the absence of a strong political machine in the region made their commitments to the party all the more credible.

In the 2000s, United Russia began to take over many of the functions—selecting candidates, distributing patronage, controlling legislative spoils, managing election campaigns—that gubernatorial machines had once performed. In the 1990s, many State Duma deputies were hand-picked by Russian governors and elected with the backing of regional machines and local financial-industrial groups (Hale 2006). But as the 2000s wore on, governors' clients were increasingly replaced by cadres selected by United Russia. Evgenii Trofimov, who was responsible for composing United Russia's regional list for the North Caucasus in 2003 relates the following anecdote:

I remember when we were forming the lists for the 2003 elections. I went to Rostov, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo Cherkessia, Stavropol Krai, Krasnodar krai. I remember meeting Tkachev [then-governor of Krasnodar] who was proposing one candidate and we were proposing another. I told him that we really preferred our candidate. He[Tkachev] was a party supporter at that time. And we had a serious fruitful exchange and came to an agreement. I remember how when I was

⁷⁷ See Aburamoto (2010) for an account of this in Khabarovsk.

in Rostov the governor wanted to put himself at the top of the regional list followed by one of his deputies and then put another one of his deputies in the third spot. I spoke with him and said: “What? You don’t trust people? Why don’t we put this woman, a doctor, well-trusted in the number 2 spot? Everyone liked her. He agreed with me. That’s how we formed the lists. And there weren’t any questions at the Congress.”⁷⁸

Increasingly over the course of the 2000s, the machines of local notables began to be melded into United Russia. Far reaching party reforms adopted at the Sixth party congress in November 2005, extended the reach of the central party organs deep into the decision making realm of regional party organizations and leaders. The federal leadership of the party gained control over (1) nominating the heads of regional party organizations, (2) proposing the candidates for speaker of the regional legislature, (3) proposing the candidate for governor, (4) choosing candidates that will represent the legislature in the Federation Council and (5) certifying the protocols of regional party conferences.

Since then the central party leadership has become increasingly active in regional cadre politics.⁷⁹ In a number of high profile cases the party leadership has intervened to iron out differences among regional elites over party list spots and imposed solutions if rivals could not come to agreement.⁸⁰ In other instances, the party has sent special delegations to the regions to determine who among the regional elite should face sanction for economic crises or social unrest. For example, when large-scale anti-regime protests broke out in Kaliningrad in 2009,

⁷⁸ Author’s interview with Evgenii Trofimov, Member of UR Faction in Fourth Duma and Vice Chairman of United Russia’s Executive Committee, June, 11, 2013, Moscow.

⁷⁹ In 2008, party leaders announced a campaign to make regional branches even more independent of governors. In addition to making rotation of regional party functionaries mandatory, the party leadership proposed to make regional party secretaries full-time employees. The latter reform never happened, however. For more on the campaign see: see “Vperyod, Kommissari.” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. 22 April 2009. “Edinaya Rossia razlubila bystrye s’ezdy” *Kommersant*. 29 July 2008 and “Aleksandr Tkachev poluchil partiinuyu dolzhnost.” *Kommersant*. 6 April 2010 and “Edinaya Rossiya razliubila bystrye s’ezdy.” *Kommersant*. 29 July 2008.

⁸⁰ Notable cases include Pskov and Murmansk in the run-up to the March 2007 regional elections. In both regions, conflicts flared up in the regional branches of the party. And in both cases party leaders from Moscow imposed a solution to the conflict. See Tirmaste, Maria Luiza. “Edinaya Rossia pomirila gubernatora s merom.” *Kommersant*. 19 January 2007. and Bilevskaya, Elena. “Murmanskikh edinorossov pomirila rukha Moskvyy” *Kommersant*. 11 December 2006. Another more recent example comes from the events surrounding the reconstitution of the Volgograd regional branch in 2014: See “23 aprelya sostoitsya konferentsiya Volgogradskogo otdeleniya Partii” United Russia Online New Feed. Accessed online: <http://er.ru/news/115365/>

United Russia sent a delegation of party officials to the region to determine which local party officials should be punished.⁸¹ In the end, Sergei Bulychev, head of the regional United Russia branch and one of governor Boos' close associates, was removed from his post. In the past, regional governors would have been in charge of managing their own political machines, but in the 2000s, United Russia came to manage many such tasks.

That these efforts to bring gubernatorial machines into the orbit of the party had some teeth is demonstrated by the extent to which they irked prominent regional governors. For example, the 2005 party reforms provoked staunch opposition from Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov (Slider 2006). In June 2009, Baskhortorstan President Murtaza Rakhimov made waves by decrying the growing influence of the party, "...I have just heard that United Russia needs to be independent—'not under the paw of governors.'...I am sorry, but the core of the party should be formed from below. But that doesn't seem to be the case right now. The party is being run by people who have never commanded anything more than three chickens. Is that the way it's really going to be?"⁸² Such statements indicate that United Russia's expanded role in the regions was more than virtual.

5.4 Conclusion

Mikhail Gorbachev once said that United Russia is a "bad copy of the CPSU".⁸³ By this he likely meant that the party exhibits the centralized bureaucratic tendencies of a dominant party but eschews the clear ideological vision that was a hallmark of communist parties. While prophecies of a return to CPSU-style, single party rule have proven false in Russia, United

⁸¹ "Mitingovavshim za vsye obeshayut 'protiv vsekh'" *Kommersant*. 2 February 2010 and "Kremlin, United Russia Worried After Kaliningrad Rally" *The Moscow Times* 2 February 2010.

⁸² "Dissident Respubliki Bashkortorstan" *Moskovskii Komsomolets* 4 June 2009.

⁸³ "Vopros Nedeli." *Vlast'*, 6 August 2007.

Russia is now functioning as a dominant party institution that provides benefits to both leaders and elites. For the Kremlin, the party helps maintain elite cohesion, makes passing legislation easier, routinizes the process of making political appointments, and reduces the costs of coordinating supporters in elections. For elites, United Russia provides access to patronage and policy and reduces the uncertainty associated with securing access to these spoils.

By delegating a range of important political tasks to United Russia—especially in legislatures and the regions—the Kremlin raised the costs of renegeing on its commitments to cooperate with elites under the framework of a dominant party system. The Kremlin further strengthened its commitments by linking the maintenance of the dominant party to other institutional commitments, making public commitments to the party, giving elites the institutional tools to solve their collective action problems, and by limiting investment in parallel institutions that duplicate the functions of United Russia. Elites, for their part, made their commitments credible by linking their political machines to the party and giving the central party leadership the ability to sanction them for indiscipline. These commitments have helped the two sides assure each other that the other will be a faithful partner in the dominant party system.

Furthermore, by making the rules of the accommodative arrangement clear to both sides the dominant party has made it easier for the Kremlin and elites to monitor each other's compliance. Enshrined in the dominant party system are rules—parchment or implicit—specifying what constitutes compliance on the part of both the leader (e.g. supporting party candidates in elections or privileging party cadres in legislatures) and elites (e.g. maintaining party discipline). By making it easier to identify defections, United Russia reduces the temptation of both elites and leaders to spurn their commitments and abuse the other.

However, United Russia does not exercise direct, collective control over the executive

branch. In the Soviet Union, most important political decisions were made by non-state party organs. Those decisions were then transmitted to state organs for implementation. This is not the practice in post-Soviet Russia. Most officials in the executive branch—including Putin—do not owe their positions in power to United Russia, and the executive branch sets the policy direction. This necessarily limits United Russia's independence, and, ultimately, undermines its role in the political system.

Because of this, some authors have sought to downplay United Russia's role as a political institution (e.g. Bader 2011, Roberts 2012, Gill 2012, Whitmore and Isaacs 2014). According to some, United Russia—like other post-Soviet parties of power—is a *sui generis* phenomenon that should not be compared to other dominant parties (Makarenko 2010, Bader 2011, Roberts 2012). The perspective that I offer is somewhat different. While United Russia's state-supervisory role pales in comparison to that of some of history's most highly-institutionalized ruling parties, such as the Chinese Communist Party, it is something more than an institutional shell, and we can learn much about it—and about other dominant parties—by comparing it to other dominant parties.

For one thing, as this chapter has noted, the dominant party ideal envisioned by many—where a party exercises collective and autonomous control over state institutions—is a very rare phenomenon. The institutional strength of dominant parties varies significantly between countries, but most of the world's dominant parties are like United Russia in that their collective influence over the top leadership is limited. Leaders in dominant party regimes may selectively violate the independence of the dominant party (perhaps by purging elites), even as they delegate it some authority and remained constrained by the system (e.g. see Magaloni 2008, 723-724).

Most dominant parties constrain leaders (and elites) in some ways, but are still dependent on them in others. United Russia falls into this category.

It is certainly not the case that United Russia is identical to the PRI, UMNO, or the PDP. No two political institutions are ever identical. But the differences among dominant parties should not prevent comparative analysis of their similarities. Analyzing the creation of United Russia with a theory of dominant party formation can improve, I hope, our understanding both of Russia's political institutions and authoritarian institutions more generally.

There is also a tendency, I think, among many observers and scholars to understate the institutional significance of United Russia. For observers in Russia—and perhaps some scholars—I suspect that this arises out of a tendency to make implicit comparisons between Russia's political institutions and those that exist in the West. The frame of comparison is rarely other autocracies and certainly not personalist autocracies. But in comparison with many of those personalist autocracies, Russia's ruling party institutions are significant. I have argued that, over the course of the 2000s, United Russia came to function as an institution, a bundle of rules and norms that structured the behavior of leaders and elites. Putin came to rely on United Russia to secure elite loyalty, win elections, control legislatures, and help him manage cadres. And many elites came to rely on United Russia for the dependable provision of spoils and careers. By defecting from the party, elites risk access to those spoils, and by dismantling the party Putin would jeopardize his ability to keep elites loyal. Thus, both sides retained an interest in maintaining the dominant party system.

United Russia has played a key role in the maintenance of Russia's electoral authoritarian regimes and I suspect that Putin's Russia would look very different without it. As Vladislav Surkov remarked during the height of the 2009 economic crisis: "The system is working...One

party dominates and there are many minuses to this, but I am deeply convinced that there are many more pluses in this. If we had entered this turbulent zone in a more undisciplined fashion, I can assure you, the damage that the state and society would have suffered would be much greater.”⁸⁴ Without United Russia, elites would be more fractious, policy-making would be more difficult, and Russia’s rulers would have a harder time mobilizing political support. As rulers in countries not so far from Russia have repeatedly found out, holding on to power in a country with fractious elites and weak ruling party institutions is not so easy. Without United Russia, the Putin regime might not have persisted for this long.

⁸⁴ Remarks by Vladislav Surkov at the Strategy 2020 Forum 2 March 2009
http://www.polit.ru/country/2009/03/03/surkov_text.html.

Table 5.1: Bills Passed in Duma by Initiator, December 2, 2007-July 29, 2010

Initiator	Number of Bills Passed	% of all bills passed
President RF	127	13%
Government	321	33%
Federation Council		
Deputies	72	7%
State Duma Deputies	334	34%
Federation Council	6	1%
Regional Legislatures	104	11%
Supreme Court	11	1%
Arbitration Court	3	0.30%
Total	978	100.3%

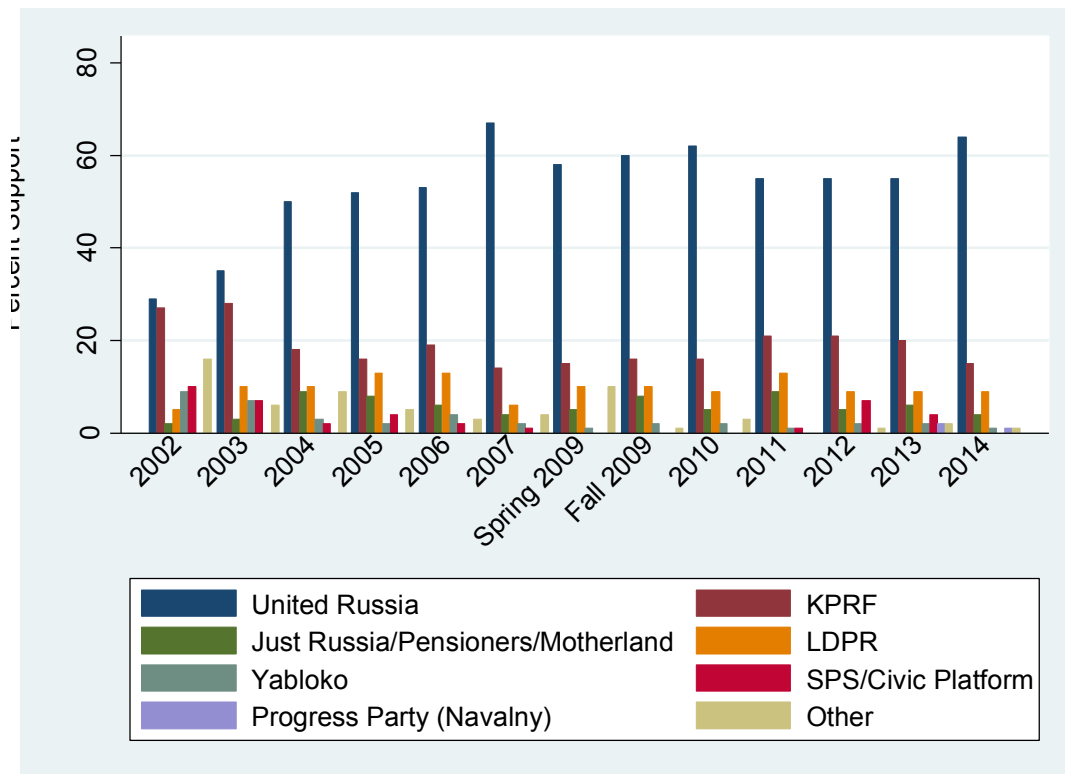
*Shares do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table 5.2 Transitional Partisanship in Russia (2012)

Party	Share of Electorate
United Russia	32
KPRF	9
LDPR	3
Just Russia	3
All Others	3

Source: Hale and Colton (2013)

Figure 5.1 Popularity Ratings of Major Russian Political Parties



Source: Levada Center Omnibus Surveys. The question is the following: “If elections to the State Duma were held this Sunday, would you vote and if so which of the following parties would you vote for?” Figures are given as the percent of those who would vote and have chosen a party. Data are from November of each year, except 2008 when data are not available.

Table 5.3 Defections from United Russia in Russian Regional Legislatures

Year	Regional Elections	# of Incumbent Candidates who were UR Faction members in Prev. Convocation	Number of Defectors	Number of Defectors Elected	Share of Incumbent Candidates from UR that are defectors	Share of Incumbent Candidates from UR that are defectors and are elected
2010	14	248	15	2	0.06	0.01
2011	39	779	40	10	0.05	0.01
2012	7	172	7	3	0.04	0.02
2013	16	347	33	5	0.10	0.01
2014	11	249	13	4	0.05	0.02

*Data is from the Russian Central Election Commission (www.cikrf.ru) and the author's *Database of Russian Political Elites*.

Table 5.4 Defections from United Russia in Gubernatorial and Mayoral Races, 2009-2014

Year	Number of Elections	Number of Opposition Candidates	# of opposition candidates that were defectors	% of all opposition candidates that were former UR members	% of elections with a defection	# of defectors that won an election	# elections with a defection won by opposition
Governors							
2012	5	12	0	0	0	0	0
2013	8	32	2	0.6	25	0	0
2014	30	135	0	0	0	0	0
<u>Total:</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>181</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>0.1</u>	<u>4.6</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Mayors							
2009	18	64	1	1.6	5.5	0	0
2010	10	26	1	3.8	1	0	0
2011	2	8	0	0	0	0	0
2012	19	85	3	3.5	15.7	1	1
2013	11	61	2	3.2	18.2	0	1
<u>Total:</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>244</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>2.9</u>	<u>11.7</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>

Table 5.4 UR Defectors Among Top Opposition Candidates in Regional Legislative Elections, 2009-2014

Year	# Opposition Candidates	# Elections	# of candidates in 'top three' of opposition party list that are former UR members	% of candidates on in 'top three' of opposition party list that are former UR members
2009	99	12	1	1
2010	116	13	4	3.4

2011	351	39	10	2.85
2012	79	6	1	1.27
2013	193	16	11	5.7
2014	148	14	9	6
<u>Total:</u>	<u>986</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>2.63</u>
