

Institutional Factors and Russian Political Parties: The Changing Needs of Regime Consolidation in a Neo-Patrimonial System

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Neil Robinson, Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick, Ireland. e-mail: neil.robinson@ul.ie

Abstract

Presidentialism and other institutional factors have been major influences on the development of Russia's party system. Why and how they have influenced party development has changed over time. This article looks at these changes and explains them as a response to the evolving neo-patrimonial system in Russia. Rules establishing electoral institutions have been particularly important and have been changed according to the needs of regime stability. Russian party development has flowed and ebbed as a result, particularly as electoral rules have changed. One function of parties under Yeltsin was as vehicles that signalled which interests had to be negotiated with by Yeltsin or incorporated into the regime. Under Putin, and as rules have changed, this function ended, and United Russia as the paramount party became a vehicle for controlling interests instead. The article ends with some speculation about the sustainability of this pattern of political development.

Introduction

Institutional factors are always important in structuring party development and party competition, and hence the structure of a party system. These effects are generally mechanical: they shape the incentives that political actors have, forcing them to cooperate or not, creating opportunities for action in electoral cycles, and hence shape the ways in which parties develop, compete for power and interact. The impact of institutional factors on party development in Russia has changed between the 1990s and the 2000s. This change has not been the result of changes in wider institutional design. There has been a marked degree of continuity across the years in what might be called the first-order institutions, i.e. the constitutional powers that are allocated to executive and legislative branches. These powers, especially in the version established by the Constitution of 1993, remain in place and largely unchanged (the exception being the length of the presidential term, which has moved from five to seven years).

Russia has always had a presidential system of some sort since 1991; what changed formally between 1991 and 1993 and post-1993 is the balance of powers between parliament and president, and even this change was not as complete in practice as it was in constitutional law until changes in second-order institutions, in electoral laws in particular, changed parties and the party system after 2001. These second-order institutions have had an impact on party development in large part for the obvious reason that not being institutions of the first-order, they are easier for politicians to change. But recognising that change happens where it can happen is not the same as explaining why it has happened, what its nature is, and what it might entail for the future. To understand these aspects of party development, it is necessary to look at the context of changing institutional influence. The argument advanced here is that Russia has, as Henry Hale (2010) has argued, a form of ‘electoral patronal’ polity, what will be called a form of neo-patrimonial system in this article. This system is shaped by personal networks of clientelistic relationships formed around a ‘patronal presidency’, i.e. a presidential institution that acts as the main source and channel of reward for network members and is the chief object of competition for clientelistic networks (Hale 2006a; 2010). The changing needs of this ‘patronal presidency’ and of the Russian system of neo-patrimonialism that it rests upon have driven Russian leaders to adapt rules that influence Russian party development and to engage or ignore party development, with consequent effects on the nature and structure of the Russian party system.

To argue these points through, we will look first at the idea of neo-patrimonialism and how it might shape politicians’ use of parties. We will then look at how the needs of Russia’s neo-patrimonial system have changed since 1991 and what this has meant for the development of political parties. What we will see is that

as different elements of neo-patrimonialism have been stressed according to the needs of regime stability so Russian party development has flowed and ebbed. This paper therefore deliberately takes a wide view and does so since such a view allows us to draw out several possible implications from the argument. First, it enables us to say that whilst parties have arguably had less impact on politics since the end of the Yeltsin presidency and the advent of Putin's 'centralization' they might be more important since they are more central to regime consolidation than under Yeltsin. Simply put, during Yeltsin's administrations, parties developed into vehicles that signalled which interests had to be accommodated; under Putin, they became vehicles for controlling such interests. Second, it may be the case that this process has gone too far and needs to be rolled back. The implication of this is that whilst Russia might have something that looks like a 'dominant party' at the moment because of the centrality of United Russia (UR) to the management of the Russian political system, this can still change (Remington, 2008; Mikhaleva, 2009, 291-95).

Neo-patrimonialism and parties

The concept of patrimonialism is currently enjoying something of a resurgence in studies of Russia, thanks to the combination of personalism and 'statism' that have characterised the circumscription of Russia's weak democracy since 2000.¹ In fact, although more attention has been given to the issue of neo-patrimonialism in Russia recently, the concept can be applied more generally to the Russian polity (and others in the former USSR) since 1991 (Robinson, 2002, 2011; Lynch, 2005, 159-63; van Zon, 2009; Whitmore, 2010, Isaacs, 2011). It is possible to talk about Russia having had a neo-patrimonial system since 1991, because neo-patrimonialism is a flexible concept: what it describes is not a particular institutional order or definite state of

affairs within a polity in terms of rights and obligations of citizens, arrangements of social groups or economy, levels of democracy or autocracy. Neo-patrimonial systems are inherently changeable because they are combinations of legitimating practices and norms, and of forms of economic practice such as proprietorial office-holding and corruption, and rent-seeking and political and bureaucratic intervention in the economy.² In its purest form traditional patrimonialism is a type of ‘basic natural state’: relations between political actors are personal and access to economic resources are through the institutions of the state, which is itself a construct of personal relations. Basic natural states are the most simple of ‘limited access orders’ since access to wealth and power is uninstitutionalised (North, Wallis, and Weingast, 2009, 55-69). Neo-patrimonial states are still ‘natural states’/‘limited access orders’ but are more mature forms of these phenomena because in them personal ties and relations are complemented, complicated and sometimes conflicted by impersonal institutions that have some existence independent of individual political actors. These impersonal institutions are most notably a bureaucratic state machinery, the development of which pushes a part of the state away from personal relations toward more enduring hierarchies based on impersonalism; and impersonal market economic exchange, which adds additional channels to wealth to the traditional personalised access to resources through the machinery of a state constructed around its leader(s) but is otherwise quite hollow.

Neo-patrimonialism is thus a non-democratic political order that is made up of conflicting modes of organization and their legitimation rather than a particular institutional, social or economic order (Médard, 1982; Erdmann and Engel, 2006). How and in what combination these conflicting modes of organization and their justification are co-joined, and what leads to their conjunction, is a matter of material

conditions and pressures, but also of political choice and organization. As material conditions change and competition between states develop there may be pressure to develop state machineries and economic practice for development purposes, to improve domestic stability and international security, to insure resource flows that can be distributed through personal networks, and that can cope with social change. How (and whether) these pressures are dealt with is a matter of choice: a political agent in a neo-patrimonial system can place emphasis on one or more of these organizing principles to justify their policy preferences and/or to attempt to build-up their power. An agent can promote impersonal market exchange over personalised economic particularism, bureaucracy over proprietary or corrupt office-holding, some combination of these, and do so in the name of a wide range of political sentiments – nationalism, democracy, egalitarianism, etc. This means that neo-patrimonialism can have a wide variety of forms and combinations of traditional personalism, bureaucracy and economic organization.

Figure 1 about here

The quickest way to conceptualise this is graphically. Figure 1 maps out the space that neo-patrimonialism occupies between personal and impersonal modes of political legitimation, and between closed, personal access to economic wealth and more open, impersonal market forms. Neo-patrimonial polities take different forms within this space according to their combination of different legitimating principles. In each corner of this space there are four ideal-types toward which a neo-patrimonial system may veer due to material and other pressures, and political choices. A neo-patrimonial system where bureaucratic impersonalism merges with high levels of political control of the economy will tend towards a developmental state model where bureaucracy endeavours to direct development (the top left of Figure 1); where

bureaucratic impersonalism combined with impersonal market economic regulation the tendency will be towards a less directed developmental state with the bureaucracy acting not as the director of investment decisions but facilitating impersonal market relations through legal guarantees of property etc. (the top right of Figure 1). Where both impersonal markets and bureaucracy are weak the tendency will be to the traditional patrimonial ideal-type that Max Weber (1947, 622-49) originally described (bottom left of Figure 1), in which neo-patrimonial, impersonal elements are very weak. Where personal patronage is a key form of political legitimation but mixed with the form of market exchange, the tendency will be toward a form of patrimonial capitalism (bottom right of Figure 1) (Schlumberger, 2008).

There is thus much room within which politicians can manoeuvre in a neo-patrimonial polity as they try to build-up their own power and/or respond to internal and exogenous pressures to adapt. Political parties are vehicles that can support and obstruct these movements, and can play supporting or central roles in their progress. They may be created or called on to support leadership efforts to respond to pressures towards one or other of the ideal-types, or to support the political ambitions of a political entrepreneur that leads them to try to develop their power by promoting bureaucracy over traditional personalism, more market personalism over economic personalism, or *vice versa*. A politician or group may try to use a party as the organizational means of shifting the balance between different legitimating principles. In this case the character of the party contributes to the character of the neo-patrimonial regime. If it is a leader-centred vehicle for the promotion of the leaders' charismatic authority, then it will balance out impersonalism in the state bureaucracy to some degree, pulling the system down toward the bottom of the neo-patrimonial space as it is represented in Figure 1. The party will develop as an impersonal,

bureaucratised entity if it is a coalitional party that serves as a mechanism for adjudicating between interests. In this case, it may fit and complement a more impersonal form of neo-patrimonialism, moving the system up toward the top of the neo-patrimonial space in Figure 1. Alternatively, parties may support or resist some element of the neo-patrimonial mix or the whole neo-patrimonial system. In the latter case they will be anti-systemic opposition parties (of all political hues). In the case of the former, parties may represent different positions of elites within the neo-patrimonial system.

The ways in which parties are created and their ability to support or oppose leaders or factions within the neo-patrimonial system are influenced by institutional factors, by arrangements of electoral rules and cycles, and by the relationship of parties to the dominant leadership position within the neo-patrimonial system. In turn, the arrangement of parties can then influence how dominant leaders rearrange institutions. Other factors that influence party development and partisanship such as sociological cleavages will not be unimportant in the development of parties to achieve these ends, but will be secondary to institutional factors, since these will be manipulated by leaders to maximise the support that parties can give them, or to hinder opposition. Parties thus have no fixed role in a neo-patrimonial system and are not subject to a constant set of institutional pressures. Institutions are changed – and change parties – according to leadership interests, although these interests may not always be best served by the changes that they induce and as circumstance allows.

Neo-patrimonialism and Russian political parties

Hale (2010, p. 35) has argued that Russia's patronal presidency has gone from resting on 'competing pyramids' of machine/clientelistic power to resting on a 'single

pyramid' under Putin. There is some truth to this description – even allowing for the fact that there may be some divisions at the top of the pyramid since Medvedev took over from Putin as president – since there has been a simplification of the Russian party system, primarily through the alteration of rules governing party participation in elections, and this has made the Russian political system much more streamlined. This in itself is testimony to the importance of parties as a means of managing the neo-patrimonial system. This change was not inevitable but was a response to the changing needs of the neo-patrimonial system, and reflected an accumulation of pressures to change between the 1990s and the 2000s.

The neo-patrimonial system under Yeltsin

The Soviet Union had a particularly patrimonial form of communism, where personalism and clientelism significantly and simultaneously undercut and supported the formal bureaucratic hierarchies of the party-state.³ The USSR strove for political control over the economy and for ideologically-generated bureaucratic personalism, but the networks of protection and clientelism that existed within the command economy and bureaucracy meant that it fell far short of its goals and ended somewhere towards the left of Figure 1, between the traditional patrimonial and development state I ideal-types. Yeltsin's efforts to replace this form of neo-patrimonialism with some version of liberal-democratic capitalism were defeated by it and by the choices that he made over reform. The latter, ironically, enabled a form of neo-patrimonialism to survive and grow in strength. The choice of economic reform as the primary mechanism of achieving change in Russia meant that Yeltsin made the Russian political system a highly personalised one. The presidency 'needed' to be strong so that reform could be carried through, or so theory had it. The image of the

presidency that Yeltsin strove to project at the end of 1991 and start of 1992 was of national leadership beyond parties and to which parties should rally in support of the national reform effort (see, for example Yeltsin's speech in *Izvestiya*, 28 October 1991, where he argues that parties need to create a united political bloc to support him). When this did not work it justified the further strengthening of the presidency in order to compensate for the weak material conditions (a strong civil society) that Yeltsin argued were necessary to support a healthy party system (*Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 8 April 1992).

Party development thus suffered twice over, first as Yeltin ignored it, and second as attention focussed on the person of the presidency as the locus of decision-making. From very early on, and well before the consolidation of power within the presidency and the weakening of parliament through the adoption of a new Constitution, one role of political parties and public politics was to add weight to lobbying efforts rather than to act as institutions for public representation, aggregation of social preferences, office seeking organizations, or policy formulating bodies. The best example of this was Civic Union, formed in the summer of 1992 and defunct a year later to all intents and purposes (Lohr, 1993). Civic Union arose as a coalition of small parliamentary parties, business and union interests that were united around opposition to government economic reform policy. The movement fell apart and only competed ineffectually and half-heartedly in the 1993 Duma election, once the battle against the government's economic policy had been won in the main and there had been a change of government personnel to insure that politicians close to the core interests of Civic Union had entered government and were therefore able to lobby Yeltsin directly, without a mediating public institution like a party or public political movement. Yeltsin aided this process of marginalizing parties and public politics by

broadening the personnel base of his administration and increasing the number of advisory and policy-making bodies within it so as to draw political actors into the executive and away from parties (Robinson, 2000). The result was a very widely drawn administration in which bonds to the president were personal and did not have any great political or social depth (Willerton, 1998).

Institutional design then worked to support this situation after the adoption of the new Constitution and the elections to the Duma in December 1993. First, and most obviously, the new Constitution created a weak parliament. This was repeated regionally by the compromises over regional legislatures and regional power structures. The weaknesses of parties in legislatures at both federal and regional levels insured that they were secondary to executive positions, which remained the route to influence over policymaking that could be accessed without party support.

Second, the new electoral system at the federal level created multiple means of entering parliament, through the PR list system or through one of the parliament's single mandate districts elected by obtaining a plurality. This, as Regina Smyth (2006) has pointed out, sent mixed messages to potential candidates about the importance of parties as electoral vehicles. Other resources – particularly ties to local elites – were more important to candidates seeking election to parliament through the single mandate district seats so that party organization was at best left undeveloped and at worst, and all too often, was an irrelevance (Golosov, 2004).

The combination of a weak parliament and a mixed electoral system resulted in unrestrained party formation along with the emergence of pseudo-parties formed to fight in elections. The political space therefore became very crowded with electoral blocs and alliances of convenience emerging at election time alongside more stable mass parties and organizational parties formed from within government to capture a

part of the vote and generate some parliamentary support for the government. As many writers have pointed out, this meant that the electorate was supplied with a confusing array of party choices, and parties were weak as politicians' investment in them – shown by their rapid rise and decline – was often shallow (McFaul, 2001; Rose, 2001; Golosov, 2004; Hale, 2006b). With the exception of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which had history to fall back on, no party managed to consolidate its position within the electorate as a distinct social partisan (White, Rose and McAllister, 1997, 134-51).

Under these conditions the role of parties and elections was not so much to move the Russian political system in one direction or other to develop or attenuate its neo-patrimonial nature. Instead, parties and elections worked to sustain neo-patrimonialism by facilitating Yeltsin's personalist style of rule. They did this by helping to structure inter-elite bargaining (Panov, 2008, p. 58). Parties, or more usually 'party substitutes' (Hale, 2006b, 19), and accumulation of votes by them were signalling devices to the Yeltsin administration about who was in the 'game' and needed to be accommodated. The sequencing of elections reinforced this since the adopted election cycle placed presidential elections just after the Duma elections from 1995 onwards. Participation in parliamentary elections was therefore a signal about potential support in the presidential election that could be traded for. The high degree of fragmentation in the party system due to the over-supply of parties meant that there was very little danger of any party being able to construct a winning position to threaten this system in the mid-1990s. There was too much overlap among anti-systemic parties for them to be able to construct a winning position. This allowed liberal parties and government parties to maintain their opposition to one another and protect their part of the fragmented electoral space without fear of leaving power up

for grabs by extremists (Fish, 1995; Robinson, 1998). Rules on parties did not therefore need to be tightened or long-term support given to parties to control political competition. The bargaining structure created by parties and elections worked for Yeltsin, since it created a feedback mechanism to him, albeit one that might not have been that efficient.

Presidentialism and the second-order rules organising political competition that were put in place in 1993 thus reinforced personalism and helped to move the post-Soviet Russian system away from bureaucratic impersonalism as a way of legitimating power. On the vertical axis of Figure 1 then, Russia moved down, towards the traditional patrimonial ideal-type. The fact that Yeltsin's personal style of rule and coalition maintenance was supported by electoralism – the impersonal rules of the Constitution and electoral law – meant that Russia did not go too far down that axis to something approaching full-scale traditional personalism. At the same time that it moved down the vertical axis of Figure 1, Russia moved rightward away from political control of the economy. This was also a limited move since the marketization that took place across the 1990s was constrained and spatially uneven. Parties had an influence on these developments, since they were important vehicles through which elites could act, but they were not the only channels through which elites could seek to gain access to Yeltsin and influence distributional and other policy choices.

The neo-patrimonial system under and after Putin

The fragmentation of the Russian party system under Yeltsin facilitated his personal hold over office in an unstable political-economic situation, and his staying in office and style of rule helped perpetuate party fragmentation. Free and chaotic party competition and the existence of so many 'party substitutes' was an inefficient system

for reconciling the tensions between patrimonialist rule and bureaucratic social management. This tension existed because of the complex needs of Russia as a state and a society that demanded a more complex administration than could be provided by personalist presidentialism. The inherent instabilities of this system were shown by the financial crisis of 1998 and its political aftermath. The 1998 economic crisis showed that the mixture of personalism and markets did not create a stable economic basis upon which the Russian state could fulfil its functions, even at a very basic level (Robinson, 2009). The balances between personalism and state, and market and political control over the economy had to therefore be addressed. The possibility of a government having support in parliament and some autonomy from the president that had been threatened under the post-crisis prime ministership of Yevgenii Primakov showed that personalist power could be subverted, or at least exposed, because of the division of sovereignty (weak as it was) over the government between president and Duma. This division and the weakness of Yeltsin prompted a more structured elite response to the 1999-2000 electoral cycle as Yeltsin's weakness led to the formation of Fatherland-All Russia. This party was a 'party of power' formed by regional leaders rather than from central government with the aim of controlling the selection of Yeltsin's successor. The response from the centre was the creation of Unity (to replace the electorally defunct Our Home is Russia party from the 1995 elections), a 'desperate strategic move by an incumbent administration to defeat an outside challenge to its hold over the presidency' rather than a true party with distinct ideological aims, a policy agenda and organizational form and philosophy (Hale, 2004, 181).⁴

These tensions started to be dealt with following Putin's election as president in the spring of 2000, but have not been fully resolved. With the presidential issue

settled, the warring elite factions that had been represented in the December 1999 Duma elections by Unity and Fatherland-All Russia were brought together to form UR over the course of 2001. The creation of UR as a new consolidated ‘party of power’ was a case of taking advantage of the good fortune that had seen Unity ride Putin’s coat tails to electoral success in 1999 with 23% of the vote. It was easier for its creators to roll Fatherland-All Russia into Unity to create UR than to continue to resist the Kremlin, especially since the powers of regional leaders had been Putin’s first target for reform in 2000. Developing central control over the federal system was thus a condition for the creation of UR. These changes healed rifts within elites that had followed the 1998 crisis, or at least did so in the main and in public. They also expanded executive power into the Duma so that the question of sovereignty over government formation was clearly resolved in the favour of the presidency.

The future of UR was then guaranteed by changes in the laws on parties and elections. These laws have been in a state of almost constant evolution since 2001. Changes in laws regulating party competition thus mirror (as well as shape) the development of UR. The various laws passed since 2001 either directly limit, or create means to control party competition.⁵ In brief they have:

- changed the requirements for legal registration by parties; the 2001 law required 10,000 members, located in regional branches of 100 members minimum in at least half of Russia’s federal units; this was raised to 50,000 members minimum in a 2004 amendment, in branches of at least 500 members in half the federal units;
- abolished the single mandate districts and raised the threshold for securing seats in the PR list from 5 to 7%;
- banned regional parties from competing in elections to clear the way for UR at local level, effectively ending regional leaders from developing their own political machines independent of UR;
- banned electoral blocs – alliances between interest and lobby groups effectively – to limit electoral competition to formally registered parties;
- broken the linkage between parliamentary and presidential elections by resetting the electoral cycle: in the future the Duma will sit for 5 years, the president will serve for 6.

Not surprisingly, these law changes, as well as the constraints put on parties locally and the machinations of the Kremlin, have limited competition between parties and led to the effective electoral demise of some parties that had been the mainstay of the party system in the 1990s.

The short-run effect of the creation of UR and the adoption of a suite of laws limiting party competition was a greater reconciliation of the tensions between patrimonialist rule and bureaucratic social management centred on the person of Putin. The key term here is reconciliation, not resolution or removal. There were some clear political benefits from the creation of UR and its Kremlin sponsored ‘leftist’ electoral mirror, A Just Russia.⁶ The executive had more reliable partners within parliament and a means of channelling a broader range of social demands into pro-government vehicles. This was arguably very important, since it limited demands that were made on the state during the period of high oil prices. Unlike other states that have highly personalised polities, Russia did not use the resources that flowed in during an energy price spike to increase the flow of resources through patronage networks to a point of fiscal unsustainability (although arguably it was headed in that direction as state spending rose in 2006-2009). This both reflected the effort to be more bureaucratic/impersonal in management style and the narrowing of the political spectrum.

These positives aside, tensions within the neo-patrimonial system still existed and continue to exist, and UR has served to elide them rather than resolve them. It thus played a vital role in the Putin regime, one far more central than any party played under Yeltsin: it was a site in which the various elements of the neo-patrimonial system as Putin was creating it came together and was a structure to manage them, or attempt to do so. But this was not without its own contradictions. UR was successful

before it developed as an organization. Moreover, the wealth that flowed in from the hydrocarbon boom of the mid-2000s meant that it was more important for it to manage public expectations by capturing votes than it was to develop as an organization. Its underdevelopment meant that UR was a vehicle for helping the presidency and government manage neo-patrimonialism, but also that it reflected the tensions of neo-patrimonialism that needed management. On the one hand, the party was an impersonal organization, not a charismatic organization in its own right. It should have some life beyond Putin as a result, but in fact has not: it relies on Putin's charisma and appeal for its popularity whilst being distanced from that charisma. This dependence/distance is summed up by Putin's being its leader since 2008 but not a member. The party thus both conforms to the idea that a modern democratic political party should be non-charismatic, a vehicle for developing and delivering a utilitarian social programme, and at the same time cannot develop as such a vehicle. This has also made the party a transmission belt for Putin's somewhat schizophrenic vision of Russian development and not a means for resolving the tensions within his project. UR has mirrored Putin's thinking about Russian economic development and the unresolved tensions therein between increased statist control over elements of the economy and the need for a more impersonal market economy. UR thus has promoted the idea that a more neutral bureaucratic administrative system should develop in Russia and that this should be (impersonal) market-supporting, but at the same time has been part of Putin's armoury for dealing with personal disloyalty within the political system and a supporter of greater political control over the economy and the use of economic position as a reward for political loyalty.

In short, like Putin himself, UR has been pulling Russia in several directions at once.⁷ The benefits of this between 2000 and 2008 were great for Putin. He could

choose whatever strategy for himself and for UR that was most beneficial to stabilizing the regime he was creating. But this system of resolving the tensions that exist within neo-patrimonialism worked well whilst Putin was the only leader around which the suturing of its various elements had to occur, whilst exogenous pressures on the system to change were controllable, and whilst the contradictions of the system were traded-off against economic growth. All of these things were cast in doubt after Dmitrii Medvedev's election and as the rolling crisis of the international economy began around the same time. Medvedev and Putin's relations may or may not be good and comradely; that cannot be decided finally here or anywhere else as yet. But the election of a new president and Putin's sideways move to the prime ministership inevitably threw open the questions of whom the patrimonial system worked to, president or prime minister, and how far there was a tension between constitutional, impersonal order that placed president over prime minister, and Putin's personal power. If he exercised that power, was he actually making the system more patrimonial rather than holding it in balance as he had before when he was the guarantor of some resolution of the contradictions of neo-patrimonialism? Medvedev, no matter what his intentions or Putin's, fell naturally into the role of technocrat and hence opened up the gap between personal authority and constitutionally-guaranteed impersonalism that Putin held closed as President. This problem reflected back onto UR too. Was it a pro-presidential party or a Putin party? Was there a difference between the two, and if so, is it resolvable? UR did not seem to have been able to contain these tensions and resolve them. It has not been able to develop internal mechanisms and procedures for conflict resolution amongst elites and policies. These may come over time as factional activity within the party develops, but the prospects in the short-run were not good. In the meantime, in the absence of internal means of

resolving conflict, UR cannot, as Smyth et al. (2007) have argued, become a truly hegemonic party and hence perform the balancing role that Putin played as president.⁸ The absence of such mechanisms along with the problems Russia has faced made UR less effective than in the past as its relatively poor performance in the December 2011 elections showed. It was not a vehicle that dealt with economic problems as they manifested themselves over 2008-2009 and hence did not respond to electors' day-to-day concerns. Instead, the contradictions of the neo-patrimonial system were exposed. The party's electoral reliance on administrative resources and fraud became more glaring, as the parliamentary walkout following regional elections in 2009 and complaints about electoral fraud in autumn 2010 and after December 2011 show. Although these contradictions have not led to confrontations over electoral practice to the extent that was the case in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003, 2004 and 2005, and in Belarus in 2010, the exposure of malpractice is qualitatively different to the complaints about elections under Yeltsin and earlier under Putin. Then malpractice could be presented as frequent but contained to some regions and localities so that it was non-systemic; now it is clearly and unambiguously national and routinized. This raises the possibility of elections becoming ever less legitimate electoral cycle on electoral cycle and this may further hinder the development of UR as a hegemonic party: political legitimacy and authority will lay with individual actors (principally Putin) rather than collective ones (notably UR). UR's failures may thus become a vicious downwards spiral for party development, and lead to a shift towards greater personalism to ease the tensions of neo-patrimonialism.

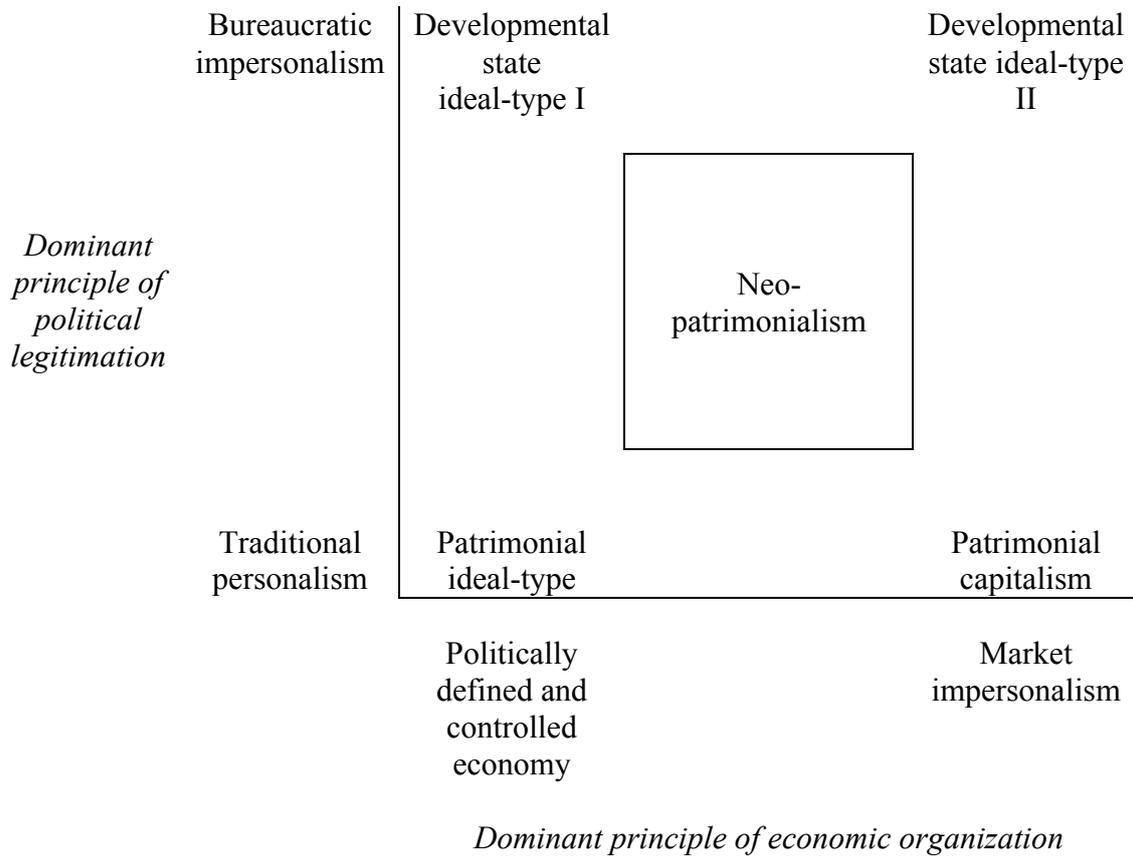
Conclusion

The roles played by political parties in Russia have changed as Russia's neo-patrimonial system and its stabilization have changed. Institutional design, particularly the design and sequencing of elections, have shaped these roles. Under Yeltsin, institutional design ensured that party influence was dispersed in a highly fragmented party system so that his personal rule was not constrained and he could work to construct support from the signals that fragmented party competition sent him. In responding to the fiscal and political problems that Yeltsin left, Putin amended electoral rules and used the fortuitous early electoral success of Unity to create a more structured system of party competition. This enabled him to legitimise his rule as more impersonal and bureaucratic than Yeltsin's, but to maintain his personal power and control at the same time. Parties, or at least UR, became more important tools than they had been under Yeltsin as a result, although they were at the same time emasculated in many important respects. This change is, however, not immutable. It may be the case that this process of control has gone too far and needs to be rolled back. Russia looks a long way from social breakdown. However, the sporadic unrest and demonstrations that have come with economic contraction and more obvious electoral fraud, and the perception (at least) of a need to move beyond UR and AJR to create institutional support for Medvedev's modernization plans, point out that the system for managing neo-patrimonialism put in place by Putin needs to find ways to adapt. It is an open question as to whether this adaptation is possible. Russia is not neatly authoritarian in the same way that Uzbekistan or Belarus are, but the ability of society to work with the political system to resolve problems has diminished from what was already a low base over the last few years. Russian society may not be able to act as a social support for moving beyond neo-patrimonialism in the near-future. This leaves within-system adaptation, which in the short-run is not

likely to be more democratic. Solutions to these dilemmas will not come from within the party system at the moment, since parties are so constrained by institutional factors, and by Putin himself in UR's case. Given these obstacles, continuity is probably the most likely outcome until such time as the electoral rules and laws on parties are changed. Some members of the Russian political establishment, most obviously Medvedev himself, have hinted that some such changes are necessary to secure modernization. This is far from being the same as the end of Russia's neo-patrimonial system, or even the beginning of its end, but perhaps, it might one day come to be seen as the end of its beginning.

FIGURE 1

THE NEO-PATRIMONIAL SPACE



Notes

¹ Statism is in quotation marks here because Putin's statism is not necessarily that empowering of the state *per se* as much as the regime under Putin. Rather, it is a simulation of state power that has particularly grown up since 2000 based on the perception that Putin is all about the state and desirous of developing its power. The quotation marks describe the gap between statist intentions and delivery of state capacity. On Putin's simulation of state power, see Holmes (2002).

² It should be noted that we are talking about neo-patrimonialism as a system here, rather than neo-patrimonialism as a narrow regime type 'in which the leader treats the state as his private fiefdom and gives only rhetorical attention to formal political institutions', cf. Brownlee, (2002), 37.

³ On patrimonial communism, see Kitschelt et al. (1999, 21-24) and Hale (2007, pp. 227-250). On the USSR's tendency to create networks of affinity and mutual support, see Urban (1985). For an analysis of how the formal system needed the 'second polity' of patronage to function, see Willerton (1992, especially 230-41) for a comparison of Soviet to other forms of patronage politics.

⁴ For details on the 1999 election and their relationship to the presidential election of 2000, see Gel'man et al. (2002). Biographies of Unity and Fatherland-All Russia can be found in McFaul et al. (2000).

⁵ For more on the law and some later rule changes, see Mikhaleva (2009, pp. 239-253 and pp. 278-285); Borisov and Zaslavsky (2005). The latter includes the text of the 2001 law on parties with its amendments to 2004. Discussions in English include Bacon (2004), Wilson (2006, 2007), and Smyth et al. (2007).

⁶ A Just Russia was created in 2006. The intention behind its formation, according to some analysts (and its leader), was to soak up votes that had in 2003 gone to the Rodina electoral bloc (barred like other electoral coalitions for the 2007 race, and rolled into A Just Russia) and to stop them from going to the CPRF or Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democrats. See Abdullaev (2006), Sestanovich (2007, p. 123), and Sakwa (2011, p. 19).

⁷ See, for example, the speech by Boris Gryzlov (2007), the Duma's chair and leader of United Russia in a speech in May 2007. United Russia, Gryzlov argued, was realising 'Putin's plan', a plan that had been around since 2000 (although only now labelled as such). The plan as Gryzlov presents it has no social philosophy behind it; it is just a series of aspirations for such things as achieving national economic competitiveness. Putin's plan, in other words, is defined in the moment and in Putin's actions, which can be statist or marketizing according to need and whatever he decides the balance between should be at a particular point in time.

⁸ As Smyth et al. (2007, p. 135) put it, the 'success or failure of the party will hinge on the development of internal party institutions that enable the party to legislate and implement policy and constrain party elites ...'.

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