

“Parties of power as authoritarian institutions: The cases of Russia and Kazakhstan”

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Abstract

I use the “authoritarian institutions” framework to explain the phenomenon of “parties of power” in Russia and Kazakhstan and to explore their role in the autocratic consolidation of the two countries’ “hybrid” regimes. I focus on two mechanisms by which these parties contribute to authoritarian stability: the first is the role they perform in collecting leaders’ popularity and channeling mass consensus through elections, often with overwhelming majorities. A second and most important function is to stabilize and institutionalize elites support and to reduce transaction costs between the ruling group and other elites (regional, economic, etc). I place particular emphasis on the party function as “monopolist of jobs”, meaning their capacity to create long-term support from other elites by providing them with a career path.

Keywords: *Party of power – authoritarian regime – Russia – Kazakhstan – elite*

Adele Del Sordi is a PhD student in Political Systems and Institutional Change at the Institute of Advanced Studies IMT in Lucca. For her PhD thesis Adele is investigating the role of so-called "parties of power" in the political process in the post-communist area, in particular in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Introduction

Russia and Kazakhstan are commonly placed on the authoritarian side of the spectrum democracy-autocracy, though with some differences in degree. In the classification proposed by Diamond (2002), the Russian regime is classified as “competitive authoritarian”, while Kazakhstan is included into the category of “hegemonic electoral authoritarianism” (Diamond, 2002, 10).

Along with strong leaders (the president Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan and the “tandem” Putin – Medvedev in Russia) the contemporary political systems of these countries are characterized by the presence of prominent executive-controlled political parties. Commonly labeled as “parties of power”¹, United Russia (*Edinaia Rossiia*) and Nur Otan dominate national parliaments, have a big and ever-increasing membership and organizational structure, and enjoy a privileged position in their political systems, as well as the support of the country leaders². Party members occupy key positions in the government and their youth organizations act as effective recruiting and mobilizing machines.

The presence of parties and elections in authoritarian regimes is conventionally explained with a need for international legitimacy and the influence of international trends in favor of democratization triggered by the end of Cold War (Gel'man 2008b; Brill Olcott 2008). However, in this as well as in other contexts, this argument alone seems not sufficient to give account of the presence of strong executive-supported parties. Parties in autocracies may as well be needed for their ability to sustain the regime (Magaloni 2008).

In this paper I see whether and how the Russian and Kazakhstani parties of powers perform similar functions. First of all, I look at the literature on authoritarian institutions for hypotheses, in particular the role of parties co-opting and coordinating elite support and mobilizing mass consensus. Then I present a reconstruction of the origins of the parties of power in Russia and in Kazakhstan, highlighting the role of ruling elites in creating and supporting these parties³. This section aims at showing the similarities between the Kazakhstani and the Russian political systems, and at underlining the peculiar inter-dependence relation existing between party and leadership. The last section is a first attempt to refer the hypotheses about the role of parties in autocracies to United Russia and Nur Otan, focusing on both elements of elite coordination and mass mobilization.

¹ Here I use the term “party of power” in its most generic definition, the one of “executive-based party”. I am not convinced of the scientific usefulness of the “party of power” as a concept, as most of its features are captured in the category of hegemonic party. For a discussion on different definitions of “party of power” see Andrey Meleshevich, *Party Systems in post-Soviet countries: a Comparative Study of Political Institutionalization in the Baltic State, Russia and Ukraine*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

² United Russia has currently a membership of almost 1.93 million. www.edinros.ru. Nur Otan has a membership of 755 743 (www.ndp-nurotan.kz). This number is only apparently small, as the population of Kazakhstan is today slightly above 15 millions (15,399,437 as of June 2009).

³ In this paper I use the terms “ruling elites” and “executives” as synonyms, to indicate the leader and his close circle of supporters.

1. Parties as authoritarian institutions

The study of non democratic types of political rule has a long tradition, which goes back to the seminal work of Juan Linz on the topic (1975). While in the 1990s, in the wake of the “third wave” of democratization, the debate on democratic transitions occupied most of the discussions among scholars in Comparative Politics, the contemporary diffusion of autocracies and the consequent feeling of uneasiness in continuing to use the “transition paradigm” have brought about a renewed attention on authoritarian regimes and their governance (see Huntington 1991 and Carothers 2002). The study of one-party rule (meaning both single-party and dominant party regimes) has received particular consideration, also in virtue of its diffusion: one-party regimes are the most common type of autocracies⁴. The other reason for such an attention is the relative stability and durability that characterize party-based regimes in comparison with other regime types, in particular military ones (Geddes 2003, Magaloni 2008)⁵.

Several hypotheses have been made on the ways parties contribute to maintaining authoritarian stability. Their functions can be grouped under two main ones: “co-opting the opposition and elite bargaining” and “building mass support” (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010: 126-128).

Co-opting the opposition and elite bargaining

The starting point of all these hypotheses is the willingness of the authoritarian leader (the “dictator”) to stay in power (Tullock 1987, Wintrobe 1998, Haber 2006). The dictator has first of all the choice of relying on repression or trying to co-opt elite groups by bestowing resources on them. In fact, elites play a pivotal role, as they can decide either to support the regime in place or to defect and support a potential opponent.

Elites can be co-opted through the promise of office or other spoils, or of policy concessions within the legislature (Gandhi & Przeworski 2006). While the role of legislature in

⁴ One-party regimes represent the 57% of authoritarian regimes during 1956-2006, and 33% of the total numbers of regimes in the world. See Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli, “Political Order and One-Party Rule”. *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010), p. 124

⁵ A cautious approach is necessary when defining this as a causal relation. As Magaloni and Kricheli suggest, it may well be that there are other reasons for party-regimes to survive for a long time, that are associated with performing these functions but not conditional to them.

authoritarian context is quite debated and has been shown to be of scarce relevance in several empirical studies (Lust-Okar 2005, 2006, Blaydes 2009), establishing a dominant party is seen as an effective way for the dictator to make “credible inter-temporal power-sharing deals with elite opponents” (Magaloni & Kricheli 2010: 127). In particular, Magaloni (2008) notes that the sheer promise of spoils, office or policy concessions does not ensure stability in the long term because it creates a perverse system of incentives. The dictator is not motivated to remain faithful to his promises and not to abuse his “loyal friends” (Magaloni 2008: 715); also, seen the lack of credibility in the dictator’s commitment to them, the elites have quite a motivation to defect and trying to seize power autonomously, as soon as they have sufficient resources. Making his commitment visible, establishing a political party is a way for the dictator to make his power-sharing deals with elites more credible and, therefore, to correct this situation (Magaloni 2006 and 2008).

In these circumstances, the position and relative strength of elite groups is crucial: they should be strong enough to have some resources and to have a potential for defection, but still be in a relatively weaker position, compared to the ruler (Magaloni 2008). The ability from both sides to “punish the other party if it decides to deviate from the joint-government arrangement” seems in fact particularly relevant in making this kind of bargaining possible and effective (Boix & Svobik 2008: 2 in Magaloni and Kricheli 2010: 127).

Also, the party of power lengthens time horizons for the dictator and elites alike by acting as a “monopolist of jobs” (Magaloni 2007: 19). To elites, the party appears as a highway for career advancements, lowering their incentives to defect both because the dictator’s long-term commitment looks more credible, and because the party creates a sort of gradualism and progressiveness in the access to spoils, office and policy deals over time. This is possible only in a situation where the party has the total control of important jobs and privileges.

Mobilizing mass support

Mass consensus is as crucial as elite support for the dictator to survive without recurring to routine repression. The literature has indicated several ways a dominant party can serve this purpose. The party machine can be first of all used as a patronage system, distributing rents to loyal supporters and enacting a “punishment regime”, leaving those who defect without privileges (Magaloni 2006). An example of this were the Communist systems, which had on the

one hand a total control of resources and positions and, on the other, an efficient espionage system which allowed to have information about individual loyalty (Magaloni 2008, Magaloni & Kricheli 2010).

Even in situations where this total control is not possible, consensus is crucial to regime stability, and the party can function as mobilizing force. In fact, consensus can be an informative signal of regime's stability: to know that the regime is widely supported assures citizens of the reliability of promises of rents (Kricheli 2008) and deters other elite groups from trying to organize against the dictators (Magaloni 2008, Hermet 1978). This explains why one-party regimes invest so much in over-winning elections, generating a large turnout and creating an image of invincibility (Geddes 2006, 2008).

Another way to generate consensus is by promoting economic growth and having the party promoting redistribution policies. The connection between economic growth and the presence of an "enlightened dictator" has actually shown to be effective in maintaining autocratic stability, though so far it has not been clarified whether this works better in one-party regimes (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010).

Finally, the activity itself of mass mobilization can serve for sustaining the regime. It does so by allowing the creation of a system of rewards for loyal party cadres who invest effort, resources and organizational skill in the process of mobilizing people for elections (Lazarev 2005, Magaloni and Kricheli 2010).

2. The establishment of “parties of power” in Russia and Kazakhstan

In the post-Soviet context, the presence of a strong government-created party has been long considered a unique characteristic of the Russian political system. The label itself of “party of power” has been created for the parties created and supported by the Kremlin since the early 1990s. On the other hand Kazakhstani politics are often described as more personalistic and non-partisan in nature, and associated to the other Central Asian republics (Gel'man 2006: 7).

Is it possible to see a common pattern in the evolution of the Russian and the Kazakhstani party systems? After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the monopoly of the Communist Party, both countries experienced a phase of proliferation of small parties in the 1990s, followed by a new phase of consolidation around a dominant party, which ended up with monopolizing the legislature as well as the political scene. This movement, attributed to the Russian case only, has been described as the “swing of a pendulum” (Gel'man 2006: 546-547). In fact, looking, as he does, to the evolutionary dynamics of the party systems of both countries, it is possible to see a similar move also in Kazakhstan. A look to the Effective Number of Parties in parliament (EPI) since 1992, for example, shows similar patterns of change, though on different levels. Table 1 reports values of this measure for the majority of post-Soviet countries since independence⁶. Both countries have quite high values of the EPI in the 1990s (between 3.96 and 6.19), while the value drops drastically in the 2000s, as a result of the emergence and increasing success of United Russia (founded in 2001) and Nur Otan (instituted in 1999). This move is effectively visualized in Table 1.

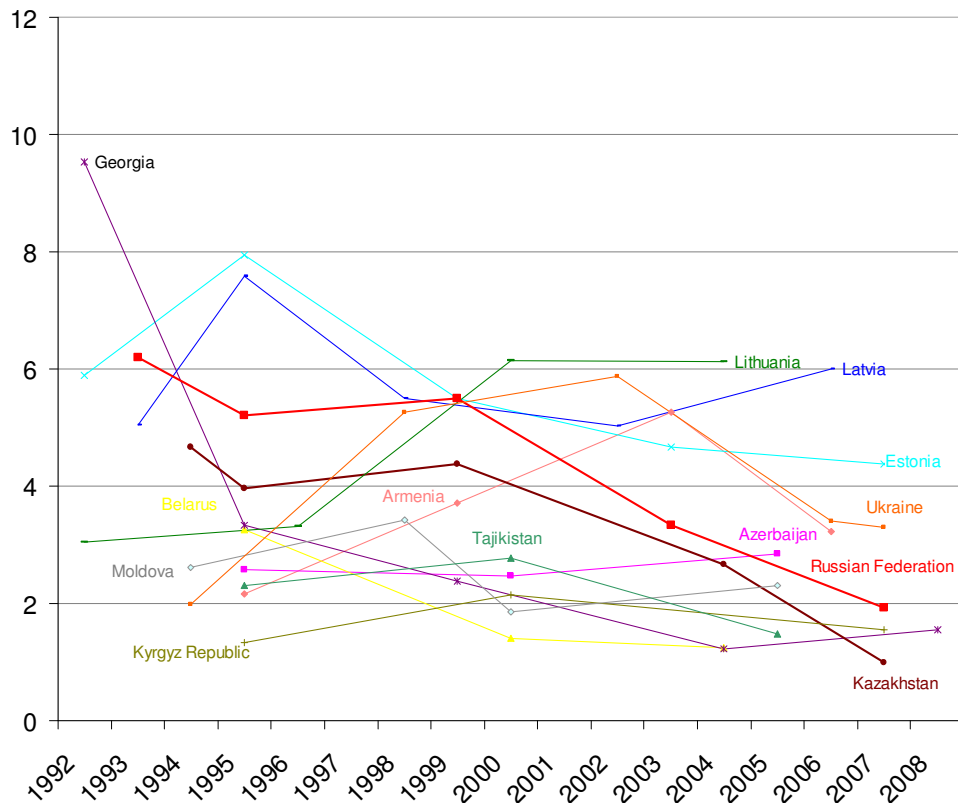
Even if in the 1990s in Kazakhstan there was not a situation of party-system “hyper-fragmentation” (Hale 2006), there were indeed a number of political parties competing in elections; and, similarly to Russia, these parties were pushed to the margins of the political scene by the emergence of Nur Otan and by the progressive weakening of oppositions. In the words of another analyst, Kazakhstan “tried pluralism and abandoned it” (Brill Olcott, 2002: 87).

⁶ The index is calculated according to the formula $1/\sum p_i^2$, where p is the proportion of seats assigned to each party as a result of an election. See Laakso and Taagepera, 1979. The source of data is H. Ersson, *Elections and Democracy after Communism?* Palgrave 2009.

Table 1 Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties in the Former Soviet Union

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Armenia				2.16				3.72				5.27			3.22		
Azerbaijan				2.57					2.46					2.84			
Belarus				3.26					1.4				1.25				
Estonia	5.9			7.95				5.5				4.67					4.37
Georgia	9.54			3.33				2.37					1.22				1.55
Kazakhstan			4.67	3.96				4.37					2.66				1
Kyrgyzstan				1.34					2.15								1.55
Latvia		5.05		7.59			5.49				5.02				6		
Lithuania					3.32				6.14				6.13				
Moldova			2.62				3.43		1.85					2.31			
Russian Federation		6.19		5.21				5.5				3.34					1.92
Tajikistan				2.3					2.77					1.47			
Ukraine			1.98				5.26				5.87				3.41	3.3	

Figure 1 Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties



In both cases the role of elites in creating and supporting the party with resources was fundamental. This becomes evident looking at the process of party-building in the 1990s: this

shows how an increasing commitment of elites paired with the increasing success of parties of power.

In **Russia**, the Kremlin engaged in party building already in the early 1990s. The elites established the first potential “parties of power” in occasion of the 1993 elections. Two parties, Russia’s Choice and the Party of Russian Unity and Accord, were created but they obtained a scarce success, gaining 15.5 percent and 6.7 percent of the vote respectively and occupying 106 out of 450 seats in the State Duma. Neither party was able to control the parliamentary agenda or to impose the will of the president on the Duma. Lacking legislative success, both parties rapidly lost membership and the support of the ruling elites.

Elites’ support, in fact, soon shifted to two other parties. For the Duma elections of 1995, the Kremlin backed the left-wing Bloc of Ivan Rybkin and the right-wing Our Home is Russia (*Nash Dom – Rossiya*, NDR). However, also these parties did not manage to establish a solid majority in the Duma. The former got only three seats; the latter, with 10.1 percent of the vote and 55 seats, was unable to oppose the major decisions of the Communist-dominated legislature. The fate of NDR was similar to its predecessors: it lost heavily in the next parliamentary elections. The main reasons for this scant success were individuated in the lack of commitment of President Yeltsin (Colton & McFaul 2000) and the scarce resources and expertise invested by the elites in these first party projects (Gel’man 2006).

A different situation was the one of the major contenders in the 1999 parliamentary elections, Unity (*Edinstvo*) and the “would-be party of power” Fatherland–All Russia (*Otechestvo – Vsyā Rossiya*, OVR), which represented the interests of regional governors (Colton & McFaul 2000). Unity in particular received the support of the Kremlin and the open endorsement of Vladimir Putin (Colton & McFaul 2000 and 2003). It received 23.3 percent of the vote, while OVR got 13.3 percent, occupying 80 and 69 seats respectively. With the further consolidation of the Russian elite around Vladimir Putin on the eve of the 2000 presidential elections, the parties established a pro-government coalition in the Duma. The centrist coalition of four factions and groups (Unity, OVR, Russia’s Regions, and People’s Deputy) controlled a firm majority of 235 out of 450 Duma seats. United Russia originated in December 2001 as a result of the merge between Unity, OVR, and Russia’s Regions (Gel’man, 2002).

United Russia was the major winner of the 2003 parliamentary elections, primarily due to the strong endorsement from the president, Vladimir Putin. Together with latent coalition politics

with minor parties and independent candidates in single-member districts this led to unexpected results: United Russia got only 37.8% in party list voting but in the State Duma received more than 2/3 of seats, and thus formed a “manufactured over-majority” (Golosov 2005, 108-119).

Ruling elites continued to support the party of power also later, by implementing a series of reforms aimed at preserving the central position of the party of power monopoly on the Russian political scene. In 2005 the threshold to enter the parliament was increased from 5% to 7%, and the parties received strong incentives to merge rather than to form coalitions as electoral coalitions were prohibited (Hale 2006). Registration of new parties became more difficult, requiring a higher number of members (from 10,000 to 50,000) and of regional branches (in two thirds rather than in half of the subjects of the Federation) (Gel'man 2008).

Also the abolition of popularly elected regional governors enhanced the positions of the party of power, as reduced the influence of the powerful but divided regional elites in favor of the party of power (Gel'man 2006).

United Russia obtained impressive results in the 2007 Parliamentary elections: 64.30% and 315 seats. It also dominates in the regions, being present in 83 regions, and dominating in 81. In many cases it has the two thirds of seats.

In **Kazakhstan**, the first attempt to create a presidential party to be the functional equivalent of the banned CPSU took place in 1992, when Nursultan Nazarbayev, former Secretary of the Kazakhstani Communist Party and nominated to the office of President, sponsored the creation of the Union of People's Unity (SNEK), later renamed the People's Unity Party (PNEK) (Brill Olcott, 2002: 93).

In the first elections to the new parliament in March 1994, the PNEK got only 32 seats of the 135 available. The others were divided between the People's Congress Party of Kazakhstan (22 seats), the Socialist Party (12 seats), the Federation of Trade Unions (12 seats) and deputies from fourteen different groups. This parliament was dismissed in March 1995. The reason was a constitutional court decision which ruled that the parliamentary elections of one year prior were invalid due to administrative irregularities involving the vote counting process (Brill Olcott, 2002: 92). Following nine months of a handpicked “People's Assembly” to succeed the parliament in an interim period, new elections were held in December 1995 and saw PNEK acquiring a slightly steadier position in the legislature.

In 1999 the unsuccessful PNEK was abandoned in favor of a new potential party of power, Otan (Fatherland), founded by the former Prime Minister Tereshchenko to put forward the presidential choices in the upcoming legislative elections. In the same years other parties sponsored by elites started to emerge: it is the case of the Civil party, founded in 1998 by influential businessmen, including those in the Eurasia group, in order to protect their business interests in the Parliament; it is also the case of Asar, set up by the daughter of President Nazarbayev, Dariga, to promote her political ambitions and promote a basis for her political authority (Kennedy 2007). These parties eventually decided to incorporate into Otan in 2006, confirming the trend toward the concentration of the Kazakhstani party system. The resulting party, Nur Otan, which loosely translates as "Fatherland's Ray of Light", dominated the parliament after 2007 (Bowyer, 2008: 6). In the Majilis elections of 2007 it received 88.41% of the votes and all the seats⁷.

What emerges from this brief account is how crucial was the role of executives in creating and supporting the party of power. Ruling elites were active in creating and supporting parties through several means, including “administrative resources”, privileged access to media and institutional change. The role of this last element, or “institutional engineering”, as it has been called, is particularly relevant (Gel'man 2008). Electoral rules were changed ad hoc, in order to create a higher barrier for new political actors and favor the party of power⁸.

Secondly, it is evident that a relation of interdependence exists between the party and ruling elites. The power of the party seems to be only “virtual” (Wilson 2006, Roberts 2010). The ease elites showed in investing in a new party project when the previous one failed is a sign of this asymmetric relation. This situation is partially caused by the party origins in the executive branch of the State (see Likhtenshtein 2002, Roberts 2010). The priority for party-building elites is to stay in power: therefore, they are careful in keeping a balance between having a party that is

⁷ The election results are available on the website of the Central Electoral Commission of Kazakhstan. http://election.kz/portal/page?_pageid=153,511661&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL.

⁸ In both countries a 7% threshold exists, and a high number of signatures is required for party registration: 50000 in Kazakhstan, as established by the 2002 Law on Political Parties. See Vladimir Gel'man, “Party Politics in Russia: From Competition to Hierarchy”. *Europe-Asia Studies*, Volume 60, Issue 6 August 2008, p. 913 - 930 and Hans Oversloot and Ruben Verheul “Managing Democracy: Political Parties and the State in Russia”. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 22, 3 (2006): 383–405

a powerful and efficient tool of rule and avoiding that the same party develops as an autonomous source of power⁹.

Other elements that can be interpreted as a sign of dependence of the party from ruling elites are the aforementioned extensive use of State resources by the party and the strong association with leaders' popularity. In particular, United Russia and Nur Otan seem to gain most of their popularity from the endorsement they receive from their country leaders. Putin never accepted to become the leader of United Russia while he was the President of Russian Federation: nevertheless he always supported the party, and his high approval rating was always "a major resource for the party of power" (Gel'man, 2006: 8). Eventually, after stepping out of the presidency and becoming Prime Minister, he accepted the role of party leader. In 2008 Medvedev addressed United Russia as the 'ruling party' at its Tenth Party Congress¹⁰. Nur Otan, on the other end, openly defines itself the party "of President Nazarbayev", as it is possible to read on its website and party program¹¹.

On the other hand, it seems that the party performs functions which may be crucial for regime survival and durability. In the next sections I investigate these functions according to hypotheses drawn from the "authoritarian institutions" literature, as discussed in section one.

⁹ By this I mean the transfer of power from leader to the party and the consequent creation of a one-party dominant political system. For the Russian case this possibility was proposed by Jonathan W. Riggs and Peter J. Schroeder (2005). "Russia's Political Party System as a (Continued) Impediment to Democratization: The 2003 Duma and 2004 Presidential Elections in Perspective" in *Demokratizatsiya*, 2005.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3996/is_200501/ai_n13640850/

¹⁰ It is possible to watch Medvedev's address to United Russia in occasion of the Tenth Party Congress at <http://rutube.ru/tracks/1219630.html?v=ea97dbd1514fea1e29dbe2b6042bea41>

¹¹ The party program can be found on <http://www.ndp-nurotan.kz/new/documents/Program.pdf>

3. United Russia's and Nur Otan's authoritarian functions

Elite co-optation and bargaining

Do United Russia and Nur Otan contribute to sustain the regime through elite bargaining and co-optation?

There are a few studies on the emerging party-based regime in Russia that seem to confirm this impression (Gel'man 2008, Reuter & Remington 2009).

In a perspective that highly resonates with the hypotheses introduced at the beginning, Reuter and Remington (2009) present party-building as the solution to a two-sided commitment problem between the leader and his inner circle and the other political elites, including “regional and local chief executives, prominent businesspeople, aspiring politicians, and opinion leaders from the professions” (Reuter and Remington 2009: 506). United Russia has shown to have several advantages for both sides: “reduce transaction costs for elites in bargaining over policy, give career opportunities to ambitious politicians, manage conflict and succession struggles among elites, mitigate uncertainty for elites over whom to support, and coordinate electoral expectations on the part of elites and voters” (Reuter & Remington 2009: 503). Its benefits, moreover, were a sufficient incentive for political elites and the inner circle alike to face the inherent set of costs and risks connected with it, and to “become hostages to the party’s collective fortunes” (Reuter & Remington 2009: 509). Reuter (2010) has convincingly shown how possessing resources and being in a relative position of strength rather than weakness influenced the decision of Russia’s regional governors to join United Russia after 2003.

The function of the party as a “monopolist of jobs” (Magaloni 2007: 19) is particularly interesting. Magaloni posits that a dominant party could ensure a better support for the regime by providing a career avenue for loyal elite members.

In Russia, indeed a United Russia *cadres* reserve of bureaucrats has been formed¹². A project of the party, it mirrors in concept and structure an initiative of President Medvedev, the *rezerv upravliaiushikh kadrov* (reserve of managing *cadres*). This includes 600 profiles of young (under fifty years of age), qualified people, active in politics as well as in the business sector and

¹² The project started in October 2010. The website of the project is <http://profkomanda.edinros.ru/>

civil society¹³. The motivation for such an initiative was the necessity to establish an efficient and reliable system for individuating and promoting talented individuals in the ranks of bureaucracy and government administration.

If we think of United Russia as a monopolist of jobs, we would expect some overlap between the party reserve and the Presidential one: it would mean that the party takes an active part in selecting future leaders and bureaucrats, and confirm the impression that being involved in the party-of-power is a useful requisite in order to pursue a career in state administration and politics. However, a first analysis of the composition of these two lists reveals that the overlap is minimal: only 38 of the 600 members of the Presidential Reserve are also part of the United Russia equivalent. The Presidential Reserve also includes a number (33) of United Russia MPs, and 25 high party officials¹⁴. This limited number shows that the party contributes only in minimal part to the selection of future state bureaucracy, at least through this channel.

Of course this is not enough to definitively rule out the possibility that party membership might be at least a useful tool for one's career in government or bureaucracy. The lack of data on central membership, though, make this a quite complex and time-consuming investigation.

Another example of the party partial involvement in leaders' selection is the selection of regional governors. In the first three years of his mandate (since May 2008), Medvedev has proceeded to substitute about one third of the 83 heads of the federal subjects. While the official motivation for such a change was an attempt to rejuvenate and the local leadership, in accord with to the 'modernization' agenda of the President, this has been also the occasion to replace influential local politicians (who still had "converted" to United Russia) with loyal party men. Of the 34 governors replaced by Medvedev, 32 were nominated in representation of United Russia (the other two are nonpartisan). More interestingly, since the spring of 2009, the party has been allowed to propose nominations for the vacant governors' seats¹⁵.

While the number of governors who are at the same time "*edinorossy*" has not significantly changed, the type of party affiliation has. Many of the replaced governors (and of

¹³ The complete list can be find at <http://www.vz.ru/information/2009/2/17/257358.html>

¹⁴ Members of the Party executive bodies, such as the Higher Council and the General Councils. Many (21) of these party top officials are actually also parliamentarians.

¹⁵ This was a result of a series of reforms proposed by Medvedev in December 2008. According to the law, this is a privilege of parties who have the majority in the regional Parliament. The nominations, though, cannot be done on local level but on federal level. This is the reason why some analysts saw the reform as a possible way for the central party, or even for Putin to influence the nominations. See Natalia Kostenko, 110 *dnei na vyborakh*, Vedomosti n. 243, December 23 2008.

the ones still in power since the 1990s) had joined United Russia as a result of a process of negotiation and bargaining with the centre, in which both sides gave up some of their influence and power in order to gain stability (of their position, for the governors, of the regime, for the centre) (Reuter 2010). Many of the new governors are “new” people, in some cases selected from the cadres reserve, and who built their career as “business-bureaucrats” or within the party ranks.

The role of parties, as well as other institutions such as elections and parliaments, can be seen as a tool of regime stability also for Kazakhstan. In particular, the party’s role seems the one to create and maintain a balance between different influence groups, or “clans”: powerful “power brokers” including family kinships, regional networks and economic elites who have the control of resources and sometimes of “whole sectors of the economy” (Starr 2006)¹⁶.

Referring to all of the Central Asian republics, Starr sees the party as a tool for leaders to emancipate themselves from the control of these power brokers without upsetting the internal balances on which their rule depended. Starr sees as crucial the moment when the Central Asian leaders, including Nazarbayev, went back to power after Gorbachev’s attempt to break local power networks in the last years of the Soviet Union (Starr 2006: 8-10). These groups allegedly played a crucial role in the return to power of the leader, consequently creating a condition of dependence and weakness. Elections and parties are the tools that the leader uses to correct this situation. In particular, elections would serve the useful purpose of “engaging the populace with the president’s programs and ratifying the presidents’ general course” (Starr 2006: 11). The control guaranteed by election management and by a political party would ensure that the elective principle does not undermine the fragile presidencies and not interfere with the “deals” on which those presidencies depended.

The perspective of weak Central Asian leaders and regimes, totally hostage of these “clans”, is not totally convincing, especially as far as Kazakhstan is concerned. The conditions of State weakness and under-government that Starr assumes are not in place. Moreover, Nazarbayev does not seem the mere keeper of a delicate balance between different elite needs, a *primus inter pares* among equally powerful actors, or a coordinator. His control of the State apparatus is much more pervasive.

¹⁶ Here I use Starr’s wide definition of “clans”, including different power groups.

Still, the image of inter-dependence between leader and elites at large – the “clans” – and of the party as a tool used by the leader to maintain the balance between potentially centrifugal forces and keep it in his favor is persuasive. The relative influence of different groups (clans vs economic elites) and the mechanisms by which the party performs this co-optation function remain to be seen, though.

As far as the role of Nur Otan as monopolist of job, the complete lack of central data on membership make this task particularly difficult. However, a recent study on party formation (Isaacs 2011) has highlighted dynamics that seem to follow this pattern. On the one hand, party membership seems necessary to maintain one’s position or advance in one’s career, and it is often “proposed” by employers. In particular, Akims (local district heads) seem to use their large appointment power to ensure that people join the ‘right’ party, (namely, the president’s one). On the other hand, Nur Otan is often portrayed as a “*viable framework for career development*”: many people consider being part of a “*party of bureaucrats*” as an advantage and a possibility for a fast career (Isaacs 2011: 107, quotes from interviews).

Mass mobilization

As seen in the first section, there are several ways political parties can be used to mobilize citizenship and achieve at least some genuine consensus for the regime, including establishing a “punishment regime”, having the party carrying on campaigns and mobilizing activities during elections and making sure that the leader’s and regime popularity (also due to economic success) translate in electoral support. Finally, party officials’ loyalty can also be evaluated on the basis of the zeal and effort displayed in mobilizing consensus.

While there is no evidence of a wide-scale Communist-style “punishment regime” being in place, in both countries the parties are primary actors in campaigning, especially through their active local branches and youth organizations (*Nashi* and *Molodaya Gvardia* in Russia, *Zhaz Otan* in Kazakhstan)¹⁷.

¹⁷United Russia has about 55000 local branches, in all 89 regions; Nur Otan has local representations in all the 15 administrative districts. <http://www.ndp-nurotan.kz> and www.edinros.ru

Campaigns are carefully organized, and participation encouraged, so that to achieve a higher turnout. Just as in Soviet times, low levels of participation feared and fought against (Pravda 1978). There is also an evident worry of party organizers to achieve very high results, also recurring to electoral fraud (Myagkov, Ordeshook & Shakin 2009). The party seems to be very conscious of these results and consider its responsibility not only to win but to over-win. United Russia has dominated in the Parliamentary elections of 2003 and, even more, 2007 and in the regional elections in 2004-2006 and 2009, and is expected to do anything in its power to repeat the performance in the upcoming March 13th regional elections¹⁸. The party rhetoric emphasizes the efforts put by the party, describing the successful campaigns as “model” ones (*obrascovye*) and praising the party electoral strategies (Ivanov 2009: 80-85). Even results are presented in a way that emphasizes achievement and competition between party officials rather than victory over an adversary: for example the regions where UR received very high percentages of votes in the 2004-2006 regional elections cycle were called *otlychniki*, “outstanding students” (Ivanov 2009:125). Regional party officials seem to compete for getting firmer victories, with results that are definitely above the majorities needed. Possibly, the correspondent party branches are rewarded accordingly, confirming the impression that the mobilizing activity serves to maintain and entice internal discipline as well as achieving solid electoral results.

In Kazakhstan as well the party of power receives impressive percentages of vote, as a result of genuine popular consensus as well as less legitimate techniques. A preoccupation for giving an image of invincibility also seems to be in place, and it is actually delivered: as mentioned before, the total of the seats in the parliament is currently occupied by Nur Otan members.

The use of so-called “administrative resources” gives the party of power a crucial advantage in organizing and winning elections¹⁹. These can be defined as the ability of political

¹⁸ In a recent interview, Alexei Titkov, an analyst with the Institute for Regional Politics, declared that the ruling party's "main competitor at the elections will be its own result". The context is the upcoming regional elections, where United Russia expects to lead the vote but with lower percentage (less than 50%). See Alexandra Odynova, “United Russia in Key Test for Votes” *The Moscow Times*, March 11th 2011 <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/mobile/article/united-russia-in-key-test-for-votes/432343.html>

¹⁹ The term “administrative resources” is used almost exclusively in reference to the Russian case. The first to use of the term was Dimitri Ol’shanskij, Director of the Centre of Strategic analysis and forecasts of Moscow in August 1995. He included “adminresursy” into a series of indicators used to evaluate parties and blocs competing in the following parliamentary elections. See “*Slovar Russkogo Publichnogo Yazyka Dvadcatogo Veka*”, published on

candidates and parties to use their official positions or connections to government institutions to achieve party objectives, including “the development of party infrastructure and/or participation in elections” (Meleshevich 2007: 196).

Resources are used first of all to distribute various goods among voters, in a fashion common also in democratic systems; an example is the Kremlin increasing public spending just before the 1999 elections (Colton & McFaul, 2000: 208 and 213). In Kazakhstan, the general association between regime, political stability and economic performance may also serve as mobilizing force²⁰.

Most interestingly, these resources are used to suppress opposition by unfair political competition or eliminating competition. Smyth argues that Kremlin’s parties of power chose almost always the second solution, because of their need to get results in the short term while investing relatively little into the process of party building (Smyth 2004). Resources include funding, support networks on regional level, personnel and structures of administration, relations with business people and privileged access to state media (Colton & McFaul, 2000, Gel’man 2006).

Privileged access to State media can be also included in this list. The presence of a bias in favor of the Kremlin’s parties in State media, and its effects on Russian electoral results have been shown by several empirical studies (Oates & Roselle 2000; White, McAllister & Oates 2002; White & McAllister 2006). For Kazakhstan, an analysis of OSCE media monitoring reports has shown the news coverage during electoral campaign to be regularly and extensively in favor of Nur Otan (as well as its predecessors), both in terms of time allocated and in tone, generally positive or neutral (Del Sordi 2010: 22-23).

Another factor of the electoral success of the party of power is the choice to rely on a vague and all-embracing ideology (Gel’man 2006: 10). Both United Russia and Nur Otan can be considered “catch-all” parties²¹. United Russia’s founding values are the vague ideas of

Kommersant-Vlast, 23 June – 23 September 2003. Retrieved on January 23 2010 from <http://krotov.info/history/20/1950/history.html>.

²⁰ These achievements are usually associated with Nazarbayev, thus the role of Nur Otan might be simply the one of collecting such popularity for parliamentary elections and propagating further presidential plans. The “stratospheric” popularity of Nazarbayev and its connection with economic growth and political and interethnic stability was recently confirmed in a popular survey, conducted by the Strategy Center of Social and Political Studies, based in Almaty. See Joanna Lillis, Nazarbayev Adored as Kazakhs Eye Kyrgyz Strife with Suspicion on Eurasianet, August 17th 2010. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61758>

²¹ Catch-all parties’ aim is to reach “a wider audience and more immediate electoral success” (184). The concept was introduced by Kirchheimer in his study of post-war European democracies. Otto Kirchheimer. “The

modernization, patriotism and social conservatism that are sometimes summarized by the term “Putinism”; Nur Otan appeals to generally shared humanistic ideas as ethnic tolerance, the social and spiritual well-being of citizens, combined with a vague endorsement of economic and political reform and some reference to “Eurasianism” (Brill Olcott, 2008).

Gel'man underlines the advantages of occupying such a centrist position in the political spectrum, in particular in a context like the Russian one, where the role of ideology has shrunk²². Gel'man notes how United Russia has located itself on the “zero point on the left-right continuum between pro-statist and pro-market parties”, as well as on other ideological axes. This “median-voter” position allowed United Russia “wide room for political maneuvering that was unavailable for the disunified segments of the opposition”, too distant to create an anti-regime coalition (Gel'man 2006: 10-11). Centrism is considered an asset also by Regina Smyth, who argues that the success of the party of power is actually “contingent” on its ability to portray itself as a centrist organization (Smyth 2002: 558).

These parties also gain a large part of their success from the leaders' popularity. Both Nur Otan and United Russia enjoy the support of their presidents and rely on it for their success. As seen, Putin endorsement was a decisive factor in determining Unity's success, and this support continued when United Russia took over, constituting “a major resource for the party of power” (Gel'man, 2006: 8). Nur Otan also enjoys Nazarbayev's personal popularity: differently from Putin, the president is actually a party member and has even mentioned his intention to endow it with some of his powers (Shaymergenov 2007: 7). In turn, Nur Otan openly defines itself as the party “of President Nazarbayev”, as it is possible to read on its website and party program²³.

Transformation of the Western European Party Systems”, in Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966

²² See Steven Hanson, ‘Instrumental Democracy: The End of Ideology and the Decline of Russian Political Parties’, in Vicki L. Hesli and William M. Reisinger (eds.), *The 1999-2000 Elections in Russia: Their Impact and Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.163-185.

²³ The party program can be found on <http://www.ndp-nurotan.kz/new/documents/Program.pdf>

Conclusion

The “authoritarian institutions” perspective seems a fruitful one to understand the role of United Russia and Nur Otan in their political systems. It is not clear yet whether these systems are going to transform into party-based autocracies, and probably it will not happen, given the asymmetric nature of the relationship existing between party and “power”, i.e. the ruling elites.

The recent establishment of a People’s Front in Russia could possibly be the sign of a future decision to discard United Russia and is, surely a powerful reminder that party institutions in this context receive most of their living essence from the top.

United Russia and Nur Otan, however, do perform certain functions to sustain regime stability, and these are worth further investigation.

On the elite coordination side, the emergence of a party of power as the solution of a commitment problem is a promising avenue of research, though I think it should be balanced with other elements, such as (to mention one) the familiarity of post-soviet leaders with one-party rule.

The role of parties of power as “monopolists of jobs” is particularly interesting, also because of the influence of the Soviet legacy: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was indeed performing a similar function, granting social mobility only to (loyal) party members.

From the preliminary analysis presented in this paper, it seems that this could be the case in both countries, but this should always be balanced with the presence of an asymmetrical relation between the party and the ruling elites supporting it.

The mobilizing function of parties of power is the most explored so far, but it also offers promising avenues for future research: the role of youth organizations in mobilizing and creating loyalty for the regime and the internal competition among party officials for getting “better” electoral results seem particularly relevant.

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