

The Origins of United Russia and the Putin Presidency: The Role of Contingency in Party-System Development

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Social science has generated an enormous amount of literature on the origins of political party systems. In explaining the particular constellation of parties present in a given country, almost all theoretical work stresses the importance of systemic, structural, or deeply-rooted historical factors.¹ While the development of social science theory certainly benefits from the focus on such enduring influences, a smaller set of literature indicates that we must not lose sight of the critical role that chance plays in politics.² The same is true for the origins of political party systems.

This claim is illustrated by the case of the United Russia Party, which burst onto the political scene with a strong second-place showing in the late 1999 elections to Russia's parliament (Duma), and then won a stunning majority in the 2003 elections. Most accounts have treated United Russia as simply the next in a succession of Kremlin-based "parties of power," including Russia's Choice (1993) and Our Home is Russia (1995), both groomed from the start primarily to win large delegations that provide support for the president to pass legislation.³ The present analysis, focusing on United Russia's origin as the Unity Bloc in 1999, casts the party in a somewhat different light. When we train our attention on the party's beginnings rather than on what it wound up becoming, we find that Unity was a profoundly different animal from Our Home and Russia's Choice. Unlike these parties of power, Unity's chief aim was *not* to provide representation for the president in parliament but to be a decoy in the war to defeat the virulently anti-Kremlin Fatherland–All Russia Party, drawing away enough votes for the latter to finish below political expectations. That is, Unity was a *presidential election tactic*, not primarily a parliamentary party project. Its success in the Duma race, especially shocking to its creators, was a largely unintended, though

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certainly welcome, side effect. This side effect was itself the result of an extraordinary set of highly contingent events that all converged to bolster Unity's fortunes. In fact, only after the Kremlin realized that it had been quite lucky to defeat its presidential rivals in Fatherland–All Russia and that Unity had been key to its success in doing so, did Kremlin forces begin to turn Unity into what they hoped would be an enduring, well-developed political party to represent presidential interests across the land—United Russia. A highly contingent campaign tactic and a congeries of unusual events wound up unexpectedly producing one of the two major parties that defined Russia's party system from 1999 into the next decade.

The Challenger: Fatherland–All Russia

Once Our Home is Russia leader Viktor Chernomyrdin was fired in early 1998 from his role as prime minister, Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov seized the initiative to try and build an opposition party based on the ruins of Chernomyrdin's coalition of regional leaders (here called "governors" for simplicity's sake) and other political notables known as the Our Home is Russia Party.⁴ Among provincial leaders, Luzhkov was extraordinarily well positioned to initiate such an effort, possessing unparalleled stocks of administrative capital. Naturally, these began with his job as the leader of Russia's political and economic capital, Moscow, a post that brought high visibility and national power to its occupant, even during Soviet times.⁵

Upon becoming mayor in 1992, Luzhkov wasted no time consolidating a wrestler's grip on the city's enormous economy. He proved to be a master of managing the post-Soviet transition, effectively turning Russia's most diverse and complex economy into what Ortung has categorized as a "single-company town" dominated by the Sistema Group that his city of Moscow founded.⁶ Through the privatization process and other maneuvers, Sistema acquired more than one hundred companies during the 1990s, including several banks, electronics firms, media outlets, the Moscow city telephone system, the Rosno insurance group, and ventures like Intourist and the glistening underground Manezh Mall, which were geared largely to Moscow's tourism industry. Its affiliated banks included the Bank of Moscow, the official municipal bank. This bank processed 30–40 percent of the municipality's resources and conducted extensive business with other key banks handling city business, including Most Bank. Other important Sistema banks included Guta Bank, the Moscow Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Promradtechbank, and Sverdlovsky Gubernsky Bank.⁷ Luzhkov's administration kept a finger in a vast number of his city's economic pies, giving him a great deal of political influence.

Luzhkov creatively used his control over the capital's economy to build ties and influence with the leaders of a large number of Russian provinces. Since the USSR had managed the country almost entirely out of Moscow, virtually all communications, transportation, and other economic infrastructure tended to radiate out from Moscow to Russia's other regions. One of Luzhkov's most powerful levers was his cozy relationship with many of the country's most powerful banks, virtually all of which were headquartered in Moscow, and most of which had

important relationships, directly or indirectly, with other Russian regions. The Sistema banks led the way, having gained rapidly in national standing after the August 1998 financial crisis. Whereas some banks like Menatep and Inkombank were hit hard by these events, Sistema's Guta bank, the Moscow Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Promradtechbank, and Sverdlovsky Gubernsky Bank had not been heavily invested in the GKO (state security) pyramid. Guta Bank CEO Artem Kuznetsov said that his bank had considered this market too risky.⁸ These resources enabled Luzhkov to become an important source of patronage for poorer Russian regions.

Luzhkov's post as the capital city's mayor also endowed him with certain advantages in the sphere of mass media. For one thing, his alliance with Most Group had the benefit of extending positive news coverage of the mayor across many of Russia's regions through Most's NTV television network and publications like the daily newspaper *Segodnia*.⁹ Taking to heart the immense power of nationwide television in getting Yeltsin reelected in 1996, Luzhkov sought not only to influence other people's broadcast resources but also to build up his own. In June 1997, a new television network hit the airwaves under the control of the Moscow city government. This network, known as TV Center, sought to expand into the regions, reaching many major cities by the time of the 1999 election. Headed by Luzhkov ally Sergei Yastrzhembsky, most analysts considered this station to serve little function other than as a vehicle for the mayor's presidential ambitions. The capital's boss simultaneously began expanding his influence over print media, ultimately winning the loyalty of the longstanding and popular *Moskovskii Komsomolets, Rossiia* (created March 1998), and *Metro* (founded in 1997 and distributed weekly, free of charge), as well as the intellectually oriented *Literaturnaia Gazeta*. He also gained control of the *Moskovskaia Pravda* printing press, which potentially gave him influence over papers printed there.¹⁰

In the late 1990s, Luzhkov began staking out platform territory, playing most prominently on nationalist themes. He railed against Russia's recognition that Sevastopol, a key port for the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet, was part of Ukraine. He called for Russia to send arms to Serbian-led forces if NATO launched a ground war in Kosovo in early 1999.¹¹ He declared that reunification with Russians and Russian-speakers (*rossiiane*) in the "near abroad" should be a national goal.¹² He advocated consolidating Russia's eighty-nine regions into ten to thirteen provinces, implying that there would no longer be federal regions designated as homelands for particular ethnic minorities like the Tatars.¹³

Luzhkov reserved some of his most blistering words for the Yeltsin administration, however. Though he usually avoided attacking the president personally, he lambasted economic "shock therapy" and what he said was corrupt privatization that had transferred important state assets to the control of a criminal oligarchy. Pro-Luzhkov media, notably NTV, popularized the now-common usage of the term "the Family" to refer to Yeltsin's inner circle, thereby casting them as a mafia-like syndicate.¹⁴ He went as far as to say that the state should actually renationalize some of these properties, reallocating their shares to those who suffered losses in the process of the original privatization scheme.¹⁵ His own

movement, he declared, would stake out a popular middle ground, what analysts sometimes called the “left-center” between the far-left Communists and the political “right” occupied by the Yeltsin administration and parties like Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces. His opposition to Yeltsin led him to promise that he would eventually take power away from the institution of the presidency, transforming Russia into a parliamentary state.¹⁶ In 1998, he began converting these investments into a political party that he called Fatherland.

At first, Kremlin officials saw little reason to worry, since most governors were reluctant to cede leadership to a person they saw as a chief rival for revenues and investment. The critical turning point came on August 17, 1999, when Luzhkov cemented an alliance with two other major players. The most important was former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov who, at the time, was widely regarded as Russia’s most popular politician since he had been premier while Russia’s economy weathered the financial storm of 1998 and began to recover by 1999. Fired suddenly by Yeltsin in the spring of 1999, he had also been wooed by the Communists. With Primakov on board, other Russian governors were more willing to join the Luzhkov bandwagon. This meant the “All Russia” alliance of some of the country’s most powerful (and often most autocratic) governors, including Tatarstan’s Shaimiev and Bashkortostan’s Rakhimov, who were sure bets to deliver large shares of the vote for their collaborators. Instantly, most pundits projected an outright victory for this “Fatherland–All Russia,” with some fearing the advent of a newly one-party state in Russia.

The Kremlin Strikes Back

The fact that all of these disparate and ambitious politicians had managed to come together so forcefully sounded alarm bells throughout many Kremlin structures. Despite the Communist Party’s failure to bring Primakov into their fold, even its leadership began suggesting that it could back Primakov in the presidential race should he perform sufficiently well in the Duma race and promise to give more power to the parliament, where the Communists were counting on a strong delegation.¹⁷ Most worrying to Yeltsin’s coterie, however, were suggestions and even outright declarations that even the president himself could be prosecuted for wrongdoings committed during his tenure.¹⁸ This Yeltsin “court” was usually said to include powerful insiders who had effectively run the country during Yeltsin’s long bouts with debilitating illness, alcoholism, and depression. Chief among these figures were Yeltsin’s daughter, Tatyana Dyachenko; oil magnate Roman Abramovich; “oligarch” Boris Berezovsky; presidential administration chief Aleksandr Voloshin; powerful railroads minister and erstwhile first deputy prime minister Nikolai Aksenenko; and other senior administration officials, including Igor Shabdurasulov and Valentin Yumashev.¹⁹ Each of these figures owed their massive opportunities for wealth or power largely to Yeltsin and stood to lose everything and to face possible criminal prosecution should the Primakov-Luzhkov team capture power.

Luzhkov sensed the danger in pushing the Kremlin to desperation, but he also saw the electoral benefit to be gained from continuing to attack its corruption.

Thus, while roundly criticizing the administration generally, he proposed various ways of providing Yeltsin, although Yeltsin alone, with future security. For example, in June 1999, he suggested that all retiring presidents should become members for life of the Federation Council, a status that would grant them immunity from criminal prosecution.²⁰ Themselves unprotected, many of Yeltsin's closest circle of advisors and officials began devising ways to bring down the Fatherland–All Russia juggernaut. Their first set of attempts, trying to undermine gubernatorial cooperation by proposing multiple counter-coalitions for governors, had failed as of August 1999. Their more aggressive efforts in fall 1999 proved much more effective. These efforts are elaborated in what follows.

The Mass Media Assault

During summer 1999, Kremlin officials began a series of moves to prepare for a media war. The aim was not simply a negative campaign to reduce the popularity of Fatherland–All Russia in the electorate but to destroy the focal point that had allowed Russia's powerful governors to agree on a coalition to

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capture the Kremlin. The ultimate target was Primakov, but the Kremlin's strategy was first to blast Luzhkov so as to turn him into a burdensome, malodorous albatross around the former prime minister's neck. Primakov was the more elusive target given his longstanding reputation for honesty and his status as “national savior” in the wake of the August 1998 financial crisis. The key was first to brutalize his close party associate, the mayor of Moscow, and then more subtly undermine the authority of Primakov himself. By turning these two figures into centers of political antigavity, Yeltsin loyalists would re-create the collective action problems faced by governors, which in turn would facilitate other Kremlin strategies to prevent them from uniting to seize control of the Russian parliament and presidency.

The centerpiece of the Kremlin assault proved to be the creation of what could be translated loosely as the “Sergei Dorenko Show” on the state-controlled ORT network and the decision to pit it directly against the NTV network's famous news analysis program, *Itogi* (“Final Analyses”). To understand how remarkable the success of the Dorenko Show was, one has to understand the dominant hold that *Itogi* had previously enjoyed on Russian audiences. Every Sunday evening in the late 1990s, television sets turned to this program almost religiously for expert commentary on the news, policymaker interviews, and a biting satirical puppet show (*Kukly*) featuring caricatures of Russia's best-known politicians. *Itogi*'s iconic status was so great that, even though ORT's other news programs had higher ratings and reached more Russian territories than NTV did, few paid much attention when ORT announced it was scheduling the Dorenko Show to go head-to-head against *Itogi*.²¹ Since NTV and *Itogi* had been relentlessly reporting on

corruption in Kremlin circles, and since NTV owner Vladimir Gusinsky was a longtime associate of Luzhkov as the head of the Most Group, observers saw ORT's move as a vain attempt by the hopelessly unpopular Yeltsin "Family" to counter the news analysis hegemony of *Itogi*.

The Dorenko Show, however, immediately made waves with its blistering attacks on Luzhkov and, on the basis of this political spectacle, actually managed to win the ratings battle when *Itogi* refused to respond with equally riveting material. During the weeks of the campaign, Dorenko, in his trademark smirking baritone, lambasted Luzhkov for alleged misdeeds ranging from the plausible, that there is corruption in Luzhkov's Moscow bureaucracy, to the outrageous, that Luzhkov was an accomplice to the murder of U.S. businessman Paul Tatum, to the just plain ridiculous, that he had ties to the deadly Japanese Aum Shrinrikyo cult. For example, in just one typical episode, aired on November 21, 1999, the Dorenko Show "reported" the following stories:²²

A Fatherland–All Russia member, former Federal Security Service [FSB] chief Nikolai Kovalev, blocked the prosecution of a group of Chechens, the ethnic group widely blamed for the Moscow apartment bombings.

"Luzhkov people" had threatened American businessman Paul Tatum to get him to sell his ownership stake in the Slavianskaia Hotel, which Tatum refused to do. Tatum was then murdered. The person shown defending Luzhkov was Kovalev, discredited in the previous story.

Luzhkov broke his promise to build a hospital in the town of Budennovsk, victim to a highly publicized hostage-taking by Chechen terrorists in 1995. Footage was aired in which Luzhkov stated that Moscow City did not spend a penny on the hospital.

Bashkortostan's President Rakhimov, another Fatherland–All Russia leader, was behaving "wildly" by suspending local broadcast of the Dorenko Show, an act that constituted nothing less than separatism and a lack of faith in his own people.

Primakov revealed his own anti-Semitism by criticizing Boris Berezovsky's run for the Duma in the Karachaevo-Cherkessiiia single-member district.²³

Merely pronouncing the word "Luzhkov" makes this election campaign dirty. "Luzhkov himself is *kompromat*."²⁴

Luzhkov controls all Moscow courts by paying them. He now claims that he will win his lawsuit against the Dorenko Show.

Luzhkov's lawyer in the case filed against the Dorenko Show is a representative of the totalitarian sect Aum Shrinrikyo. This lawyer is a friend of Luzhkov.

When sick, Luzhkov is treated in Austria and Primakov is treated in Switzerland. This is unpatriotic. When Yeltsin is sick, he gets treated in Russia.

Nightly news programs on the state-owned ORT and RTR echoed these themes, only slightly toning down the vitriol.²⁵ RTR network commentator Nikolai Svanidze even reported that Luzhkov had failed to protect Muscovites from terrorism in the wake of the September 1999 apartment bombings.²⁶

While the assault on Luzhkov was a multibarreled barrage, attacks on Primakov

started later in the campaign and tended to focus attention on the former prime minister's age or to suggest that he was a clandestine and ruthless spymaster. In late October, a billboard appeared on a busy Moscow street with the words: "Congratulations! Dear Yevgeny Maksimovich is 70."²⁷ This might not have been seen by all as a slight had not the words appeared next to a picture of a wheelchair.²⁸ One ORT report even claimed that Primakov was terminally ill.²⁹ To bolster the spymaster image, Dorenko reported accusations coming from the Georgian special services—no friends of Primakov—that Primakov was linked to an attempt to assassinate Georgia's President Eduard Shevardnadze.³⁰

Dorenko's show was devastatingly successful, quickly and easily outcompeting *Itogi* in the battle for viewers in the traditional Sunday evening "news analysis" slot. Remarkably, people watched the Dorenko Show not only as an entertaining spectacle, but as a reliable source of information. The highly respected polling agency ROMIR found that the Dorenko Show was the most trusted analytical program on Russian TV, believed by 34 percent of those surveyed. Only 23 percent felt that *Itogi's* commentators were the most reliable.³¹ *Itogi* had long decried corruption in the Kremlin "Family," though not with nearly the panache displayed by ORT. In some sense *Itogi* was getting a taste of its own medicine, but a much deadlier dose. Nonetheless, NTV's flagship program refused to escalate its own level of hyperbole in response to the anti-Fatherland-All Russia campaign. In the end, mass opinion surveys designed by Colton and McFaul reveal that of people who believed that the Dorenko Show treated all candidates equally, only 4.9 percent voted for Fatherland-All Russia, far below its overall showing at the polls. Similarly, among those who reported that they fully trusted or simply trusted the Dorenko Show, only 5.6 percent and 8.5 percent respectively voted for Fatherland-All Russia, whereas among those who mistrusted or completely mistrusted it, the party received 14.9 percent and 29.8 percent of the vote.³²

The Grooming of Putin

To take full advantage of the renewed collective action problems facing Russian governors who might want to band together to capture Kremlin spoils, Yeltsin loyalists concentrated on finding a new political figure who could potentially serve as a "counter focal point" to Primakov and Luzhkov. After Yeltsin fired Primakov as prime minister in May 1999 and installed Sergei Stepashin in his place, many observers speculated that Stepashin might be the "counter-focal" candidate. While in office, Stepashin did make an effort to coordinate a governors' bloc that he could lead. Stepashin claims that the Kremlin deliberately undermined these efforts, but Yeltsin wrote in his memoirs that he had seen Stepashin as a transitional figure even as he was being appointed, considering him too soft for the job. Yeltsin had only been paying the prime minister lip service, so Stepashin never had a chance.³³ On August 9, 1999, Yeltsin fired Stepashin and replaced him with Putin. At the time, the vast majority of observers saw Putin as a sure loser, especially after he received the apparent "kiss of political death" in the form of an endorsement by the unpopular Yeltsin.³⁴ Few people even knew who Putin was upon his appointment. His standing in the presidential polls was

a paltry 2 percent in August, having not even been included on the main polling agencies' questionnaires earlier.³⁵

Then why did Yeltsin's backers take what, at the time, appeared to be a monumental gamble on this public nobody? Putin's personality appears to have played a significant role, enabling him to win the trust of powerful administration insiders, including Yeltsin himself. Yeltsin claims to have decided on Putin as his successor as early as spring 1999, waiting only for the right timing to tap him as prime minister.³⁶ During his tenure in presidential structures and then the government (as FSB chief), Putin cultivated a reputation as a fair, competent administrator. Among those who could influence Yeltsin's perceptions, "Oligarch" Boris Berezovsky reports that he himself was impressed by Putin during Primakov's term as prime minister. While Primakov appeared to have Berezovsky on the political ropes under the pressure of a criminal investigation, Putin took the daring step of attending a birthday party for Berezovsky's wife, making him one of only a few high-ranking officials to show up. This, Berezovsky declared in a later interview, demonstrated to him that Putin put loyalty and respect before public opinion.³⁷ Putin's experience as the first deputy head of the Yeltsin administration in charge of dealing with the provinces gave him a chance to demonstrate his willingness to put pressure on Russian governors disliked by the Kremlin.³⁸ Even after he became head of the FSB and secretary of the security council, he made clear that he saw Russia's top security problems to be internal rather than external, citing in particular Russia's difficulties in the North Caucasus.³⁹ As of summer 1999, one of his greatest assets was not having any significant negative baggage by virtue of his being a virtual political unknown. Berezovsky later claimed to have played the main role in getting key Kremlin officials to see these assets, although Yeltsin takes all the credit for himself.⁴⁰

But even after he was installed as prime minister and anointed Yeltsin's "heir" by the president himself, Kremlin insiders were still hedging their bets when speaking to outsiders. As late as October 13, 1999, Igor Shabdurasulov, first deputy head of the presidential administration, publicly stated that the administration was not ready to back Putin or any other candidate at that time.⁴¹ It took a new crisis in Chechnya and Putin's decisive reaction to turn Kremlin cadres into true believers.

The September 1999 Apartment Bombings and the New Invasion of Chechnya

In August 1999, a wild set of events started to unfold that soon transformed an apparent Yeltsinite nebbish into a presidential juggernaut. First, in early August, rogue Chechen warlords invaded the neighboring Russian province of Dagestan, declaring their aim to carve out an "Islamic state" in the region. After Russian forces repelled this incursion, terrorist bombs, clearly timed to maximize casualties, decimated two large, working-class apartment buildings in Moscow in the middle of the nights of September 9 and 13. Two other apartment bombs were detonated in smaller Russian cities, leaving more than three hundred innocent residents dead. The terror that then engulfed Russian society was not unlike that

which seized the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Given the USSR's cookie-cutter approach to housing design, the apartment buildings that had been obliterated, shown over and over on Russian television, looked just like the kinds of apartment complexes in which millions of Russians lived. Anyone's residence could be next.

Putin stepped up to the challenge by publicly blaming the rebellious republic of Chechnya for the bombings and ordering a large-scale military operation to gradually seize control of Chechen territory. Average Russian citizens, tired of inaction in the face of seemingly relentless national decline, rallied enthusiastically around their new and decisive leader. When Putin invoked modern gangland slang to aver that he would "whack" Chechen terrorists "in the john" if he found them there, much of the public took comfort in someone they saw as finally taking action to restore security and order.

In fact, the Russian government had planned an invasion of Chechnya months before the apartment bombings, before Putin assumed the Russian premiership, and even before the rogue Chechen rebels' invasion of Dagestan. Stepashin, minister of internal affairs when the plan was initiated, brought this to light in a post-election interview. According to Stepashin, he, Putin (then FSB chief), and other government officials in March 1999 began preparing for a military incursion into Chechnya as a response to the ongoing disorder that had predominated there since the previous Chechen war had ended with the 1996 Khasaviurt Accord. Yeltsin later revealed in his memoirs that the precipitant was the March 5, 1999, kidnapping of a Russian deputy minister of internal affairs (General Shpigun), an act for which Moscow blamed Chechens.⁴² The plan was to capture the northern part of the republic, stopping at the Terek River, which could serve as a natural boundary between the flatter Russian-controlled region and what, essentially, would become a rebellious zone in the southern, more mountainous part. Stepashin reported that he continued this planning during his own prime ministership and that Putin, upon assuming the reins of the Russian government, inherited this operation.⁴³

Some observers have claimed that Kremlin insiders actually organized the apartment bombings as part of a sinister plot to make a new war in Chechnya popular and, thereby, transform Putin into a leader of irreproachable stature. Since a post-election falling-out with Putin, Berezovsky has championed the "FSB did it" interpretation, publicizing the account of a former FSB officer (Aleksandr Litvinenko) and a historian (Yury Felshtinsky). According to this story, the "smoking gun" was a strange false alarm in the city of Ryazan. On September 22, shortly after the Moscow bombings, three people later identified as FSB agents were seen placing a large sugar sack, the kind that had actually contained an explosive in the Moscow blasts, into the basement of an apartment complex in Ryazan. After the bomb was found and defused, FSB spokesmen announced that this had merely been a "test" and that the sack actually contained sugar. The Ryazan authorities who had seized the material, however, reported that the explosives and detonating device had been real.⁴⁴ One thing remains unclear about the "FSB did it" interpretation: If the motive was to get an FSB-friendly man installed

as president, why would the FSB have preferred Putin, a little-known “upstart” who had leapt to the post of FSB director through outside political channels, to Primakov, who was certainly senior in stature and pedigree and who was also widely reputed to have a KGB past? Another version, even more circumstantial, tries to link former “Privatization Tsar” Anatoly Chubais to both military intelligence and the explosions.⁴⁵

Government officials have sought to pin at least indirect responsibility on Berezovsky himself. FSB director Nikolai Patrushev claimed to have evidence that Berezovsky had extensive economic dealings in Chechnya and the North Caucasus more generally, including the financing of Chechen separatists.⁴⁶ A senior official in the office of the general

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prosecutor reported that his organization was investigating a possible role for Berezovsky in financing the August 1999 invasion of Dagestan by Chechen rebels as well as the kidnappings of Russian officials in Chechnya.⁴⁷ Financier George Soros, based on his personal interpretation of Berezovsky’s operating style,

even speculated that Berezovsky might have been behind the terrorist attacks themselves.⁴⁸ Prosecutors, without making public any evidence of guilt, quietly secured the convictions of five men from the republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia for the bombings and closed investigations into the Ryazan incident, saying “nothing unusual” happened there.⁴⁹

One other plausible scenario was advanced by Reddaway and Glinski, who argued that the most likely explanation pointed to the Dagestan Liberation Army, a tiny militant Islamic organization claiming to represent several small villages in Dagestan. Warnings reportedly had been issued prior to September 1999 that this group would resort to the use of explosives in Russia were anyone to encroach on their communities, which were occupied when the Russians repelled the Chechen warlords from Dagestan in early August 1999.⁵⁰

At this point, there is simply too little evidence and there are too many theories to know for sure what really happened. For the purposes of our interpretive analysis, what may be more important is whom the Russian people blamed for the bombings. In the initial aftermath of the attacks, few publicly questioned the official version that Chechens were responsible. By spring 2002, however, the vast majority of Russians appear to have been uncertain. Just 16 percent were sure that Chechen rebels did it, but even fewer, 6 percent, were convinced of FSB involvement.⁵¹

All of this is quite consistent with the interpretation that Putin was popular not because the Chechen War was popular in and of itself but because of what Putin’s move into Chechnya communicated about Putin as a leader.⁵² Indeed,

even during the critical autumn after the apartment bombings, the evidence is strong that what Russians were looking for was not, specifically, an invasion of Chechnya but any kind of decisive action that could be interpreted as standing up for them. According to the reputable VTsIOM polling agency, in late November 1999, at the same time that the ratio of people supporting to opposing continuation of the military action in Chechnya was well over 2:1, more people than not would also have supported a halt to the war if Putin had proposed it (48 percent to 42 percent).⁵³

Reinforcing the importance of these findings, reliable public opinion surveys throughout fall 1999 found consistently that only a minority of the population supported preventing Chechen secession at any cost. One poll, taken in October, soon after the invasion had begun, revealed that just 20 percent supported keeping Chechnya in Russia at all costs and that far more respondents, 32 percent, would actually be “happy” to see it separate from the federation. Another 34 percent reported that they could live with an independent Chechnya. Interestingly, the percentage of Russians for preventing Chechen secession at all costs strongly appears to have followed Putin’s lead rather than driven his behavior. In fact, VTsIOM reported that the percentage that would have been happy with Chechen secession was a whopping 53 percent in September, right after the bombings. Only as Putin gradually ramped up the rhetoric, moved troops decisively into Chechnya, and saw his ratings rise accordingly did these figures begin to fall. By December 1999, the percentage that would have been happy without Chechnya had dropped to 21 percent. This is still a significant number, especially given that at this time only 30 percent supported keeping Chechnya at all costs, while 48 percent would still have accepted Chechen independence.⁵⁴ As one VTsIOM analyst noted, the percentages supporting keeping Chechnya at all costs were roughly equivalent to the percentages in the Soviet Union that had supported keeping the Baltic countries in the USSR at all costs.⁵⁵ As if to underline the conclusion that what Russians wanted more than any particular solution was action in general, the September poll found that 64 percent of Russian citizens also would have supported the “solution” of deporting all Chechens from Russian territory.⁵⁶

The desire of people to be led, more than any support for the particular policies Putin pursued, is further manifested in a series of questions asked about media coverage of the war. Many observers characterized public support for the war as growing out of biased coverage. This may be true to some extent; however, we must not underestimate the sophistication of the Russian citizen. People clearly did not believe leadership claims, broadcast throughout the state-owned media, that the war would be over quickly.⁵⁷ A VTsIOM poll taken in January 2000 asked people to estimate how long the war would last, and only 14 percent predicted that it would end in victory by the end of March 2000. Some 39 percent thought it would last more than a year, as opposed to 38 percent who thought it would end before a year had elapsed.⁵⁸ As of February 2000, just one month before Putin won a landslide electoral victory, another poll found that only 27 percent of Russian citizens averred that they believed Putin’s statements about the war, although only 7 percent replied that they did not believe him.⁵⁹

Despite their vastly unformed views on precisely what needed to be done, the public quickly mobilized around the dynamic leadership that Putin offered them. This is evident in his skyrocketing approval ratings during the months following the apartment bombings. While just 2 percent would have voted for him for president in August 1999, this figure had risen to 51 percent by December. While 31 percent had generally approved of his performance in August 1999, this figure had catapulted to 80 percent by November. Asked in a different way, 44 percent of the population said that their opinion of Putin had changed for the better by November, with another 46 percent claiming they had assessed him correctly all along. Only three percent said that their evaluation of him had worsened during this time.⁶⁰ Putin was by far the most popular man in the country.

A Political Decoy: The Unity Bloc

With the emergence of United Russia as a major nationwide structure during Putin's first term, it is sometimes assumed that this was what the Kremlin had planned all along in creating the Unity Bloc in fall 1999 to contest the Duma elections of that year. To many, Unity was simply the successor to Russia's Choice, Our Home is Russia, and other attempts by Kremlin insiders to promote a party to support the president in the parliament and in regional elective organs.⁶¹ Writing in the warm glow of victory, Yeltsin recorded in his memoirs that he had carefully planned such a victory all along.⁶²

The most interesting things about Unity, however, are the ways in which it was fundamentally different from these earlier efforts to build a party of power. From the beginning, Russian observers, insiders, and even Unity's leaders clearly saw that the main purpose of this bloc was not victory for itself in the parliamentary elections but the sabotage of the prospects of the leaders of a rival party (Fatherland–All Russia) for an entirely different set of elections: the presidential ones, scheduled to be held the following year.⁶³ Its primary aim was negative rather than positive, presidential rather than parliamentary: to subvert the Luzhkov-Primakov presidential project rather than to gain parliamentary representation for presidential supporters. With Putin firmly in place as a "counter focal point" and with the enemy's rallying points disintegrating under Dorenko's heat, Unity was important as an electoral counter-coalition of governors that could "outbid" Fatherland–All Russia for the support of enough governors to keep the latter from finishing strongly in the Duma race. Observers believed that a poor Duma showing by Luzhkov and Primakov would weaken their presidential bids. And the presidency is where real power lies in Russia.

In the most direct sense, Unity is better viewed as the successor not to Russia's Choice or Our Home is Russia, which actually were attempts to win strong parliamentary representation in support of a sitting president, but to the 1996 presidential campaign of Aleksandr Lebed. In 1996, the Kremlin faced a situation quite similar to its occupants' 1999 predicament. In that campaign, the rising opposition was the Communist Party's nominee Gennady Zyuganov, who many predicted would win.⁶⁴ A longtime Kremlin insider, Aleksei Golovkov, convinced the Kremlin to channel money and support to Lebed, who it was hoped would

siphon the nationalist vote away from Zyuganov and prevent a first-place Communist finish in the first round of voting. This tactic was regarded as remarkably successful; Lebed came in third place with 15 percent of the vote and then proceeded to endorse Yeltsin in the runoff, which Yeltsin then won.⁶⁵ It is telling that Golovkov was one of Unity's chief behind-the-scenes architects in fall 1999, formally in charge of the bloc's campaign and its organizational structures.⁶⁶

Even Unity's most public leaders did little to hide that their primary goal was the destruction of Fatherland–All Russia rather than victory for its own sake. One journalist, just days after the announcement of Unity's founding, asked the bloc's top candidate, Emergencies Minister Sergei Shoigu, whether this was the case. Shoigu responded not with a denial, but instead by essentially appealing directly to Fatherland–All Russia supporters and candidates to switch to Unity.⁶⁷ Any Unity success beyond this "anti-party" task would be icing on the electoral cake.

The Kremlin initially had little reason to believe that Unity could be anything more useful than a weapon in the struggle for the presidency. Past Kremlin efforts to create true parties of power had failed miserably, with former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar's Russia's Choice garnering a crushingly disappointing 16 percent in 1993 and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin's Our Home is Russia netting a humiliating 10 percent in 1995. With Yeltsin's popularity at a longstanding low, and with Putin remaining a political unknown in late September, there was little reason for the Kremlin to suspect, while Unity was being created, that a new attempt at a party of power would fare much better. That Unity organizers were well aware of these past failings was evident, even in the quotidian symbolism of the adhesive with which they chose to seal office windows in one of their analytical centers: old "Russia's Choice" bumper stickers ("Your Choice") from its disastrous 1993 campaign.

In short, Unity began primarily as a desperate strategic move by an incumbent administration to defeat an outside challenge to its hold over the presidency, not as an effort to win a loyal presidential base in the parliament. Only when Kremlin officials witnessed Unity's success with undisguised surprise and glee did they see the real promise of a presidential political party for ensuring their long-term political survival. Even Yeltsin, who claims in his memoirs to have planned Unity's electoral success, admits: "23 percent! Such a result was expected by no one."⁶⁸ Only after the 1999 Duma elections did efforts to turn Unity into a permanent structure begin.

Building Unity. Throughout the fall of 2003, then, it remained a very poorly kept secret that the Unity Bloc was merely the latest of the efforts to derail Fatherland–All Russia, a task that became extremely urgent after Luzhkov and Primakov announced this alliance. The basic idea was to create a new kind of bloc that not only mimicked Fatherland–All Russia's "can-do" campaign but that even outdid it in providing politics without politicians, professionalism without ideological baggage.

Yeltsin insiders played the central part in creating Unity. The figure of Golovkov has already been discussed. Also chief of Russia's largest insurance company, Golovkov clearly knew the Kremlin ropes, having headed Prime Minister Gaidar's

government *apparatus* and having been a key architect in building both of Russia's previous attempts at establishing genuine parties of power, the aforementioned Russia's Choice in 1993 and Our Home is Russia in 1995.

Much of the brainstorming and legwork was done by Boris Berezovsky, who was constantly toying with new approaches to electoral politics.⁶⁹ One of these new approaches was a governors' bloc consisting of some of Russia's most macho regional bosses, such as Afghan War veteran Aleksandr Rutskoï of Kursk. Berezovsky began calling this coalition *Muzhiki*, which might well be translated as "Real Men." One of Berezovsky's closest allies in the government, influential railroads minister Nikolai Aksenenko, continued this effort with some success, targeting provincial chiefs left out of Fatherland—All Russia.⁷⁰ While the governors later decided that they could do without the manly moniker, the result was ultimately the Unity Bloc.⁷¹

The official coordinating the effort was First Deputy Presidential Administration Head Igor Shabdurasulov, who presided at the first congress of the movement even as he denied any Kremlin support for it.⁷² Shabdurasulov made key strategic decisions for the bloc and conducted negotiations on its behalf regarding merging with other movements.⁷³ Sergei Shoigu, who became the formal party leader, also claimed to have played a role in devising Unity, openly acknowledging administration support while claiming authorship for himself.⁷⁴ A member of Our Home is Russia, Shoigu had sought to join Unity as part of a broad coalition with his old party but was eventually pressured to sign on without Chernomyrdin and his colleagues.⁷⁵ Organizers also brought in a variety of micro-organizations as "founding partners" so that it could clear certain bureaucratic hurdles, but these did not play much of a real role in campaign or organizational decisionmaking.⁷⁶

This team managed to gather signatures of support from thirty-nine governors by early October.⁷⁷ The coordinating council that was announced at its founding congress, held on October 3, 1999, included governors such as Rutskoï of Kursk, Nazdratenko of Primorski Krai, Platov of Tver, Polezhaev of Omsk, Nazarov of Chukotka, Gorbenko of Kaliningrad, Iiumzhinov of Kalmykia, and Nikolaev of Sakha (Yakutiia).⁷⁸ In the end, however, among all these regional chief executives, only Platov put his own name on the Unity party list.

While parties almost always kept their sources of financing hidden from view, various reports indicate that Unity got much of its funding through government structures and even foreign firms connected to Berezovsky. The magazine *Profil* reported that Railroads Minister Aksenenko was one important source of financing, as was the concern Transneft.⁷⁹ Berezovsky, after his post-election falling out with Putin, let slip that Unity had received funding from Swiss firms that had done business with Aeroflot, controlled by Berezovsky.⁸⁰ One high-ranking Unity official quickly denied these assertions as politically motivated, however.⁸¹

The Unity Campaign. Created less than three months before the Duma election day, Unity's organizers had to rush to put together their candidate lists, giving them a rather slapdash character. According to Shabdurasulov, people were considered for inclusion only if they were not professional politicians, had been

outside of major past political battles and scandals, and were in positions of high authority.⁸² While Putin had not yet formally endorsed the bloc, he nicely summed up this approach to candidate recruitment in an address to regional election commission heads: “We need not professional patriots, but patriotic professionals.”⁸³ They aggressively courted famous personalities, landing on a troika who were almost completely new to electoral politics. Shoigu, Yeltsin’s longest-tenured minister as of 1999, was the high-profile minister of emergency situations, whose image almost always reached television audiences as a hero working to avert or cope with some sort of disaster caused by others. He was well trusted in Kremlin circles, having stood by Yeltsin on the political barricades during the August 1991 coup attempt in the

USSR and having kept his political nose clean ever since.⁸⁴ Second on the list came Aleksandr Karelin, the multiple-gold-medal-winning Greco-Roman wrestler who was something of a cultural icon in Russia. Third was Aleksandr Gurov, famous as a corruption-fighter and battler of mafia structures.⁸⁵ Unity’s

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television campaign could pair the following slogans and candidate images to great effect: “Russia must be honest” (Gurov); “Russia must be strong” (Karelin); “Russia must be saved” (Shoigu).⁸⁶ This effort to convey strength was reinforced in a play on words that, in Russian, produced the acronym “MeDvEd”⁸⁷ (BEAR). The campaign capitalized heavily on ursine symbolism, not only using bears in their ads, but sending activists out campaigning in full-body costumes or even with live bears in tow.⁸⁸ None of the bloc’s troika, nor any others in Unity, were actually “Putin people,” since Putin was so new to big politics that he did not have a core team of his own.⁸⁹

All other candidates were relegated either to thirty-one single-member districts (time and organizational constraints preventing coverage of more) or 181 slots on regional party lists for the proportional representation half of the Duma voting.⁹⁰ These candidates mainly consisted of two types of people. One set represented gubernatorial power. Since most regional leaders were not yet confident of the young party’s potential for success, and probably sensing that winning was only a second priority, they tended to tap rather low-level functionaries or other little-known supporters for these list spaces.⁹¹ The other type of Unity candidate might be categorized as the “random celebrity,” ranging from an astronaut to a television host.⁹²

Unity’s campaign themes gave precedence to style but also included some substance, at least, to the extent that Fatherland–All Russia’s campaign did. As Colton and McFaul astutely observe, “Unity on the stump conveyed an attitude rather than a concrete program,” placing no faith in abstract concepts like

socialism or capitalism.⁹³ In the words of Primorski Krai strongman Yevgeny Nazdratenko, an original Unity supporter, “The ideology of Unity is the lack of any kind of ideology.”⁹⁴

Despite this bravado, Unity’s leaders did stress some important issues on the campaign trail, primarily those emphasized by Fatherland–All Russia. Most critically, this meant Fatherland–All Russia’s advocacy of regional autonomy, a key element holding together the Luzhkov-Primakov coalition of governors.⁹⁵ The secretary of Fatherland–All Russia’s coordination council, clearly vexed by Unity’s strategy, called its regional policies the “purest plagiarism” and decried its effort to “confuse” voters and draw votes away from his party.⁹⁶ Unity even went so far as to mimic Fatherland–All Russia’s ambiguity on the federalism issue. In one speech, Shoigu said that governors eventually would need to implement federal decisions more obediently but sugared this pill by calling for the abolition of elections at all levels of government below that of governor, whose position presumably would involve the right to appoint these lower levels.⁹⁷ Other major platforms stressed publicly by Shoigu during the campaign included a hard line on Chechnya, opposition to capital flow restrictions, support for presidentialism, and abolition of the party-list voting for the Duma.⁹⁸

Among these issue positions, however, only the slight emphasis on free-market economics contrasted significantly with Fatherland–All Russia, which put a statist-industrial policy strategy at the center of its public appeal. Although Smyth finds little distinction between the views of activists in the two blocs, she does conclude that they differ noticeably on a left-right continuum, revealing that Fatherland–All Russia had successfully staked out a position on the center-left and Unity on the center-right.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the Colton-McFaul surveys support the interpretation that Unity capitalized on the same public “desire for leadership” that benefited Putin. People were much less concerned about where they were going than who was taking them there. While Unity supporters were no more likely than any other party’s backers to support a hard line on Chechnya, for example, more people believed that Unity’s leaders would “best handle” this problem.¹⁰⁰

Away from the brightest media glare, the primary goal was to wean regional political machines away from Fatherland–All Russia. Alongside efforts to shore up the support of governors who had originally signed a letter backing Unity, Shoigu visited many provinces run by core All Russia supporters, including Ingushetiia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and St. Petersburg.¹⁰¹ The formal Unity leader even presented Tatarstan’s President Shaimiev with an award of distinction from his ministry.¹⁰² Shoigu also made special efforts to win over those governors who had been part of the Our Home is Russia party through both a travel itinerary and a phone campaign.¹⁰³

For much of the autumn, the governor-recruitment effort met with only modest success. As noted above, only one governor lent his own name to the bloc’s list for the proportional-representation (PR) competition, Tver’s Platov, and only one other region, Kursk, invested a significant number of its own administration’s representatives. There were not even any deputy governors on it. The representatives of regional state power who did appear on Unity’s PR party list were

mainly officials at the subregional *raion* or village level.¹⁰⁴ This speaks volumes as to how confident governors were in this bloc's own electoral prospects and is quite consistent with the interpretation that the bloc was not seen by governors as aiming primarily to win but instead to put a dent in Fatherland–All Russia's performance.

Once Putin's political star began to skyrocket in November, however, the cornerstone of Unity's campaign strategy became its support for the new Russian prime minister. Shoigu stressed that a key goal was to win a sizeable Duma fraction to help Putin in the Duma, although he was very careful to stress that Unity was pro-government (implying Putin), not pro-Kremlin (implying Yeltsin).¹⁰⁵ Putin, whose popularity was far ahead of Unity's in October and November, intentionally distanced himself from the bloc during this time since he had no clear indication that Unity would succeed. In late October 1999, the percentage of voters saying they would vote for Unity was hanging precariously around the 5-percent threshold for the party-list race. Clearly, just as the Kremlin hoped to damage Luzhkov and Primakov through a poor showing by their party, Putin's supporters also feared that he would be hurt if he endorsed a party that then proceeded to perform disappointingly, just as past parties of power had actually weakened their leaders. Moreover, Putin was well liked by a broad section of society, and high-ranking Kremlin strategists believed that by putting his own weight behind one party, Putin would alienate some of his supporters.¹⁰⁶ By mid-November, polls consistently showed Unity getting just over 5 percent, which was enough to convince Putin strategists that the party was not a loser. Putin's advisors were also convinced by this time that Putin had risen in stature sufficiently to make himself a credible focal point for gubernatorial coalition-building and that if he were to back Unity, many regional leaders would follow.

The coup de grace came when Putin finally endorsed Unity unambiguously on national television in late November. With Shoigu by his side, Putin declared that "I personally, as a citizen, will vote for Unity."¹⁰⁷ Unity immediately capitalized, putting out a press release declaring that "Unity supports Putin and Putin relies on Unity. And this is a union of victors."¹⁰⁸ Almost immediately, Unity's ratings surged skyward, rising from 9 percent the week before to 18 percent right after the endorsement.¹⁰⁹ When the votes were finally tallied, Unity emerged with 23 percent, putting it in second place and just one percentage point behind the Communists. This stunning success, which a gleeful Shabdurasulov declared a "revolution" and a "colossal breakthrough," also delivered a crushing blow to Fatherland–All Russia, left with just 13 percent of the ballots cast after having projected a strong plurality, if not an outright majority, back in summer 1999.¹¹⁰ This result of 13 percent was actually quite a good one by the standards of past efforts to win votes for self-avowedly statist and centrist parties, which had never before even cleared the 5-percent threshold in Duma races.¹¹¹ But given initial expectations, this was nothing short of a catastrophe for the party. While Luzhkov had given up his own presidential ambitions earlier in the autumn, Primakov saw the writing on the wall after the election and agreed to quietly serve in the Duma rather than seek higher political office. With Unity came presidential victory.

Fatherland–All Russia's Strategic Failure

The failure of the governors to unite into an opposition party in 1999 cannot be attributed solely to the Kremlin's exploitation of collective action problems facing Fatherland–All Russia's regional leaders; Fatherland–All Russia had the opportunity to respond in kind but failed to do so. While it was certainly disadvantaged given the Kremlin's powerful media holdings and economic resources, the Luzhkov-Primakov alliance had a great deal of resources of its own. It failed to anticipate the power of the Kremlin onslaught, however, and did not take effective measures to hold together more than the bare nucleus of the alliance.

Successful campaign strategists in many established democracies do not see an opponent's negative barrage as being necessarily lethal. In the United States, for example, the standard response is to strike back quickly and with equal vigor, negating the net advantage that the opponent seeks to gain. This tactic was certainly available to Fatherland–All Russia and its allies in autumn 1999. While many have decried the advantages enjoyed by the Kremlin in terms of administrative resources, Fatherland–All Russia also had a formidable stock of its own. If we begin with the Dorenko Show, essential in destroying the focal point around which Fatherland–All Russia was built, we must not forget that the pro-Fatherland–All Russia show *Itogi* was the unrivaled master of television news analysis prior to September 1999. Dorenko's growling hatchet job worked, not because there was no alternative, but because it won the ratings battle, going head-to-head with *Itogi*. This became painfully apparent to *Itogi*'s famous host, Yevgeny Kisilev, during one broadcast in November. Initially excited when told that none other than Primakov himself had called unexpectedly and asked to say a few words live on *Itogi*, Kisilev then had to listen on the air as Primakov, by expressing his outrage at what Dorenko had just been saying, revealed that even Fatherland–All Russia's leader had been watching the Dorenko Show instead of NTV's flagship program.¹¹² As for nightly news coverage, both NTV and TV Center (the smaller network effectively controlled by Luzhkov himself) could serve up a feast of biased coverage in favor of Fatherland–All Russia. Primakov and Luzhkov also had many supporters in daily newspapers, many that were not friends of the Kremlin. Russian citizens did have access to alternative points of view. While Dorenko's ORT and the other state-owned network, RTR, certainly reached a few areas that NTV and TV Center did not, the decline in support for Luzhkov and Primakov was broadly national in scope, a phenomenon that cannot be explained by the geographic reach of these mass media.

It remains a major puzzle why Fatherland–All Russia failed to use its own vast resources to respond in kind to the Yeltsinite attack. For example, Putin began with virtually no image, an opportunity that Fatherland–All Russia could have exploited to define him in negative terms. While Putin did win support for his war on Chechnya, the analysis of public opinion presented in this article shows that the general public would have supported a wide range of responses other than an invasion, leaving room for a forceful Fatherland–All Russia counter-proposal, one that was never made with any conviction. Unity, also, did not become regarded as a likely winner until late November. It seems logical, therefore, to suspect

that the “Putin phenomenon” could have been nipped in the bud by a more aggressive, ruthless Fatherland–All Russia campaign.

Fatherland–All Russia’s campaign disaster has its roots partly in strategy and organization, but also in principle. Strategically, Luzhkov and Primakov had counted primarily on governors to ensure that the vote went their way, an expectation anchored in what they thought would be Primakov’s enduring popularity.¹¹³ The result was rather extreme optimism, reflected in speculation that they could win as much as 65 percent of the vote.¹¹⁴ As a result, they had not put much thought into developing a plan of counterattack. When they suddenly faced the full force of the Kremlin’s onslaught, they were caught flat-footed and were not prepared to respond immediately.

While a nimble and tightly run campaign could certainly have adjusted in time to respond, Fatherland–All Russia’s organization was anything but tightly run. Each of its component movements had its own team and advisers in place prior to their merger. The process of conglomeration left many figures in place, each of whom had their own ideas about what needed to be done. While Georgy Boos, Fatherland’s campaign chief, proceeded to be named the head of Fatherland–All Russia’s campaign headquarters, he continued to rely primarily on Fatherland structures. Primakov, however, made a point of bringing in his own staff and making his own campaign decisions, which were often not to the liking of the Fatherland group.¹¹⁵ To make matters worse, Boos had little campaign experience and had been appointed largely as a compromise figure with ties to both Luzhkov and Primakov. Add in the activism of strong-willed regional leaders like Shaimiev and Rakhimov and the result was a very loose campaign organization that did not have control over its own message and suffered from major coordination problems in any effort to shift tactics.

This lack of campaign unity was reflected in the party’s response to the critical issue of Chechnya. Luzhkov, known for his strong-arm methods of administering Moscow, had moved to expel Chechens from the city in the wake of the apartment bombings by requiring all non-residents to reregister with central authorities, denying this reregistration to thousands who could not give a good reason for being in the capital and deporting hundreds, drawing fire from human rights groups.¹¹⁶ But Primakov, as one of Russia’s leading Middle East specialists and a longtime journalist working in the region, was known for his sympathy for Islamic peoples’ governments. He made it a point early on to stress that Islam and Islamic peoples could not be blamed for the attacks—only “extremists” could be held responsible. He even sought to restore a positive connotation to the term “Wahhabi,” which to many had become synonymous with “terrorist Islam.” Accordingly, he opposed the forced deportation of peoples from the Caucasus region and was clearly uncomfortable with Luzhkov’s policy of denying registration to thousands of them.¹¹⁷ The result was that Fatherland–All Russia generated no clear stance at a time when polls showed that the public wanted decisive leadership most of all.¹¹⁸

Finally, Primakov—and, to some extent, Luzhkov—appeared to have been restrained in part by shared principles from engaging in an all-out negative

counterattack against their Kremlin-oriented rivals. While the polls discussed above showed that a large majority would have supported a Stalinist and racist response to the September 1999 apartment bombings, Primakov appears to have ruled out this sort of response completely as a strategy for outflanking Putin. Luzhkov may have been willing to flirt with such a tactic, at least if one can take his own response to the bombings in Moscow as a guide. But both concurred in opposing large-scale military operations and supported halting troops at the Terek River, effectively sealing off what would be a rebellious part of Chechnya. Nevertheless, the two party chiefs seemed to have gone out of their way to avoid politicizing this particular issue. In an October 1, 1999, interview, for example, Primakov dodged the issue of whether Russia should negotiate with Chechnya's President Aslan Maskhadov. While his response indicated that he favored such talks, the interviewer pressed him for a reaction to whether the Putin government was doing the right thing. "Don't make me criticize the present government," Primakov admonished; "I don't want to do this because it's easier to criticize than to do something."¹¹⁹ Such a response is highly unusual from a candidate under relentless assault from an opponent's negative media campaign. Primakov appears to have genuinely believed that taking the high road in the campaign would better serve him and the country. Indeed, his whole campaign had been about being above dirty politics. One should not forget that to most Russians, and even many politicians, Chechnya was a real matter of grave national concern, not just a "political football."

In the end, Fatherland-All Russia's criticisms of the war turned out to be too few, too uncoordinated, too weakly stated, and too late to ward off the rise in Putin's, followed by Unity's, popularity.¹²⁰ Its charges of general "Kremlin corruption" had been rendered moot by the rise of Putin and Unity, who were presented to the electorate as "new political men" unconnected to past political intrigues and corrupt games.¹²¹ Fatherland-All Russia, and the media that backed it, failed to implement a vigorous campaign associating Putin and Unity with past Kremlin corruption, unpopular figures like Boris Berezovsky, and other public bogeymen, all of which should have been relatively easy for a talented strategist to do.¹²² The responses of Primakov and Luzhkov to the negative campaign against them indicated that they were entirely on the defensive. Primakov's aforementioned outburst against Dorenko on *Itogi*, for example, only nurtured the public image of a man not in control of events, a man who could easily lose his trademark cool under fire. Luzhkov blamed his chief public relations man, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, for such failures, claiming that he had largely disappeared from the scene once his campaign "ship" came under attack. "He simply lost several intellectual battles," Luzhkov stated.¹²³ This public relations man, more a specialist in languages and foreign relations than a professional campaign strategist, may well have been out of his element. In an effort to economize, given what at first looked to be a sure victory, Yastrzhembsky reportedly refused to hire outside campaign specialists to help with strategy and tactics.¹²⁴ That Yastrzhembsky went over to the Putin camp after the election, becoming its chief spokesman on the Chechen war, at least suggests that he might even have been "bought off" by

Kremlin insiders at some point during the campaign, although this has been denied inside the former Fatherland–All Russia camp.

Conclusion

On the surface, the defeat of Fatherland–All Russia illustrates the Kremlin's power and the futility of political-party-building generally in Russia, but a different angle facilitates the observation that the Kremlin could have lost this battle had Fatherland–All Russia run a better campaign and that the incumbent forces managed to hang on to the presidency only by creating their own political party, Unity. The Fatherland–All Russia episode is absolutely essential for understanding why forces around the president began feverishly turning Unity into a strong political party replete with nationwide organization shortly after the election. Although Fatherland–All Russia failed, one interpretation is that it drove home the need for Kremlin insiders to have a party in place to prevent or defeat "future Fatherland–All Russias," especially since these insiders could not count on finding a candidate as promising as Putin turned out to be after Putin's retirement. Thus, the Kremlin took the project of building United Russia much more seriously during 2000–03 than it did Russia's Choice or Our Home is Russia after they won fractions in the 1993 and 1995 Duma contests, respectively. Indeed, part of this process involved Unity's formal merger with (read: absorption of) Fatherland–All Russia to formally establish "United Russia." The result was a United Russia landslide in the parliamentary race of 2003, an outcome that produced a one-party majority for the first time since the Duma was founded in 1993.

Taken together, these episodes illustrate the highly contingent nature of the political processes that produce party systems in new democracies. While election systems, electoral cleavages, and historical legacies all certainly influence politics, they still leave a great deal open to chance. The case of United Russia demonstrates how a series of contingencies can completely alter electoral expectations and outcomes within a matter of weeks. In this instance, the combination of Dorenko's appeal, the Moscow apartment bombings, Putin's appearance, his forceful reaction to the terrorist attacks, Unity's campaign savvy, and Fatherland–All Russia's poorly developed strategy launched a political decoy—Unity—on a trajectory to becoming the country's dominant political party. Moreover, this political decoy originally had been aimed more at clearing the field for the presidential contest than at the Duma elections themselves. The partisan constellation that resulted came to define Russian politics in Putin's first and now also, it appears, in his second term. To fully understand party system development in new democracies, the role of chance and contingent decision making by elites should not be neglected.

NOTES

1. Seminal works include Gary Cox, *Making Votes Count* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties* (NY: Wiley, 1954); Herbert Kitschelt, et al., *Post-Communist Party Systems* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Party Systems & Voter Alignments* (NY: Free Press, 1967); and Rein Taagepera and Matthew Soberg Shugart, *Seats and Votes* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1989).

2. O'Donnell and Schmitter, for example, stress the highly contingent nature of the democratization process, and McFaul argues that the laws constituting election systems can actually have a highly random element. See Michael McFaul, "Explaining Party Emergence and Non-Emergence in Post-Communist Russia: Institutions, Agents, and Chance," *Comparative Political Studies* 34, no. 10 (December 2001): 1159–87; Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1986).

3. Timothy Colton and Michael McFaul, "Reinventing Russia's Party of Power: 'Unity' and the 1999 Duma Election," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 16, no. 3 (July–September 2000): 201–24; Regina Smyth, "Building State Capacity from the Inside Out: Parties of Power and the Success of the President's Reform Agenda in Russia," *Politics & Society* 30 (December 2002): 555–78.

4. Here the term "party" is used to refer to any organization with the legal right to run candidates for federal elections. This differs from the Russian legal definition, which distinguishes between "parties," "blocs," "movements," and "associations," among other things.

5. Timothy J. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

6. Robert W. Orttung, "Business and Politics in Russia's Regions," *Problems of Post-Communism* 51, no. 2 (March/April 2004): 48–60.

7. Juliet Johnson, *A Fistful of Rubles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 190–3; *Moscow Times*, September 5, 1998.

8. *Moscow Times*, September 5, 1998.

9. *Argumenty i Fakty*, no. 18 (April 1999): 15, ISI Emerging Markets.

10. *Kommersant Daily*, August 26, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; Leonid Bershidsky, "Media Watch: Luzhkov's Agitprop Empire," *Moscow Times*, August 14, 1998, DJRL no. 2308.

11. *Associated Press*, Moscow, April 17, 1999.

12. *Kommersant*, February 27, 1999, 2.

13. *RFE/RL Newline*, v. 1, no. 147, Part I, October 27, 1997.

14. Mikhail Sokolov, *Izvestiia*, June 9, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

15. *Vremia MN*, June 10, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Reuters*, October 7, 1998, DJRL no. 2418; *Financial Times*, September 17, 1998.

16. TV Center, *Novosti*, October 30, 1998, 4:45 EDT.

17. *Kommersant*, July 9, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

18. For example, see Yevgeny Primakov interview, *Ekho Moskvy* (radio) 15:35, October 1, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

19. *Kommersant Daily*, June 8, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

20. *RFE/RL Newline*, June 10, 1999.

21. In the most important media markets; the shows aired at different times further to the east.

22. Author's personal viewing. After viewing the majority of these programs, the author can vouch that this one was quite typical.

23. Viewers would recognize Berezovsky as Jewish.

24. The term *kompromat* is Russian slang for "blackmail material," literally "compromising material."

25. For one description, see the report in *The Moscow Times*, December 11, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

26. *Vremia MN*, October 6, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

27. The standard respectful form of address in Russian uses a person's first name and patronymic without the last name.

28. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (October 29, 1999, 10:18).

29. *Moscow Times*, December 11, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

30. *Vremia MN*, October 28, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Polit.Ru*, accessed October 29, 1999, 20:19.

31. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (December 8, 1999, 13:20).
32. For their book analyzing these data, see Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003).
33. Sergei Stepashin, interview, *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, January 14, 2000, ISI Emerging Markets; Boris Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii Marafon* (Moscow: Act, 2000), 311–12.
34. For example, the leading Russian political experts who wrote predictive columns in *Russian Election Watch*, Henry E. Hale (ed.), (no. 2, September 1999), did not even see fit to mention Putin as a potential player in the Duma race. Even in the October 1999 issue (no. 3), commentators did not give him much chance unless he aligned himself with other political forces.
35. Henry E. Hale (ed.), *Russian Election Watch*, no. 2 (September 1999).
36. Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii*, 360.
37. *Vedomosti*, March 24, 2000.
38. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, May 26, 1998, in Johnson's Russia List (henceforth JRL) no. 2199; *RFE/RL Newslines*, 2, no. 142, Part I, (July 27, 1998); *RFE/RL Newslines*, 2, no. 99, Part I (May 26, 1998).
39. Vladimir Putin, interview on NTV, *Geroi Dnia*, March 29, 1999, approximately 19:45 Moscow time.
40. Berezovsky himself claimed credit in late 1999. See *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2000, DJRL; Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii*.
41. *Segodnia*, October 13, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
42. Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii*, 365–6.
43. Sergei Stepashin, interview, *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, January 14, 2000, ISI Emerging Markets. In part, Stepashin's motive for revealing this information appears to have been his disagreement with Putin's decision to push the invasion beyond the Terek River, a move that Stepashin considered unwise.
44. *RFE/RL Newslines*, August 28, 2001; "The Assassination of Russia," documentary film produced under the aegis of Boris Berezovsky, 2002; *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (July 12, 2001, 18:51); *RFE/RL Newslines*, March 12, 2002; *RFE/RL Newslines*, March 8, 2002. For one critical response to these accusations, see Anatoly Baranov, *Pravda.ru*, September 10, 2001.
45. Boris Kagarlitsky, "We Don't Talk To Terrorists. But We Help Them?" *Novaia Gazeta*, January 24, 2000, JRL.
46. *RFE/RL Newslines*, March 26, 2002.
47. *Ibid.*
48. George Soros, "Who Lost Russia?," *New York Review of Books*, April 13, 2000, 10–18, as cited in Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2001), 615.
49. *RFE/RL Newslines*, November 15, 2002; *RFE/RL Newslines*, May 15, 2002.
50. Reddaway and Glinski, *Tragedy*, 615–6.
51. *RFE/RL Newslines*, April 17, 2002.
52. Henry E. Hale, "Is Russian Nationalism on the Rise?," policy brief no. 110 in the series published by the Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, February 2000).
53. VTsIOM, "Press-Vypusk 6 Dekabria 1999 goda," <http://www.wciom.ru/EDITION/press15.htm> (accessed December 8, 1999). In keeping with VTsIOM's standard methodology, the poll included sixteen hundred adult respondents in eighty-three population points in thirty-one regions of the country. The margin of error is estimated to be 3.8 percent. The survey was taken November 26–29, 1999.
54. In the December poll, 11 percent supported a new option that was presented to respondents: "the independence of Chechnya has already come about," which also implies acquiescence, putting the overall "acquiescence figure" at 59 percent. See VTsIOM, *VTsIOM na Polit.Ru*, www.polit.ru/documents/160134.html (accessed January 10, 2000, 12:42).

55. Leonid Sedov, leading associate at VTsIOM, *Nezavisimaia Gazeta–Stsenarii*, no. 5 (2000) JRL.

56. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (October 12, 1999, 15:35). The report did not specify whether “Russia” included Chechnya itself in this question.

57. *Ibid.*, January 18, 2000, 11:15. This poll was conducted by the respected agency ROMIR. Of the people surveyed, 50 percent thought that the war would last a long time and only 19 percent believed it would end in a quick and full victory for federal forces. A further 19 percent linked the war to the presidential elections.

58. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (January 27, 2000, 15:57).

59. *Ibid.*, February 17, 2000, 13:14.

60. VTsIOM press release, November 29, 1999, <http://www.wciom.ru/EDITION/press14.htm> (accessed December 3, 1999).

61. On the importance of parties of power in Russia, see Colton and McFaul, “Reinventing,” and Smyth, “Building.”

62. Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii*, 384–87.

63. Sergei Mulin, *Segodnia*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

64. Jerry F. Hough, Evelyn Davidheiser, Susan Goodrich Lehmann, *The 1996 Russian Presidential Election* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1996).

65. *Ekspert*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

66. Colton and McFaul, “Reinventing,” 206.

67. He replied to the question in the following way: “The elections will show who will take what away from whom. I personally have nothing against this bloc [Fatherland–All Russia]. It seems to me that a significant number of sober-minded people have joined it, sharing our views. I would fully venture that we could cooperate in the nomination of candidates for the Duma in the single-mandate districts.” (Sergei Shoigu, interview, *Itogi*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets).

68. Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii*, 388.

69. *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2000, JRL.

70. *Profil*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

71. Colton and McFaul, “Reinventing,” 205–6.

72. *Vremia MN*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (November 9, 1999, 10:13).

73. Vladimir Ryzhkov, interview, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, October 8, 1999, 1, 3, ISI Emerging Markets.

74. Sergei Shoigu, interview, *Itogi*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

75. *Vremia MN*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; Viktor Chernomyrdin, interview, *Segodnia*, October 12, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; Colton and McFaul, “Reinventing,” 206.

76. Russian law required parties to be registered one year in advance to compete in the Duma election. Founding member organizations included the Popular-Patriotic Party, the My Family movement, the All-Russian Union of Support and Cooperation for Small and Middle Business, Blago Denstvie, Generation of Freedom, the “In Support of Independent Deputies” movement, and the Russian Christian–Democratic Party. See *Vremia MN*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

77. Colton and McFaul, “Reinventing,” 205. Among these was Tuleev, again revealing his inclination to work with the Kremlin more than with the Communist Party.

78. *Segodnia*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Vremia MN*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

79. *Profil*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

80. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (November 15, 2000, 1008, 20:12).

81. *Ibid.*, 14:33.

82. *Vremia MN*, September 29, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

83. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (October 6, 1999, 14:43).

84. *Profil*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

85. *Segodnia*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
86. Ad broadcast on the ORT network, November 24, 1999, 21:45 Moscow time.
87. *Mezhregional'noe Dvizhenie "Edinstvo"* (Interregional Movement "Unity").
88. Colton and McFaul, "Reinventing," 210; *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (December 8, 1999, 17:22).
89. Head of analytical center of the Unity Bloc, interview, November 19, 1999.
90. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (October 15, 1999, 15:33).
91. *Segodnia*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
92. *Segodnia*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; Andrei Stepanov, *Izvestiia*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 21, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
93. Colton and McFaul, "Reinventing," 209.
94. *Nezavisimaaia Gazeta*, October 2, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
95. *Vremia MN*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
96. Oleg Morozov, *Segodnia*, October 4, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
97. Sergei Shoigu, interview, *Itogi*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
98. For examples, see: Sergei Shoigu, interview, *Itogi*, October 5, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Vremia MN*, December 1, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (November 10, 1999, 08:58).
99. Smyth, "Building."
100. Colton and McFaul, *Popular Choice*, 216–7.
101. *Izvestiia*, December 1, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
102. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (November 29, 1999, 18:08).
103. Vladimir Ryzhkov, interview, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, October 8, 1999, 1, 3, ISI Emerging Markets.
104. *Izvestiia*, October 16, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Vremia MN*, October 15, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
105. *Vremia MN*, December 1, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (October 29, 1999, 09:58).
106. *Vremia MN*, December 1, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
107. Colton and McFaul, "Reinventing," 211.
108. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (December 1, 1999, 18:39).
109. According to VTsIOM's ratings. See Henry E. Hale, "On November's Campaign Trail," *Russian Election Watch*, no. 5 (December 3, 1999): 2.
110. *The Moscow Times*, December 21, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
111. For example, Civic Union in 1993 and KRO in 1995.
112. Hale, "Campaign Trail," 3.
113. Providing an example of how Fatherland–All Russia expected to generate support, its campaign manager, Georgy Boos, admitted just before the election that his party had mobilized over one hundred thousand people for a rally in part by sending circulars to state-funded institutions. See *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (December 16, 1999, 11:01).
114. Georgy Boos, Fatherland–All Russia campaign chief, interview, *Kommersant Daily*, July 15, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.
115. *Moscow News*, October 21, 1999, DJRL; *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (August 6, 1999, 13:58).
116. Henry E. Hale, "On the Campaign Trail in September," *Russian Election Watch*, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 2.
117. Yevgeny Primakov, interview, *Ekho Moskvy* (radio), October 1, 1999, 15:35, ISI Emerging Markets.
118. Primakov, October 1, 1999.
119. Primakov, October 1, 1999.
120. For example, Luzhkov's early November statements: *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (November 5, 1999, 13:16, 17:50).

121. For examples, see the attack on general corruption reported in *Segodnia*, October 29, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets; and Primakov's snub of Yeltsin and his associates reported by *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (October 21, 1999, 20:34).

122. Some potentially winning material for such a campaign was reported, but in a low-profile way. See, for example, the negative material gathered on Gurov (Unity's number three candidate) by *Segodnia*, October 19, 1999, ISI Emerging Markets.

123. *Polit.Ru*, <http://www.polit.ru/> (February 2, 2000, 11:23).

124. *Moscow News*, October 21, 1999, JRL.