

United Russia Is No Party of Power

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Reading tea leaves — or coffee grounds if you happen to be in Russia — won't help anyone guess who the next mayor of Moscow will be. My prediction is that our leaders will opt for the candidate who is least likely to make a play for the Kremlin in the future.

But Yury Luzhkov's firing has made one thing very clear: United Russia is not a political party at all. In reality, it is little more than a superficial label or a badge worn by the overwhelming majority of high-ranking, opportunistic state employees. Examples of genuine parties include the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, in Mexico; the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; the Communist Party of China and the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan.

For all of the major differences among those parties, they all once held — or in China's case, still hold — control over the agencies of state power. Those parties first make decisions within the party structure, and then those decisions are carried out by the party functionaries.

If the decision to remove Luzhkov, who was a founding member and one of the most important leaders of United Russia, was not made within the party structure, it indicates that the party, as such, does not exist.

This means that it would be impossible for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to use United Russia to defend against an attack by President Dmitry Medvedev if, hypothetically, he tried to invoke his presidential powers to fire the prime minister. Similarly, there is no United Russia faction in the State Duma that could ever be used for the purpose of impeaching the president, if such a mission were ever to be attempted. In other words, United Russia is a hollow trophy awarded to whoever wins the political struggle, not one of the sides in that struggle.

University of Wisconsin political science professor Scott Gehlbach and I once wrote a commentary regarding the appointment of First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov. I held that Zubkov's appointment was one more step in Putin's attempt to maintain sole power over the political system. Gehlbach saw it as a signal that the Kremlin was trying to build an institutionalized ruling party after the manner of Mexico's PRI. We got so caught up in this analogy that we accidentally made the embarrassing mistake of referring to the PRI as the Institutionalized Ruling Party rather than by its proper name, the Institutional Revolutionary Party.

It was an amusing slip of the pen, but in essence, I was right about the future of United Russia. It might not be a bad thing after all that Russia has a party of power. As the lesser of two evils, a party-based dictatorship is better than a personality-based dictatorship, such as former Turkmen leader Saparmurat Niyazov — aka Turkmenbashi, “the leader of all Turkmen.”

There is no better evidence of the fact that there is no party of power in Russia than the highly unprofessional way that Luzhkov was fired after being smeared on government-controlled television.

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