

Heinrich Schwabecher: Establishing a Two-party System in Russia

It is not least thanks to the intense activity of the Russian president, Mr Putin, that the country's political-party system recently acquired a new format. The president's intervention directly led to a meeting between the chairmen of three Russian parties – the Rodina, the Party of Life, and the Pensioners' Party. Following their decision to merge, they announced the foundation of a new party on August 29, 2006. This newly-established party, which is to have a social democratic orientation but will nevertheless show unlimited loyalty towards the executive power, is tentatively called 'Mother Country, Pensioners, Life – a Union of Trust'.

Now, what are the objectives of this new political party? And what are the objectives of the Kremlin itself, which pushed ahead its foundation? Will Russia get a new 'Party of Power' next to that which is Putin's own at the moment, United Russia?

In August 2006, it became generally known that there had been a meeting between Vladislav Surkov, the deputy chief of the Russian presidential administration, and leading members of the Party of Life by the end of March. And Mr Putin himself had met the chairmen of the two other parties – the Rodina and the Pensioners' Party – in July and August. According to Mr Mironov, the chairman of the Party of Life, the new social democratic party, whose self-interpretation probably emerged from those meetings, while willing to develop its own solutions for problems set by the president, does feel obliged to support Vladimir Putin's political and economic course without restriction.

The parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2007 and 2008, respectively, represent important decisions for Russia. This explains why the head of state so massively intervened in favour of a party of his own through which he intends to gain control over the Duma by 2007 and go on from there to set the scene for the presidential elections of the following year.

There can certainly be no doubt that United Russia, as the party of power, will win the elections of 2007; however, percentages are what counts. Although massively supported by the Kremlin, the party should not be able to obtain more than 40 percent – not enough for the country's current leadership to secure its power in parliament.

The reason for the establishment of the new party was a specific strategy: The intention was not only to weaken the communists, the only opposition force left in the Duma, but to oust them if possible, and to win the loyalty of the country's potential left-wing voters. Sergei Mironov, the chairman of the Party of Life, seems to be the best man for this task. What the fabric of power within the new party will finally look like will become clear only after the regional elections of October 2006 and March 2007. However, it is apparent even today that Mr Mironov is indeed Mr Putin's favourite.

Despite all the arrangements of the Kremlin, the prospects of the new party are not exactly rosy. According to surveys, it would win only a few percent of the votes and might not even jump the seven-percent hurdle to enter the Duma. What is more, the role the Kremlin played in the merger of the three parties is highly disputed among experts. Nevertheless, the new party's share of the votes, together with the 40 percent United Russia is expected to obtain in the upcoming

parliamentary elections of 2007, should result in a stable parliamentary majority of the government-friendly parties, leading to a virtual one-party rule.

It is beyond question that the Kremlin aims to hold on to its power and the resources of the present elites beyond 2008, and pushing the new party answers this purpose. To those in power, the establishment of a one- or two-party system whose components are controlled by the Kremlin appears a suitable means towards this end.

Given the situation in Russia, it is very difficult to predict the outcome of the upcoming elections at the moment. There are two possible scenarios: One is, and this is the most probable, that both parties will field their own, not really competing candidates, in which case it would be irrelevant for the retention of power which of the two actually wins. The other is that the new party will be used by pressure groups within the ruling elites to support their own candidate who, should he win, would be bound by the interests of this group.

The development of a two-party system in Russia reveals that on the one hand, the basic rules of democracy are criminally neglected by the ruling elites, and that on the other hand, the steps taken to 'guide democracy' show how nervous the Kremlin actually is on the eve of the elections mentioned above.

What is more, the development just described is remarkable with regard to Russia's future foreign policy, which is traditionally determined by individuals and pressure groups. The more Russia's party system comes under control, the closer the country approaches 'bureaucratic authoritarianism'. The person who tries to influence Russia's internal situation today will be the person to influence the country's foreign policy tomorrow.