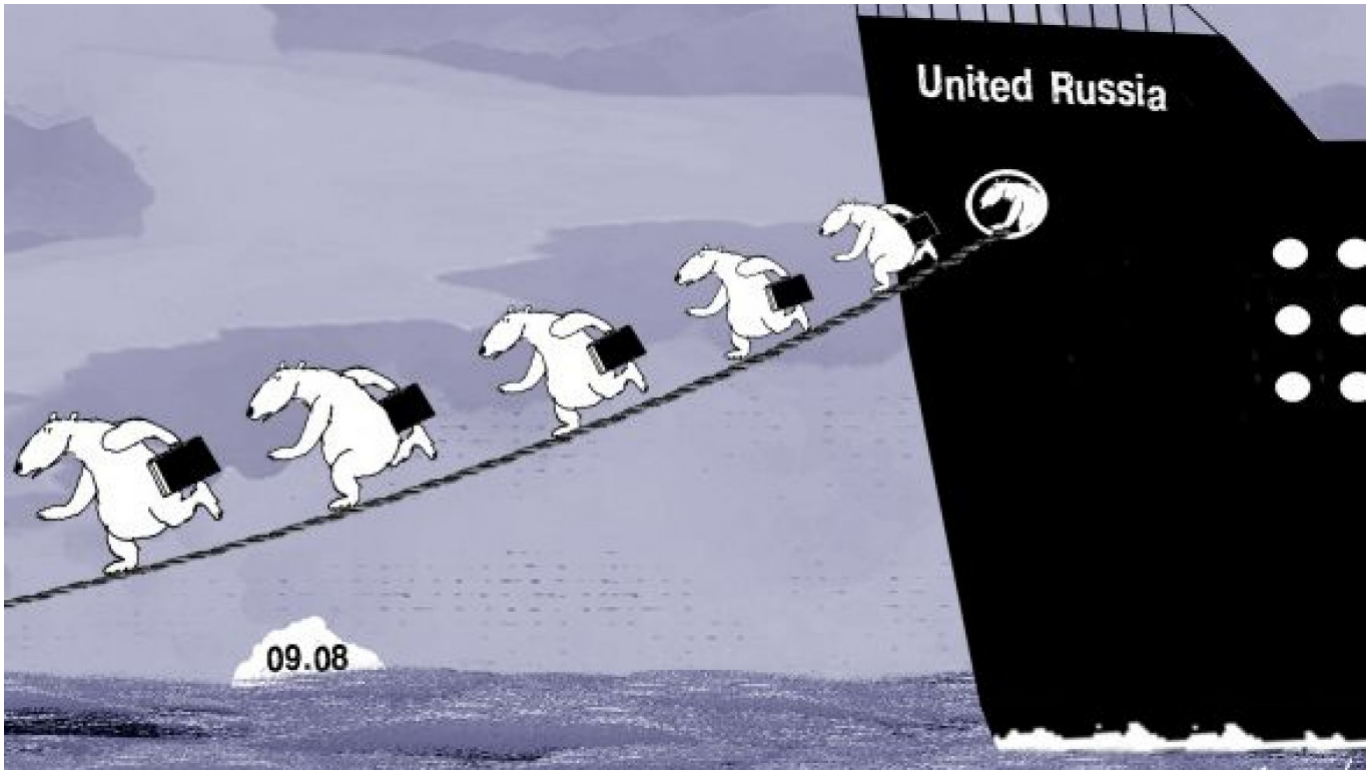
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# Regional Elites See United Russia's Stock Falling

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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The regional elections to be held on Sept. 8 prove that the leaden and inert politics that characterized Russia in the 2000s are gone forever and that they have been replaced by an active and increasingly vibrant spirit.

This summer was marked by two main trends.

First, the political nuclear reactor in Moscow remains dangerously hot. The political chain reaction triggered by the protest movement that began at Chistiye Prudy on Dec. 5, 2011 threatens to "melt down" the ruling regime's "stabilizing graphite rods." With the great mass of government officials, businesspeople and independent professionals remaining active even at the height of the August vacation season, opposition leader and mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny has been mentioned in Moscow's federal media with the same frequency as acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin. Even if Sobyanin wins in the first round of voting as expected, these elections — the first in the capital after a long break — have already been characterized by an intense and genuine struggle.

There are indications that forces within the Kremlin are working to prevent Sobyanin from gaining too much political influence with a strong win in fair and competitive elections. This explains why Navalny has been given greater publicity — albeit often negative — in the form of police breaking in and searching an apartment owned by his supporters and an endless series of attacks by the siloviki.

Second, the regional elite — who were previously herded under the uniform banner of United Russia — now see their political influence beginning to melt and break up like chunks of ice falling away from Greenland in the heat of global warming.

The latest report by former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin's Committee of Civil Initiatives, titled "The party system: the beginning of the reset," offers a simultaneously comic and impressive picture of how many prominent politicians are abandoning the rotting and sinking ship United Russia. They are bailing out in all directions in order to avoid getting sucked into the whirlpool of the sinking Titanic — this one stamped with the party's logo of a large bear.

In fact, they are abandoning not only United Russia but also the other parliamentary parties that have been caught in the suffocating bear hug of the Kremlin. Once considered legitimate alternatives to the ruling party and an answer to Navalny's appeal to disgruntled voters in 2011 to vote for "any other party" but United Russia, they have now completely discredited themselves through their mindless and unconditional support for the Kremlin's draconian and idiotic initiatives.

These days, Russia's political parties are like freely traded companies on the Moscow Stock Exchange. If, like investors, regional politicians perceive that the "systemic parties" are losing value in the eyes of voters, they hurry to affiliate themselves with new parties, buying up shares while they are still cheap. These politicians' only goal is to hold status and influence in the regions, and they could care less what the name of the party is that enables them to achieve it.

For example, former Deputy Speaker of the Ulyanovsk legislative assembly and United Russia member Viktor Seliverstov switched over to billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's Civic Platform party. Then there's Just Russia's Zakhar Misanets, who now carries the flag of Dmitry Rogozin's Rodina party. Former Ivanov Duma speaker and United Russia member Viktor Nazarov is now heading the party list for Civil Platform. Similarly, Rodina's party list in Ivanov is now headed by two former United Russia members and former United Russia member General Alexander Akhlyustin now heads the party list for the Patriots of Russia party.

In the Arkhangelsk region, the former leader of the local Just Russia party has joined Rodina and an entire contingent of high-profile United Russia members have broken ranks. In the Irkutsk region, both former United Russia leader Alexander Bitarov and Vladimir Matiyenko, former Just Russia head in the regional parliament, have joined the Civil Platform. In the republic of Buryatia, the Civil Platform list now includes former Ulan-Ude Mayor Gennady Aidayev along with other major directors and officials. These are only a few of the dozens of such stories across the country.

This means that the party reforms begun by the Kremlin under pressure from society and the

European Court of Human Rights have unexpectedly led to rapid changes in the political life of the country — and apparently far more rapidly than the Kremlin had expected.

Of course, the local politicians who change parties more quickly and frequently than they change shoes do not make Russian politics more ideologically sound or meaningful. They see no difference between Civil Platform, the Liberal Democratic Party and Just Russia and place no importance on which party is "liberal" and which is "socialist."

In fact, this mass migration of politicians from party to party cheapens all party programs and principles, turning Russian politics into a Brownian motion of indistinguishable and equally foul-smelling individuals, clans and identical PR campaigns. This widespread cynicism evinced by politicians has driven down voter turnout and increased the public's aversion to politics in general.

At the same time, the growing diversity among parties is quickly breaking up the monopoly of the ruling party as well as the monopoly of the four-party cartel created by the Kremlin: United Russia, Just Russia, the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party.

However, both the people involved as well as their vested interests remain the same. After September 8, we will see greater fragmentation of legislative assemblies and numerous mayors from new parties. They will declare their right to power by making authority in the region more accountable and more open to the public. But at the same time, the risk increases that a senseless "war of everyone against each other" could break out, just as we see happening now as Ukraine's democratic transformation begins to unravel before our eyes.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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