1. Introduction

Russia’s ruling party, “The United Russia” (abbreviated as UR) has provoked the interest of a number of scholars and observers. Some have even described UR as a dominant party (Gel’man 2008, Reuter and Remington 2009). In the 2011 Duma election, however, the situation changed slightly: UR’s mobilization capacity appeared to reach its limits and votes for UR radically decreased compared to the election of 2007.

How can this change be explained? UR’s deterioration trend has long been observed in Russia’s regional and local elections. The decline in UR’s popularity should therefore be observed by focusing on the regional and local levels (Panov and Ross 2013). In order to understand the real changes afoot in regional politics, this paper focuses mainly on the configuration of the regional elite groups. Such an approach is also appropriate for understanding the nature of UR. For, as Reuter and Remington (2009) point out, UR’s rise to power was facilitated by organizing the support of regional elites. This paper reveals that the role of regional elites and the elite alignment in each region—that is, the (non-)existence of conflicts between the governor and the mayors and the relative strength of communists as a leading opposition group—both affect UR’s relative strength in each region.

This paper contributes to the existing literature in the following respects. First, it enables us to better understand how the political order at the national level has been influenced by the regional elites, and in turn how the regional elites have been affected by political change at the national level. This dynamic is crucial to demystifying the Russian political system, in which the regional elites play a significant role. Second, the regional-level analysis reveals that UR’s political foundations are unstable. These findings might provide a significant empirical basis for further
activating existing scholar’s debates about whether UR can be classified as a dominant party (Panov and Ross 2013).

In order to explore the relations between the elite alignment and UR, this paper presents an empirical analysis of three case regions. Three regions in the mid-Volga—Saratov, Ul’yanovsk, and Samara—are selected on the basis of the variable levels of support for UR in the 2007 and 2011 Duma elections. These election results will be detailed in the third section. Further, selecting neighboring regions makes it easier to control for other variables, such as ethnicity, socio-economic structure, and distance from Moscow.

The argument proceeds as follows. The next section lays out the framework for the analysis, sketching the formation of the main elite groups in the regions and UR’s emergence and fluctuating status in each. Section 3 provides general information about the three regions. The fourth section is devoted to empirical analysis of the three regions. The last section concludes that the elite configuration affected UR’s activities in each region.

2. Framework of analysis

The formation of the regional elite groups

In this section, we trace the origins of main regional elite groups: (1) the governors; (2) capital city mayors; and (3) the communists.

In post-Soviet Russia, regional administrations played a prominent role in the regional politics. With the intensifying centrifugal force of the Russian Federation, the governors enjoyed relative autonomy in the 1990s (Gel’man 1999). In the 2000s, President Putin tried to reduce their power by launching a series of federal reforms (Chebankova 2010). Although a series of political reforms—especially the re-introduction of the gubernatorial appointment system in 2005—weakened their position against the federal center, the governors retained their status as the most influential political actors in the regions.

Regional capital mayors also function as key actors in the political space. Regional capital cities tend to be relatively abundant in terms of tax revenue compared to other rural areas. On the other hand, governors attach greater importance on rural areas than they do cities. The mayors’ political interests, namely, to attract more resources to their city, tend to collide with those of the
governors. As a result, capital city mayors are inclined to stand against the regional governors as potential opposition (Slider 2004).

The communists belong to the third elite group. Communists, the former ruling party in the Soviet Union, still wield influence, whether as regional quasi-ruling parties or as the leading opposition. Especially in the 1990s, during the series of economic reforms under the so-called banner of “shock therapy,” the communists found political advantage in criticizing the El’tsin administration. The situation was the same in the regions: regional communists severely criticized both the regional administrations and the El’tsin administration.

Of course, there are other salient actors, such as democrats, agrarians, and so on (Gel’man et al 2003), but the most important characteristic of the three actors identified above is their shared ability to draw upon so-called “administrative resources,” derived from the mobilization of administrative personnel, state finance, and other organizational resources. Governors and mayors have the capacity to control and mobilize the staff members of their administrative organs. Communists are also able to exploit their party organizations—for, in practice, the communist party has been the only party in Russia with well-developed regional organizations with access to administrative resources (in some regions)—by being elected governors.

This paper thus considers governors, capital city mayors, and the communists as the main elite groups in the regions. The configuration of these elite groups differs widely from one region to the next, however: in so-called “red regions,” the governors and communists are closely aligned. Other regions with sizable capital cities tend to be characterized by conflict dynamics between the governors and capital city mayors.

The emergence of UR and the regional elites

UR was founded in December 2001 as a result of the unification of two electoral blocs, “Fatherland All Russia (OVR)” and “Edinstvo,” which had been founded in the course of the 1999 Duma election campaign. In the following 2003 Duma election, UR obtained 37.6% of the votes. UR, unlike temporary electoral blocs in the 1990s—such as “Choice of Russia” in the 1993 Duma election and “Our Home is Russia” in 1995—began to consolidate as a ruling party. In 2003 and 2004, regional branches were created across the regions.

At first, governors were reluctant to join UR for fear that this affiliation might erode their
own political resources and potentially limit their autonomy. For the governors, who could mobilize their own resources, there was no need to join the national ruling party. Although UR regional branches were registered before the 2003 Duma elections, these branches only existed on paper and governors distanced themselves from associating with them. This is one of the central reasons why UR encountered difficulties in mobilizing political resources in the first half of the 2000s.

On the other hand, some mayors were eager to gain institutional support from UR in order to become more significant political actors on the regional level. This tendency became obvious in the course of 1999 Duma elections, which served as milestone in Russian politics. It is well known that the governors tried to establish regional electoral blocs (Lussier 2002), while some mayors also struggled to ally themselves with the potential ruling parties to add weight and legitimacy to their positions.

The communists played a less obvious role during this phase. While UR was establishing itself as a party, and while President Putin enjoyed such high popularity ratings, the opposition parties, including the communists, were marginalized in regional politics. Their vote share dropped from 24.3% in the 1999 Duma election to 12.6% in the 2003 Duma election. The situation was the same in the former “red regions,” where the communists had developed their own electoral bases over the course of the 1990s.

In sum, though some mayors tried to gain additional political resources by approaching UR, the governors were not eager to follow suit. As a result, UR had difficulties penetrating into the regions.

The regional elites under UR’s dominance

In the middle of the 2000s, UR began to dominate the Russian political space. Some reasons readily emerge. First, as a result of political reforms such as the amendment of the Federal Law “On Political Parties,” it became easier for UR to gain more seats in the legislative organs (Wilson 2006). Second, the party’s control over the opposition became obvious; the Russian political system as a whole became less competitive than in the 1990s. Third, it is no less important that support for President Putin was high (Colton and Hale 2009).

The governors were compelled to join the UR through the introduction of the gubernatorial appointment system in 2005, as well as the growing dominance of the party: as of June
2008, 77 of 83 heads of regional administrations became members of UR (Russian Analytical Digest 43, 2008). By the time of the 2007–2008 elections, UR succeeded in establishing its electoral foundations by including the governors, who had been principal actors in regional politics.

The entrance of governors into UR created new difficulties for this party. Since both the governors and the mayors had become members of UR, this led to internal conflict within the party. Especially in the regions where the capital city mayors’ popularity was high, the relations between governors and mayors grew strained. The conflicts have grown more apparent over the course of electoral campaigns: the governors’ group and the mayors’ group now fight against each other for higher positions on UR’s list.

The growing dominance of UR was coincidental with the increasing influence of communists. Communists gained traction not only from their traditional supporters, but also from people who took negative views towards UR’s dominance. Although other parties face difficulties in opposing the ruling party and its authority, it was relatively easier for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation to criticize the Medvedev/Putin administration. This leverage is why the Communist Party could play a unique role, even in the face of UR’s dominance.

Thus, as soon as UR succeeded in including the governors and establishing a dominant party, regional elite groups started to act as autonomous actors. In spite of UR’s dominance, the regional elite groups were able to maintain their own political intentions and resources.

3. Three regions

As mentioned in the introduction, in order to explore the relations between the alignment of regional elites and UR activity, three neighboring regions in the mid-Volga—Saratov, Samara, and Ul’yanovsk—have been selected for analysis. The results of the 2007 and 2011 Duma elections were varied across the regions (See Table 1). The Saratov region recorded high UR’s vote shares in both the 2007 and 2011 elections. As for Ul’yanovsk, UR enjoyed relatively good results in the 2007 election, but less so in the 2011 election. Comparatively, the Samara region is characterized by lower support for UR in both election years.
Table 1. The UR’s vote shares of the 2007 and 2011 Duma elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007 Duma election</th>
<th>2011 Duma election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average (all Russia)</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (non-ethnic)</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saratov</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ul’yanovsk</td>
<td>66.2%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samara</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Official website of the Central Election Committee of the Russian Federation)

Saratov is a relatively sizable agricultural region of 101,200 km², located between Volgograd and Samara. Its population stands at around 2,565,000, and its capital city, Saratov, is a famous historical city often associated with the Volga German Republic. The Saratov region from the late 1990s to 2005 was led by Dmitrii Aiatskov.

Ul’yanovsk is an industrial region bordering Samara. It is not nearly as large a region as Saratov or Samara, with only 37,200 km² and a population of 1,299,000. Ul’yanovsk has attracted attention for its unique economic liberalization policy in the 1990s, styled as a “soft landing.” The then-governor of the Ul’yanovsk region, Yurii Gariachev, tried to preserve the Soviet-style ration system.

Samara region is an industrial region of 53,600 km², which has been listed as one of the “donor” regions. Samara has two big cities, Samara and Tolyatti, and a population of 3,170,000. The region’s post-Soviet governor, Konstantin Titov, was known as an influential politician not only within the Samara region, but also on the national level.

The information used in case studies is based on newspapers and personal interviews with local politicians and journalists. Interviews were taken in the course of the author’s fieldwork, which held in these three regions from October to December 2010. As for newspapers, author read at least three newspapers—newspapers of regional/city administration, business-oriented or independent newspapers, and regional version of national newspapers such as Kommersant’—of each region and

---

1 But the “soft-landing” policy soon reached its limit: in 1996, the ration system was abolished.
2 The donor region signifies an administrative unit which contributes to the federal budget more than it receives.
### Table 2. Lists of newspapers in each region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Newspapers of regional/city administration</th>
<th>Business-oriented/independent newspapers</th>
<th>Regional versions of national newspapers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saratov</td>
<td>Saratovskie vesti</td>
<td>Saratovskie gubernskie vedomosti</td>
<td>Kommersant’ (Saratov/Samara)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ul’yanovsk</td>
<td>Ul’yanovskaia pravda</td>
<td>Simbirskii kur’er</td>
<td>Kommersant’ (Samara)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samara</td>
<td>Volzhskia komuna</td>
<td>Samarskoe obozrenie</td>
<td>Kommersant’ (Samara)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

compared with each other. When citing the articles of regional Kommersant’, the name of branch office is indicated in the parentheses. The location and the jurisdiction of the branch offices have changed over the time.

### 4. Case study

**Saratov Oblast’**

Saratov in the 1990s was known for the dominance of its governor, Aiatskov. Aiatskov, with El’tsin’s support, succeeded in marginalizing both the capital city mayor and the communists. The mayor in Saratov, who had not been elected by its people but appointed by its governor, was placed under a stronger control of the governor than in other regions (Ryzhenkov 2008). Aiatskov took a decisive anti-communist position, and as a result, communists could not gain any seat in the regional parliament during the 1990s (Kommersant’ September 10, 2002). This political situation in Saratov was described as “winners take all” (Gel’man et. al 2003).

In Saratov, UR appeared as a result of the unification of OVR and Edinstvo. The Saratov OVR leader, Duma deputy Vyacheslav Volodin,³ became the main figure in the newly emerged UR branch in Saratov (Saratovskie gubernskie vedomosti April 19, 2001). On the other hand, the governor, Aiatskov, had made every effort to create his own party in the course of the 1999 Duma

---

³ Volodin, who had been vice-governor of the Saratov region in the late 1990s, was elected as a Duma deputy in 1999. Later Volodin became one of the most influential political figures within UR.
election campaign, though the attempt did not bear fruit.\(^4\) After the 1999 Duma election, Aiatskov became politically inactive. He distanced himself from UR and never joined in the creating of the party during its early stages.

However, Aiatskov had no choice other than to involve himself in UR’s activities, especially over the course of the 2003 Duma election campaigns (Kommersant’ January 10, 2003). As a member, Aiatskov frequently clashed with the UR because the “Volodin group” dominated UR’s Saratov branch. The Volodin group bore openly hostile attitudes towards the regional administration headed by Aiatskov. In 2004, during the electoral campaign for the regional parliament, the tension between Aiatskov and Volodin intensified after a series of scandals related to personnel problems (Kommersant’ January 12, 2004).

The introduction of the gubernatorial appointment system in 2005 changed the political landscape of Saratov. The region was one of the first in which the governor was appointed according to the newly introduced appointment system. As the incumbent governor, Aiatskov—who had already been weakened because of a series of conflicts within UR and accusations of abuse of power in spring 2004—was not chosen as the new governor (Kommersant’ May 15, 2004). Instead, the director of the Balakovo nuclear power station, Pavel Ipatov, was appointed to be Saratov’s new governor in March 2005 (Kommersant’ March 4, 2005). Volodin welcomed Ipatov, saying, “Ipatov is the first governor who has a UR membership at the time of inauguration” (Saratovskie vesti April 6, 2005).

Volodin, however, soon began to criticize Ipatov’s governance style (Kommersant’ April 26, 2007). As a result, Ipatov’s position was weakened, and Volodin succeeded in controlling the regional political scene. Ipatov’s name was not listed in the party list for the 2007 Duma election; instead, Volodin’s name was listed first (Kommersant’ July 3, 2007). The result of the 2007 Duma election in Saratov, with 64.8% of the votes cast for UR, can be seen as clear evidence of UR’s dominance in Saratov. In addition to the relative strength of the UR regional organization in Saratov, the results can be partly attributed to UR’s style of electoral mobilization: the UR regional branch launched a series of party projects that were closely connected to vitally important problems in the areas of social policy and education (Author’s interview with UR party member, October 18, 2010).

\(^4\) In the end, Aiatskov allied with “Our Home is Russia,” which was created at the time of the 1995 Duma election, and failed to gain the electorate’s support.
Thus, in Saratov, UR succeeded in establishing a relatively stable electoral basis. However, this did not imply a total absence of conflict among the regional elites. One of the most severe conflicts occurred between Volodin and the Saratov city manager and successful businessman, Oleg Grischenko. Grischenko’s power threatened the Volodin group, and so the latter began to criticize Grischenko for his lack of obedience to the party (Kommersant’ (Volgograd) June 2, 2007). Grischenko resisted against Volodin, and even wrote a letter to Gryzlov, criticizing Volodin’s tactics (Kommersant’ (Volgograd) June 22, 2007).

Interestingly enough, though, such conflicts never ended up destroying the UR regional branch past the point of repair. This finding may be attributed to the coercive nature of the politics in Saratov. First, controls on freedom of speech were especially severe in the region, and local journalists were repeatedly sued for libel by Putin and Volodin (Kommersant’ August 11, 2007). Second, elites showed little mercy when eliminating potential threats. The case of Mayor Lysenko is typical in this aspect. Having been considered a brilliant politician—as mayor of the second-largest city, Engels—Lysenko intended to run in the March 2011 regional election. However, just before the regional elections, Lysenko was accused of committing “murder” and his name was taken off the list (Kommersant’ February 16, 2011). This case clearly shows the machinations of the Saratov elites.

Since the regional elites gathered around the UR regional branch did not split, and the opposition groups had no real influence on regional politics, UR’s electoral mobilization was further strengthened. The results of the regional parliamentary elections tipped strongly in UR’s favor in Saratov. In the Saratov city parliament, for example, 37 of 41 seats were won by UR (Kommersant’ (Saratov) March 15, 2011). UR’s electoral success did not change radically in the course of the 2011 Duma election, and the party obtained 64.9% of the votes. Considering that in most regions UR’s performance suffered dramatically, the electoral result in Saratov was exceptional and akin to those in Russia’s ethnic regions.

UR had become a dominant political vehicle for Saratov’s regional elites, and even severe conflicts inside the party organization did not split up the regional branch.

Ul’yanovsk Oblast’

In Ul’yanovsk, the former first secretary of the CPSU regional committee, Yuriii Goriachev, was appointed as the first governor of Ul’yanovsk. Goriachev, who had forged a strong identity as a
communist, succeeded in establishing the party’s power basis. Goriachev, however, distanced himself from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation owing to conflicts between the “old” and “new” communists (Author’s interview with Professor Dergunova, November 28, 2010).

In the first half of the 1990s, Goriachev enjoyed his popularity and took a decisive stand against the El’tsin administration, but his anti-El’tsin policy soon reached an impasse, and most people realized that this policy was already anachronistic. Goriachev tried to maintain his power by creating a new regional bloc under the banner of the “Ul’yanovsk Patriots Union,” trying to erode away the power base of the communist camp. Although his attempt proved successful to some extent (Magomedov 2005), he failed to manage the overall dissatisfaction of the electorate. Because of this, in the course of the 2000 gubernatorial election Goriachev came to be overwhelmed by his rivals. In the end, however, General Vladimir Shamanov, who gained support from the Kremlin, defeated Goriachev (Simbirskii kur’er January 11, 2001).

As the second governor (2000–2004), Shamanov took a pro-Kremlin position. He joined UR in January 2003 and actively participated in founding the UR regional branch in Ul’yanovsk (Simbirskii kur’er January 30, 2003). For Shamanov, who ran the gubernatorial election as a “parachute candidate” and did not have roots in Ul’yanovsk, close ties with the Kremlin and UR were crucial in maintaining his legitimacy as a governor.

However, as the economic conditions in Ul’yanovsk deteriorated and energy supply issues became more pressing, Shamanov suffered a drop in popularity. UR grew reluctant to support Shamanov. Facing the 2003 Duma election, UR decided to eliminate Shamanov from the UR party list (Simbirskii kur’er October 2, 2003) and stopped supporting Shamanov outright. Although Shamanov was eager to run for the 2004 gubernatorial election, UR did not support him and even suspended his membership (Kommersant’ November 22, 2004). Instead, UR supported the mayor of Dimitrovgrad—the second-largest city in Ul’yanovsk—, Sergei Morozov.

In the 2004 gubernatorial election, UR’s chosen candidate, Morozov, was elected (Kommersant’ December 28, 2004). As governor, Morozov maintained a good working relationship with UR. UR played a significant role in extracting subsidies from the federal center, which was crucially important for improving economic conditions in Ul’yanovsk. For example, a Ul’yanovsk

---

5Ul’yanovsk experienced a serious “energy crisis” in the early 2000s: citizens’ supplies of heating and hot water were repeatedly stopped by energy suppliers due to nonpayment of bills.
campaign focused on solving the housing problems of “deceived citizens (obmanutye dol’schiki)⁶ was held successfully, providing new apartments to those who had paid for their apartments but could not inhabit them (Simbirskii kur’er October 5, 2006). The quality of governance in Ul’yanovsk positively affected UR’s popularity as well. The 66.2% of the votes that went to UR in the 2007 Duma election in Ul’yanovsk can be attributed to the relatively stable relations maintained between the governor and UR.

However, the popularity of UR and Morozov soon reached a limit. Ironically, one of the causes can be attributed to the dominance of UR itself. All committee positions in the Ul’yanovsk Oblast’ parliament were held by UR deputies (Kommersant’ (Samara) March 21, 2008). The regional election in October 2008 brought all city parliamentary seats in Dimitrovgrad to UR (Kommersant’ (Samara) October 14, 2008), which made the electorate more cautious of the predominance of UR. The popularity dip for UR and Morozov was also owing to the economic crisis of 2008, which led to steep budget cuts. Across Russia, the economic crisis damaged regional politicians, who had been dependent on their economic achievements enabled by the abundant subsidies from the federal center (Kommersant’ (Samara) April 17, 2009).

Recognizing the limits of UR when it came to winning votes, political elites in Ul’yanovsk began to split ranks. In 2009, UR’s Ul’yanovsk city branch collapsed over dissent about the abolition of the mayoral election. As a result, some party members went further and left UR altogether (Kommersant’ (Samara) January 19, 2010). It is no less important that the communists began to serve as a core for opposition forces. The regional communists severely criticized UR, for example, over the closing of a school due to a decrease in the number of pupils (Kommersant’ (Samara) July 2, 2010).

This tendency prompted questions about the legitimacy of UR’s dominance. In the course of the March 2010 regional elections, some politicians declined to register as candidates for Ul’yanovsk city parliament. They insisted that the electoral committee’s position was not neutral, but rather bent in favor of UR. Later in February 2010, dissatisfied politicians created a so-called “civil control committee”—a platform from which they criticized the existing political regime (Kommersant’ (Samara) February 11, 2010).

⁶ In the early 2000s a number of people experienced housing problems: they could not move into apartments for which they had properly paid principally because of the sudden bankrupt of building companies.
The 2011 Duma election was held amidst a political atmosphere unfavorable for UR. The percentage of votes cast for UR that year was 43.6%—20 points lower than in 2007—and clearly indicates the dip in UR’s popularity. By contrast, the communists gained 23.1% of the votes, 12 points higher than in the previous election. In Ul’yanovsk city, specifically, the communists gained 29% of the votes, whereas UR obtained 30% (Kommersant’ (Samara) December 11, 2011). These statistics signal the changing tides for UR and the rising strength of the opposition.

Thus, in Ul’yanovsk, UR handily consolidated its electoral base early, with the aid of the governor Morozov. UR’s dominance did not last for long, however. Soon after the 2007 Duma elections, the cohesion of the elites began to crumble and so too did UR’s popularity.

Samara Oblast’

Samara witnessed a series of conflicts between the governor, the Samara city mayor, and the mayor of Tolyatti, the second-largest city in Samara. The governor of Samara, economist Konstantin Titov, succeeded in establishing a sound constituency among voters. However, Samara city gained its own political power separate from the region as a whole, especially after the 1997 mayoral election. The new Samara mayor Limanskii won the election mainly because of his promise not to increase housing prices (Volzhskia komurna August 1, 1997). Limanskii’s populist appeal in turn engendered conflicts between the governor and the Samara city mayor.

Facing the 1999 Duma election, Titov created his own electoral bloc, “Voice of Russia,” and tried to enter into the political scene on the national level. His attempt was, however, not fully successful: in the end, Titov’s bloc “Voice of Russia” allied with the Union of Right Forces (SPS), which was known for its market-oriented economic policy. However, SPS obtained 8.5% of the votes and failed to become an influential political force. Titov sustained his ambitions through the 2000 presidential election as a candidate from SPS, gaining only 1.5% of the votes (Samarskoе obozrenie January 24, 2000).7

Thus, in Samara, Titov was principally concerned with his own individual political campaigning, and throughout his election attempts, he distanced himself from “Edinstvo” (later UR). Instead, it fell mainly to the mayors of Samara and Tolyatti to lead the formation of UR in Samara.

7 After the presidential elections, in April 2000, Titov assumed responsibility for his defeat in the presidential election and resigned. He was soon reelected in July 2000.
Mayor Limanskii took the first step to become a leader of Samara “Edinstvo” (*Volzhskiaia kommuna*, January 19, 2000). Thereafter, the mayors of Samara and Tolyatti began to compete with each other, which resulted in severe conflicts within the party’s regional branch. This invoked a legitimacy problem in which the party center had to decide between the Tolyatti branch and the Samara branch. This legitimacy problem further marginalized the position of the UR regional presence in Samara.

Titov further pursued his political ambition. In October 2000, Titov was elected as a leader of the Russian Socialist Party (*Volzhskiaia kommuna* October 31, 2000). Since his sudden conversion was considered incomprehensible, he found he could gain less support than before both from regional elites and the electorate. Facing the 2003 Duma election, due to the unpopularity of the Russian Socialist party, Titov had no choice other than to cooperate with UR (*Samarskoe obozrenie* September 22, 2003). However, his actions did not help to consolidate the UR branch in Samara. The Samara branch had difficulty in selecting their candidate for SMD (single-member districts) portion (*Samarskoe obozrenie* August 25, 2003).

Later, after the introduction of the gubernatorial appointment system, Titov finally decided to enter UR fully (*Samarskoe obozrenie* November 24, 2005). Titov’s membership, however, posed a serious problem to UR. The UR regional branch in Samara, with its weak organization, was completely disrupted by Titov, the most influential political figure in the region. The Samara UR branch experienced severe internal conflicts, including a particularly heated one concerning the formation of the party-list for the 2007 Duma election (*Samarskoe obozrenie* June 4, 2007). In order to resolve them, in the summer of 2007 (just before the Duma election) a new governor, Vladimir Artiakov, was appointed (*Kommersant’* August 28, 2007). Nevertheless, UR received 56.0% of the votes, which was still lower than the national average.

The elite configuration in Samara in the mid-2000s remained competitive. For example, in Samara city, as a result of the 2006 Samara mayoral election, the incumbent Sergei Limanskii, who was supported by UR, was defeated by Viktor Tarkhov, a candidate from Just Russia (*Kommersant’* October 23, 2006). As a result, Just Russia succeeded in gaining administrative resources in Samara city. The Samara city administration headed by Tarkhov intervened in the UR branch’s activity (Author’s interview with party activist, November 10, 2010). Despite the overall dominance

---

8 At the time of perestroika, Tarkhov held important posts, including the chairmanship of Kuibyshev (Samara) Oblast’ Soviet and a role as the ispolkom chairman of Kuibyshev (Samara) City Soviet. In these roles, Tarkhov had a rivalry with Titov.
of UR in the latter half of 2000s, Samara’s political scene differed from the other regions.

Moreover, UR’s authoritarian character became problematic. At the time of the Samara mayoral and city parliament elections of October 2010, the electoral committee declined to register some independent candidates (Kommersant’ (Saratov) September 9, 2010). This led to a series of anti-UR protest movements (Kommersant’ (Saratov) September 28, 2010). It further eroded UR’s position in Samara. The 2011 Duma election was held against this backdrop. UR gained 39.4% of the votes, 10 points lower than the national average. On the other hand, the Communist Party and Just Russia obtained 23.1%, 14.2%, respectively, which means that leading opposition parties were more popular than the national average.

In sum, in Samara, UR encountered some difficulties in consolidating its electoral base. This can be attributed to highly competitive nature of Samara’s politics—competitiveness that UR found extremely difficult to embrace.

5. A tentative conclusion

The above analysis of the mid-Volga regions reveals that the elite configuration substantially affected UR’s activity in each region. UR’s political life can be divided into two phases: (1) its emergence in the regions (2002–2005); and (2) a phase following the time in which UR’s dominance at the national level had been achieved (2005–2011).

During the early phases of UR’s establishment, contrary to the conventional view, it would appear that UR had difficulty penetrating into certain regions. Governor’s reluctance played a major part. As was shown from the Saratov case, governor Aiatskov did not participate in the formation of UR. This tendency was also observed in Samara, where the governor Titov focused on his own political ambitions. At the same time, it is also important to note that the elite configuration in each region affected UR’s relative success. In Saratov, where the potential opposition forces against the governor had been long oppressed, it became relatively easy for UR to establish a foothold once the governor was incorporated into the party. In Ul’yanovsk, although governor Shamanov longed to ally himself with UR, due to his unpopularity, UR did not seek a return alliance with the governor. UR therefore lacked a crucial supporter at the regional level. In Samara, the mayors struggled to align themselves with UR, while the governor went his own way. These cases made it difficult for
UR to organize the regional elites in the mid-Volga. Thus, though UR began to penetrate into the regions, the degree and the course of such activity was not identical across the regions.

In the recent course of centralizing reforms, the situation has slightly changed. Even in Samara, where the governor distanced himself from UR, there was no choice not to join UR. In Saratov and Ul’yanovsk, it became easier for UR to build friendly relations with governors. It seemed that the situation of UR became identical across these regions, due to a series of institutional reforms and increasing turn to more authoritarian governance. However, the process was not linear. Although the Saratov case shows that the party’s political stability was maintained in an authoritarian way, this was not the case for Ul’yanovsk and Samara. In Ul’yanovsk, under UR’s dominance, communists began to actively criticize UR. In Samara, UR’s dominance also came into question; though the governor finally joined UR, this act invited a series of internal conflicts within UR. In sum, under UR’s dominance, the regional elite groups started to act according to their relative capabilities in the balance of power.

Thus, it can be concluded that the role of the regional elites—especially the governors’ attitudes towards UR—had impacts on the ways UR formed regional branches and at what speed. However, the subsequent change has not been linear. The overall elite configuration in each region has also affected UR’s position. Although regional elites united into one party in the mid-2000s, its cohesiveness was far from strong. Even if it once occupied a predominant space of Russian politics, it was not until long that the party began to fragment into sub-groups which sought to exercise a maximum leverage in the region of each own. This aspect is also important in understanding the nature of UR.

6. Bibliography


Gel’man, Vladimir. “Second Europe-Asia Lecture. Regime Transition, Uncertainty and


