

The political scene in Russia: change is a-coming

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On 4 April in Russia, the law which liberalises the party system came into force. This law renders the process of registering political parties easier (only parties possessing this status can participate in elections). The most important change is the reduction of the number of members needed to register a party from 40,000 to 500. The procedure of registration itself has also been simplified. However, the registration mode by virtue of the decision of the governmental body – the Ministry of Justice – has been preserved. The state also preserves many informal instruments of control over the party scene, including financing of parties (state grants and donations from private sponsors).

Commentary

- The liberalisation of the law relating to the party system is the government's response to the escalation of protests which has been observed in Russia since autumn 2011 (another gesture will be the law which will reinstate direct the election of governors which is currently being prepared). While demonstrating its willingness to make concessions, the government also expects these changes not to threaten the dominance of the “ruling party”, United Russia, hoping that the low threshold of the parties’ size will lead to the fragmentation of the opposition electorate: many parties will be established, they will compete with one another and thus will not gain much support.
- At the present stage it is difficult to determine whether these calculations of the government will be successful. It is however certain that once the law has come into effect, the number of parties will increase considerably – at present there are only seven officially registered parties in Russia. It may be expected that both democratic parties will be registered (including PARNAS which groups together a section of the opposition and is led by Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov and the party headed by Mikhail Prokhorov who is supported by the former finance minister Alexei Kudrin) as well as nationalist parties (many requests for registrations of nationalist parties have already been submitted to the Ministry of Justice). The government may also encourage the establishment of parties intended to win over part of followers of the opposition. Furthermore, the existing parties may undergo organisational changes, including the “ruling party”, United Russia, or the left-wing Just Russia, as their present formula has outlived its usefulness, support for the parties has declined and internal conflicts have been increasing.

- The liberalisation of the law relating to political parties may encourage the institutionalisation of the protest movement which has so far been dispersed, even more so that the increase in political activity has been observed in Russia in recent months, including at the local level. Such involvement was observed in Moscow, where the presidential elections (held on 4 March) coincided with local elections in which one third of votes were cast for opposition or independent members. Opposition politicians also sustained a landslide victory in the elections of mayors in Togliatti (18 March) and Yaroslavl (1 April) and many opposition politicians participated in the elections as observers. The elections, which mark the change in the trend of the government's full political domination, are accompanied by an increasing number of demands for the reinstatement of the direct election of governors and the decentralisation of the regional policy. The regional elections to be held in October in 10 Russian regions may prove to be a test both for the "new" political scene and social involvement in political processes, as well as for the Russian government.