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United Russia: Party of Crooks and Thieves, and Then Some

By Ilya Yashin



To international observers, Russia's ruling party might appear to be a typical political organization. But in fact, there is a deep connection between Russian President Vladimir Putin's political party, United Russia, and organized crime. The party has become riddled with corruption and lawlessness, and the way to fortune and unbridled power in Russia today is to curry favor with the party, where high-level political appointments inevitably lead to access to wealth through criminal and kleptocratic networks.

United Russia emerged shortly before the 1999 parliamentary elections. It was then a political movement called Unity, and Russian oligarchs actively supported it from the start. Unity won a majority of seats in the State Duma in the 1999 elections, and in 2001, the movement was converted into a party and changed its name to United Russia.

Meanwhile, Putin was gradually consolidating his power in the country, and United Russia became a key element of the new system. Relying upon a media monopoly, the use of administrative resources, and financial support from oligarchs, United Russia gradually gained control over the entire legislative branch and all levels of government, from the federal to the municipal.

In particular, United Russia members played an increasingly noticeable role in the national government; almost all governors and heads of the national republics became United Russia members. "The United Russia party has become a consolidating force that guarantees political stability," Putin has said.

However, not many Russian citizens share the president's opinion. According to a poll conducted by the Levada Center in 2013, more than half of all Russians considered United Russia to be a party of crooks and thieves, and 62 percent of the population believed that Putin's subordinates were only interested in strengthening their personal authority and financial benefits.

Russians' attitude toward the ruling party is hardly surprising. Over the years of a de facto political monopoly, many top United Russia representatives have been involved in widely publicized criminal cases. With ever-increasing frequency, State Duma members, senators, governors, and mayors representing the ruling party have been imprisoned on charges of corruption and bribery, and even of masterminding murders.

In the 1990s, criminal organizations either opposed the state or bribed its representatives. However, the turn of the twenty-first century was marked by a new trend: organized crime groups began penetrating government structures through United Russia. Thugs from the 1990s traded their leather jackets and gold chains for business suits and party membership cards and soon they too were occupying government offices. Criminal elements essentially began using the structure of the country's main political party as a means of upward social mobility; it allowed them to integrate into the government system and to gain access to resources.

This process led to a dramatic increase in corruption and to wide-scale theft of the nation's wealth. Criminal structures were establishing strict control over entire sectors of the Russian economy. Several regions were left completely at the mercy of organized crime groups acting under the protection of the United Russia party.

Examples abound:

In 2010, Vyacheslav Gaizer, a United Russia candidate, became governor of the Komi Republic. In 2015, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation arrested him on charges of running an organized crime group that had essentially taken over the region. The defining characteristics of Gaizer's mafia clan are its ramified structure and its deep penetration of the country's government system, both of which were made possible thanks to the support of the United Russia party.

Putin appointed high-profile United Russia member Aleksandr Khoroshavin as governor of Sakhalin in 2007. The support of the Kremlin and the ruling party provided Khoroshavin with a sense of impunity and he gradually turned into minor royalty, with a corresponding standard of living. Khoroshavin remained in office until 2015 and enjoyed the support of Putin and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, as well as of the United Russia party. In 2015, he was arrested on bribe-taking charges; after his arrest, it was discovered that he had set up a system of extortion and bribery on a vast scale.

In 2004, United Russia supported Nikolai Denin's candidacy for governor of the Bryansk region. During the elections, Denin represented not only the ruling party but also the region's organized crime elements, and his victory strengthened the influence of organized crime in the region. Fraud schemes were common in the region under his rule. As a member of United Russia's Supreme Council, Denin managed to avoid criminal liability for years. However, in 2014, he was placed under house arrest; the next year, he was sentenced to four years in prison.

United Russia's leadership claims that criminal activity among the party's representatives is a rare phenomenon. However, the number of criminal cases against United Russia officials who occupy government positions suggests the opposite. In fact, the geography of crime involving members of the ruling party covers the entire country, as well as every level of government. But although law enforcement bodies have achieved some success, they are generally unable to curb the corruption that has pervaded the entire country and in some cases has even reached the international arena.

The entire country is in the clutches of a venal system. In order to get access to the feeding trough of public funds, one must simply share one's profits with those who offer protection from above. As a result, since United Russia's rise to power, the party has established itself as a route to

upward mobility for criminal elements. These criminals have adapted, and have managed to successfully integrate themselves into government bodies by using the party's resources.

In supporting United Russia, Russian citizens are contributing to a corrupt system that poses a danger to the state itself.

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Russia

Image: Former governor of Sakhalin region Alexandr Khoroshavin is escorted inside a court building as he attends a hearing in Moscow, March 4, 2015. In 2015, he was arrested on bribe-taking charges; after his arrest, it was discovered that he had set up a system of extortion and bribery on a vast scale. REUTERS/Maxim Zmeyev