

## POLITICAL PLURALISM OR STAGNATION

Gerhard Mangott



GERHARD MANGOTT is an Austrian political scientist and expert on Eastern Europe and Russia. He has been a professor at the University of Innsbruck since 2003. He has also been a member of the board of the 'Austrian Political Science Association' since 2005, and is a member of the advisory council of the Paul Lazarsfeld Association in Vienna

■ *Do you agree that 2010 marked the advent of the ultimate crisis of systemic and non-systemic opposition? What exactly is happening with political opposition in Russia?*

Governments usually have four options in dealing with dissenters: deprive opposition movements of visibility in the (electronic) media, which requires state control over the main media holdings; discredit the core figures of the opposition movement; stifle and harass any opposition by repressive measures, which requires tight control over the law enforcement agencies; or co-opt core figures of the dissident circles and entrust them with influential positions in the government. In my view, the Russian ruling class is making use of all four of these strategies, with variations in the mix over time.

In addition to restrictions from above, however, **Russian dissenters still lack a charismatic and unifying leader; their support base is still small, while the social milieu of opposition actors is still narrow and almost negligible beyond the larger towns.** Besides, its focus on civil and political rights does not actually meet the core concerns of many Russians, which are jobs and how to make a decent living.

■ *Any ruling power in a democracy needs opposition and Russia is no exception. Should the ruling power interfere in the process of forming an opposition by way of its legal institutions?*

Liberal democracies are based on indivisible human and civil rights, which enable, among other things, freedom of opinion and association. In principle, the rule of law provides an even and fair playing field for the articulation and aggregation of ideas and goals. That said, it is not the task of the incumbent elites to foster or even create dissenting parties or organizations. In democracies, the ruling power must not take any decisions which might ultimately restrict the freedom of expression and organization. **The ruling power's task is neither to encourage nor to prevent or restrict political opposition.** The idea that the incumbent elite form its own opposition is bizarre, artificial, and manipulative; it demonstrates a perverted logic of political competition in a free society.

■ *'Edinaya Rossiya' is at the center of the Russian party system and a number of claims have been raised against it. The President says that it has become 'excessively monumental'; Vladimir Pligin claims that in the near future it might split into several*

*parts. Do you think this party could possibly produce opposition forces?*

If 'Edinaya Rossiya' were a political party with a distinct political platform then this could possibly happen. However, 'Edinaya Rossiya' is not a political party, but an organization bringing together officials of both the federal and regional levels. **It is a network of state officials, and a highly sophisticated tool for implementing decisions of the Russian government.** It is a recruitment base for the ruling elites and it is a tool for carving out careers. It is not, however, a political party that devises political strategies and ideas on its own. So 'Edinaya Rossiya' will likely not split along ideological lines but rather fall apart if the composition of the ruling elites change as a result of clannish infighting or the emergence of new patrimonial leaders.

■ *In your opinion, what is the main problem being passed from the generation of 2000 to that of 2010?*

The major task of the coming decade is to enable and facilitate the emergence of opposition movements and clubs. The centralized and authoritarian control of the political society must be, albeit gradually, abandoned. Such transitions to more liberal concepts of power are risky, bumpy and protracted. These might unleash destabilizing forces but are nevertheless unavoidable, if the Russian political

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and civil society is to prosper in the foreseeable future. Without such political pluralism stagnation will eventually become the defining characteristic of Russian politics. ■

*Gerhard Mangott was speaking with Yulia Netesova*