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Dominant Party Regimes and the Commitment Problem

The Case of United Russia

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This article analyzes the formation of a stable dominant party in an authoritarian regime as a commitment problem between two sides: the ruler and other elites. After defining a dominant party regime and outlining the costs and benefits that such a regime entails for each side, the authors examine the efforts made in Russia to establish United Russia as a dominant party and argue that the Kremlin and regional elites have overcome their commitment problem through mutual investment in the United Russia party. In contrast to previous party-of-power projects, United Russia represents an equilibrium arrangement between the federal center and other political and economic elite actors.

Keywords: *dominant party; Russia; authoritarian regime; elite; United Russia; Putin*

1. Dominant Parties in Authoritarian Regimes

Political scientists have devoted increasing attention in recent years to institutional variation among nondemocratic regimes (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Geddes, 1999b; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2006; Way, 2005). One important type of variation in these regimes is the extent to which leaders rule through a dominant party. Some authoritarian leaders use a dominant party to secure victories at the ballot box, control legislatures, mobilize support for the regime, manage elite conflict, and bind allies to the ruling coalition. Others prefer to rule through a combination of personal attachment, patronage, and coercion, rather than sharing access to

resources with a party. This invites a question: Why do dominant parties emerge in some authoritarian regimes but not in others?

Russia under Vladimir Putin offers an excellent case for examining this puzzle. Under Putin's late predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, the Kremlin struck individual bargains with powerful elites to perpetuate its rule, showing no interest in building a strong propresidential party and even undermining Yeltsin's advisers' efforts to create ad hoc "parties of power" in elections in the 1990s (Belin & Orttung, 1997, pp. 31-37; Colton & McFaul, 2003, pp. 47-51). Only in 1999 did his circle act to assemble a party to compete in the December 1999 Duma election and thus ensure a smooth presidential succession (Hale, 2004, 2006; Shvetsova, 2003; Smyth, 2002). Even for a few years after 1999, however, the degree of the Kremlin's commitment to the new party of power was only tentative. Regional elites still possessed substantial autonomy inherited from the 1990s that they were reluctant to relinquish to a Kremlin-controlled party. In turn, the Kremlin could not be sure that they could count on these elites to lend full support to the party. Until 2003, the Putin leadership made little effort to press powerful regional elites to join Unity/United Russia. Kremlin strategy shifted only as the 2003 parliamentary election drew near and Putin's team recognized that it needed the governors' substantial administrative resources to ensure a strong showing for its chosen party (Slider, 2005, pp. 178-179).

Since the 2003 elections, however, the Kremlin has invested much greater effort into making United Russia a dominant party at the center and in the regions. Other elites in Russia still control enough political resources that it is necessary for the Kremlin to engineer a device to co-opt them, but they are not so strong vis-à-vis the Kremlin that they are willing to defy the Kremlin's party-building project.

United Russia's position is commanding. In the 2003-to-2007 convocation of the State Duma, it controlled two thirds of the seats (more than 300 of 450). As of 2008, it also controlled a majority of seats in all regional legislatures, and 78 of Russia's 83 regional administration heads were party members. The party has a self-reported mass membership of over 1.5 million with over 53,000 regional, local, and primary branches. At every level, the party is increasingly being used as device for managing intraelite relations and a way for the Kremlin to manage political and bureaucratic appointments. Vladimir Putin chose to run at the top of the United Russia list in the December 2007 Duma election and to become its leader as prime minister, yet without becoming a party member. The Kremlin has also sponsored a series of major reforms to the rules on parties and elections with a view toward both privileging the party of power in the electoral arena

and elevating its institutional role (Gel'man, 2006; Makarenko, 2006; Wilson 2006).

We argue in this article that United Russia is consolidating its position as a dominant party. After defining the concept of a dominant party and dominant party regime, we argue that forming a dominant party is a two-sided commitment problem shared by the central rulers and other political elites. We then explore the plausibility of this theoretical framework by examining Russia's experience with parties of power in the 1990s and, in more detail, the rise of United Russia after 2002.

2. Defining the Dominant Party

We define a dominant party as a party that has the leading role in determining access to most political offices. It shares some powers over policy making, patronage distribution, and political appointments and uses privileged access to the public purse and public policy to maintain its position in power.¹ For example, it may pressure courts and election commissions to refuse opposition parties opportunities to register, deny them access to the media while providing extensive and favorable publicity to the dominant party, manipulate court rulings on the fairness of election campaign tactics, intimidate voters, pad vote counts, and the like. These measures are intended to ensure that election outcomes never threaten the rulers' political control.² The dominant party's tendency to resort to these methods distinguishes a dominant party regime from a democratic polity where a particular party enjoys a long tenure in office. In a dominant party regime under authoritarian rule, some opportunities for opposition forces to compete may exist, but these forces are largely marginalized. The operative rule is that the authorities must never be required to relinquish power as a result of an electoral defeat.³

An additional component of this definition is the dominant party's role as a successful supplier of certain benefits to rulers, other elites, and voters. The party can reduce transaction costs for elites in bargaining over policy, give career opportunities to ambitious politicians, manage conflicts and succession struggles among elites, mitigate uncertainty for elites over whom to support, and coordinate electoral expectations on the part of elites and voters. As we show in greater detail below, United Russia has come to fit this description well.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) offers one clear, albeit extreme, case of a dominant party system. The CPSU's dominance of the

political system was exercised through its monopoly on policy making, ideology, and political recruitment (Harasymiw, 1984; Hough, 1969; Hough & Fainsod, 1979; Remington, 1988; Rigby, 1968). The high internal centralization, monopoly on political activity, and Marxist-Leninist ideology make communist party systems outliers among the range of dominant party regimes, but their well-established procedures for exercising power give contemporary post-Soviet party builders a wealth of usable experience.

In the communist regime, the boundary between state and party is erased. In such an arrangement, the party becomes the sole gatekeeper of political influence in the country, controlling nomination of the executive, making appointments to the bureaucracy and civil service, and dictating the direction of policy making. Some have called this arrangement a “party-state” (Widner, 1992), distinguishing it clearly from other dominant party arrangements where the party fails to achieve this level of penetration. Our definition of dominant party encompasses both party-states and authoritarian regimes that “merely” bolster their rule with the aid of a dominant party. To fit our definition, the party must serve only in the roles outlined above and be institutionally distinguishable from the ruler’s personal apparatus. Examples of dominant party regimes include Kenya under the Kenya African National Union (before and after 1992), Mexico under the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), Zimbabwe under the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front, the Soviet Union under the CPSU, Paraguay under Stroessner and the Colorado Party, Azerbaijan under the Aliyevs and YAP (New Azerbaijan Party), and Indonesia under Suharto and Golkar.⁴

3. A Dominant Party as a Commitment Problem

Samuel Huntington (1970, p. 4) once described dominant party regimes as the only modern form of authoritarian regime. According to Huntington, these parties arose out of processes of modernization—social differentiation, economic development, and nationalist struggle—which opened up fissures in society that could only be healed through concession, co-optation, and/or organization. Authoritarian leaders might choose to co-opt and form an inclusive dominant party, or they might use the party as an “organizational weapon” with which to exclude or repress other social groups. In any case, party organization was seen as a response to a competitive threat from forces in society. In a similar vein, Smith (2005) argues that dominant parties (single parties in his terms)

are more likely to emerge when incumbent rulers are faced with a strong social opposition that compels them to build a strong party organization to maintain coalitions and monitor allies. Gandhi and Przeworski (2006) take a similar view of the problem, arguing that dictatorial institutions, including legislatures and parties, will be used to grant policy concessions and co-opt opponents when the potential for opposition is high.⁵

These theories are built on the incentives of one actor: the incumbent ruler(s). When incumbents are forced, either by fiscal constraints or social opposition, to build a party, they will do so. We consider this account incomplete. We argue that the agreement of other elites is required to establish a strong dominant party. Indeed, the coordination of powerful elites in the ruling party is a primary factor determining whether a dominant party equilibrium will emerge.⁶

Formation of a dominant party, thus, poses a commitment problem between two sides: regime leaders and other political elites. These latter can include regional and local chief executives, prominent businesspeople, aspiring politicians, and opinion leaders from the professions. Simplifying considerably, we treat such elites as a unified body, who choose collectively whether to commit themselves to the party project and to invest their political capital in it. Likewise, we treat the ruler and his entourage as a unitary actor. Thus we treat the problem of party building as a bilateral commitment problem faced by a ruler choosing whether to invest his political resources in a dominant party and a body of regional and other elites who choose whether to cast their lot with the proposed party project.

The problem a ruler seeking to build a dominant party faces is as follows. The ruler wants other elites to bind themselves to a ruling party but also wants to retain maximum freedom of maneuver for himself. He may reason that he can rule without relying on a party or believe that the costs (in particular, the potential for agency loss) of building one to be too high. The ruler is also likely to be unwilling to commit himself to the party unless he can be sure that the other elites are making a complementary commitment. Those other elites for their part will not tie their fates to the party unless they can be sure that it will be a mechanism for guaranteeing the supply of careers and resources. Nor will they consent to commit themselves when the costs of linking their personal bases of political support to the party organization are too high. Both sides wish to maximize the benefits received from the dominant party of power while minimizing the costs. An equilibrium is found when each side can be assured that the other side has made a credible commitment to the party.

Benefits of a Dominant Party

Before considering how the dilemma can be resolved, let us review the ways in which a dominant party might benefit the two sides. We suggest that there are at least four such benefits: coordinating electoral expectations, ensuring reliable legislative majorities, co-opting potential opponents, and managing political recruitment.

The desirability of an institutional solution to the problem of coordinating the expectations of voters and of political elites has been well established in the comparative literature and borne out in recent Russian political history. Coordination failures at the time of elections can be costly for candidates and parties, causing them to waste resources on futile races and skewing results far from a majority-preferred outcome (Cox, 1997; Shvetsova, 2003). Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this problem occurred in Russia in 1995, when 43 parties were listed on the ballot for the Duma election, and approximately half of the votes were cast for parties that failed to clear the 5% threshold (White, Rose, & McAlister, 1997). As Regina Smyth (2006) shows, the low information environment in Russia leads to coordination failures that undermine the democratic promise of the post-Soviet transition.

The problem of coordination of expectations for an elite would not arise in a no-party environment, when politicians run as independents and personal loyalty to the ruler suffices to keep them in power. At the point that an impending electoral contest requires a formal affiliation with a particular party, however, elites are forced to choose among competing party labels. The risk of casting their lot with the wrong party is grave. The need for information about the prospects of the multiple rival parties is acute. A clear signal of the ruler's preferences can be decisive in persuading many other political figures to follow him. The case of Russia in 1999, detailed below, offers a vivid example of this dilemma.

A second benefit to rulers and elites provided by a dominant party is the provision of stable majorities in legislatures (both national and subnational). In semiauthoritarian regimes, such as Putin's Russia, the legislature is marginalized only if it is entirely controlled by the executive (Chaisty, 2005; Remington, 2006; Weldon, 1997). Rule by decree, even when the president has extensive formal decree powers, is more limited than commonly believed. In Russia, for instance, the decree-making powers of the president are limited to the establishment of law where no existing law exists and to the resolution of inconsistencies in existing law (Haspel, Remington, & Smith, 2006). There are also certain policy areas that must

be governed by law rather than decree.⁷ As Jeffrey Weldon (1997) argues, the wide range of informal powers wielded by the Mexican president in the period of "presidencialismo" depended on the PRI's maintenance of an absolute majority in both chambers of Congress and the ruling party's firm internal discipline. A president whose margin of support in the legislature is insecure must bargain for support of his policy agenda, often trading off particularistic goods to build ad hoc majorities (Cox & Morgenstern, 2002; Shugart, 1998).

President Putin understood this clearly. In the Third Duma (2000 to 2003), the Kremlin found it costly to buy a support coalition among single-member district (SMD) members and smaller factions (Remington, 2006). In the Fourth Duma, the Kremlin set about to ensure that it would not have to make these side payments. In the Fourth Duma, the 300-plus-member United Russia faction has exercised ironclad discipline over its members in support of the president's legislative agenda. The president has not had to fear losing votes or been forced to make concessions on the side to achieve passage of his preferred bills. Where parties of power in the legislature are weak and undisciplined, deputies are prone to challenge the president. What is more, the opposition is in a good position to lure away disgruntled deputies, as happened in Ukraine under Kuchma (D'Anieri, 2007; Way, 2005). Therefore, semiauthoritarian leaders can benefit from strong, loyal parties in the legislature. In turn, legislators find it beneficial to exchange their support for the party program in return for electoral and career benefits through access to patronage.

Third, dominant parties serve as mechanisms for co-opting elites, turning potential neutrals or opponents into active allies. In exchange for linking their fates to the dominant party, elites are granted access to policy, rents, and career advancement. Dominant parties encourage loyalty by assuring elites that they will have continued access to spoils in the future so long as they remain wedded to the party (Brownlee, 2004; Geddes, 1999a, 1999b; Smith 2005). Geddes (1999b, 2003) demonstrates how interactions between party members or factions in a dominant party equilibrium come to resemble an assurance game, in which both sides are better off by remaining loyal to the party. If the factions successfully coordinate their actions, then the party can maintain its hold on power. The party thus reduces uncertainty and lengthens the time horizons of other elites. The act of affiliation with the party establishes a visible sign of loyalty. In case of defection, leaders know whom to punish. In this way, the dominant party lowers information costs for all actors and establishes clear rules of behavior. When the boundaries of protest are clarified and the gains to be made

by remaining loyal are locked in, dominant parties can assuage elite conflict and promote regime stability. In times of executive succession, when the risk of divisions within the elite is particularly severe, dominant parties help ensure the stability of the regime and provide a ready-made support coalition for new executives.

Fourth, dominant parties also provide the regime with a mechanism for routinizing the political recruitment process. The *nomenklatura* system used in communist regimes is the clearest instance of this institutional role. In the Soviet system, the *nomenklatura* covered all positions of influence, not just those involving elective and appointed offices in the state (Harasymiw, 1984; Voslensky, 1984). Particularly in a large country, the informational costs associated with managing appointments and distributing patronage are enormous. To the extent that the regime wants to ensure that appointees to political posts are loyal and avoid destructive intraelite rivalries over access to office, the regime benefits from using the party to control those appointments. United Russia has recently invested significant capital in the creation of a “personnel reserve” at every level that would serve to prepare politicians and bureaucrats to move up the career ladder, contingent on their loyalty to the party. In other words, the dominant party lets politicians know when it is their turn. Observers of Russian politics sometimes dismiss United Russia as *merely* “a labor union of bureaucrats” as if that meant it were not a “real” party. Making it a labor union for bureaucrats is the whole point, however. A dominant party is a closed shop for political elites; how to induce both employers and prospective members to give it exclusive representational rights for the elite is the challenge.

Costs of a Dominant Party

A dominant party imposes costs on both rulers and elites as well. First, in what can be thought of as the initial bargain, rulers relinquish some share of rents, policy, and institutional control to the party—goods that might be kept for the leader in the absence of a bargain. Second, if we conceive of the relationship between regime leaders and the dominant party as a version of a classical principal–agent problem, then leaders stand to pay costs in real or potential agency losses. For political elites, the primary cost associated with joining the party is the loss of autonomy and spoils. For many elites, the piece of the pie they stand to receive by tying themselves to the regime may be smaller than the share they would receive if they were to maintain their own personal patronage networks and rent streams. Ultimately, a dominant party is a risk pool. By jointly committing themselves to the party, both sides become hostages to the party’s collective fortunes. Grave policy failures,

an electoral catastrophe, a popular leader's death or other shocks could leave both the rulers and the elites worse off than if they had eschewed the dominant party project in the first place.

Construction of a successful dominant party requires that state leaders relinquish some autonomy, institutional control, patronage flows, and policy to the party. Although dominant parties vary in the degree to which leaders and elites lend these powers to the party, even the most tenuous dominant parties take some autonomy, rents, and policy control away from the leader. Leaders also pay a delegation cost when they invest in a dominant party, as party leaders now act as representatives of the rulers, posing a version of the traditional principal-agent problem. The incompleteness of contracts and asymmetry of information between the principal (the ruler) and the agent (the party) create the potential for shirking by the agent and agency losses to be incurred by the principal. In the case of dominant parties, agency losses can come in two varieties. First, party members may shirk their end of the contract by not performing their roles as dominant party members, riding on the coattails of the party machine rather than helping to generate support for it.

The second potential cost borne by the ruler is more significant. The party itself may grow so strong and potentially independent that it comes to usurp policy, rents, and even office from the ruler. This is the ultimate fear of any state leader contemplating investment in a dominant party. Migdal (1988) noted this propensity of Third World leaders to subvert the very institutions that would strengthen their governing capacity, for fear of the possibility that these institutions would come undermine their own power. Kitschelt (1995) pursues a similar argument with respect to the relationship between parties and presidents in new democracies. In pure dictatorships, Sonin and Egorov (2005) explore a model in which a dictator chooses slightly incompetent viziers for fear of the possibility that a competent vizier will come to challenge him. For a regime such as Putin's Russia, Hale (2006) sums up the problem quite nicely:

While a party might help a president rule more authoritatively, the authority that the party itself would accrue through this process could make it a threat to the president's personal power since it is likely to develop interests of its own that might one day contradict those of the president. Building a party that is based on anything more than pure loyalty to the president starts to create a reputation that benefits the party both in elections and in legislative bargains and that therefore becomes costly to contradict. There is also the risk that the party might groom leaders, perhaps a speaker of the parliament or the governor of a prominent region, who could come to rival the president. (Hale, 2006, 207)

These are very significant agency losses indeed. Returning to the case of United Russia, then, the Kremlin must always be wary of the chance that United Russia could become too independent. Indeed, recent years have witnessed gambits by United Russia to gain more institutional power and as well as displays of its independence. Thus, the Kremlin has tried to balance its need to tap the power bases of regional executives while at the same time preventing a takeover of the party by a unified coterie of governors.

Some indication of the potential for friction between United Russia and the president is the disagreement between the Kremlin and United Russia about the composition of the government. Soon after its victory in the 2003 Duma elections, United Russia leaders began making public statements about their interest in forming a party government.⁸ In 2003 and 2004, it appeared that the Kremlin supported the idea of extending the party's influence into the government—another carrot to extend to elites in the “party bargain.” But by 2005 and 2006, the Kremlin had clearly changed its tack and was opposed to the idea of a party government. In a 2006 press conference, Putin unequivocally voiced his opposition to a law allowing the majority party in the Duma to name the government, calling such a law “irresponsible.” Putin added, “It is my deep conviction that in the post soviet space, in the conditions of a developing economy, strengthening state capacity, and the definitive realization of federal principals, *we need firm presidential authority*.”⁹ Nonetheless, United Russia leaders have repeatedly stated their desire to attain more influence in the government. Vyacheslav Volodin, secretary of the party presidium, described the formation of a party government as one of United Russia's “main objectives.”¹⁰ Another vocal advocate of a party government has been Tatarstan president Mintimer Shaimyev, cochairman of United Russia's higher council. Shaimyev has repeatedly called for United Russia to “fulfill its duty as a party” and push for the formation of a government party majority in the Duma.¹¹ Of course, the party has not attempted to force the issue. Nonetheless, the potential for a dominant party of power to develop interests of its own that might contradict the interests of the president is a major cost that state leaders bear in investing in a dominant party.

There are costs as well for political elites in relinquishing their autonomy and patronage networks to a dominant party. For many regional elites in Russia, the ideal situation would be for the dominant party to guarantee them security in office while leaving them full flexibility to bargain with opponents and make side payments to supporters. Moreover, they would prefer to maintain direct control over their own patronage networks and

political levers of influence and to ensure themselves against the risk of the failure of the dominant party project.

In Russia, following the 2003 Duma election, the Kremlin altered the calculus for governors through a series of institutional reforms. The elimination of the direct election of regional executives in 2004 meant that governors now required the president's approval rather than control over regional elections to retain power. United Russia had already gained a great deal of control over the governors' own political machines through the reform in 2002 of the system of regional legislative elections. The new system, which required that at least half the seats in regional legislatures be filled through party list-proportional representation, deprived governors of some of their control over regional assembly elections.

Before the reform, the support of a governor and his arsenal of administrative resources was a key determinant of a candidate's election prospects in regional assembly elections (Golosov, 2003; Hale, 2006). With the move to mixed systems for regional legislative elections in 2003, governors sought to continue this practice of patronage politics by placing preferred candidates either on the list of their own "regional party of power" or on the list of United Russia. Kynev (2006) reports that governors played the central role in decisions about the composition of United Russia party lists for regional elections in 2005 and 2006. Indeed, the governors' interest in controlling regional legislatures only grew after the reforms granting regional assemblies the right to confirm presidential gubernatorial appointees.

Recently, however, this style of decentralized patronage politics has come into conflict with the goals of United Russia's leadership. On several occasions, central party leaders have intervened in the process of drawing up candidate lists by imposing their own choice or strong-arming regional executives into accepting the party's preferred list. In the run-up to the March 2007 regional elections in Murmansk, Andrei Vorob'ev, chairman of United Russia's Central Election Commission, personally flew to Murmansk to iron out a conflict between the region's two major financial industrial groups (the Kolsk Metallurgical Company, a daughter affiliate of Norilsk Nickel, and Apatit, a company controlling 85% of Russia's phosphate production) about spots on the party list.¹² In the past, the regional governor would have been given discretion over the allocation of these spots, but in this case, the United Russia central leadership decided the appropriate allocation of list spots and dictated the choice to the governor.

Thus a dominant party offers benefits to both the ruler and the political elite but imposes costs as well. Both sides stand to reap gains from coordinating

election strategies and expectations, guaranteeing stable legislative majorities, co-opting potential allies, and stabilizing political recruitment. At the same time, both sides bear costs in the loss of rents, policy, and autonomy. The center pays these costs in the initial bargain, as do political elites. For the center, there are also delegation costs that manifest themselves most acutely in the threat that the party could come to further challenge the center for authority, policy-making control, rents, and possibly even the office of the executive itself. Each side faces a risk that if the other side shirks its responsibilities and the party project fails, it will be worse off than if it had chosen to rely on its own arsenal of personal resources instead. Each side thus can benefit from a successful party of power but is willing to commit its own resources to the project only to the extent that the other side does so as well.

Our approach implies that a dominant party will not emerge if the distribution of political resources is skewed so heavily in favor of the ruler that he has no need to co-opt other elites. Nor will one form when elites have substantial independent resources of their own, as was the case in Russia in the 1990s, when governors and other regional elites had carved out great swaths of *de facto* and *de jure* autonomy; this is because, however much a ruler may want to co-opt and control these forces, other elites will be unwilling to relinquish their own autonomy and make a credible commitment, and without central rulers creating a focal point for coordination, strong elites will find it almost impossible to overcome their coordination dilemma. Thus, neither side will risk investment in the nascent dominant party. We would expect that a dominant party will emerge only when other elites hold enough independent political resources (relative to the ruler's supply of political resources) that co-opting (or neutralizing) them is necessary, but not so many autonomous resources that they are unwilling to commit to the party.

To summarize, this theoretical framework departs from previous frameworks in that it poses the problem of dominant party formation as a two-sided strategic interaction. As such, it shifts much of the focus to the preferences and resources held by other elite actors outside the immediate ruling circle. A systematic test of the theory would require cross-nationally valid measures of the relative distribution of political resources between rulers and other political elites, a formidable task. Here we confine ourselves to comparing several unrealized dominant party projects in Russia and one successful instance of dominant party formation to illustrate the commitment problem and draw attention to how the distribution of resources between the two sides can be used to predict mutual investment in the dominant party.

4. Overcoming the Commitment Problem

Post-Soviet Russia offers multiple illustrations of failures and successes in resolving the commitment problem. Throughout the early and mid-1990s, despite an increasingly strong and organized communist opposition and a lack of treasury-filling rent revenues, Yeltsin intentionally undermined the Kremlin's primary party of power project, Our Home Is Russia. The party did not become a major political force uniting different groups in the regions. A more successful example was the formation of Unity. On the eve of the 1999 parliamentary elections, the Kremlin was willing and able to solve regional elites' coordination dilemma with the creation of a new bloc called Unity. But immediately after the elections, the authorities were reluctant to grant Unity much independence of action, and regional elites still refrained from directly linking their fates to the party. Unity's last-minute formation was driven in large part by the rise of a competitive threat from a rival group of governors, but this competitive threat was insufficient to turn the party into a full-blown dominant party. Only after 2003 did United Russia—Unity's lineal successor—become a dominant party by attracting the unequivocal support of the Kremlin and across-the-board commitments from regional elites. United Russia's recent emergence as a dominant party occurred despite windfall oil and gas revenues filling Kremlin coffers and the absence of significant social or organized elite opposition.¹³ Below, we examine the case of United Russia's rise in more detail both to show that United Russia is indeed a dominant party and to demonstrate that United Russia's emergence as a dominant party can be explained most fruitfully with reference to the commitment problem framework.

The failure of Our Home Is Russia, the partial success of Unity, and the triumphant emergence of United Russia as a full-fledged dominant party allows us to compare the effect of the relative distribution of political resources between the ruler and the elite while holding other national-level factors constant. The consolidation of the dominant party regime is therefore the outcome of a series of choices made by individual leaders and elites at different times, reflecting both the change in the political environment and the steep learning curve that accompanies a major regime change. The close in-case analysis should therefore generate testable predictions about the conditions under which dominant party regimes should form in other settings.

The fate of the Our Home Is Russia project in the late 1990s is hard to explain other than as a failure of commitment on the part of both central-level leaders and regional and business elites. In spring 1995, Yeltsin's political advisers devised a scheme to form two moderate blocs, one to the

right of center, the other to the left, to compete for the 1995 Duma election. These were to divide the left, leaching support from the communists, and to give the government a base of support in the Duma from among moderate and democratic groups. Yeltsin asked Duma speaker Ivan Rybkin to head the left-center bloc and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin to head the right-center bloc, which was called Our Home Is Russia. Rybkin had difficulty attracting elite or popular support, or even finding a name for the bloc.¹⁴ In the end, the bloc—called Bloc of Ivan Rybkin—experienced a crushing defeat, winning only 1.1% of the party list vote.

Our Home Is Russia had weightier resources and soon acquired the nickname of “party of power” for its reliance on elite political and economic office holders. It was also referred to as “Our Home Is Gazprom” for its close ties to Gazprom’s substantial financial resources. Most of the cabinet ministers joined the bloc, and a number of business leaders and regional political elites affiliated with it. However, almost no other parties entered it, and many SMD candidates who had initially affiliated with the party soon left it. One of the early parties to enter the bloc, Sergei Shakhrai’s Party of Russian Unity and Concord, also deserted it in August (Belin & Ortung 1997, pp. 34–36). In the election, the Our Home Is Russia bloc took 10.1% of the vote, enough to form a faction in the Duma but not enough to serve as a dominant or pivotal force in parliament or in the regions. At its peak, the party claimed the membership of around one third of Russia’s governors. However, both the center and regional elites made only ephemeral commitments to Our Home. Yeltsin was always reluctant to pledge his support to the party, and affiliated governors were wary of jettisoning their personal political machines to link their fates to the Kremlin’s party (Hale, 2006, pp. 208–209; McFaul, 2001, p. 205). The coup de grâce for the party came with Yeltsin’s firing of its leader, Chernomyrdin, as prime minister in March 1998. Observers pointed out that President Yeltsin himself had undercut the party’s prospects by publicly declaring the artificial nature of the party and his own lack of confidence in its future. Yeltsin’s advisers later claimed that Yeltsin had been unwilling to commit himself to the party out of fear that the party’s success would put Chernomyrdin in a position to challenge him in the coming presidential election (Baturin et al., 2001, pp. 536–537). In sum, then, Yeltsin looked upon other elites as a threat, especially if they were organized and united at a time when regional and other elites had acquired so much *de facto* and *de jure* autonomy from the center. Given his waning political capital at the time, Yeltsin opted for a divide-and-rule strategy. Recognizing this, regional elites calculated that they could receive no significant spoils from a lame-duck party of power and that they stood to gain more by retaining their own independence.

The Our Home Is Russia project in 1995 was the forerunner of subsequent efforts to create a party of power and clearly illustrated the problem for a dominant party in an environment of contingent commitment by both the leader and the political elite. In 1999, the situation was fundamentally different: A presidential succession was unavoidable, and the political elite faced a severe coordination dilemma (Shvetsova, 2003). The governors needed to know whom to support in the impending 2000 presidential race because it was clear that Yeltsin would leave office. Our Home Is Russia still existed but was not a serious political force. Individual governors launched their own "governors' parties" to fill the vacuum and, in some cases, to advance their own candidacies for the presidential race. Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov created a bloc called Fatherland in December 1998. In January 1999, Samara's governor formed a bloc called Russia's Voice. In April, Tatarstan's president, Shaimiev, created All Russia. Kemerovo's governor, Aman Tuleev, created a bloc called Revival and Unity (Sakwa, 2003, p. 132). A number of other party projects were attempted as well (Hale, 2006, p. 219).

Then in August, Luzhkov and Shaimiev merged their blocs to form Fatherland–All Russia (OVR, for its Russian initials), naming former prime minister Evgenii Primakov as its head. This positioned Primakov as the prime contender for the presidency and the head of a powerful party of power. A number of smaller blocs immediately joined. OVR was the apparent next party of power. From the standpoint of the governors, the ideological orientation of a bloc was of little importance; the key was to back the right candidate for president. As one governor put it, "We governors are pragmatic people and will never support a hopeless presidential candidate who can get as little as ten percent of the vote" (cited in Shvetsova, 2003, p. 216). In an environment of high uncertainty, the political elite needed to know around whom to rally (Shvetsova, 2003, pp. 221). Therefore, after it became clear that Putin was the designated successor to Yeltsin, the party that Putin backed would be the focal point for other elites.

Yeltsin named Vladimir Putin as prime minister and presumptive successor on August 9, 1999. At the same time, Yeltsin's entourage—Boris Berezovsky is said to have been one of the initiators of the effort—began to form a Kremlin-supported electoral bloc to win away governors' support from the OVR bloc. As Olga Shvetsova puts it, "For recoordination, all that the creators of Unity needed was to switch enough players from a 'Primakov' to a 'Putin' equilibrium" (Shvetsova, 2003, p. 224). This they did when Putin invited a sizable group of governors to the Kremlin on September 27 to express his support for the new bloc that was being formed around cabinet minister Sergei Shoigu and to declare that "Fatherland could not be

supported" (Shvetsova, 2003, p. 225). Immediately, 32 governors announced their support for the new bloc. A few days later, on October 3, the Unity bloc was formally launched (Hale, 2006, p. 82). The election was only 2 months away, but the Kremlin had made some headway in solving the commitment problem: Governors knew whom the Kremlin would back, and the Kremlin knew that most governors would lend their support to the new project rather than the rival OVR. A vicious media campaign directed against Primakov and Luzhkov, and a successful military campaign in Chechnia directed by Putin, also quickly reinforced Putin's and Unity's standing. By late November, Unity had surpassed OVR in the polls (Shvetsova, 2003, p. 226). In December, the effect of the remarkable turnaround in coordination was evident: OVR took 13.3% of the party list vote; Unity, 23.3%.

In 1999, the Kremlin realized that it had to pool the governors' extensive political resources if it hoped to secure a smooth presidential succession. It was therefore willing to invest more in the latest party of power. However, in early 2000, the political elite still had reason to doubt whether the Kremlin's commitment to Unity would survive the presidential election of 2000. Consequently, signals from the Kremlin that it would deepen its investment in Unity affected the elite's calculations. In July 2001, the Kremlin sanctioned a merger between Unity and OVR, naming the new party United Russia. President Putin attended the founding congress of the new party in December 2001, and by the spring of 2002, the party was engaged in the task of expanding its reach into the regions, and by this time, United Russia could count on the active support of at least two dozen governors. But initially, the Kremlin appeared intent on preventing governors from enjoying too much influence in the party. In many cases, the party initially sought to recruit governors' opponents rather than co-opt the governors themselves. Former Putin adviser Alexandr Beshpalov was charged with expanding the party's reach into the regions, often at the expense of the governors' power (Slider, 2006). Even into early 2003, the party sought to recruit governors' opponents and extend federal political influence into the regions by challenging governors rather than co-opting them. The newly appointed presidential representatives to the seven federal districts sometimes supported nonpartisan candidates in gubernatorial races (Hale, 2004). In a few governors' elections, federal envoys even supported candidate who were running against the United Russia candidate.¹⁵ During this period, the envoys, whose primary role was to extend federal influence into the regions, played a divide-and-rule strategy with respect to regional elites, striking bargains with independent governors and parties at some junctures and supporting United Russia candidates at other junctures.

In this period, neither side was ready to commit itself fully to the dominant party project. Most regional elites were extracting more resources from independent control over their own power bases than the Kremlin could promise if they tied their political fortunes to United Russia.¹⁶ The Kremlin, well aware of this, knew that any attempt to invest more in the party would simply result in regional elites' making pro forma commitments while the Kremlin would be left bearing the cost of promoting the party. In other words, it would be making concessions to regional elites (i.e., rents, policy, and institutional control), but it would not be receiving the benefits of a dominant party because regional elites would be emboldened to shirk their commitment when it mattered most. Moreover, encouraging the coalescence of a potent governor's party would be dangerous at a time when the governors still possessed substantial resources. In 2002, the Kremlin was still unwilling to provide the tools for the governors to overcome their coordination problem when it could not be sure that they would remain loyal.

All of this began to change in early 2003. Alexandr Bespalov, United Russia's chief organizer, who had churned up so much acrimony among regional leaders in his attempts to force United Russia into the regions, was dismissed as head of the party's Central Executive Committee. Federal envoys began working to recruit candidates to run under the United Russia banner, encouraging propresidential forces to work through the United Russia organization, and channeling resources to party candidates (Hale, 2006, p. 231). In addition, the party drastically changed its position on the co-optation of governors. The Kremlin began reaching accommodation with them and encouraging them to run at the head of United Russia party lists. In other words, the Kremlin sought to tap the power base of governors rather than subvert them. Speaking at the United Russia party congress in September 2003, Putin announced that although he would not formally join the party, he would, as a citizen, vote for it.

The proximate impetus for this change was the December 2003 Duma elections. The Kremlin knew that it needed to enlist the administrative resources of the regional elites for its preferred electoral vehicle if it wanted to secure a loyal legislative majority. Moreover, the power imbalance between the Kremlin and regional elites had widened since 2000 as sustained economic growth, windfall oil revenues, and the precipitous rise of President Putin's approval ratings strengthened the Kremlin's bargaining position. In addition, President Putin's centralizing reforms, including the removal of governor's ex officio seats in the Federation Council and the creation of the seven federal districts, reinforced the president's institutional power vis-à-vis the governors. Hence, the Kremlin was in a better

position to commit itself to offering future spoils to regional elites, and regional elites were more inclined to accept the deal.

The results of this effort paid off handsomely. Much has been written about United Russia's dominance in the 2003 Duma elections. The party captured 37.6% of the party list vote, though it achieved victory in 45% of SMD races. Even where it did not achieve victory in the SMD races, it strategically coordinated with other pro-Kremlin parties and governors to ensure the election of sympathetic deputies. The most startling of United Russia's successes was not the votes garnered at the ballot box but its success in attracting independent and other partisan deputies. Although the actual results of the election gave United Russia a bare majority with 232 deputies, a further 78 deputies joined in the weeks after the elections, giving United Russia a constitutional majority of 310 seats. The party was quick to impose strict voting discipline, as voting cohesion among United Russia deputies was significantly higher than it was among Our Home deputies in the Second Duma (Kunicova & Remington, 2008).

After the 2003 elections, both sides further tightened their commitments to the party. Putin met frequently with party leaders to discuss legislative initiatives, and the president continued to voice his support for the party's expansion. In addition to reforms expanding the role of parties in the political process, the Kremlin pushed through important reforms targeted specifically at privileging the role of United Russia—the most notable of these being the reform allowing the majority party in regional legislatures to propose candidates for the president to nominate. The Kremlin encouraged the party to continue its strategy of co-opting regional elites and channeled significant resources into the party's bid to win majorities in regional legislatures.

Putin's reforms of the laws on parties, elections, and selection of governors sharply altered the institutional environment for the elite. In 2004, the Kremlin cancelled the direct election of regional executives. According to the new law, the president nominates a candidate for governor for confirmation to the regional legislature. If the parliament rejects the president's nomination twice, the president has the power to nominate an interim head and call new elections to the regional legislature.¹⁷ Legislation passed in 2005 even allows a party that has won a majority in a regional legislature to nominate a candidate for governor.

By March 2007, 72 regional executives had joined the party. As the bargaining position of the federal center has improved and as it has extended institutional control over the regions, governors have come to calculate that they stand a better chance of capturing spoils by affiliating with the party of power than if they maintained their own political machines apart from the

party of power (Turovsky, 2006). From January 1, 2005, until March 31, 2006, Putin nominated 47 regional executives. Forty-two of those executives were United Russia party members or became members soon after their nomination (Petrov, 2006). Of 14 new regional executives (i.e., governors appointed who were not incumbents), only 3 were not United Russia members.¹⁸

Despite the fact that a handful of governors are able to remain outside the party ranks and the government remains nonpartisan (only three members of the government and virtually no members of Vladimir Putin's inner circle are party members), there is no denying that United Russia has begun to play a role as an institution for controlling supporters. In the Duma, United Russia whips have made it clear that deviation from the party voting line would result in repercussions. Competition for spots on United Russia party lists in the regions has been fierce. Influential lobbying groups and politicians have come to recognize that affiliation with the party is a prerequisite for gaining access to policy and rents (Kynev, 2006). Chaisty (2006) calculates that 109 of 310 United Russia members in the State Duma are direct representatives of big business. It is well understood that deviation from the party would mean the loss of access to rent streams in the future. As of March 2007, no governors had unilaterally defected from the party, and in only one region (Stavropol) has an assembly previously dominated by a United Russia majority witnessed significant defections from the party.¹⁹

But it is in the regions where the party has most clearly succeeded in its role as an autonomous institution for controlling and co-opting elite actors. Even after Putin's much-publicized centralizing reforms, regional elites (including mayors, governors, powerful enterprise directors, and heads of local self-government) are still responsible for the outcome of elections at every level, and it is in the Kremlin's interest to ensure that the efforts of these actors are coordinated. Yet micromanaging relations among these thousands of elite actors is a task that the presidential administration could never accomplish on its own. In the 1990s, the Kremlin effectively outsourced this task to governors. Since 2003, the Kremlin has delegated this task to United Russia, as the party has become a focal point for elite consolidation and a forum for conflict resolution. In several high-profile cases, the central party leadership has exercised its new powers to assuage elite conflict in the regions by providing an institutional forum for regional leaders to iron out their differences and by imposing solutions if opponents in the party cannot come to agreement.²⁰

As of mid-2007, the party controls majorities in 76 of 86 regional legislatures. By 2006, 90% of Russia's mayors had joined United Russia, including the mayors of 7 of the 10 largest cities.²¹ Since 2005, the party

has undertaken a concerted effort to extend its influence over the heads of Russia's 24,000 municipalities as well as secure majority representation in the legislative organs of local self-government. Traditionally a nonpartisan group (90% were nonpartisan in the 1990s), 50% of municipality heads were United Russia members by 2007.²² In regional legislatures, powerful business groups structure their lobbying efforts through within-party log rolls instead of making ad hoc deals and competing for direct access to the governor. As one leading member of the United Russia faction in Sverdlovsk oblast commented,

Several times each session we tell the leader of our faction which projects and initiatives are most important to us. Everyone does this and a fair division is then worked out. This way we all know that we can fulfill certain promises to our districts and our supporters. . . . Personally, this arrangement lets me sleep better at night.²³

In other words, the party has come to provide an institutional mechanism for dividing access to spoils among important business and political interests. In Chelyabinsk oblast, an official in the United Russia's executive committee reported that the regional party branch tries very hard to ensure that loyalty to the party is rewarded both in the legislative arena and at election time:

If a member works for the benefit of the party, then it is in the party's interest to ensure that he sees some perspective in continuing to support the party. Therefore, we try to fill vacant list spots with party supporters who have not yet had their chance.²⁴

Thus, even if a given elite actor fails to achieve his or her preferred rent, policy, or career objective in the present, he or she has some reason to believe that continued loyalty and support for the party will result in access to these goods in the future.

United Russia has thus structured the incentives for regional elites in such a way as to induce their commitment to its success. Although they are not compelled to join the party, remaining independent of it poses grave risks and uncertainties. Affiliation, on the other hand, solves a number of collective dilemmas for regional officials, such as setting rules for the distribution of legislative spoils and career opportunities. That the party's dominance is not merely due to the general centralizing trend in Russian politics is suggested by the fact that the same logic making it overwhelmingly attractive for regional elites to cast their lot in with the party has also restrained the Kremlin from intervening too directly or frequently in the

party's affairs. The government has given the party's office holders a say in allocating "national project" funds in the regions, for example.²⁵ A system of intraparty "primary" contests—very unpopular among senior government officials and parliamentary deputies, not to mention governors—determined the placement of candidates on the party's election lists for the December 2007 Duma election.²⁶ Likewise, despite the misgivings of some senior Kremlin figures, an official ideology associated with the party is being developed.²⁷ The dominant party system has developed in an environment in which the Kremlin holds a preponderance but not a monopoly of political resources. Under these circumstances, the Kremlin is willing to give United Russia sufficient autonomy to serve as the mechanism for winning electoral majorities and dividing the spoils of victory. In turn, in exchange for relinquishing their autonomy and freedom of maneuver, regional elites benefit from clearer rules governing political recruitment, resource allocation, and election management.

In a February 2006 speech before United Russia leaders, one of Putin's closest advisers, Vladislav Surkov, held out to the party the prospect of "dominating the political system for at least the next 10-15 years."²⁸ In a July 2006 speech, Surkov informed activists from another pro-Kremlin party that the political system would be "built around United Russia" for the foreseeable future.²⁹ Throughout 2006, the Kremlin supported United Russia candidates for nomination to governor and intimated to governors that their chances of renomination depended on whether they affiliated with United Russia and whether they could deliver votes for United Russia in regional elections.³⁰ Imperative mandate laws institutionalized a mutual commitment to the dominant party, for at least according to the letter of the law, deputies could not change their partisan affiliations after elected. In spirit at least, this means that United Russia majorities installed in many of the October 2006 and March 2007 regional elections would have to be stable for at least the next 4 years.

In sum, since mid-2003, both the Kremlin and regional elites have increased their commitment to the party of power, turning it into a true dominant party. Regional elites still command enough political influence to make it necessary for the Kremlin to co-opt them if it hopes to dominate elections and legislatures and maintain political stability. For the Kremlin, the only question was when the benefits would come to outweigh the costs. As regional elites became weaker vis-à-vis the Kremlin throughout 2003, 2004, and 2005, regional elites found it easier to commit themselves to the party. This in turn allowed the Kremlin to assign a lower value to the potential agency costs and to make its own commitment to the party. This

arrangement appears to be in equilibrium, because it is self-reinforcing. Regional elites can count on the Kremlin to continue channeling resources through the party because they know that the Kremlin has a stake in its durability. Likewise, the Kremlin is able to commit itself to the party because it knows that the relative weakness of regional elites makes their commitment more likely. Neither side has an incentive to defect, given its knowledge of the other side's preferences.

Notes

1. This definition is similar to existing definitions in the literature. Geddes (1999a) for instance defines a "single party" as a party that dominates access to political office and "has some influence over policy, controls most access to political power and government jobs, and has functioning local-level organizations." Gel'man (2006) describes parties of power in the former Soviet Union as those that are closely tied to the executive, lack any definite ideology, and depend heavily on state resources for perpetuating their hold on power.

2. The use of such methods in Russia and other post-Soviet regimes is well documented in McMann (2006) and Wilson (2005).

3. The dominant party regime's use of extraconstitutional means to guarantee election outcomes also logically eliminates the role of uncertainty and alternation between rulers and opposition that Adam Przeworski has made central to his definition of democracy (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000).

4. A discussion of operationalization according to this definition and a full list of all the world's dominant parties since 1919, coded by these criteria, can be found in Ora John Reuter (2007).

5. Both Smith (2005) and Gandhi and Przeworski (2006) add fiscal pressures to their model, arguing that rulers with access to substantial rent revenues have little reason to relinquish much to coalition partners when they can use their rent revenues to buy off opponents.

6. Geddes (1999a, 1999b, 2003) makes elite cooperation central to her model of single-party equilibria. Geddes thus models dominant party equilibria as an assurance game between different factions. By shifting attention to the necessity of elite cooperation in achieving dominant party equilibrium, our model shares common ground with Geddes. Moreover, we agree that relations between factions and members in dominant parties resemble an assurance game when the party is in equilibrium. In contrast to Geddes, however, our research question is dominant party emergence rather than the dynamics of dominant parties in equilibrium. In other words, like Smith (2005), we are interested in how the assurance game comes to be played in the first place, that is, how cooperation is achieved in the first period.

7. See Haspel, Remington, and Smith (2006) for a list of these policy areas. It should also be noted that decrees are less durable than laws, which require another passage of another law to be overturned. A presidential decree, on the other hand, can be annulled or superseded by a succeeding president's decree. A president seeking the implementation of lasting policy reform will thus prefer a law to a decree.

8. As of 2008, only five members of the government are United Russia party members. The remaining 20 ministers are non-partisan.

9. Alexandra Samarina, "Edinaya Rossiya utochnyaet presidenta [United Russia corrects the President]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 2, 2006.

10. Ibid.

11. Yuri Burnosov, "Pravitelstvo i partiya ediny? [Are the government and party united?]," *Novaya Politika*, January 24, 2007, available from www.novopol.ru.

12. Elena Bilevskaya, "Murmanskikh edinorossov pomirila ruka Moskvyy [The Hand of Moscow reconciled the Murmansk United Russians]," *Kommersant*, December 11, 2006.

13. Cf. Benjamin Smith (2005), who argues that rulers are more inclined to form dominant parties if they cannot rely on ready access to resource rents to reward supporters and when they are faced with significant social opposition.

14. According to Yeltsin's advisers, Rybkin was hampered in his effort to distance himself from the government; every time he offered even mild criticism of the government's policies, Chernomyrdin would phone him and protest, "Vanya, how can you say such things?" (Baturin et al., 2001, p. 538).

15. Hale (2005) reports that this was the case in Komi and Ingushetia.

16. Moreover, as in 1999, the governors were inhibited from forming their own party of power by severe coordination problems among themselves.

17. Law, "On the introduction of amendments to the Federal Law 'On the general principles of the organization of the legislative (representative) and executive organs of the state authorities in the subjects of the RF' and to the Federal Law 'On basic guarantees of citizens' voting rights and rights to participate in referenda in RF,'" No 159-F-3 from December 11, 2004.

18. Karlin in Altai Krai, Dudka in Tula, and Zyazikov in Ingushetia.

19. In Stavropol, deputies defected from United Russia to join Just Russia, headed in the region by former United Russia mayor and Stavropol mayor Dmitrii Kuzmin.

20. Notable cases include Pskov and Murmansk in the run-up to the March 2007 regional elections. In both regions, conflicts flared up in the regional branches of the party. And in both cases, party leaders from Moscow imposed a solution to the conflict. See Maria Luiza Tirmaste, "Edinaya Rossiya pomirila gubernatora s merom [United Russia reconciled with the governor and the mayor]," *Kommersant*, January 19, 2007; and Elena Bilevskaya, "Murmanskikh edinorossov pomirila ruka Moskvyy," *Kommersant*, December 11, 2006.

21. This figure is cited from Vladivostok mayor Vladimir Nikolayev, "Edinaya Rossiya goroda beryot [United Russia is taking cities]," *Kommersant*, December 25, 2006.

22. Natalya Kostenko, "Knut i Pryanik dlya Munitsipala [Sticks and carrots for a city]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 26, 2007.

23. Author's interview, July 2, 2007.

24. Author's interview, July 6, 2007.

25. The "national projects" are priority funding programs initiated by President Putin to improve the quality of education, housing, medical care, and rural social services. Although they are centrally administered by the government, United Russia leaders in the Duma and in the regions have been given the opportunity to take credit for bringing home specific local projects.

26. *Kommersant*, July 18 and 21, 2007.

27. The ideology, encapsulated by the term *sovereign democracy*, is being provided with both a theoretical doctrine and an array of channels for its dissemination among the public. These include academic papers and conferences, school textbooks, and speeches by leaders. Recent collections of articles on the subject include Garadzha (2006) and *Suverennaiia demokratiia* (2007).

28. Accessed March 21, 2007, from United Russia Web site: <http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=111148>.

29. Accessed March 21, 2007, from United Russia Web site: <http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=114850>.

30. Nabi Abdullaev, "Governors Appointed for Loyalty and Votes," *Moscow Times*, January 26, 2007.

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