

Analysis

Do Russian Liberals Stand a Chance?

By Elfie Siegl, Berlin and Moscow

Summary

The crisis of the Russian liberal democrats has become manifest since they failed to win seats in parliament in December 2003. The reasons include their proximity to power, the divide between the liberal political elite and the people, the fragmentation of the democratic movement, overreaching ambition, and competition among liberal leaders. Veteran democratic politicians have been discredited and worn out, while the generation of their successors is as yet too inexperienced. Against this backdrop, the parliamentary elections of 2007 and the presidential elections of 2008 could represent an existential threat to Russia's liberal democrats. The future of democrats in Russia will depend to a large extent on whether they themselves are able to agree on a shared party platform and on a common leadership in the coming months. So far, only incipient signs of consolidation are apparent. Behind the scenes, rivalries and machinations continue unabated.

Fear of terrorism and revolution

Russian liberal democrats are fundamentally different from their counterparts in the West. They are primarily opposed to the Communist Party in their country, having originated from the "informal" groups and clubs that came into existence during the first years of perestroika. At the time, the members of such movements included dissidents from the Brezhnev era and young intellectuals as well as prominent individuals from the fields of science, literature, and journalism. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, political parties and electoral blocs emerged, sometimes coalescing around these "informal" groups. For example, in the run-up to the 1993 parliamentary elections, the Yavlinsky-Boldyrev-Lukin bloc was founded, which eventually became the Yabloko Party. Radical reformers such as Anatoly Chubais, who was responsible for the privatization of state property under Yeltsin, and Boris Nemtsov, the young governor of Nizhny Novgorod and later a member of the Russian government, were among the founders of the Union of Right Forces (SPS). In economical terms, the liberal democrats were in favor of developing a market economy in post-Soviet Russia. Politically, their single goal was battling the Communist Party. They spared no means in order to reach that goal. In 1993, when then-president Yeltsin ordered troops to open fire on a parliament dominated by his Communist opponents, they did not oppose these undemocratic measures. In 1996, they manipulated the presidential elections via the media in order to ensure that the physically stricken Yeltsin, and not Communist leader Zyuganov, would win the polls. Subsequently, they first supported Yeltsin's successor, Putin. When his policies began to take on an increasingly authoritarian charac-

ter, they were criticized by individual representatives of the pro-democracy camp; however, no democratic opposition to Putin has emerged.

Furthermore, it is more difficult for the liberal democrats to form such an opposition today than it was in the 1990s, since the Kremlin is doing everything in its power to prevent that from happening, including increasing restrictions on democratic rights and freedoms. Political observers in Moscow invoke the threat of "terrorism" to justify such measures, especially extremism emanating from the Northern Caucasus, which reached an apex in the September 2004 hostage-taking in a school in Beslan, North Ossetia. Another factor is most likely the Kremlin's fear of a Ukrainian-style "Orange Revolution", which could involve a democratic opposition organizing mass protests against the results of forged elections and ultimately taking over power. However, this irrational fear, if it really exists, is more illustrative of ignorance on the part of the Russian leadership about conditions in the country than an indication of an actual threat to the Kremlin in the near future. Unlike in Ukraine in late autumn of 2004, the opposition forces in Russia are fragmented, and their leaders are hamstrung by overreaching ambition, disproportionate self-confidence, and a competitive way of thinking. So far, there is no prospect in Russia of a political personality of Viktor Yushchenko's caliber uniting the democratic camp and possibly leading it to victory. Instead, there is a large number of veteran liberal democratic politicians who like to adorn themselves with two attributes – a party of their own, and presidential ambitions. One of these is Yabloko chairman Grigory Yavlinsky, who once proposed a 500-day program to reform the Soviet economy. He has repeatedly

campaigns unsuccessfully for the presidency, yet has consistently refused to take on real political responsibility. This has not prevented him, however, from courting the various Kremlin leaders for high government appointments. Irina Khakamada, a former vice speaker of the Duma parliament, also harbored ambitions of winning a Kremlin position. After a futile election campaign, she founded the Nash Vybor party. Chubais has for many years been at the helm of Russia's largest government enterprise, electricity giant RAO EES. His detractors claim that he bankrolls the SPS party with company funds. In any case, he operates behind the scenes to ensure that the party does not fall foul of the Kremlin.

A broad variety of democratic parties and groups exists today. These include Yabloko and SPS as well as the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, Garry Kasparov's United Citizens Front, Boris Nemtsov's Committee 2008 (which advocates democratic presidential elections), the Republican Party of independent Duma delegate Vladimir Ryzhkov, several youth organizations, and a couple of human rights groups. SPS and Yabloko have only just begun to work together, joining forces in the December 2005 Moscow city council elections and the regional legislative elections that took place 12 March.

The crisis of Russian liberalism

The crisis of liberalism has come to the fore at least since the December 2003 fiasco, when Yabloko and the SPS both failed to clear the 5 per cent barrier in the state Duma elections – ending the presence of democratic parties in the parliament. Political analyst Lilia Shevtsova offers several reasons for this crisis, including the liberal rhetoric of an illiberal power that allows the Kremlin to semantically dominate the field of liberal democratic politics; the failure of the liberal democrats of the Yeltsin generation to consolidate their position as an opposition to the ruling powers; their ignorance of issues such as justice and equality; and the difficulty of realizing liberty, equality, and justice in a society where liberal reforms have never reached completion and where strong paternalistic structures dominate. Furthermore, Shevtsova is convinced that the geographic territory of Russia is too large for integration into Europe, which might provide a measure of security for a liberal democratic transformation.

Irina Khakamada, on the other hand, believes the reasons for this crisis are to be sought in an estrangement between the political liberal elite and the people. As far as liberal ideas and values are concerned, she says, Russia has experienced a qualitative leap since the 1990s. Post-Soviet citizens have become democrats

and full-fledged liberals, according to Khakamada. However, they have not voted for democratic forces in elections because they blame their leaders, such as Gaidar and Chubais, for the loss of all the privileges they have been deprived of in post-Soviet Russia – social support, guaranteed job security, and free health-care and education. She believes that there is a huge discrepancy in Russia today between the need of society for liberal leaders and the real political liberal elite. Khakamada says that the liberals of the Yeltsin era have reached a historical dead end and that Yabloko and the SPS party were defeated at the last parliamentary elections because they had no answers to the problems of the people. Her view is that the democrats lost Russia because they acceded to the shelling of the parliament in 1993 and because they participated in ballot-rigging in 1996 in order to award Yeltsin an artificial victory. In 1999, they helped to prepare the way for Putin as Yeltsin's successor because they regarded this hitherto unknown lieutenant colonel in the intelligence service as their insurance against subsequent attempts to hold the Yeltsin clan legally accountable for its misdeeds.

Because their policies served the interests of those in power and because of their proximity to the rulers of the Kremlin, liberal democrats in Russia have squandered their credibility as an opposition. Unlike in Ukraine, for example, the most vociferous opposition forces in Russia are not the liberal democrats, but the nationalist and patriot groups. This situation, says political scientist Hans-Joachim Spanger, has been brought about by "political technologies" and Putin's government-controlled democracy, and is the result of a fragmentation of the liberal camp and of a purposeful encouragement of new and old nationalist parties. Among these are the National Bolshevik Party and the "Rodina" bloc. Like the rightwing extremist Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, "Rodina" was inspired by the Kremlin. The slogans of this party, such as "Russia for the Russians", "Moscow for the Muscovites", and "Jail the Rich", are enthusiastically embraced by those who feel disappointed and betrayed by the "salon liberals". In the face of increasing xenophobia and neo-Nazi rallies, Nemtsov, too, warns of embryonic fascist tendencies in Russia; however, he wisely keeps silent about one of the main reasons for this phenomenon, namely the failure of the democrats.

No future for the Russian liberals?

The most important question facing the liberal democrats in Russia today is whether or not they will manage to consolidate, that is, to form a com-

mon party and to agree on a joint leadership figure. Political scientists in Moscow, such as Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Moscow Center or Georgy Satarov, who heads the INDEM foundation, are certain that the answer will determine whether the liberals have a future in Russia or will instead disappear from the political landscape. Only little time remains to find solutions: A new Russian parliament will be elected in December 2007 and a new president in March 2008. In the run-up to these polls, the Kremlin has been tightening the political rules of the game: According to the latest version of the law on political parties, a political party must have 50,000 members (up from 10,000) and must be represented in all 88 subjects of the federation in order to be registered. Putin also introduced changes to the electoral law. For example, the majority voting system was abolished, all elections are based on party lists, and the minimum vote barrier was raised from five to seven per cent, while combined party lists were outlawed. One would think that under such conditions, the liberals would be aware of the need to fight for their political survival. The reality, however, is different. It almost appears as if the liberal forces had learned nothing from their previous defeats. For there is still no agreement in sight; rather, quite the opposite is the case – fragmentation and backstage machinations continue. Although Yavlinsky, until recently a strict opponent of party alliances, now says that all efforts for unification must be undertaken in view of the threat to liberals, the bottom line is that talk is cheap. Independent Duma representative Vladimir Ryzhkov says there are many obstacles to unification, most of them related to the need for all party leaders to make sacrifices and be prepared to change their parties as well as themselves. However, he says, people tend towards stagnation; in fact, they love this stagnation, which according to Ryzhkov is the main reason for Russia's ill fortunes. If it was possible to create a united democratic party with an attractive platform and candidates who had not lost the confidence of the public, such a party could well win seats in parliament, Ryzhkov believes.

The electoral potential of democratic voters in Russia, according to surveys, amounts to about 20 per cent of the electorate. This does not mean, however, that all of these 20 per cent would vote against Putin's authoritarian system. Igor Bunin, director of the Center for Political Technologies, remarks scornfully that "the public is content because stability abounds, the economy is growing, and the president is a wonderful person". In the 2003 Moscow city council elections, with a turnout of 60 per cent, 18 per cent of votes were cast in favor of the democratic parties.

Last December, he says, they won 12 per cent with a voter turnout of 35 per cent. According to Bunin, the democrats today have only one goal – to survive politically by securing seats in the new Russian parliament in 2007. However, they will only be able to reach this goal if it suits the Kremlin. The raising of the minimum vote barrier from five to seven per cent, though, indicates to observers in Moscow that the Kremlin only wants two or three major parties in the future State Duma: "United Russia", the Communist Party, and the LDPR.

Olga Kryshchanovskaya, a Moscow sociologist, suspects that the Kremlin might be planning to build up a pseudo-liberal democratic opposition party in order to obstruct the real democrats at the next election. This model has already proven its usefulness: In 1999, the pro-Putin party "Unity" was invented to compete with the Communists, and managed to go from scratch to secure more than 20 per cent of the seats in parliament. In the meantime, it has become the richest and most powerful party in the country.

Liberal competition not welcome

Mikhail Kasyanov has come to the fore as the youngest of the prominent liberal politicians. He served as Putin's prime minister for four years and was forced out of office after daring to criticize the arrest of oil multi-billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky in October 2003. Kasyanov has been having trouble with the Kremlin since he publicly announced a few months ago that he might stand as a candidate in the 2008 Russian presidential elections. First, he was threatened with legal action for alleged improprieties in the purchase of a country house. Next, he was prevented from taking over the chair of Russia's oldest, but hitherto irrelevant liberal party, the Democratic Party: The party conference delegates mysteriously split their vote and elected pro-Kremlin "political engineer" Andrei Bogdanov as chairman. Kasyanov was accused of having tried to buy delegates' votes. It appears that the more the Kremlin perceives its potential rivals to be a threat in the 2008 presidential elections, the tougher it cracks down on them even now. Khodorkovsky, who was the richest man in Russia until 2003, was sentenced to eight years in a labor camp in 2005 after signaling his intention to give up his business and enter politics. Baku-born chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov, openly running for president, not only met with obstruction when campaigning on the topic of reforming municipal services, but has also been given to understand that he is not welcome in Russia. Nemtsov, once Yeltsin's designated crown prince, carries the stigma of a traitor to the na-

tion since he became a political counselor to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko. Even if the liberal democrats were able to secure a fair election campaign with equal access to the electronic media, their main problem would remain the lack of charismatic leaders in their midst. Some are “worn out”, while others do not have enough experience yet. However, Russia

needs liberalism both for political and for economic reasons. Mark Urnov, the dean of the Political Science department at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, thinks that unless Russian society adopts the basic principle of political competition, it will not manage to build an efficient economy.

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About the author:

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Tables and Diagrams

**Results of the Duma Elections 1993, 1995, 1999 and 2003
(according to party lists)**

