

Russian Liberalism in an Election Year: Still in Crisis

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Abstract

Russia's liberal opposition is in tatters. Right Cause is reeling from the ejection of its oligarch leader Mikhail Prokhorov. Despite the return of Grigory Yavlinsky, Yabloko lacks the resources to contest the election effectively. Finally, the Justice Ministry refused to register the People's Freedom Party, led by Boris Nemtsov and his colleagues. With no real opposition, Russia will continue to suffer under an authoritarian model of politics.

Requiem for a Movement

Following elections to the Russian State Duma in December 2003, Vladislav Surkov, then Deputy Chief of Staff of the President's Executive Office and architect of United Russia's successful campaign, claimed that the defeat of the liberal parties, Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces (SPS), marked the end of an era. "The historic mission of the liberal parties in Russia" declared Surkov was over. Similarly, most post-election analyses suggested that the two parties would, to paraphrase Trotsky, be confined to the dustbin of post-Soviet history. Once the electoral dust had settled, a further obituary for Russia's liberals came from a more unexpected source, the former sponsor of the main liberal parties. In March 2004, awaiting trial on charges of tax evasion and fraud, former Yukos CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published "The Crisis of Liberalism in Russia", a withering critique of Yabloko and SPS in which he accused the liberals of misleading the people about the economic reforms of the 1990s and ignoring those who had suffered hardship as a result of such reforms. As a result, liberalism in Russia has been thoroughly discredited.

Subsequently, the decline of the liberal parties continued apace. In 2008, facing massive debts to the state for unpaid electoral broadcast fees, the Kremlin persuaded SPS to disband (in return for writing off its debts) and to merge into a new "Kremlin-friendly" liberal party, Right Cause. Yabloko meanwhile continues to plough its lonely social-liberal furrow, barely registering on opinion polls. The replacement of Grigory Yavlinsky with Sergei Mitrokhin as party chairman did nothing to halt the party's decline. Rejecting electoral politics altogether, disaffected members of Yabloko and SPS joined the Solidarity movement, an organisation focusing primarily on street protests and blogging activities.

Ahead of December's parliamentary elections it seems highly unlikely that liberal parties are capable of resurgence. Opinion polls suggest that no party of a liberal-democratic hue will be returned to the State Duma. Two registered parties, Yabloko and Right Cause, have campaigning mountains to climb if they are to reach the notoriously high electoral threshold of seven per cent, whilst the People's Freedom Party,

founded less than a year ago, was denied registration by the Justice Ministry.

Each of these parties can be seen as occupying distinct positions on the "opposition continuum". At one end we find the quasi or semi-opposition, those parties or individuals outside the ruling elite who aim to join government but not necessarily with the intention of enacting major policy changes and who do not seek to be overly critical of the regime for fear of exclusion or in the hope of preferable treatment. At the opposite end are situated what the celebrated political scientist, Otto Kirchheimer, referred to as the "principal" opposition, political actors seeking power precisely because they want to change the way the political system operates. During Putin's first term, parties tended to move along the continuum with a degree of fluidity. However, since 2004 Russia's party system has stabilised and it is possible to categorise parties in relation to their opposition credentials (see Table 1).

The Kremlin-Loyal Opposition: Right Cause

Created in 2008 as a merger between two insignificant pro-Kremlin liberal parties (Civil Force and the Democratic Party of Russia) together with the remnants of the disbanded Union of Right Forces, Right Cause remained in the margins of Russian politics until the spring of 2011 when the billionaire oligarch, Mikhail Prokhorov, took control of the party. President Medvedev openly expressed his support for the rejuvenated party, leading to speculation that Right Cause may become a vehicle for the president. Prokhorov was quick to position the party, announcing that, it would become an alternative to United Russia but was not in opposition. The word "opposition", associated with "fringe groups that have lost the sense of reality" was to be expunged from the party's vocabulary, stated Prokhorov. Initially there was little to suggest that Right Cause would be anything other than a Kremlin-friendly "pseudo-opposition" party, a supposition reinforced by Prokhorov's regular meetings with the president and Medvedev's warm words of support. Moreover, during the summer of 2011 the party's opinion poll ratings improved to the point

that by September it was no longer inconceivable that the party might be capable of reaching the seven percent cut-off in the elections. A high profile election campaign was expected after it was revealed that Prokhorov was prepared to spend up to \$100 million of his own wealth on electioneering.

However, by the end of the summer there were signs that Prokhorov was beginning to take a more independent line. The party's manifesto, published at the end of August, stated that authoritarian rule had returned to Russia and the country was becoming a "farce and a parody of the Soviet Union", stifled by bureaucracy. Prokhorov also claimed that United Russia's political monopoly was unhealthy and proposed a 226-seat limit for any one party in the State Duma. Although Medvedev promised to look at Prokhorov's "exotic plan", the proposal drew the wrath of Vladislav Surkov, now First Deputy Head of the presidential administration, who dismissed the idea out of hand as undemocratic. As long as Right Cause occupied the "right-liberal" niche it was safe from the machinations of the Kremlin. By turning his fire on the party of power, Prokhorov was taking a major risk.

It was still a shock however when, on 15th September, Prokhorov was ousted as leader at the party's congress. Prokhorov was quick to claim this was a Kremlin-engineered coup, the architect of which was likely to be the "grey cardinal", Surkov. Prokhorov urged his supporters to leave the party, now no more than a "Kremlin puppet party". Without Prokhorov's charismatic leadership and, more importantly, without his vast wealth it is unlikely that Right Cause will be able to fight an effective campaign unless it is allowed access to the regime's "administrative resources". At the time of writing the full reasons for Prokhorov's ouster were unclear and, given the murky nature of Russian politics they are likely to remain so. However, it seemed as though Prokhorov was paying the price, just as previously the Rodina (Motherland) party and Sergei Mironov's A Just Russia had, of straying too far from the Kremlin's notion of "constructive opposition".

The Kremlin--Sanctioned, Semi-Opposition: Yabloko

Ever present on the party political scene since the first elections to the State Duma in 1993 and perennial oppositionists during both the Yeltsin and Putin presidencies, it is tempting to see Yabloko as the archetype Russian "principal" opposition party. However, since losing Khodorkovsky's funding in 2003 and having failed to reach the threshold for parliamentary representation in two consecutive Duma elections, the party's relationship with the Kremlin is ambiguous. Under Sergei

Mitrokhin's leadership, Yabloko continues to be critical of government policies but is wary of attacking the president or prime minister outright. In return the party is allowed access to limited funding, sufficient to maintain its Moscow headquarters but not to fight effective electoral campaigns. Yabloko now operates less like a national political party and more like a social organisation concentrating on local issues such as campaigning against unpopular development projects.

Former party chairman, Grigory Yavlinsky, has been seen in the past as both Yabloko's greatest asset and liability. He has been criticised for turning down the offer of governmental posts and refusing to cooperate with parties representing the economic liberal strand such as the Union of Right Forces. Nevertheless, he remains a nationally well-known political figure. Recognising the need for a leader with a higher profile, the party has agreed that Yavlinsky will head the Yabloko party list in December. Such a move will not result in any divisions within the party. Mitrokhin has always made it plain that although he was party chairman, Yabloko's leader would always be Yavlinsky.

The party faces a gargantuan task to achieve the required seven percent of the votes. Since losing its parliamentary representation in 2003 Yabloko has rarely polled more than a single percent in opinion surveys. Nevertheless, with the implosion of Right Cause and the refusal of the Justice Ministry to register the Party of People's Freedom (detailed below), it has been presented with an opportunity. Whether Yabloko has either the operational capacity or the necessary financial support to take full advantage of this opportunity is another matter.

The Non-Systemic, Principal Opposition: The People's Freedom Party (PARNAS)

The People's Freedom Party, known in Russia by its acronym, PARNAS, was founded in December 2010 by Boris Nemtsov of the Solidarity movement and the leaders of three other existing political movements: Mikhail Kasyanov of the Russian People's Democratic Union; Vladimir Ryzhkov of the Republican Party of Russia; and Vladimir Milov of Democratic Choice. Like Nemtsov, the three leaders, although clearly aligned to the democratic opposition, have experience of working in, or close to, government.

The failure of parties within the broad liberal-democratic movement to form effective electoral coalitions or create a single united party has been a persistent phenomenon of post-Soviet Russian politics. Speculation over the possible creation of a unified liberal bloc was rife in the run-up to the 2003 parliamentary elections and the failure to form an effective electoral coalition was identified by some as being at the root of the subse-

quent elimination of liberal parties from the State Duma for the first time. The creation of PARNAS therefore, and the Solidarity movement which helped to spawn it, can be seen as a major achievement for Russia's liberals, bringing together representatives of the hitherto previously fractious liberal strands. Social liberals such as former leader of the Yabloko youth movement, Ilya Yashin, are content for the time being to co-exist alongside economic liberals such as Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov.

Few in the new party believed that it would be allowed to register for the parliamentary elections. Moreover, many Solidarity activists viewed any attempt to do so (involving the accumulation of 45,000 members in half of Russia's regions, the minimum requirement for registration) as being a drain on valuable resources. Nevertheless the party went ahead with the project in the fairly certain knowledge that registration would be denied. In an interview with the author, Ilya Yashin stated:

"When we don't take part in elections our opponents say 'why do you criticise when you didn't even try to take part in this election'. So we will do everything to register the party and I am sure they will refuse us and after this we will have the moral right to criticise the system."

As expected, in June 2011 the Justice Ministry refused to register PARNAS, citing alleged discrepancies with the party's statutes and the membership list submitted. The ministry also claimed to have received communications from former members who had given up their membership after the list was compiled (although no such former members were identified). A second alleged violation related to the party rules, which, the ministry claimed, did not include a provision for the mandatory rotation of party leaders. The party refuted the charges, pointing out that possible discrepancies related to only 79 members out of a total of 46,000 (one thousand more than required for registration by the Law on Political Parties). Moreover, lawyers for the party insisted that the charter did have a mechanism for the rotation of party leaders. Most analysts believed PARNAS had been subject to far greater scrutiny by the Justice Ministry than was strictly necessary.

At the time of the Justice Ministry's ruling, PARNAS was achieving opinion poll ratings of around three per cent – hardly spectacular but actually quite promising for an unregistered party that had only existed for lit-

tle over six months and which had received very little publicity.

Following the Justice Ministry's decision, divisions emerged over what choice of strategy to follow. Some argued for a campaign of street protest to highlight the failings of an electoral system which prevented the opposition from participating, many from this camp also support a campaign aimed at persuading voters to spoil their ballot papers. Others, such as Vladimir Milov and the political and social activist and serial blogger, Alexei Navalny (not a member of either Solidarity or PARNAS) have called for a campaign against United Russia. Rather than spoil their ballot papers (the suspicion being that such papers are more than likely to find their way into United Russia's pot) voters should vote for any party other than the "party of thieves and swindlers" (Navalny's depiction of United Russia and now a term used regularly amongst opposition activists).

Electoral Prospects

With Right Cause seemingly torn asunder, Yabloko unlikely to be able to mount an effective challenge and PARNAS prevented from standing, the prospects of seeing any liberal opposition of whatever hue in the next State Duma remain bleak. Whilst the liberal parties have in the past made strategic errors (the failure of Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces to cooperate in any meaningful sense in 2003 being a prime example) it is the nature of the political system under the Putin-Medvedev tandem rather than the actions of the parties which explains this state of affairs. The Russian political system can best be described, to use Andreas Schedler's term as "electoral authoritarian", a model associated with the Peruvian political system during the years of Fujimori's presidency when political opposition was severely restricted. An electoral authoritarian regime "plays the game of multiparty elections" but ensures that effective opposition is shackled, essentially making elections instruments of authoritarian rule. As the renowned political scientist, Robert Dahl, reminds us, the presence of organised opposition is as central to the overall concept of liberal democracy as is the existence of free and fair elections. The glaring lack of organised opposition, liberal or otherwise, in the elections to the State Duma in December suggests that Russia will remain wedded to the electoral authoritarian model for the foreseeable future.

About the Author

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