

## Analysis

### Does Russia Still Have an Opposition?

By Andrew Wilson, London

#### Abstract

Russia's traditional liberal opposition of Yabloko and the Union of Right-wing Forces will play little role in the 2007 State Duma elections. Also marginalized are wild cards Garry Kasparov, Mikhail Kasyanov, Dmitry Rogozin, and Eduard Limonov. Generally Kremlin opponents have not adjusted to the current rules of the game by uniting their efforts, transcending past identities, and reducing associations with discredited figures like Anatoly Chubais. Beyond its main party United Russia, the Kremlin has set up its own "opposition" in Just Russia, but it is not clear if this effort to establish a "two-party" system will be any more effective than the attempt in 1995. The main task for the Kremlin is to preserve its resources and popularity at a time when the opposition is not even powerful enough to challenge the authorities' agenda.

#### Failing Liberal Opposition

The campaign for this December's Duma elections may have begun, but the liberal opposition is not making an impact, and arguably isn't even trying. Its divided total vote count seems likely to underscore even the 11.8 percent that the three opposition candidates won officially in "authoritarian" Belarus in 2006. Only unity and a near miss of the 7 percent barrier would lend any moral authority to post-election protests. But both Yabloko and the Union of Right-wing Forces (URF) seem more interested in mere survival or possible presidential runs in 2008. The old arguments that they have different electoral niches and that their sum might be less than the parts do not excuse their failure to build a common front. The remnants of Russian liberalism will be defeated by the rules of the game to which they have failed to respond, rather than by the type of blatant electoral fraud that has sparked "electoral revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, wild cards like Other Russia (Garry Kasparov's United Civic Front and Mikhail Kasyanov's National Democratic Party), or for that matter Dmitry Rogozin's Great Russia and Eduard Limonov's National Bolsheviks, will make even less of an impact on the streets, if their parties cannot even take part in the vote.

These are the considerations before one even mentions the kind of "counter-revolutionary technology" that has been developed since 2004. The anti-NGO (non-governmental organization) campaign, the ability to muddy the waters around exit polls, the role of the pro-Kremlin nationalist youth movement Nashi and the likely appearance of "counter-demonstrators," and the increasing Kremlin role in manipulating "alternative" campaign technologies, like the Internet and flash mob assembly via texting, will all severely limit the potential for the liberal opposition to make any extra-electoral impact.

#### Lessons from Ukraine

The Russian opposition should have learnt at least three lessons from Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004. The first of these is unity. The second is the need to reinvent your image, and not just by rebranding, although orange was a good choice at the time, warm and positive, a help in rallying neutrals. In the Ukrainian case the key task for the opposition was to transcend the politics of cultural nationalism, and go beyond the agenda set by Rukh in the 1990s. This it did well. One reason for choosing orange was to sideline the traditional national colors of yellow and blue; but Yushchenko also ran a substantive, values-based campaign and refused to perform to the nationalist caricature that his opponents wanted. The Russian "democrats" also need to leave the 1990s behind, but in their case the need is to overcome their association with shock therapy, "market Bolshevism" and "liberal oligarchs" like Anatoly Chubais. So-called "modular" colored revolutions don't simply transfer mechanically, unless the would-be opposition is a suitable vehicle. The old-style Russian opposition has been putting the cart before the horse, hoping that the mere idea, or exemplar, of previous color revolutions would revivify them and their fortunes, rather than the other way around.

The third Ukrainian lesson was also flunked, namely not to take money from disreputable or discredited sponsors (though in the Ukrainian case this last lesson was learnt only retrospectively). The idea that Mikhail Kasyanov was a "Russian Yushchenko" or even a "Russian Tymoshenko" was ludicrous. Every rumor of a link with the exiled Boris Berezovsky has been a gift to the Kremlin media. Both Yushchenko and Tymoshenko were regime defectors who brought considerable resources with them, but this is the wrong lesson for Russia in 2007. The opposition has spent

too much time hoping for the arrival of a sugar daddy from the regime's still solid ranks, and has failed to understand just how effective the anti-oligarch "special operation" was in 2003, when the Kremlin used its attacks against Mikhail Khodorkovsky to bolster its image. Whether fairly or not, it is the Kremlin that exploited the visceral hatred many Russians feel for the super-rich, and it is still the Kremlin that can play the anti-oligarch card.

### The Kremlin's Strategy

The liberals are therefore perfectly capable of messing things up on their own, but the Kremlin characteristically prefers to over-insure. The over-exposure of Mikhail Barshchevsky's *Grazhdanskaia sila* (Civic Force) on official TV seems to indicate that it is serving as a clone. The Kremlin does not want either liberal party to have even the limited moral authority of improving on their 2003 score (4.3 percent for Yabloko, and 4 percent for the URF).

The liberals of course are not the only opposition. What about the loyal opposition? Or more exactly, how does the Kremlin go about picking a loyal opposition? Has the Kremlin not upset the balance of forces it achieved in 2003 by constantly talking of a two-party system (plus minor satellites), rather than four? (The four parties that won representation in the Duma in 2003 are United Russia, the Communists, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and Rodina.) The new system might actually have less efficient "fit" than the old. The idea that real factional conflict in the Kremlin might align with virtual competition between the main two parties (United Russia and Just Russia) has not really come to pass. The idea that the Duma elections might be used for a "primary" contest between presidential contenders seems to be fading too, though this will become clearer when party lists become final. Elite conflict goes on behind the scenes, very much across party lines or in no reference to party lines, and we are left once again with Churchill's "dogs fighting under the carpet."

The only real problem with the old Duma quartet was with Rodina. Although clearly a political technology "project" put together by the Kremlin, at least in its mature stages, Rodina was admittedly a complex phenomenon that posed several management problems for a Kremlin that was unsure whether to coopt or control its particular political niche, and which has always been nervous of a genuine grassroots nationalist movement it could not command. But its replacement, Just Russia, has its problems too. A new left-nationalist party could keep its distance from its official backers in 2003, and its leaders pose as vigorous neophytes. Just Russia is just too visible, and too visibly pro-Kremlin. Moreover, in so far as Russia now has a

type of "theatre politics," the audience's attention has to be engaged. But the sparky personality of now-excluded leaders like Rogozin was arguably the main reason why so many voted for Rodina in 2003. And the proposed "script" is a hard sell: the myths that Just Russia is an outsider party that is being victimized by United Russia, and that Just Russia is against United Russia but is pro-Putin, are difficult to finesse and difficult to grasp. The new "Kremlin 2" project may therefore flop like the Rybkin Bloc, the other half of a previous two-shot strategy in 1995 along with Our Home is Russia – if not quite so spectacularly badly (Rybkin won 1.1 percent). The difference can be made up with "administrative resources," but the project will have no dynamism going forward.

Also, where are Just Russia's votes supposed to come from? United Russia is recording 50 percent or more in recent polls, up almost 15 percent on 2003, when it won 37.6 percent. Prestige-wise, it obviously has to do better than last time, and may want to win an absolute majority by more direct means than in 2003. Just Russia's potential electorate overlaps, but only incompletely, with Rodina's old electorate (9 percent in 2003), some of which may go to Patriots of Russia or to the People's Union. So far, Kremlin-connected "political technologists" are running fewer "flies" this time, so some of their wasted vote or "*moloko*" is up for grabs (in 2003, when a variety of left-nationalist parties were directed against the Communist Party (CPRF), they won a total of 11 percent; and the 7 percent barrier, raised from 5 percent in 2003, is a greater disincentive to vote for smaller parties). But one or more of the CPRF and LDPR may have to suffer – and currently both are outscoring Just Russia in the polls (see [www.levada.ru/reitingi2007.html](http://www.levada.ru/reitingi2007.html) or graph on p .10).

The LDPR may have gained Andrei Lugovoi, the alleged murderer of Aleksandr Litvinenko, at number two on its party list and a substantial *succès de scandale*, but it has lost leading financiers like Suleiman Kerimov of Nafta Moskva and Konstantin Vetrov (to United Russia), as well as long-time number two Alexei Mitrofanov (to Just Russia). Of course, Zhirinovskiy, who doubled his vote to 11.4 percent last time, is nothing if not a great survivor, and ultimately the Kremlin may prefer to stick with the predictability of his fairly low-cost services. Meanwhile, the fake conflict between United Russia and Just Russia (though it is getting plenty of real rough edges) may rebound to the benefit of the CPRF. The Communists' "core" electorate may in fact be in the high teens, without Rodina and the "flies" that brought it down to 12.6 percent in 2003. Interestingly, the Communists have barely changed personnel or policy for this campaign, hoping that Kremlin managers may again plump for the devil they know.

But Just Russia, the LDPR and CPRF can't all get 10 percent or more. Ultimately, the smaller parties, most of whom are once again actual or potential "clones" or "spoilers," may tip the balance, but it is hard to assess their role until the Kremlin has decided just who it wants to push up or push down. What, for example, of Patriots of Russia or the Party of Social Justice? They could equally well take votes off any or all of Just Russia, the CPRF or the LDPR. In its current situation of such power, the Kremlin may be guilty of failing to redesign the function of projects which had a much clearer purpose in 2003, which was then to take votes off the CPRF and clear a space for Rodina, as well as providing a virtual chorus for the "anti-oligarch" campaign led by United Russia. Some of these projects may have to be reanimated later in the campaign, with a late spending and advertising splurge. It may be more difficult to redesign them at this late stage.

### The 2007 Campaign

A common theme is precisely what the 2007 campaign lacks for now. Once it is launched, it may help move more pieces into place. In key respects, of course, the 2007 campaign is very different from 2003, and totally unlike that of 1999. The Kremlin possesses powerful reserves of popularity and resources. The problem is how to conserve them and manage their transfer, either in "operation successor" or to Putin's new power base, without provoking open elite conflict. The Kremlin's

*About the author:*

Andrew Wilson is Senior Lecturer in Ukrainian Studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, and an honorary fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London. He is the author of *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (Yale University Press, 2005).

political technologists, however, are not used to status quo elections. Nor are they used to elections without dramaturgia or drama. There is arguably an inbuilt tendency in "managed democracy" towards constant reinvention, to launching a new drama for every election cycle, in an attempt to keep the electorate well-managed. One reason for the appointment of Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov and the rumors of a new anti-corruption purge (*chistka*) might be to boost Just Russia. There may be a rule that you can't play the same trick twice, but "oligarchs" and Russia's unpopular "offshore aristocracy" is probably a big enough theme in which to maneuver. However, this year's dramaturgia is more likely to be the different ways of demonstrating that "Russia is back." And not just via the Winter Olympics or claiming the North Pole. Conflicts with neighbours and asserting "sovereign democracy" by "deinternationalising" Russia via conflict with NGOs and the OSCE may have foreign policy ramifications, but play well with Putin's core electorate.

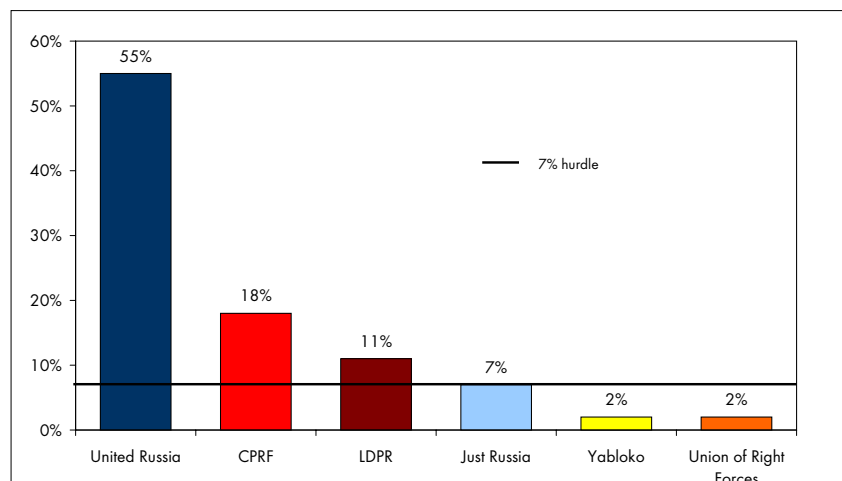
And this is probably the clearest expression of the opposition's limited power – its inability to challenge the agenda the Kremlin sets, or even to challenge the subordination of the 2007 elections to those in 2008.

And finally, one more form of opposition has been definitively rooted out – the 4.7 percent who voted "against all" in 2003. This option no longer appears on Russian ballots.

## Tables and Graphs

### Russian Attitudes Towards the Opposition

Party Ratings, September 2007



Source: <http://www.levada.ru/reitingj2007.html>