

Opinion

The Hope of Yabloko, or Why We Are Taking Part in the Elections

Galina Mikhaleva, Moscow

Abstract

In the authoritarian system of bureaucratic clans that has firmly established itself in Russia, the existence of the Russian Democratic Party Yabloko seems absurd. In this commentary, the author, a member of the Yabloko Executive Committee, explains why it is important that Yabloko takes part in the elections despite all obstacles.

Elections Without a Choice and the Trappings of a Party System

Legislative changes and political practices during President Putin's second term in office have all but completely eliminated competition in Russia's parliamentary elections, which were not free to begin with, by removing almost all options for the opposition to be represented in the State Duma. Putin's consent to lead the "United Russia" party list has completed the process of creating optimal conditions for the party of power and of corrupt bureaucrats. The Russian political spectrum consists almost exclusively of sham political parties that are expected to participate in sham elections with pre-arranged results. The 14 parties currently participating in the elections can be distinguished as belonging to the following groupings.

Administrative parties that support Putin and his policies and enjoy various degrees of support from the Kremlin:

- United Russia includes all of the country's political and business heavyweights on its party lists, which are topped by ministers and governors, complemented by artists, athletes, workers, and farmers (following the Soviet model);
- Just Russia, which is made up of second-tier bureaucrats and defectors from other parties who are concerned about retaining their seats in the State Duma; Putin's decision to campaign for United Russia has created an ambiguous and ultimately hopeless situation for this party, since it cannot compete with a Putin-led party while simultaneously supporting him;
- The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which has been weakened by the loss of a series of prominent politicians and corporate supporters. The usefulness of its continued existence is also questioned because there is no longer any requirement for an additional faction to supply the necessary votes for constitutional amendments in parliament.

Administrative projects that are also subordinated to the Kremlin, but which play a subordinate or proxy role serving to solidify the position of their political leaders and to create the illusion of a full-fledged party system: The Agrarian Party, the People's Union, the Peace and Unity Party, and the Social Justice Party.

Deception projects created by the Kremlin in order to siphon off votes from the opposition: The Democratic Party of Russia, the Citizens' Force, the Green Party, and the Patriots of Russia.

True opposition parties such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation or the Russian Democratic Party Yabloko that have an ideological foundation, a real membership base, and regular showings of strong voter support.

The Union of Right Forces is a borderline case that so far incorporates the diverse positions and strategies both of administrative parties and of a partisan business project that is based on buying votes, as well as elements of opposition.

A range of well-known politicians and political groups with various political leanings now finds itself as part of the *non-conformist opposition* and cannot participate in elections due to their lack of party status, such as "The Other Russia." Several formerly legal parties, the best-known of which is the Republican Party, were unable to register under the new election laws.

Between 2004 and 2007, there were repeated attempts to form parties, movements, and coalitions within the opposition spectrum in various forms. Among these were "Committee 2008," the United Civil Front, and the People's Democratic Union, all of which were members of "The Other Russia" confederation, which also united left-wing organizations such as the National Bolshevik Party, the Vanguard of Red Youth, and others. All attempts to form a united opposition with a common basis failed as a result of conflicts and divisions. Today, the actors include "The Other Russia" (formed by Edvard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party and the United Civil Front of Garry Kasparov) and

the People's Democratic Union of Mikhail Kasyanov and Irina Khakamada. Despite earlier assurances to the contrary, Vladimir Ryzhkov did not win a slot on the party list of the Union of Right Forces after his Republican Party was refused registration and left the "Other Russia" alliance.

The difficult position in which these politicians and groups find themselves is, on the one hand, due to legislation forbidding the formation of party blocs and banning participation by the representatives of one party in the lists of another group. On the other hand, instead of unity in adversity, the differences in political views, internal conflicts, and inept tactics have weakened the opposition.

Boycott or Participate in the Elections?

In the current political debate among Russia's conformist and non-conformist opposition, there are two different positions vis-à-vis the elections that have also been debated within Yabloko. Some regard the upcoming elections as a pure sham and believe that to participate in this process would only help legitimate the regime. Others argue that the campaign is the only remaining option for communicating one's own point of view to the voters and that participation in the polls is therefore necessary.

The representatives of the non-conformist opposition have very ambiguous and constantly shifting views in this matter. The leaders of "The Other Russia" (Kasparov and Limonov), who have long accused Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces of having come to an arrangement with the Kremlin because of their participation in polls and called for a boycott of the Duma elections, ended up presenting a party list of their own to the Central Election Committee. Nevertheless, the party was not registered. On the other hand, former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov and the People's Democratic Union, who left their alliance, and radical Communist Viktor Anpilov, who left and then re-joined it, continue to call for an election boycott. At the same time as they were urging a boycott, the various actors were trying to organize internal primaries in order to nominate a presidential candidate, first in unison and then separately. Within Yabloko's internal party discussion, one group also advocated an election boycott after the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya and after the party had been excluded from the elections in Karelia and refused registration in St. Petersburg, where Yabloko's prospects had been good. However, the dominant view remained that participation in the elections was necessary for the following reasons:

- They constitute the only opportunity to communicate our point of view on the political regime, the

economic and political development of the country, and our alternative proposals to the voter, irrespective of how limited our options are, due to the lack of any access to important television stations.

- We have obligations towards our party members and supporters, who expect us to take part in the elections.
- If we should decide to boycott the polls, we would jeopardize the continued existence of the party, which would thus be unable to remain an organized force until the moment when authoritarian tendencies may weaken and the opposition gains a genuine chance of political participation again.
- Maintaining an organizational structure without party status is only possible in two ways: Either by transforming the group into an NGO, or through the creation of a resistance group using subversive strategies. Should events develop in a certain way, the second option appears to be the more likely one. It should only be chosen, however, after all alternatives in the legal political arena have been exhausted.
- Furthermore, the latest legislative changes, leading to a distortion of results at the level of the regional electoral committees and censorship of important media, combined with a lack of potential for resistance, mean that a boycott would be a nonsensical choice.

The first three slots of Yabloko's electoral list, which has already been approved by the Central Election Commission, feature the party chairman and his deputy (G. Yavlinsky and S. Ivanenko) as well as the country's best-known civil rights activist and former dissident Sergei Kovalev, who has been a consistent critic of the regime and the president. The electoral list of 97 regional groups and 342 individuals does not include any higher-ranking state officials or any oligarchs. It is an alliance of the active parts of our society and includes business executives, university lecturers, NGO directors, journalists, students, pensioners, ecologists, civil rights activists, and chairpersons of independent trade unions. The electoral list includes more young people and women than those of any other parties (10 and 28 percent, respectively).

What We Are Hoping For

The political system that has emerged in Russia in the run-up to the elections is a contradictory one. It could develop into a variety of different directions. One option is a strong autocracy, including the imposition of a single ideological line, elements of a cult of personality, and attempts to employ mobilization techniques. On the other hand, deploying the full force of the repressive state apparatus in order to prop up the regime

is infeasible, and this fact, combined with the absence of the Iron Curtain, means that key figures in politics and business have doubts concerning the maintenance of stability in a post-Putin Russia. Such doubts give rise to aggravated conflicts, with criminal methods of persecution being deployed not only against political opponents, but also within the executive structures of power.

Conflicts within the elite open up new opportunities both for “reformers” within the government and for the democratic opposition. It is important to exploit such opportunities (e.g., airtime on important TV stations) when they arise. But the most important task is to make all thinking citizens aware that there are alternatives to the current course of the country’s development and to the current president.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

About the author:

Dr. Galina Mikhaleva is a member of the Executive of Yabloko.

Reading Tip

The Russian Electoral Statistics Database

The Russian Electoral Statistics database, created by Grigorii Golosov under the auspices of the EU-funded IRENA project, is now available online. <http://db.irena.org.ru/> The database contains detailed information on 116 federal and regional-level elections held starting with December 2003: national presidential and legislative, 34 gubernatorial, 77 regional legislative (single or lower chambers), 3 regional legislative (upper chambers), and about all by-elections to these legislatures throughout the period. Everybody who has ever dealt with the existing publications of Russian electoral statistics by the Central Electoral Commission of Russia (<http://www.cikrf.ru> and <http://www.izbirkom.ru>) knows how user-unfriendly these publications are. At any given moment of time, they are also incomplete because some of the data tend to disappear without stating a reason or leaving a trace soon after the elections. To remedy these obvious shortcomings, Professor Golosov with the assistance of Dr Iulia Shevchenko created a database that attempts to combine user-friendliness with the comprehensiveness of the data. The data sources include the publications of the Central Electoral Commission and regional electoral commissions in the <http://www.izbirkom.ru> portal, the Internet sites of those regional electoral commissions that keep them on their own, and print publications. The database is going to be updated no less frequently than twice a year. The data are in Russian. However, interested English-speakers who know Cyrillic characters and can recognize the names of regions and political parties will not find the language barrier prohibitively high. In order to facilitate their effort, a user guide in English is provided.

http://www.irena.org.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=50&Itemid=103