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LIBERAL OPPOSITION PARTIES IN MODERN RUSSIA

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Abstract

Russian opposition parties have played a pivotal role in Russian politics since the fall of the Soviet Union. However, the failures of opposition parties in elections as early as 1999 show a trend toward accepting mainstream politics, particularly the acceptance of United Russia as the dominant political force. This paper explores the failures and consequences of the Russian liberal democratic opposition movement from the 1999 Duma elections to the current period and how those have contributed to the rise of an effective one party system in Russian politics. The results Russian Duma elections showed significant failings to create a coherent liberal ideology and platform throughout the spectrum of liberal parties. This led to a lack of public support with many widespread causes and has ultimately led to the creation of a one party system in Russia. The inability of liberal opposition political parties to make headway in the Russian political scene had far-reaching effects for the future of Russian politics as whole. While the future of Russian politics appears dismal with regards to the future of liberal opposition parties, there is hope that the Russian political system will soon change to make room for more liberal democratic opposition and a healthier Russian democracy.

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Introduction

Democracy in Russia is an ever changing concept. Russia has a long history of authoritarian leaders and single party rule. When multiple party democracy accompanied the switch from socialism to capitalism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russians were faced with choices politically, as well as commercially. The 1990s saw the formation of many political parties in Russia, including many liberal parties. These parties functioned as voices of liberal opposition and democratic support for the new government. As Russia progressed through economic and political turmoil, the political parties represented differing agendas on liberal economic reform, involvement in Chechnya and the best way to proceed with the switch from socialism to capitalism. By the time of the elections in 1999 and 2003, liberal parties had become parties of opposition. Largely in those elections, liberal opposition parties were unable to achieve a significant amount of support in order to create a lasting political base. This lack of public support had many causes and led ultimately to the formation of a one party system in the Russian Federation.

The creation of many different parties allowed liberal opposition parties to come up with an identity for themselves without being forced into a niche. Ideologically liberal parties were formed with the basis of furthering social reform, democratic government, and laissez-faire economic policy.¹ Most liberal parties concentrated on loosening the tax code and moving away from the policies of shock therapy that led to the 1998 economic collapse. Economic reform was an essential requirement for most liberal parties. Liberal

¹ Hancock et al. 2003, 490.

parties also concentrated on bringing democracy to Russia and modeling Russia's government on their European neighbors.² Unlike their Western counterparts, social agendas were not very important to liberal democratic opposition parties. Opposition to President Yeltsin and then President Putin became a unifying characteristic rather than any of their policies as the parties became politically sidelined.

The Duma elections of 1999 and 2003 were crucial periods in understanding the failings of liberal opposition parties in Russia. By 1999, democratic politics had stabilized in Russia and political parties had formed solid bases and platforms of issues that they consistently campaigned for. Previous elections showed a growing number of Russians voting for liberal democratic parties. Nevertheless, in the 1999 Duma elections, the failings of liberal opposition parties were already apparent. The failure to unify ideology, to combine electoral strategy, and to keep personalities from hindering electoral politics made the dismal showings of liberal Russian parties in the 1999 Duma elections a turning point in the liberal opposition movement.

Similarly, the Duma elections in 2003 failed to produce significant support for the liberal political parties. The liberal parties attracted even less support in the elections and gained even fewer seats in 2003 than they had four years previously.³ The disunity that had prevented electoral success in previous elections persisted. In 2003, liberal parties became marginalized as they faced a stronger Kremlin and Kremlin-backed parties. The addition of these excess external struggles made it difficult for liberal opposition groups achieve anything in the 2003 elections.

² Hancock et al. 2003, 491.

³ White 2006, 87.

The abysmal achievements of liberal political parties in the 1999 and 2003 Duma elections had many causes. The causes stemmed from both internal and external factors that kept liberal opposition parties from unifying into a cohesive coalition. Internally, liberal parties were unable to move past ideological differences, varying campaign strategies, and the dominant personalities of each separate party to create a unified coalition of liberal parties. Externally, the rise of conservative parties and the rise of the extremely powerful Kremlin, Kremlin supported parties, and Kremlin-backed media outlets kept liberal parties from reaching new audiences. These forces combined to lead to the demise of successful liberal political parties in the late nineties and the formation of a one party system in Russia.

The loss of strong political voices from the left had a considerable impact on the political system in Russia. In the 2007 elections, the liberal opposition parties failed to win any seats or garner countrywide support. The absence of strong opposition groups has left a gaping hole in Russian politics. A one party system has arisen as the Kremlin and Kremlin-backed parties and media outlets gained control across the country. Because of the failures of the liberal opposition parties like Yabloko (Яблоко) and the Union of Right Forces (Союз Правых Сил) in the 1990s and early 2000s, Russians are less likely to challenge the current system that has arisen. The biased support of Kremlin parties in the mainstream media and the reluctance of liberal groups to create public opposition in the media have fomented the willingness to accept one party dominance in Russian politics. The lack of media support and mass exposure has created a cycle of support for United Russia (Единая Россия), making it harder for opposition groups to gain footing as time goes by.

The failure of liberal political parties to create legitimate opposition groups in Russian politics has left Russia with significant problems in forming a sustainable democracy. Dissenting citizens are not able to have their voices represented in government, and opposition groups are becoming more frequently ridiculed in the media. The future of Russian politics as a multiple party democracy depends greatly on the amount of power the current government is willing to relinquish in the media and the length of time that prosperity and stability can last for the Russian economy.

Results of the Elections of 1999 and 2003

The Russian Duma elections in 1999 and 2003 showed the inability of liberal political parties to appeal to and sustain support within a large portion of the population. The two main liberal political parties that sought seats in the 1999 Duma elections were Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces. These parties similar segments of society, although they attempted to attract voters with a wide variety of issues. The inability of these parties to create a cohesive image of the liberal parties or a unified coalition ultimately resulted in their failure. This failure ultimately resulted in the development of a one party system in Russian politics. The elections of 1999 and 2003 showed the inability of Russian liberal parties in their current form to appeal to Russians on a mass scale.

Perhaps the most starkly liberal group on the Russian political scene, Yabloko was formed in 1993 as a response to then Russian Prime Minister Egor Gaidar and his attempts to form a new liberal party. Yabloko strove to cultivate an outsider image as a

political party. It's charismatic and outspoken leader, Grigory Yavlinsky, refused to work in the government and harshly criticized government officials.⁴ Yavlinsky had a very volatile relationship with Yeltsin administration officials, especially Gaidar, whose economic reforms were enacted rather than his own.⁵ Yabloko officials were not interested in working with others in achieving their goals. They criticized the Yeltsin government for becoming more undemocratic.⁶ Yabloko often was in opposition to both conservative and other liberal parties, as well as key figures in the government, which made it difficult for them to reach compromises on issues. This cultivated an image that both helped and hurt them. They were seen as a party that was unwilling to concede on an issue of great importance, but they were also viewed as stubborn and uncooperative.

Their primary goal was to create a government in Russia that was modeled after European democracy. While they supported free-market economics including lower taxes, like other liberal parties at the time, Yabloko also had a social agenda.⁷ Yabloko moved towards their social agenda and away from their economic platform after the 1995 elections, which distinguished them from other parties.⁸ They called for attention to human rights and institutional subjects that had been neglected by the Yeltsin government.⁹ They were so committed to their social agenda that they believed that economic changes should be made only after social reforms were made and economic reforms would “oriented in the social sphere.”¹⁰ In their party platform from 1999, they highlighted their feeling that human rights abuses had risen in Russia and the need to

⁴ White 2006, 127.

⁵ Colton 2003, 147.

⁶ Ibid., 148.

⁷ Borshev, V., 1999. *Yabloko za Prava Cheloveka* Moscow: Yabloko, 10

⁸ White 2006, 77.

⁹ Colton 2003, 147.

¹⁰ Ibid., 149.

address human rights in mainstream Russian politics.¹¹ They also call for a stronger emphasis on health care for Russians, even in the case of AIDS victims and for drug users rather than prison.¹² The same platform called for Russians to hold themselves to the same high standards that the rest of the world, specifically Western Europe, held themselves to on these issues. They also loudly opposed the war in Chechnya, arguing for diplomacy and negotiations rather than the use of force. This not only put them against other liberal parties, but against much Russian popular opinion.

Yabloko supporters vary greatly from supporters of different liberal political groups. From the beginning, the liberal elite were the main supporters of Yabloko. Yabloko aimed to attract young, very well educated, white-collar voters and often did not attempt to court voters that did not fit into that category.¹³ Although other political figures, like former Prime Minister Sergei Stepshin attracted support from outside Yabloko's base, including Union of Right Forces supporters, Yabloko was often unable to expand support beyond the liberal elite. In the 1999 elections, a majority of those who supported Yabloko were white collar workers, students or were in managerial positions. Thirty-four percent of Yabloko supporters in 1999 also had completed either high or middle levels of education.¹⁴ Although Yabloko appealed to highly educated voters, the education disparity in Russia made it difficult for them to appeal to less educated voters.

Beginning in 1999 and continuing into later elections, Yabloko strived to revitalize its insular reputation. They hired outside advertising and commercial companies to produce campaign materials.¹⁵ Wary of the cartoon-like commercials from

¹¹ Borshev, V., 1999. *Yabloko za Prava Cheloveka* Moscow: Yabloko, 7

¹² *Ibid.*, 53

¹³ Colton 2003, 149.

¹⁴ White 2006, 118.

¹⁵ Colton 2003, 148.

the 1995 campaigns, very little came out of these strategy efforts aside from commercials featuring Yavlinsky.¹⁶ Yabloko was also known for its less traditional methods of campaigning. They held more pep rallies and press conferences than their opponents and spent liberally on leaflets and souvenirs, using volunteers to distribute them.¹⁷ These measures made it possible for Yabloko to reach voters individually and leave a unique impression.

Figure 1 – Changes of Power in the Duma 1995-1999¹⁸

Power Block	Year	Seats By Lists	Single Mandate Districts	Total Seats Per Block
Communists	1995	99	58	157
	1999	68	43	111
Unity (Pre-United Russia)	1995	N/A		
	1999	66	10	76
Union of Right Forces	1995	0	9	9
	1999	24	5	29
Yabloko	1995	31	14	45
	1999	17	5	22
Liberal Democratic Party	1995	50	18	68
	1999	17	0	17

In the 1999 Duma elections, Yabloko was looking to build upon the support they had from earlier elections. However, Figure 1 shows the dramatic change Yabloko faced going into the 1999 elections during which they lost seats in the Russian Duma.

¹⁶ Ibid., 148.

¹⁷ Ibid., 149.

¹⁸ Kommersant 1999.

Yabloko's leadership was very secure that their base would continually support them. However, this complacency often led them to take for granted the support they had, and led to very minimal campaigning.¹⁹ In 1999, Yabloko added former Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin as a way to reach out beyond their base. The party aimed to shed its "prima donna" image by distributing voter friendly leaflets and airing television ads that referred to the party leaving behind its old attitude of "all talk and no action".²⁰ Yabloko was also confident with their image as the sole party of "democratic opposition", as they opposed the other liberal parties who were responsible for the 1998 economic collapse.²¹ This opposition led Yabloko officials to be overconfident in their ability to win seats. They depended on the country's discontentment to sweep them into power, and it worked only somewhat. As Figure 2 shows, instead of garnering a possible twenty-five percent of the vote, they won only six percent, less than they had achieved in 1995.²² The 1999 election was the most conventionally run campaign for Yabloko, but it almost marked the end of their mainstream status as they won only 20 seats.

After dismal showings in the 1999 elections, Yabloko restructured in an effort to increase their base nationwide. This included new campaign strategy, which was made easier by coordinated outreach across the country because of better regional offices. Despite the effort put into campaign strategy, the 2003 elections were dominated by the Yukos scandals and arrests, as well as Yabloko's position on the Chechen conflict being so vastly different than then public opinion. Yabloko was effectively unable to campaign because of limited funding and media access due to the Yukos scandal.²³ In the 2003

¹⁹ White 2006, 119.

²⁰ Ibid., 131.

²¹ Colton 2003, 140.

²² Ibid., 140.

²³ White 2007.

elections Yabloko gained no seats in the Duma via party lists and only four through single mandate elections. Their popularity had declined to a point that highlighted how vastly out of touch they were with the general Russian public.

Figure 2 - Results from 1999 Duma Elections²⁴

	Votes, %		Seats		
	List	SMD	List	SMD	Total, %
Valid Votes	60.5	60.3			
Invalid Votes	1.2	1.3			
Total Votes (% of electorate)	61.7	61.6			
Communist Party	24.3	13.4	67	46	25.1
Unity	23.3	2.1	64	9	16.2
Fatherland–All Russia	13.3	8.6	37	31	15.1
Union of Right Forces	8.5	3.0	24	5	6.4
Liberal Democratic Party	6.0	1.5	17	0	3.8
Yabloko	5.9	5.0	16	4	4.4
Independents	—	41.7	—	114	25.3
Against all	3.3	11.6	—	—	—
Others	12.7	0.6	0	0	0
Invalid ballots	1.9	2.2			
Total	100	100	225	225	100

Unlike Yabloko, the Union of Right Forces did not have the ability to build up a base over the course of several election cycles. The Union of Right Forces was formed by former leaders of Yabloko and the defunct Democratic Party of Russia who wanted to create a more conservative, free market, socially liberal party after most of them were

²⁴ Results of Previous Elections to the Russian State Duma.”
http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_elections_93-03.php?S776173303132=34c64aec4a3e159e0c1e05ace11d02d1 (accessed April 26, 2009).

dismissed from their government positions in the wake of the 1998 economic collapse. Although their policies were often very close to those of Yabloko's, they ran into many difficulties in achieving any sort of lasting alliance. Because much of the leadership had such a strong backing in past government service, many of the Union of Right Forces policies were unsurprisingly similar to those that were initially supported by the Yeltsin government.²⁵ The Union of Right Forces earned its liberal label by favoring a balanced federal budget and limited government spending. They gained a lot of support by attacking the oligarchs, who had benefited from the early reforms of capitalism, and calling for a strengthening of the new middle class.²⁶ They gained a lot of support with their support for the war in Chechnya, which kept them aligned with the majority of public opinion. However, they did their best to distance themselves from the Yeltsin regime, particularly in the 1999 elections, by calling for the retirement of old leaders and the need for reformist parliamentary leaders.²⁷ They collected signatures on referendums calling for guarantees on private property, annulling Duma representatives' immunity from criminal prosecution, the end of the draft, and an amendment limiting the president's ability to dismiss the Duma.²⁸ These referendums allowed them to connect with the population on a more personal level regardless of the success of the referendums. They formed a niche for themselves as an economically liberal party that was not at the beck and call of the Kremlin.

The Union of Right Forces did attract similar voters as Yabloko. Conveniently, however, Yabloko's base was mainly St. Petersburg liberals, whereas the Union of Right

²⁵ Colton 2003, 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Forces was mainly supported in Moscow.²⁹ This geographic distinction kept them from attracting voters away from the other. However, the Union of Right Forces did attract highly educated, wealthier, urban elites that would also have been attracted to Yabloko.³⁰ The Union of Right Forces also attracted younger, educated, urban voters with their use of modern, media-centric campaign tactics.³¹ Their leaflets regularly printed the ages of their party leaders or the average age of all the candidates on their party list, which was forty-four.³² They strived at every opportunity to project youth and vitality. The Union of Right Forces also focused their advertising to television and away from newspapers, hosted a series of rock concerts, and placed advertisements on billboards rather than the subway, which helped attract younger, highly educated audiences. This was meant to draw richer voters who drove cars to work instead of those who took public transportation.³³

In the 1999 and 2003 elections, the Union of Right Forces built up an increasing profile among liberal voters. In 1999, they fought a very aggressive campaign, as the party sought to bring itself “out of Yabloko’s shadow”.³⁴ The Union of Right Forces felt more secure in their ability to gain seats without gaining the support of the Yabloko faction of liberals because of the appeal of their economic agenda. However, they entered the 1999 election with more image problems than any other party.³⁵ Many of their candidates had been closely involved in the government during the financial collapse of 1998 and were blamed for the economic fallout. Economic liberals across the country

²⁹ White 2006, 87.

³⁰ Colton 2003, 155.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

³² *Ibid.*, 146.

³³ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁴ White 2006, 82.

³⁵ Colton 2003, 140.

were being blamed for the economic situation, and the Union of Right Forces felt the brunt of it as they possessed the most ex-government officials at the time. In response, they launched direct attacks on Yabloko, specifically Yavlinsky.³⁶ The advertising “blitz”, spearheaded by Antonin Chubais, the coordinator of Yeltsin’s reelection campaign in 1996 and a Union of Right Forces leader, was launched in the final stretch of the 1999 election and contributed to their successes.³⁷ These attacks paid off and the Union of Right Forces won over eight percent of the vote and 29 seats in the Duma.

In 2003, however, the parties attempted to unite in a spectacularly failed effort.³⁸ Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces could not come to agreement on who would run on the party lists, who would run for president for the coalition, and how much support they felt towards President Putin.³⁹ As Figure 3 shows, neither party was able to clear the five percent threshold for the party lists. Their presence in the Duma consisted solely of the few single mandate candidates that each party was able to elect. Their internal squabbling led to dismal turnout for both Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces. Neither of the parties was capable of making inroads in the political system as a serious liberal democratic party and they quickly became sidelined.

Figure 3 – Results from 2003 Duma Elections⁴⁰

	Votes, %		Seats		
	List	SMD	List	SMD	Total, %

³⁶ White 2006, 82.

³⁷ Colton 2003, 143.

³⁸ Farizova, 2003.

³⁹ White 2006, 84.

⁴⁰ Results of Previous Elections to the Russian State Duma.”

[http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_elections_93-03.php?](http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_elections_93-03.php?S776173303132=34c64aec4a3e159e0c1e05ace11d02d1)

S776173303132=34c64aec4a3e159e0c1e05ace11d02d1 (accessed April 26, 2009).

Valid Votes	54.8	54.3			
Invalid Votes	0.9	1.1			
Total Votes (% of electorate)	55.7	55.4			
United Russia	37.6	23.2	120	102	49.3
Communist Party	12.6	10.8	40	12	11.6
Liberal Democratic Party	11.5	3.1	36	0	8.0
Motherland	9.0	2.9	29	8	8.2
Yabloko	4.3	2.6	0	4	0.9
Union of Right Forces	4.0	2.9	0	3	0.7
Agrarian Party of Russia	3.6	1.7	0	2	0.4
Others	12.74	2.1	0	0	0
Independents	—	26.8	—	68	15.1
Against all	4.7	12.9	—	3	0.7
Invalid ballots	1.6	2.1			
Total	100	100	225	225	100.0

Causes of Liberal Party Failings

The inability of liberal political parties in Russia to form a coherent coalition or to gain a significant amount of support in 1999 and 2003 had widespread causes. External and internal factors played large roles in keeping similar parties from forming cohesive coalitions. Internal divisions like overwhelming personalities, disagreements over ideology, and differing campaign strategies made it difficult for the parties to come together on their own. External pressures including media bias and increasing public support for conservative and Kremlin support parties made it even more complicated for liberal parties to find common ground.

In the late 1990s, political parties were plentiful in Russian politics. Aside from those who had a consistent base of support, parties sprouted up to support single issues or to get a single person's name in the paper. However, Russia's use of proportional representation meant that each party had to pass a five percent threshold before gaining any seats for their party list.⁴¹ This meant that anyone could form a party, and as long as they paid a fee or had enough signatures, could run names in the party lists. Seven different parties ran in 1999 and eight ran in 2003. Unification would have meant consolidating support bases, but liberal parties were often unable to do that. The unwillingness to form a coalition gave Russians too many options rather than one good option. Liberal opposition parties tried multiples times to create a workable coalition. Shortly after their failures in the 1999 elections, the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko attempted to come to an agreement to work together to achieve better results in future Duma elections.⁴² However, cooperation between the two parties was minimal and they were unable to work together long enough to see the effect of a coalition in national elections.

Personalities were also significant factors in keeping Russia's liberal parties divided. Before the 1999 elections, Yabloko was the only strong liberal democratic party on the political spectrum and was not interested in pursuing an alliance with the Union of Right Forces. The perception of similarities between the leading personalities made success difficult, as Russians saw leaders of both parties as wimps and aloof.⁴³ Ego clashes between the leaders of Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces only served to exacerbate that divide.⁴⁴ Party leaders were often seen as the standard bearers of their

⁴¹ Hancock 2003, 486.

⁴² Lebedev, 2000.

⁴³ Colton 2003, 157.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 141.

parties. In Yabloko's case, Grigory Yavlinsky became almost synonymous with Yabloko's name and policies. This made it difficult for Yabloko to achieve electoral success, because by attacking Yavlinsky, opponents could attack the entire party. Yavlinsky was the Yabloko member most often in the press and he took personal responsibility for the party and its platform. Copies of Yabloko leaflets and informational platforms with Yavlinsky's autographs were sold next to leaflets with President Putin's signature.⁴⁵ Similarly, Boris Nemtsov was the name and face of the Union of Right Forces. The tension between Nemtsov and Yavlinsky was often very public. Nemtsov earned early presidential gratitude for supporting the war in Chechnya early on. However, after the presidential elections in 2000, Yavlinsky basked in the warmth of presidential praise after his negotiations in the Moscow theater siege in 2002, which intensified the rivalry with Nemtsov.⁴⁶

Individual parties also faced problems with internal divisions that made it difficult for them to form unifying coalitions. Yabloko particularly exemplified the divisions that ideological issues could cause. As Grigory Yavlinsky became less popular after the 2007 elections, rising leaders in Yabloko wanted to move away from the ideals and image he had espoused as its leader. In June 2008, Yavlinsky stepped down as party leader and was replaced by Sergei Mitrokhin, who wanted to keep Yabloko moving in the same direction.⁴⁷ However, Maxim Reznik, who ran against Mitrokhin for the party chairmanship, was more willing to cooperate with other democratic groups to form a new Solidarity movement modeled off the Polish group. However, the move has caused a

⁴⁵ Tatarchenko, 2000.

⁴⁶ White 2006, 79.

⁴⁷ Stolyarova, 2008.

deep division within Yabloko, as some members chose participate in the Solidarity movement and others did not.⁴⁸

Non-uniform ideology also made it difficult for liberal parties to find common ground for political coalitions. Although Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces were the closest on ideological grounds and the most likely to unite, they often found the most differences between their platforms. Yabloko sought to separate itself from other economic liberal parties. The party was vehemently free market and identified itself as “democratic opposition”.⁴⁹ In addition, the parties differed greatly on how to approach the economic problem of the oligarchs.⁵⁰ Yabloko wanted to have the oligarchs repay some of the money they had gained through privatization, whereas the Union of Right Forces and other opposition groups favored arresting some of the oligarchs on corruption charges. Yabloko also had a vastly different approach to social reform. Yabloko believed that social reform was necessary before economic liberalization otherwise all economic agenda was useless. Conversely, the Union of Right of Forces was against many of the social reforms suggested by Yabloko, which made it difficult for them to work together on economic policy.

The second war in Chechnya was also a large point of division for the liberal democratic parties in Russia. Yabloko was initially divided in their position on the war.⁵¹ However, as they voiced more opposition against the second war, they became largely out of step with public opinion. Yabloko was very much a pacifist party. They believed that all human life had value, and this led them to oppose both the war in the Chechnya and

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ White 2006, 75.

⁵⁰ Mitrokhin, 2005.

⁵¹ Colton 2003, 151

the draft of Russian men into the army.⁵² This position differed greatly from the opinion of the Union of Right Forces, which strongly supported the action in Chechnya.⁵³ Antonin Chubais, a leader of the Union of Right Forces, and Yavlinsky faced each other in debate before the elections in which Chubais accused Yavlinsky of seeking to appease the Chechens similar to actions taken before World War II.⁵⁴ The large divisions in ideology made it difficult for Yabloko, the Union of Right Forces and other democratic movements to work together, despite their equal dislike of Kremlin policies.

Moreover, differing campaign tactics made it difficult for Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces to form a cohesive coalition. Yabloko's campaign methods often focused on person to person interaction. Yabloko held frequent public demonstrations against Kremlin policies, many of which are broken up by the police.⁵⁵ They then used the publicity from the almost inevitable police presence to highlight the disagreements they have with United Russia and other Kremlin-backed parties. Political analysts in Russia have said the Yabloko is hobbled by its own severe criticism of the Kremlin and United Russia, which is very popular.⁵⁶ In contrast, the Union of Right Forces focused on much more traditional media and campaign tactics, like television advertising. However, many of those advertisements hurt the Union of Right Forces more than they helped. In the 2007 elections, they showed advertisements espousing more leftist rhetoric than was typical for them, and their image was badly damaged by it.⁵⁷ The Union of Right Forces did not focus on the success of the economic measures that the Kremlin had enacted,

⁵² Borshev, V., 1999. *Yabloko za Prava Cheloveka* Moscow: Yabloko, 24

⁵³ Serova, 2003.

⁵⁴ Colton 2003, 151.

⁵⁵ Chernov, 2007.

⁵⁶ Stolyarova, 2007.

⁵⁷ Stolyarova, 2007.

many of which they had campaigned for in earlier in elections.⁵⁸ Despite employing different campaign tactics, neither party has been able to achieve electoral success.

In addition to internal conflicts like disagreements over ideology and personality disputes, external pressures made it difficult for the liberal parties in Russia to achieve success in national elections. The rise of conservative and center-right parties posed significant threats to the success of liberal democratic parties and helped to assemble the one party system that exists around United Russia. After the 1999 elections, the Unity and Fatherland parties merged to become United Russia, the political behemoth which now supports President Medvedev, Prime Minister Putin, and a majority of the Duma deputies. United Russia grew into the largest political party in Russia with the support of the Kremlin and the majority of the Duma. More than two-thirds of the delegates elected to the Duma in 2003 were from the pro-Kremlin party, United Russia.⁵⁹ Opposition parties could do little in the face of such a strong single political mainstream. During the 2000 presidential election, the Central Election Commission kept Grigory Yavlinsky, Yabloko's candidate for president, from participating in televised debates between the candidates.⁶⁰ The commission believed that Yavlinsky would agitate the public inordinately and that he did not possess the correct qualifications to participate in a presidential debate, regardless of his status as a Duma deputy. With such a large majority of the Duma, the Kremlin and regional offices concentrated in party, liberal parties faced an uphill struggle in forming a working opposition. Changes to the electoral procedures in 2005 made it increasingly difficult in the 2007 election cycle for opposition parties to win any Duma seats. Strict requirement for parties to participate in elections and the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Hancock 2003, 481.

⁶⁰ Kamishev, 2000.

elimination the single mandate districts removed smaller parties and independent candidates.⁶¹ While pro-Kremlin parties and government officials said that these changes would strengthen the party system, the changes actually removed many minority voices from representation in the Duma.⁶²

Members of conservative and center-right parties in power or those with strong ties to the Kremlin also actively impeded the political activities of opposition parties. Governors that were closely allied with the Kremlin made it difficult for liberal parties like the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko to achieve victories in single mandate seats.⁶³ Independent observers of Russian elections have also reported stuffing of ballot boxes in favor of United Russia candidates.⁶⁴ Government officials, police especially, are often used to intimidate supporters of opposition groups and keep them from rallying more support. The March of Dissenters, a yearly or bi-yearly parade of opposition groups in many cities across Russia, is usually broken up by police. Many protestors are arrested, beaten and occasionally killed. In December 2008, 100 protestors were detained in the St. Petersburg and Moscow March of Dissenters.⁶⁵ The St. Petersburg march of roughly 600 was accompanied by 3,000 policemen, including 250 OMON, which are forces akin to the SWAT police forces in the United States.⁶⁶ Other protests, including small demonstrations against the draft are routinely banned by the authorities.⁶⁷ Sadly, protests are broken up with great frequency, and opposition groups are not allowed persuade voters on an equal footing with government supported parties.

⁶¹ Stolyarova, 2007.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Colton 2003, 147.

⁶⁴ Abdullaev, 2008

⁶⁵ Danilova, 2007.

⁶⁶ Chernov, 2008.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Liberal democratic parties also face significant problems in the media. Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces, when they are given exposure, are portrayed as laughable and incompetent.⁶⁸ Although they do not help themselves by openly bickering in the media between themselves rather than against conservative parties, media bias is still present.⁶⁹ One television station, Rossiya TV, highlighted a statement by Union of Right Forces leader that showcased divisions between his party and Yabloko.⁷⁰ Although the statement was wrongly reported as reflecting divisions between the two liberal parties rather than divisions between the Union of Right Forces and One Russia, a Kremlin-backed party, the liberal parties were criticized in the media for their inability to unite.

More often than not however, opposition parties were not part of regular media coverage and did not receive equal coverage as compared with United Russia and other pro-Kremlin parties.⁷¹ Pro-Kremlin parties, specifically United Russia, became media darlings and enjoyed the biased media support of government owned television stations and newspapers. During the 2003 elections, television coverage was disproportionately biased in favor of United Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party.⁷² Similarly, in the run-up to the 2007 Duma elections, Channel One, a popular television station in Russia hired a director of election programming with direct links to United Russia.⁷³ Biased media and United Russia used the unequal coverage to question the competency of all the other parties. The government and pro-Kremlin figures found that the media was one of their most effective tools in undercutting opposition parties.⁷⁴ Russians have become

⁶⁸ *Novaya Gazeta*, 2003.

⁶⁹ White 2006, 91.

⁷⁰ Russian TV Highlights Disunity among Democratic Opposition 2005, 1.

⁷¹ Dolgov, 2003.

⁷² *Novaya Gazeta*, 2003.

⁷³ Nowak, 2007.

⁷⁴ Bisov, 2006.

accepting of a media system that does not question the status quo, which means that United Russia is likely to remain the political behemoth it was when it was first formed. There is no expectation of unbiased media comparable to the media in the United States or Western Europe. State control of media has become very widespread and the bias is almost expected as many outlets support Kremlin-backed politicians.

Liberal newspapers that chose not to support Kremlin-backed politicians faced difficulties as well. Printing plants refused to print opposition newspapers as recently as 2008. While censorship is banned by the Russian constitution, many in opposition groups believe that printing plants have been under severe pressure to not print opposition materials. Printing plants refused to print Yabloko newsletters with articles titled, “Peace Enforcement,” which criticized the Russia-Georgia conflict.⁷⁵ Multiple printing plants refused to print opposition newspapers for fear of facing police inquiry. Similarly, *Novaya Gazeta*, a national newspaper with liberal tendencies had to cease publishing in the city of Samara because of action taken by authorities to shut down the newspaper’s offices.⁷⁶ Police seized computers and effectively shut down the Samara branch of the newspaper, forcing the newspaper to ship papers in from Moscow. Pro-Kremlin domination of news media has kept opposition groups from equally persuading voters on the issues.

Effects of the Loss of Liberal Political Voice

The inability of liberal opposition political parties to make headway in the Russian political scene had far-reaching effects for the future of Russian politics as whole. In

⁷⁵ Chernov, Sergey. 2008.

⁷⁶ *Novaya Gazeta*, 2007.

2005, the laws governing the electoral process were changed. These changes have had significant effects on the success of political parties, especially smaller opposition parties. During the 1999 and 2003 elections, the 450 seats in the Russian Duma were divided evenly through seats elected by proportional representation via party lists and seats elected through individual district races. In 2003, more than 100 of the single mandate district seats were won by independent or minor party candidates.⁷⁷ However in 2005, electoral laws changed and single mandate districts were eliminated. Under the new law, only registered parties were able to compete in the elections and seats were determined by party lists. Parties are now able to register by paying a fee or collecting signatures. However, this new system reduced the number of parties that could compete in elections and the choice of representation that Russian citizens had. For any party to win seats in the Duma they must pass a seven percent vote threshold, which had been five percent until 2005. As Figure 4 shows, while the higher threshold kept out smaller parties, it also increased the power that mainstream parties wielded within the Duma. The recent changes in electoral law have also kept opposition groups from simply forming a coalition to break the seven percent barrier for party lists.⁷⁸

Figure 4 – Results from 2007 Duma Elections⁷⁹

	Votes, %	Seats	
		Seats	%

⁷⁷ Results of Previous Elections to the Russian State Duma.”
http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_elections_93-03.php?S776173303132=34c64aec4a3e159e0c1e05ace11d02d1 (accessed April 26, 2009).

⁷⁸ Results of Previous Elections to the Russian State Duma.”
http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_elections_93-03.php?S776173303132=34c64aec4a3e159e0c1e05ace11d02d1 (accessed April 26, 2009).

⁷⁹ Final Result of the Duma Election, 2 December 2007.”
http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_electoral_system.php (accessed April 27, 2009).

Valid Votes	63.01		
Invalid Votes	.70		
Total Votes (% of electorate)	63.71		
United Russia	64.30	315	70.0
Communist	11.57	57	12.7
Liberal Democratic Party	8.14	40	8.9
Fair Russia	7.74	38	8.4
Agrarian	2.30	0	--
Yabloko	1.59	0	--
Civic Strength	1.05	0	--
Union of Right Forces	.96	0	--
Others	1.24	0	--
Total	100	450	100

In October of 2008, the Union of Right Forces disbanded and merged with the remnants of two political parties: the Democratic Party of Russia and Civil Force, both phantom liberal parties. After the 1995 elections, the Democratic Party of Russia and Civil Force both existed more on paper than in actuality. The dissolution and combination of the political parties created Just Cause, a pro-Kremlin liberal group.⁸⁰ The party's success depends entirely on the support that it receives from the Kremlin, who are interested in created a "loyal liberal" political party to take the place of the Union of Right Force in the Duma.⁸¹ However, the dissolution of the Union of Right Forces and the Democratic Party of Russia leaves Russia with a serious lack of true opposition parties and an increasing amount of parties who support the policies of United Russia and Vladimir Putin.

⁸⁰ "Russia: Party Realignment Favour Kremlin Allies." *OxResearch*. 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

The Democratic Party of Russia and the Union of Right Forces were not the only political parties to face increasing pressure from the changing political situation in Russia. With the new electoral laws enacted in 2005, a “political purge” of smaller opposition parties was possible and United Russia was able to shore up more support in the 2007 elections.⁸² The results would have been vastly different under the electoral laws from previous elections.⁸³ The change in laws made it possible for United Russia and their smaller supporting parties to achieve overwhelming majority of the seats in the Duma in the 2007 elections. The laws forced smaller parties to re-register as organizations or banned them from participating in politics all together. Parties need 50,000 signatures to register for the party lists and 200,000 to contest an election, an impossible feat for many of the smaller parties.⁸⁴ Roughly seventeen opposition parties were forced out of the 2007 Duma elections because of the new law. Election transparency was also greatly affected, as only party monitors were allowed to oversee the elections and independent observers were allowed only restricted access.⁸⁵ This amounted to an inability for democratic parties to effectively challenge United Russia and their supporters in the Duma elections.

After a decade of increasing losses, parties likes Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces were effectively shoved out of the mainstream political process. With neither party winning seats in the Duma, the pro-market, pro-Western voice is entirely gone from the Duma. Any influence that they continue to wield is from the venue of private sector think tanks and non-governmental organizations.⁸⁶ Yabloko has been able to do this effectively through the use of youth groups, marches, protests, and press conferences.

⁸² Stolyarova, 2007.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Buckley, 2007.

⁸⁵ Stolyarova, 2007.

⁸⁶ Russia: Putin Tightens His Grip on Parliament. OxResearch, 1.

Youth groups have been instrumental in maintaining Yabloko's presence as a political force. Youth Yabloko is one of the oldest youth movements in Russia and has been extraordinarily successful in sustaining Yabloko's activism outside of the mainstream political arena.⁸⁷ While the pressure to unite should have forced a coalition after the 2003 elections, they were unable come together for the 2007 elections, and both parties failed once again to gain any seats in the Duma.

Despite the emergence of faux democracy, Russians are less likely to challenge the concept of single party control in the government. There is little motivation for Russians to form or support opposition parties. Opinion polls show high approval ratings of President Medvedev and even higher approval ratings of Prime Minister Putin.⁸⁸ Stability in the economy and political system led very few Russians to question the status quo and lack of true opposition within the power structure. Russians have consistently voted for the party that promised them the most stability over the past ten years, which has been United Russia and other Kremlin-backed parties as liberal democratic parties have been unable to present new ideas through mainstream media.⁸⁹ Russians have been increasingly drawn to apolitical parties, like United Russia and other Kremlin supported parties.⁹⁰ As Figure 4 shows, those parties gained popularity in recent elections.

Those Russians who are willing to support opposition parties often find themselves putting their jobs or safety in danger in exchange for their political views. During the regional elections in 2009, police went to the homes of those who were believed to have supported opposition groups to ask them to verify their names on

⁸⁷ Rossiyskaya Gazeta 2005.

⁸⁸ Cullison, Alan and Gregory L. White, 2008.

⁸⁹ Lukin, 2004.

⁹⁰ Kamishev, 1999.

petitions allowing oppositions to participate in the elections.⁹¹ The police presence intimidated many Russians into denying their names and having their actual signatures removed as false. While opposition politics have before achieved success during times of economic downturn and national insecurity, they have done so by highlighting the flaws in the current government. However, rising standards of living, stability in the economy until recent months and access to health care and education have kept Russians from openly challenging the current lack of opposition politics.

The lack of liberal opposition parties on mass media outlets has also made it difficult for liberal groups to gain significant support. Government control of many television stations and newspapers has restricted access that Russians have to information about opposition parties. State-owned media outlets, like the television station RTV, initially aired sympathetic reports on opposition parties, especially on the Union of Right Forces during its rise in 1999.⁹² At the time, the president and anchorman of the station were stalwart liberals. NTV, before it was taken over by the Russian government, portrayed Yabloko respectfully.⁹³ However, as leadership at media outlets has changed so has portrayal of opposition parties. Opposition groups like Yabloko are regularly portrayed as clowns and are not taken seriously by the Russian public. Opposition leaders are regularly banned from appearing on national, state-run media outlets.⁹⁴ In the 2003 elections, opposition parties were given virtually no coverage on mainstream television stations. Journalists who disagreed with the United Russia platform were not allowed to air their stories.⁹⁵ Russians are more likely to vote for the parties that they are

⁹¹ Chernov, 2009.

⁹² Colton 2003, 144.

⁹³ Ibid., 149.

⁹⁴ Cullison, Alan and Gregory L. White, 2008.

⁹⁵ Kovalyev, 2003.

familiar with and often that is United Russia or its allies. The media shows United Russia as the party that will maintain stability in Russia, which has become more valued than democracy.

The Future of Russian Politics

The future of liberal Russian opposition politics is very dismal. At the moment, only Yabloko remains as an independent liberal party. The Union of Right Forces, once viewed as the future of Russian liberal politics, ceased to exist. The party that replaced it, Just Cause, is a pro-Kremlin liberal party that does not vote in opposition of United Russia. United Russia's stranglehold on Russian politics has gone virtually unchallenged with the help of the strict requirements that the party lists and vote thresholds place on smaller parties. The presidential term limits were extended from four years to six with very little contention from liberal parties because of a lack of liberal representation in the Duma. Ironically, opinion polls place United Russia's popularity so high, that vote thresholds and faux support parties are not needed for United Russia's candidates to succeed in elections.⁹⁶

Despite the overwhelming popularity of United Russia and its supporting parties, other liberal opposition parties have not stopped attempting to form cohesive coalitions. In the wake of the dismal results of the 2007 Duma elections, liberal activists in Russia began restructuring and planning ways to approach upcoming elections. In late 2008, leaders from various liberal opposition groups met in St. Petersburg to discuss the possibility of forming a new group that could act as viable opposition in Duma

⁹⁶ Buckley, 2007.

elections.⁹⁷ The new movement that was formed, Solidarity, is a combination of Yabloko and Garry Kasparov's Other Russia movement. A current leader in Yabloko, Maxim Reznik, endorsed the new group as a way to combine democratic forces, despite the many difficulties the movement faces from the authorities and Kremlin supporters. The new movement is an unwelcome development for many who hoped to see the final death of the liberal opposition movement in the 2007 elections with the failures of the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko. However, current leaders of Yabloko doubt the need and effectiveness that the Solidarity movement can have in Russia, which may only lead to continued divisions within liberal opposition groups.

However as Russian politics evolves, there are two bright shining lights for the future of the Russian opposition movement. Despite the booming economy going into the 2003 elections, candidates running with the support of then President Putin or his party found it difficult to use the economy as a talking point. Many Russians were still having trouble making ends meet, a point which opposition parties capitalized on. However, the only party that able to take advantage of on the economic divide was the Communist party.⁹⁸ Many pro-market parties, like Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces, were unable to emphasize the level of poverty for average citizens, so it remains to be seen if they will be able to do so during the current economic downturn. Currently, as the world economy shudders to a halt, the Russian economy is being hit harder than many others. Russian loyalty to Prime Minister Putin and United Russia has been connected to the stability and growth of the Russian economy. As the ruble crashes, so has the popularity of President Medvedev. It is no longer clear whether he can maintain the same level of

⁹⁷ Chernov, 2008.

⁹⁸ White 2003.

economic stability that Putin kept in place as president. The first indicator of the effect of economic crisis came in the regional elections on March 1st of this year. In those elections, United Russia did much worse than expected. They lost about ten percent of their voter base, and lost significantly wherever competition existed.⁹⁹ After years of Soviet deprivation, Russians place an extraordinarily high value on economic stability and look to the ruling party to keep the standard of living going up.

Loyal opposition groups, like Just Cause, are beginning to find that more voters may be attracted by shedding their Kremlin shadow.¹⁰⁰ As opposition groups cease to be loyal pawns of the Kremlin, they may find that the current discontent is to their benefit. The Kremlin, too, will have to adjust to a real liberalization of the political process, aside from the decorative process that currently exists. As a Carnegie Moscow Center scholar in residence puts it, “If the Kremlin doesn’t take concrete steps in that direction by the next elections, the growing pressure from dissatisfied voters with no place to vent their anger will simply blow the lid right off the kettle.”¹⁰¹ With the failing economy, United Russia cannot deliver on its economic promises, and opposition groups, especially those tailored to social agendas like Yabloko, are becoming more popular.

The second hope for the opposition movement in Russia is the future of oil. Much of Russia’s economy is based on the success of their oil and natural gas rich reserves. Figure 5 shows the fluctuation in oil prices over the past twenty years. Two of the significant dips in Russia’s economy over the past ten years have corresponded with serious drops in oil prices. In 1998 and more dramatically in 2008, Russia economic troubles can be easily seen in the severe drop in oil prices. Currently, the combination of

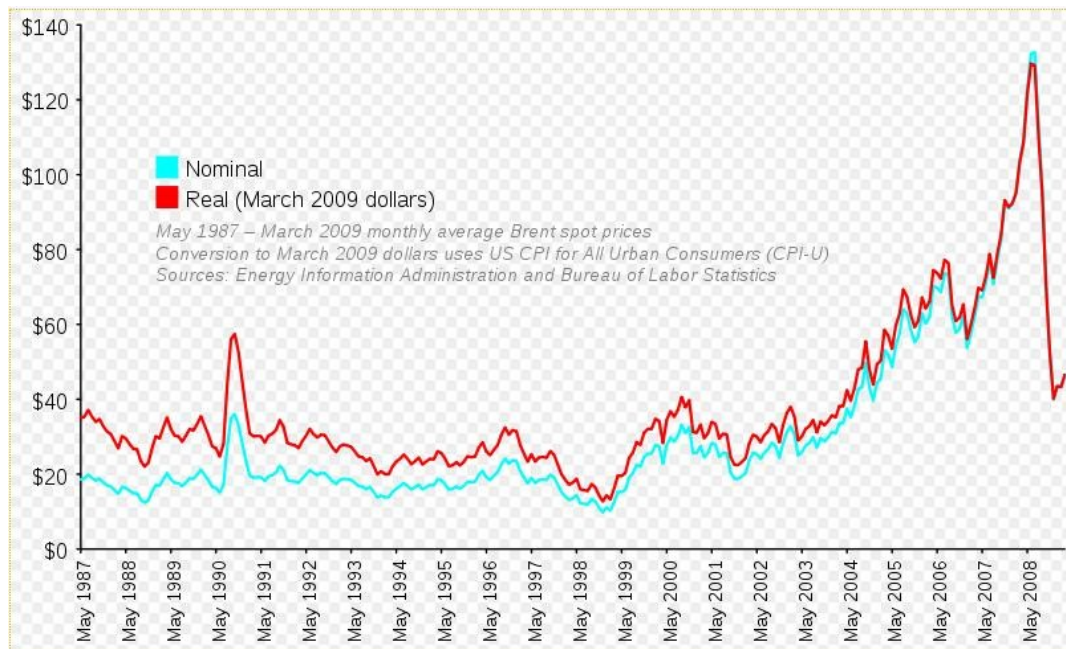
⁹⁹ Petrov, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Petrov, 2009.

a faltering economy, lower gas and oil prices, and a western public looking for ways to avoid oil and natural gas use spell problems for the Russian economy. Russia's economy is highly unspecialized and very dependent on the success of the oil market. Even without a faltering economy, Russia is going to run out of oil, and the result will be catastrophic if Russians do not diversify their economy. United Russia, with the support of the oil barons, has maintained and increased Russia's economic and political stability with regard for the limited time that it provides for the Russian economy. However, the promises of status quo economic stability are currently enough to keep most of the population from voting for liberal opposition groups.

Figure 5 – Oil Prices from 1987-2008¹⁰²



¹⁰² Energy Information Administration 2009.

Like most countries, Russian politics are increasingly dependent on economics. However, liberal opposition parties have been sidelined in Russian politics because of infighting and an inability to successfully fight the external obstacles they face. While many of the liberal leaders have joined the ranks of the pro-Kremlin parties, there is still room in Russian politics for a true opposition party. Russians deserve to have a legitimate choice between differing ideas, ideologies and points of view when they go to the polls in elections, but they do not want another revolution. The formation of a one party system does not give Russians a valid option in reflecting their political views. A constant opposition to United Russia may not be popular, and may not ever supersede United Russia as the majority party, but it will present Russians with different views on how best to move forward and help to move Russia towards a healthy democracy.

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