
Political Opposition in Russia: A Dying Species?

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Abstract: A specialist on Russian politics examines the evolution of political opposition in Russia from 1989 to 2005. The article specifies and employs a framework that focuses on the structure of the political elite and the political opportunity structure that it provides to oppositional forces. The framework is tested in brief case studies of three oppositional forces: communists, liberals, and democrats. Prospects for the future of political opposition in Russia are discussed.

In the classic 1966 volume *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* (Dahl, 1966a), the chapter on France in the early years of Fifth Republic was entitled "France: Nothing but Opposition" (Grosser, 1966). A similar chapter about Russia in the mid-2000s would have to be called "Russia: Anything but Opposition." In fact, after Vladimir Putin's first term in office and the 2003–2004 parliamentary and presidential elections, all political actors who claimed to form an "opposition" were about to disappear or, at least, seriously lose their influence. As one observer put it: "There is no opposition today in Russia's political system—neither system opposition, which is oriented toward a shift of a country's rules, nor anti-system opposition, which is oriented toward changing the overall rules of the game" (Vorozheykina, 2003, p. 57). According to surveys done by the Levada Center, Russia's best-known opinion pollsters, the number of Russians who believed that political opposition exists in the country declined from 53 percent in mid-2002 to 42 percent in mid-2004. Simultaneously, the number of Russians who believed that political opposition is needed dramatically increased (Nuzhna li, 2004).

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Yet the sharp difference between the political oppositions in two post-crisis political regimes under charismatic leadership (De Gaulle's France and Putin's Russia) is interesting in itself. For the current analysis, however, it may be considered rather as a point of departure for another question: why is the role of the political opposition in Russia in the mid-2000s so drastically diminished in comparison with the previous 10–15 years? In the 1990s, political opposition (first anti-communist, and later communist) had a decisive impact on the supply and, to some extent, on the demand on emerging Russia's political market. By contrast, in the 2000s, the former political oppositions had nearly disappeared without successors.

The major explanations put forward by observers for the decline of political opposition in Russia are, at minimum, insufficient. On the "supply" side of the political market, many analysts focus unconvincingly on *ad hoc* factors such as the lack of coalitions between liberal political parties (notably Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces), the crucial role of some events, such as the "Yukos affair," or the personalities of political leaders. On the "demand" side of the political market, sociological determinism is overwhelming. Scholars of survey research explain the failure of the opposition by referring to the high popularity of Vladimir Putin and the improvement of economic conditions in the country (VTsIOM-A, 2004). Although these factors are important, they do not lead *per se* to the extinction of political opposition, as the French experience suggests. Some culturally oriented scholars are deeply concerned about the negative influence that embedded non-democratic features (such as statism and anarchism) in Russian political culture exert on the construction of effective democratic institutions, including political opposition (Vaynshteyn, 1998, p. 49–54). But this approach, most popular among Russian observers, is poorly grounded empirically, since survey data show a very different picture (Colton and McFaul, 2002).

Sociological determinism is also poorly grounded theoretically, being implicitly based on the assumption that the political regime—or at least the party system (in the context of electoral democracy)—largely reflects the distribution of societal preferences. On the contrary, research has shown that both political regimes and party systems are often autonomous of popular values and attitudes, and display their own logic of political development (Sartori, 1969). Moreover, during the early stages of the development of political parties, the supply side of the political market decisively affects the demand side, not vice versa (see Rokkan, 1977). In other words, political actors and political institutions, or humanly devised "rules of the game," shape the direction of mass preferences and determine the dynamics of the political regime and of oppositions. This does not, of course, mean that mass preferences do not matter at all, but, realistically, the masses matter in politics only as much and for as long as political elites permit (or do not permit) them to do so.

Accordingly, we should aim to explain opposition as a political phenomenon through the prism of political factors, rather than by concentrating on general societal processes. This political science approach has

been successfully applied to the analysis of some post-Soviet political transformations (Barany and Moser, 2001; McFaul, 2001; Jones Luong, 2002; Golosov, 2004), and will be employed in this article. I first present a theoretical framework for analyzing political opposition in Russia and elsewhere. Then I focus on the impact that the structure of the political elite and political institutions had on the evolution of political opposition in Russia from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s. On the basis of this, I analyze three cases of the most visible political parties that claimed to represent the political opposition in Russia: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Union of Right Forces, and Yabloko. Finally, tentative conclusions on the prospects for political opposition in Russia will be considered.

POLITICAL OPPOSITION: A CONCEPTUAL MAP

The study of political opposition is by no means a popular field in contemporary political science. Most recent publications are heavily descriptive (see, for example, *Government and Opposition*, 1997; Helms, 2004), and the number of theoretical monographs is very limited (Dahl, 1966a, 1973; Kolinsky, 1987a). Review articles published in the 1980s (Pulzer, 1987) and 1990s (Blondel, 1997) demonstrated the lack of progress in research in this area. As Eva Kolinsky rightly points out, the fact that political opposition remains neglected among scholars is the other side of the coin of the popularity of the study of government, in the same way that common interest in the losing team in the final of a sporting event suffers because of interest in the winning team (Kolinsky, 1987b, p. 1).

Some established theoretical schemes, however, are not always useful analytical tools. Most empirical typologies either are *ad hoc* categories based on single case studies (Kirchheimer, 1957) or are overloaded by different dimensions (Dahl, 1966b, 1966c), so that their explanatory potential for comparative studies is insufficient.² Therefore, the analysis of political opposition in Russia as well as in other "hybrid" regimes (Diamond, 2002) requires not only a new typology, but a more general framework—or, so to speak, a conceptual map. This map should be useful not only for making distinctions among the various types of political opposition, but also for understanding their political dynamics in a post-communist regime.

The construction of such a conceptual map is based on two major dimensions of political opposition: their ends and their means, as Dahl (1966b, pp. 341–347) and Smith (1987, pp. 59–63) rightly suggest. The various ends or goals of the opposition might be represented in the form of a continuum. Those parties, politicians, cliques, and clans that are not present in the government, but would like to join it without any significant changes in the political regime and/or of major policies, are located at its minimalist pole. As Linz (1973, pp. 191, 192) noted in his study of opposi-

²For a similar critique, see Blondel (1997).

tion in Spain under Franco, these actors could be regarded as a “semi-opposition”; simultaneously, they play the role of “quasi-opposition.”³ At the other extreme, political actors whose goals require total control over power resources, usually to effect radical change of the political regime, are located at the maximalist pole of this continuum. Those actors, according to Kirchheimer (1957), are the “principal” opposition. Some other forms of opposition, such as “non-structural” opposition, which is oriented toward a change of major policies (Dahl, 1966b, p. 342) as well as “structural” opposition, which is oriented toward a change of political regime but accommodates power-sharing, could be located at intermediate points on this continuum.

Classification of the means of political opposition is a more difficult task. We could rely upon Linz’s distinction among loyal, semi-loyal, and disloyal oppositions (Linz, 1978, pp. 27–38), although Linz underlines the ambiguity of this typology and the residual nature of the category of “semi-loyalty.” Two major criteria of the loyalty of political opposition, according to Linz, are acceptance of legal means for political struggle and rejection of political violence (p. 29), while the use of purely illegal or violent means (or the threat thereof) is typical of disloyal opposition. With some reservations, these criteria might be used for an analysis of opposition in a broader context. Thus, various political oppositions under different types of political regimes (whether democratic or not) could be located on a two-dimensional conceptual map of ends and means (see Figure 1).

Having specified types of political oppositions, let us now address factors involved in the formation and transformation of political oppositions. The key role is played by the characteristics of the political regimes to which these oppositions must relate, such as their competitiveness and the nature of their political institutions. The competitiveness of a political regime is related to the structure of the political elite. An “elite” is broadly understood here as a set of actors who could affect politically meaningful decisions (Burton, Gunther, and Higley, 1992, p. 10). The “elite structure” is defined by the levels of elite integration (the capacity of various elite segments to cooperate with each other) and elite differentiation (functional and organizational diversity of various elite segments and their relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state and *vis-à-vis* each other) (Higley, Bayulgen, and George, 2003, p. 12). On this basis, Higley et al. (2003, pp. 13–14) produced the following typology of elite structures: (1) *ideocratic elite* (high integration, low differentiation); (2) *divided elite* (low integration, low differentiation); (3) *fragmented elite* (low integration, high differentiation); (4) *consensual elite* (high integration, high differentiation). The first type of elite structure is associated with stable non-democratic regimes, while the last is associated with stable democracies.

³Some other scholars of opposition in non-democratic regimes used similar terms, such as “factional” opposition (Barghoorn, 1973).

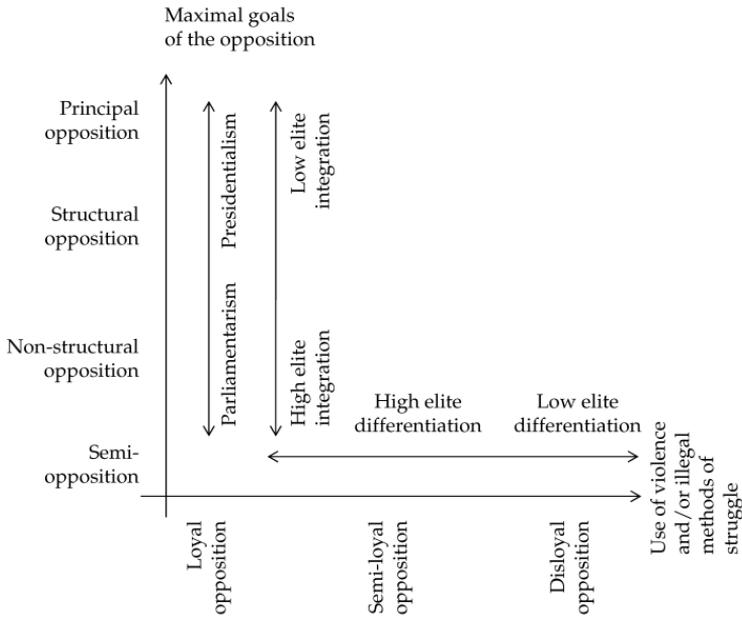


Fig. 1. Conceptual map of political opposition.

We can now relate these types of elite structure to the types of political opposition they spawn. High elite integration diminishes the potential for principal opposition and makes more likely a cooperative bargaining strategy between the opposition and the government (Dahl, 1966b, pp. 344–345), while low elite integration provides more opportunities and incentives for a principal opposition to form. At the same time, low elite differentiation produces no room for loyal political opposition, while high differentiation is in most cases unlikely to breed disloyalty of opposition. There is also the possible hyper-fragmentation of elites, or “polarized pluralism” (Sartori, 1976), when loyal political opposition, under certain conditions of political crisis, might be replaced by semi-loyal opposition, thus possibly undermining the basis of the political regime (Linz, 1978). The relationship between the various types of elite structure and the key features of political opposition is presented in Table 1.

As for the effects of *political institutions* on the opposition, the most important distinction is between parliamentary and presidential systems (Shugart and Carey, 1992), which appears to be decisive for the emergence of various types of political opposition. Presidential and presidential-parliamentary systems are commonly criticized for their basic “winner takes all” principle (Linz, 1990), so it is no surprise that they are likely to produce a principal opposition. On the other hand, under parliamentary and/or premier-presidential systems, political oppositions are offered more incentives for bargaining on the basis of coalition-building and/or

Table 1. Types of Elite Structure, Political Regimes, and Oppositions

| Elite structure | Elite integration | Elite differentiation | Political regime | Predominant opposition |
|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Ideocratic | High | Low | Stable non-democratic | No opposition or disloyal opposition |
| Divided | Low | Low | Unstable non-democratic | Principal disloyal opposition |
| Fragmented | Low | High | Unstable democratic | Principal loyal or semi-loyal opposition |
| Consensual | High | High | Stable democratic | Loyal structural or non-structural opposition |

Source: Author's reconstruction based on Higley et al. (2003, p. 15).

corporatism (Dahl, 1966b, pp. 344–345). In this connection, Kirchheimer (1957, 1966) noted the “vanishing” of opposition. In the same way, proportional-representation (as opposed to majoritarian) electoral systems, as well as decentralization and federalism (rather than unitarism and hypercentralization), also diminish the likelihood of a principal opposition forming. Thus, we might predict that the type and evolution of elite structures and political institutions determine the evolution of political oppositions.

OPPOSITION DYNAMICS IN RUSSIA, 1989–2004

The evolution of political opposition in Russia can be interpreted through the prism of the conceptual map outlined above. During *perestroika*, increasing elite differentiation (Lane and Ross, 1999) as well as the installation of partially free, semi-competitive elections and the emergence of parliamentarianism promoted the formation of a loyal structural opposition in the form of a democratic movement (Fish, 1995; Urban, 1997), along with the emergence of some left-wing and nationalist proto-parties (Golosov, 1999). But the potential of the opposition plummeted after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Soviet ideocratic elite was replaced by a divided elite, exemplified by the conflict between President Boris Yel'tsin and the Supreme Soviet (Shevtsova, 1999, pp. 31–78; McFaul, 2001, pp. 121–204). The over-concentration of presidential power relative to the legislature logically resulted in zero-sum conflict. Under these circumstances, the disloyal principal opposition that dominated before October 1993 lost heavily. The outcome of this conflict between the government and the opposition was fixed in the 1993 Constitution.

Subsequent events have had a contradictory impact on the development of political opposition in Russia. On the one hand, the broad and

ill-defined powers of the executive within the "super-presidential" system (Huskey, 1999; Fish, 2000) led to winner-take-all conflicts and a strengthening of principal opposition, while the ability of other political institutions to mitigate conflict was negligible (Golosov, 1999; Moser, 2001). On the other hand, a deep economic recession and multiple political crises (including the Chechen wars) contributed to fragmentation of the elite structure (Higley, Bayulgen, and George, 2003, pp. 20–23). To a large degree, elite fragmentation in the 1990s was a by-product of the fragmentation of the Russian state and the decline of its capacity because of "state capture" by economic interest groups (Hellman, 1998) and spontaneous decentralization (Stoner-Weiss, 1999). Although political opposition of different colors flourished in Russia during 1993–2000 (resembling to some extent the notion of "nothing but opposition"), the oppositional strategies remained unsuccessful (Gel'man, 1999, pp. 151–159).

Segments of the opposition were unable to find a solution of the "classical problem of any opposition ... how much to oppose and by what means. If the opposition does not oppose—does not present alternatives and struggle energetically for them—then the representative powers of political institutions—their capacity to mobilize and incorporate—is weak.... But if the opposition does oppose vigorously, democracy may be threatened" (Przeworski, 1991, p. 89). The problem affects not only the ideological and organizational development of opposition parties, but also their political strategies. According to the well-known typology of reactions to crises elaborated by Albert O. Hirschman, the choice of opposition strategies lies between "exit," "voice," and "loyalty" (Hirschman, 1970), represented, respectively, in the form of doing "petty things," (i.e., oppositional activities without serious challenge to the status quo), mass mobilization (mainly electoral), and bargaining with the ruling group and consequent cooptation ("implementation into power") (Gel'man, 1999). Although Russian opposition parties tried to use all these strategies, none of them brought about significant achievements. For a principal opposition, the only way to attain their goals was to win presidential elections. Neither legislative dominance (in the case of KPRF in the State Duma in 1996–99) nor influence on the composition and policy of the government (in the case of Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov's cabinet in 1998–99) helped to achieve the opposition's ends. As for the semi-opposition, which tried to serve as a junior partner of the ruling group, it lost mass support in conditions of political and economic crisis. In fact, while the potential of the disloyal opposition was fairly limited, the impact on the political regime of the loyal principal opposition (which pursued either "exit" or "voice"), not to mention the semi-opposition, was also negligible.

Putin's presidency changed the structure of the elite dramatically, which had a decisive impact on political opposition in Russia. Simultaneously, elite integration sharply increased and elite differentiation became very limited as a result of the "imposed consensus" of elites (Gel'man, 2003). Thanks to these developments, the new ruling group around Putin overwhelmingly dominated Russia's political scene, and all remaining elite

Table 2. The Dynamics of Political Opposition in Russia, 1989–2004

| Period | Elite structure | Political institutions | Predominant opposition |
|--------------------|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1989–1991 | Breakdown of ideocratic elite; rise of elite differentiation | Emergence of parliamentarism | Loyal structural opposition |
| 1991–1993 | Divided elite (low integration, low differentiation) | Presidential-parliamentary conflict | Disloyal principal opposition |
| 1993–1999/ 2000 | Fragmented elite, hyper-differentiation | Super-presidential system | Loyal principal opposition |
| 2000–? | Re-emergence of ideocratic elite, rise of elite integration, and decline of elite differentiation | Super-presidential system | Extinction of principal opposition and semi-opposition |

sections (parliamentary factions, political parties, media, business, and regional leaders) had to agree on their subordinated role or lost their elite status as such. This loss of autonomy and/or resources by segments of the elite led to a diminution of political opportunities for the opposition. Previous opposition strategies resulted in heavy losses. For the principal opposition, the “exit” strategy produced marginalization and a lack of opposition influence, while opportunities for “voice” were limited because of the scarce resource base and the threat of use of force from the ruling group. For the semi-opposition, cooptation into the regime resulted in the loss of its distinctive identity *vis-à-vis* the ruling group. Thus, the “imposed consensus” of Russia’s elites left the opposition with no choice: it became co-opted or damaged, located at the periphery of the political arena, and lost its role as a political actor. The massive defeat of all opposition parties in the 2003 Duma elections and the lack of meaningful alternatives to Putin in the 2004 presidential elections serve as the most dramatic examples of these trends. The dynamics of change sketched above are displayed in Table 2.

We will now apply this general logic of the rise and decline of political opposition in Russia to the evolution of opposition parties, which differ in their genesis, ideology, and organizational development. Although the most popular typology of Russian political parties identifies liberals, left-wing, nationalist parties, and the “party of power” (Sheynis, 2000), I will add one further distinction. According to some classifications of ideologies in Russia (Radayev, 1998, pp. 276–306), liberals—free-marketers who consider democracy just one of several possible means—should be separated from democrats—supporters of democratization who consider the market economy to be important but not the only means of economic coordination. Liberals and democrats tend to be close in their policy positions, but their ends and means during the process of regime change in Russia were very

different. The liberal trend in Russian politics in the 1990s and 2000s was represented by Russia's Choice, Democratic Choice of Russia, and the Union of Right Forces, while Yabloko was a prime example of the democratic trend. Along with the KPRF, these parties claimed to be the major opposition actors in Russian politics. I will therefore focus on the communists, liberals, and democrats, examining the evolution of their oppositional roles and the reasons they recently lost their influence and are about to disappear from the country's political scene.

THE KPRF: BETWEEN PRINCIPAL OPPOSITION AND SEMI-OPPOSITION

The organizational and ideological development of the KPRF is widely described in the literature (Urban and Solovei, 1997; Sakwa, 1998; Golosov, 1999; Flikke, 1999; March, 2002). Its trajectory on our conceptual map of opposition looks like a zigzag from disloyal opposition (during the period when it was banned in 1991–92), through ambivalent semi-loyalty during the violent conflict of September–October 1993, then, after December 1993, to loyal opposition within the framework of parliamentary and electoral politics,⁴ and to principal opposition since 2000.

The KPRF claimed a monopoly on representation of left-wing and nationalist voters, so the party's policy positions proved to be inconsistent. The party needed to maximize mobilization of its supporters in order to take control of powerful positions as well as to preserve both its dominant position on the political market and the party's own organizational unity. Hence, the KPRF presented itself as a "real" opposition to the power of non-communist incumbents. But the communists proved unable to secure the main prize: victory in the 1996 presidential elections was impossible, owing to tough resistance from Yeltsin's clique (including the threat of a *coup d'état*) but also because of the radicalism of the KPRF, which was unacceptable to many voters (McFaul, 2001, pp. 289–304). For these and other reasons, after the 1996 presidential elections the KPRF leaders announced a change of approach toward greater accommodation of the ruling group. The communists delegated representatives to the government and regional administrations, were deeply involved in bargaining with the ruling group on both political and policy issues (Shevtsova, 1999), and tried to find a balance between the poles of principal opposition and semi-opposition (March, 2002, p. 232–240). But this was not a conscious attempt to combine "voice" and "loyalty" as a means of coming to power. Rather, the KPRF refused to choose between loyal and disloyal opposition, in hopes of preserving the status quo within the party and its position on the political market. In terms suggested by Hirschman's followers, by default the communists adopted a strategy of "neglect" (Dowding, John,

⁴Although, on the level of the KPRF's political rhetoric, some elements of semi-loyalty remained visible.

Mergopius, and van Vugt, 2000, pp. 480–481), and systematically rejected taking any meaningful decisions. This was the case with their behavior during the failed no-confidence vote in then-Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's government in 1997, the legislative approval of Sergey Kiriyenko as prime minister in 1998, and the failed attempt at impeaching the president in 1999.⁵ The KPRF campaign during the 1999 parliamentary elections was based on the same lack of strategy, or on a strategy of simply securing the status quo (Chernyakhovskiy, 2000).

In tactical terms, the "neglect" strategy brought some gains to the KPRF, but the communists lost strategically. Although the share of the KPRF votes in 1999 slightly increased (24.3 percent against 22.2 percent in the 1995 elections), the communists could not consolidate their dominant status in the legislature. After that, the KPRF attempted to act as a junior partner of the ruling group, reaching an agreement with the Kremlin-created Unity faction about sharing chairmanships of parliamentary committees and retaining the position of State Duma chairman. But the potential of the opposition had been weakened and bargaining gains were merely symbolic. In fact, the very existence of a non-communist majority in the legislature undermined the position of the KPRF (Sheynis, 2000, p. 47; Remington, 2003, pp. 46–47). The communists could not shape major parliamentary decisions, so they soon lost the role of "veto group" (Sheynis, 2000, p. 49) and turned into a "cosmetic" opposition (March, 2002, pp. 240–244). And when the KPRF tried to return to a "voice" strategy and actively opposed some Kremlin-induced bills, it was effectively punished. In April 2002, United Russia—the "party of power"—and its supporters revised the distribution of committee chairmanships in the legislature, and pushed the KPRF out of those positions. Some communist leaders, including State Duma Chairman Gennadiy Selyeznev, chose loyalty to the ruling group and were expelled from the party's ranks (Remington, 2003, pp. 50–52). The communists also lost some of their potential for electoral mobilization. Their success in regional gubernatorial (Turovskiy, 2002) and legislative (Golosov, 2004) elections after 2000 was more modest.

The grand failure of the KPRF in the 2003–2004 national elections was a logical extension of this process. The communist opposition was a major Kremlin target during the parliamentary election campaign, including large-scale negative coverage on television, Kremlin pressure on pro-communist governors and businessmen, and dilution of the communist electorate through the nomination of alternative party lists—of which the Motherland list, which garnered 9 percent of the votes, was the most effective.

But even these conditions did not change the KPRF "neglect" strategy: its policy positions and organization remained nearly the same. After the December 2003 elections, when the KPRF got only 12.6 percent of the votes and 52 seats, the communists finally lost their leading role in the

⁵In the latter case, even some KPRF deputies did not vote for Yel'tsin's impeachment.

opposition. Subsequent events, such as schism within the party ranks, exclusion from the KPRF of the communists' major financial sponsor, Gennadiy Semigin, and establishment of an alternative All-Russian Communist Party of the Future (VKPB), led by Ivanovo *Oblast'* Governor Vladimir Tikhonov, in fact only preserved the status quo in terms of the KPRF's policy positions, structure, organization, and strategy. Although local branches of the KPRF in some provinces are still the only "civil society substitute" (Kurilla, 2002), the communists lost their prospects for a "voice" strategy. Moreover, the Kremlin's drive for total exclusion of the KPRF from the electoral arena could lead the communists to an "exit" strategy, and, therefore, to political marginalization.

It is hard to say why the communist strategy of "neglect" in 1996–99 was so ineffective. In all probability, the KPRF leaders wrongly assumed that against a backdrop of permanent political and economic crises, they could come to power almost by default. Also, some rumors about a possible coalition between the communists and the ruling group—especially in the wake of their informal bargaining with the leaders of Fatherland–All Russia before the 1999 parliamentary elections—were not groundless. But in general, political institutions and elite structure limited the political opportunity structure for the KPRF. Because of the impossibility of a communist victory in presidential elections, political institutions provided a strong incentive for the KPRF's movement toward semi-opposition (McFaul, 2001, pp. 360–362). But the change in elite structure after 2000 toward a new "ideocratic" elite has led the KPRF toward principal opposition without any significant chances of success.

LIBERALS: SEMI-OPPOSITION

Among Russian liberals—proponents of the free market and minimalist state—the key ideological and organizational positions were overwhelmingly occupied by a group of economists led by Anatoliy Chubais (Wedel, 1998, pp. 121–158). They proposed a large-scale program of authoritarian market reforms to Gorbachev as early as 1990 (Zhestkim kursom, 1990). When, in late 1991, the liberals were promoted to leading posts in the Yel'tsin government, their program lost all relevance because of the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the liberals consistently pursued these ideas and vigorously supported the elimination of the Supreme Soviet in October 1993. During the 1993 parliamentary elections, they organized the coalition Russia's Choice (VR), which combined the status of a "party of power" with an ideology of radical market reform, and they inherited some of the resources of the former democratic movement. Soon after the relatively unsuccessful campaign (for details, see McFaul, 1998), the coalition was reorganized into the party Democratic Russia's Choice (DVR).

DVR was a typical semi-opposition. The party represented itself as moderately critical of some governmental policies (notably the Chechen war) but unequivocally backed the Kremlin on major decisions, of which

Yel'tsin's 1996 re-election bid was the most important. Also, some party leaders, including Chubais, secured positions in the executive branch. But the strategy of "loyalty" did not bring benefits to the liberals, owing to the extremely unfavorable socio-economic context, while the costs of this strategy were significant. The liberals backed the ruling group but did not affect its composition and only partly affected some policies. Yet the general public saw them as responsible for government failures, and they soon lost popular support. For these reasons, the mobilizing potential of DVR was undermined, the party's influence in Kremlin circles weakened, and in 1994–95 many politicians deserted the DVR and VR parliamentary factions. DVR responded by trying to claim the leading role among liberal and democratic parties, and by trying to weaken its major competitor, Yabloko. This did not succeed (see Yavlinskiy, 1995). During the 1995 parliamentary elections, DVR lost heavily and seemed to have been relegated to the "minor league" of Russian politics.

However, thanks to the hyper-fragmentation of Russia's elites in the 1990s, not even the liberals' major electoral failure led to their total breakdown. Quite the opposite. The liberals' success during Yel'tsin's 1996 electoral campaign, as well as appointments of some liberals to key posts in the government in 1997–98, helped them to re-establish their status as the leading reformers among the ruling group. In this period, they effectively used patron-client ties and access to financial resources, including Western aid (Wedel, 1998; Freeland, 2000) secured through intrigues among Kremlin cliques around Yel'tsin. After the financial meltdown of August 1998, most liberals were forced to resign from government posts, and their chances of political survival seemed to be disappearing.

Faced with this major threat, the liberals displayed an organizational cohesiveness that served them well for purposes of political survival. On the eve of the 1999 State Duma elections, they created a new coalition of minor parties and organizations called the Union of Right Forces (SPS) (Shcherbak, 2005). The context of the 1999 campaign was more favorable for the liberals, who openly backed Vladimir Putin and his military actions in Chechnya. Thanks to Kremlin support and unlimited positive coverage on national television, SPS got 8.5 percent of the vote and 32 seats, defeating its principal opponent, Yabloko (Zudin, 2000, p. 180–185). Soon after the elections, the SPS transformed itself into a full-fledged party with a more-or-less coherent program and organizational structure.

During the third State Duma, the SPS remained a semi-opposition, as DVR had been in 1994–95. But the crucial distinction was that, after 2000, the new ruling group needed liberal allies in the parliament only from time to time, while the influence of the SPS on executive and parliamentary decision-making was limited (Zudin, 2000, pp. 192–195; Shevtsova, 2003, pp. 50–52). Although the SPS backed Putin during the 2000 presidential elections, only a few of its representatives were rewarded with prominent posts—and even so, they broke ties with their own party.⁶ Even liberals in the government, such as Aleksey Kudrin and German Gref, remained loyal to the Kremlin and oriented toward an alliance with the "party of power."

Although the policy positions of SPS and United Russia were not always the same (Remington, 2003, pp. 50–51), liberals only partly criticized the Kremlin's major policies in certain areas, such as military reform. Nevertheless, the SPS explicitly backed the Kremlin's major anti-democratic proposals, such as its hostile takeover of the independent television channel NTV and its banning of referenda on the eve of national elections. But the liberals' gains were minimal. Besides their loyalty in the context of Russia's economic recovery, the "party of power" got the lion's share of the political benefits. In addition, in 2001–02 the SPS unsuccessfully attempted to eliminate its democratic opponents from Yabloko in the manner of a hostile takeover—as VR and DVR had tried to do previously in 1993–95.

The same strategy predominated during the 2003 parliamentary elections. The Union of Right Forces did not even try to maximize its own vote, but rather tried to steal Yabloko votes. The response of its opponents was similar, as a result of which both parties undermined their positions. The Kremlin's attacks on big business during the campaign also weakened the SPS. The failure of the SPS in the 2003 elections was similar to DVR's results in the 1995 electoral campaign, and brought the party to the brink of organizational collapse. The co-chair of the SPS, Irina Khakamada, resigned from her post and ran in the 2004 presidential elections as an independent candidate, after which she established her own party. Along with some SPS activists, she announced her intention of creating a new opposition, but the most influential wing of the SPS around Chubais remained loyal to the ruling group. As a result, SPS was unable to elaborate a definite position for the 2004 presidential elections and in fact did not back any candidate. It is too early to predict whether the SPS will survive as a political party or will transform itself into something else. But it is clear that the very project of liberal semi-opposition has failed.

Paradoxically, by the mid-2000s the liberals had become victims of the success of their own reform proposals of the early 1990s. The re-establishment of an integrated elite and the re-emergence of a dominant ruling party were a great help to Putin's re-launch of marketizing reforms (Smyth, 2002). But to pursue this policy, the Kremlin seeks only technical assistants, rather than even partly autonomous junior political partners. The fragmented elite of the 1990s had left space for political opportunities for semi-opposition. But the new ideocratic elite that consolidated after 2000 no longer needed even a semi-opposition. The deputy head of the Kremlin administration, Vyacheslav Surkov, was correct when he announced immediately after the 2003 State Duma elections that the liberals' historical mission was exhausted. Nevertheless, as long as the ruling group in Russia does not turn into an organizational monolith, new attempts at building a liberal semi-opposition can be expected, even though their chances of success are extremely limited.

⁶Sergey Kiriyyenko, appointed presidential representative to the Volga Federal District, is probably the most notable case.

DEMOCRATS: FROM PRINCIPAL OPPOSITION TO SEMI-OPPOSITION (AND BACK)

Since its emergence as an electoral coalition in 1993, Yabloko, unlike the liberals, presented itself as a principal democratic opposition, and it explicitly criticized not only governmental policies but also the political regime itself (Gel'man, 1999, pp. 162–196; Hale, 2004; White, 2004). During the first State Duma, because of high party fragmentation, Yabloko was able to affect some legislative decisions and used its parliamentary status to articulate alternative proposals. This was of great help to Yabloko, which in early 1995 transformed itself into a party with visibility not only on the national level, but also on the regional level (Golosov, 2004). However, unlike the KPRF, which tried to achieve its goals through electoral victory, Yabloko remained a small party, whose resources were insufficient for electoral success. Yabloko's scant electoral appeal became very apparent during the 1995 parliamentary and, especially, 1996 presidential elections, when the party, in the words of its Duma deputy Viktor Sheynis, found itself "a relatively small boat between two large ships" (i.e., the KPRF and the "party of power") (*Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 20, 1996). The democratic opposition was pushed into an electoral "ghetto" (Ovchinnikov, 2000, p. 178; Kudryavtsev and Ovchinnikov, 2000, p. 463).

Under a parliamentary system, such a party would become a likely target for inclusion in a governmental coalition. In Russia's super-presidential system, however, opportunities for coalition-building were fairly limited. The large ideological distance on a left–right scale makes a Yabloko–KPRF coalition impossible, and some tacit agreements between the two on individual issues were largely based on negative consensus (Shcherbak, 2002). At the same time, the ruling group and/or the liberal semi-opposition actively offered Yabloko various forms of coalition in order to "swallow up" this party. Under these circumstances, an "exit" strategy was the only available means of organizational survival. Yabloko refused to choose the "lesser evil" whenever the party faced hard choices. The party did not back Yel'tsin in the second round of the 1996 presidential elections, was against the adoption of the 1994–98 federal budgets, and was against the nominations of Viktor Chernomyrdin and Sergey Kiriyenko as prime ministers.

Although Yabloko could not affect the outcomes in these cases, these and other moves increased its popular support. Nevertheless, Yabloko refused to delegate its representatives to the government, and those politicians, such as Mikhail Zadornov and Oksana Dmitrieva, who joined the cabinet immediately lost their party affiliation. In circumstances of permanent crises and hyper-fragmentation of elites, this strategy brought Yabloko some short-term benefits, but the long-term costs were much higher. The party looks like semi-responsible opposition (Sartori, 1976), i.e., a party that could never be in government. This provides few selective incentives for participation of mid-range activists (Golosov, 1999) and prevented attrac-

tion of new voters. To put it bluntly, in the eyes of its activists and supporters, Yabloko was not a party that could implement its own goals.

In the face of this threat, Yabloko's leaders invested serious efforts in building up the party organization, but were inconsistent because of an internal schism (Hale, 2004). Before the 1999 parliamentary elections, regional party branches were rearranged, and some experienced politicians ran on the Yabloko ticket: former Prime Minister Sergey Stepashin, Minister of Nationalities Affairs Vyacheslav Mikhailov, and some regional candidates. According to some sources, Yabloko also tried to reach a compromise with Fatherland–All Russia and proposed itself as a possible junior partner for this potential coalition (Ovchinnikov, 2000). But in the context of the 1999 campaign, after the apartment-building bombings in Moscow and Ryazan and the beginning of the second Chechen war, Yabloko's strategy was completely out of place. Yavlinskiy's proposal for negotiations with Chechen leaders was heavily criticized in the media and strongly attacked by the liberals, who were competing with Yabloko for votes. After a weak performance in the 1999 State Duma elections (17 seats, compared with 45 in 1995) and Yavlinskiy's unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2000, Yabloko's electoral perspectives became gloomy (Ovchinnikov, 2000; Kudryavtsev and Ovchinnikov, 2000; Hale, 2004). In 2000–01, Yabloko faced a deep organizational crisis. Several Duma deputies and regional activists left the party ranks, it lost the financial support of major sponsors, and the threat of a hostile takeover by the liberals loomed larger. Finally, after the takeover of NTV by state-owned Gazprom in April 2001, Yabloko nearly disappeared from national television screens.

These hardships drove Yabloko to a change of strategy: from "exit" to "loyalty" to the ruling group. During the third State Duma, Yabloko only slightly opposed some governmental policies and mostly just supported Kremlin proposals; its criticism of the president and the political regime seriously softened (Shevtsova, 2003, p. 52–53). Yabloko backed the Kremlin even in several dubious cases, such as the hostage crisis at a Moscow theater in October 2002 (while a semi-oppositional SPS criticized the Kremlin). At first glance, this allowed Yabloko to minimize losses in party-building. On the eve of the 2003 State Duma elections, Yabloko found a new major sponsor in the oil company Yukos; Yukos nominees, meanwhile, occupied key positions in the party list. At this time, Yabloko left the niche of principal opposition to avoid political marginalization. But the democrats had little chance of becoming a semi-opposition either. First, this niche was already occupied by the liberals. Second, the ruling group needed the democrats as allies even less than it needed the liberals. Third, the democrats by then had limited impact on decision-making and on public opinion. In fact, Yabloko's electoral tactics were based on fruitless consultations with the Kremlin; the "Yukos affair" and the subsequent arrest of Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovskiy were the last shots against Yabloko's prospects. The party's failure in the 2003 parliamentary elections was a natural consequence of this strategic shift, although the explanations proffered by

Yabloko representatives point to the unfairness of the campaign, electoral fraud, and the like (Mikhaleva, 2004).

Subsequent events, such as the promotion of some Yabloko leaders to second-order positions in the government and the party's unsuccessful campaign in regional legislative elections (Kynev, 2004), clearly indicated that Yabloko's potential in its current form is nearly exhausted. Yet after the 2003 elections Yabloko returned to principal opposition and demonstrated its discontent with almost all government policies and proposals. Such a position is probably helpful for the preservation of the ideological and organizational unity of the party, but its potential is certainly not enough to survive as an independent actor in Russian politics. From the very start, institutional conditions were unhelpful for the development of a democratic opposition (Gel'man, 1999, p. 198). After 2000, the "imposed consensus" of Russia's elites left no room at all.

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN RUSSIA?

The extinction of political opposition in Russia after the 2003–04 national elections resulted in bitter self-criticism among politicians; Khodorkovskiy's letter from prison (Khodorkovskiy, 2004) was also a reaction to the new circumstances. There have been efforts toward further coordination of the residual opposition parties: the formation of an umbrella organization called Committee-2008, led by some liberals and democrats; and joint anti-Kremlin protests by communists, democrats, and some liberals—particularly by the youth organizations. The rise of anti-democratic trends in Russian politics might produce incentives for the emergence of a coalition of negative consensus among virtually all segments of the opposition, as happened during the anti-communist mass mobilizations of 1989–91 (Urban et al., 1997). Without denying the role of these efforts, we should focus not only on the opposition's activities, but also on its external environment, which determines its political opportunity structure (Kitschelt, 1988; Tarrow, 1994). This structure is unfavorable for opposition of any kind. Moreover, the most recent institutional changes, adopted by the Russian parliament in 2005, aimed to diminish the political opportunity structure as much as possible. The increase of electoral threshold in the State Duma and in regional legislative elections from 5 percent to 7 percent, the prohibition of establishment of electoral coalitions, the tougher rules for registration of political parties, and the minimization (if not total elimination) of the role of electoral observers at the polls would all inhibit oppositional chances in electoral politics (Petrov, 2005). But does this mean that the window of opportunities for the emergence of new opposition in Russia is closed forever?

Some observers have suggested that prospects for opposition in Russia might improve as a result of possible regime destabilization in the wake of its ambitious modernization project, including tough social reforms (see

Shevtsova, 2003; Vorozheykina, 2003). As yet, this has not materialized, even in the wake of the neo-liberal reform of social benefits in 2004–2005; popular protest then was relatively limited, and oppositions of different kinds were unable to mobilize the masses under any political slogans. Even major policy failures of the Russian government have not yet led to anything akin to the “Orange” or “Rose” revolutions experienced in Ukraine and Georgia. Even if such a scenario is still possible, in this case it would not be the loyal principal opposition that has the best chance of success, but rather the semi-loyal or disloyal opposition. Although parties and movements in the latter category are relatively negligible at present, their potential has not yet been revealed. Minor groups—such as the National Bolshevik Party, led by Eduard Limonov, who serves as one of the most vocal opponents of the Kremlin’s reforms in 2004–2005—merely use symbolic violence as a tool of their protest activities. But they could be easily replaced by actors who would use real violence in its crudest forms, ranging from terrorism to pogroms—as happened in Russia in the early twentieth century. The Kremlin is aware of this threat, and its recent attempts to establish a puppet-like “opposition” based on the left and nationalist camps (around the Motherland party) as well as around loyal liberals aims to split and thus weaken possible protest.

The prospects for a resurgence of loyal opposition may hinge on a breakdown of the “imposed consensus” of Russian elites, perhaps in the wake of the 2007–2008 national elections. New intra-elite conflicts could lead to the appearance of influential opposition allies among elites. If intra-elite conflicts cannot be resolved, this will produce favorable political opportunities for an opposition. This scenario is not fanciful, for the simultaneous rise of elite integration and decline of elite differentiation under Putin is not based on a unity of elite goals and means (Steen, 2003). The “imposed consensus” of Russia’s elite became possible because of the Kremlin’s tactics of selective punishment of some elite sections and selective cooptation of others (Gel’man, 2003; Shevtsova, 2003). Such a cartel-like equilibrium might be stable only if the resource bases of elites support the purchase of loyalty to the status quo. As yet, the resource inflow is sufficient for Russia’s elites, thanks especially to high oil prices on the world market. However, elites could mobilize additional resources through political engineering. An example is the Kremlin’s ongoing efforts to establish a mechanism of elite organizational continuity with the help of a monopolist “party of power” (Smyth, 2002). If sustained and successful, such efforts could marginalize political opposition for decades, as happened in Mexico (Knight, 1992). But that assumes a degree of elite unity that may prove difficult to sustain.

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