

The Extinction of Political Opposition in Russia

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In the classic 1966 volume *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* by Robert A. Dahl, the chapter on France in the early years of the Fifth Republic is titled “France: Nothing but Opposition.” In contrast with the French Fifth Republic of the mid-1960s, a similar chapter about Russia in the mid-2000s would have to be called “Russia: Anything but Opposition.” After Vladimir Putin’s first term in office and the 2003 to 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections, those political actors who claimed to form an opposition are about to disappear or, at minimum, lose all influence. According to a recent survey by the Levada Center (Russia’s best-known opinion pollsters) the percentage of Russians believing political opposition exists in the country declined from 53 percent in 2002 to 32 percent in 2004. At the same time, the number of Russians who believe that political opposition is necessary dramatically increased.

Why is the role of the political opposition in Russia in the mid-2000s so drastically diminished in comparison with the previous 10 to 15 years? In the 1990s, political opposition had a decisive impact on supply and demand in Russia’s emerging political market. Russian political opposition has not merely been replaced in the process of political evolution; it has virtually disappeared without successors in the manner of a dying species.

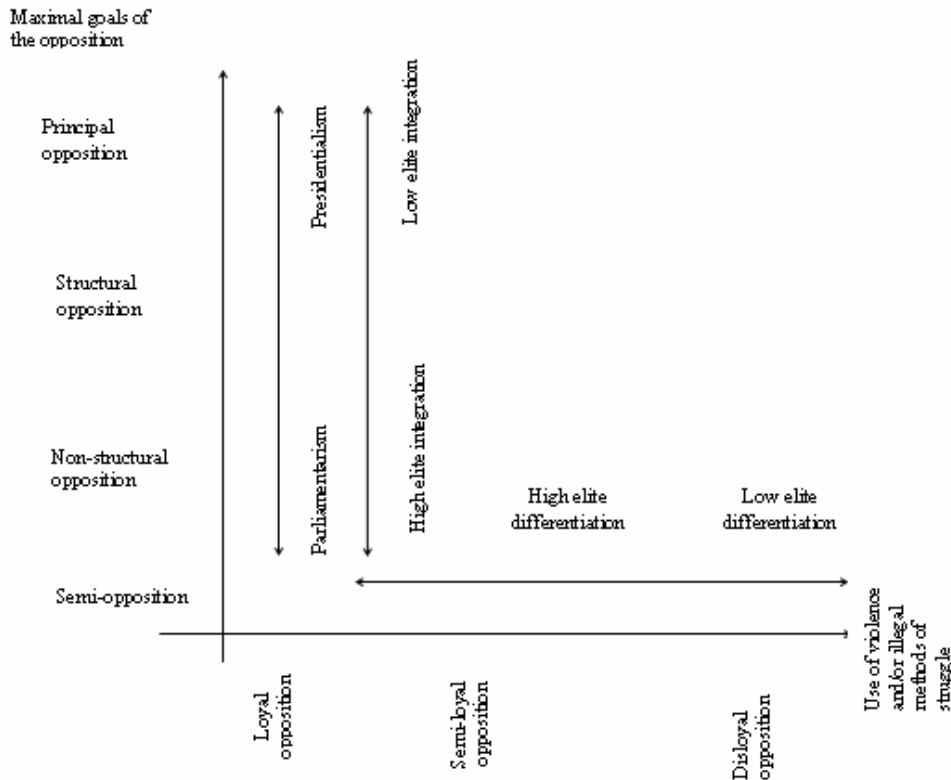
Political Opposition: a Conceptual Framework

Political opposition has two major dimensions: ends and means. The ends of opposition might be represented in the form of a continuum. Parties, politicians, cliques, and clans out of government, which would like to join it without any significant changes in the political regime and/or of major policies, constitute its minimalist pole and could be regarded as a “semi-opposition.” At the other extreme, political actors, who seek radical change of a political regime and its policies, are located at the maximalist pole of this continuum. Those actors are the “principal” opposition. Some other forms of opposition, such as “non-structural” opposition, which is oriented toward a change of major policies, as well as “structural” opposition, which is oriented toward a change of political regime (including democratic movements in the former Soviet Union during the breakdown of Communist rule from 1989 to 1991) could be located within this continuum.

The means of political opposition vary among loyal, semi-loyal, and disloyal oppositions. Two major criteria of loyal opposition are acceptance of legal means for

political struggle and rejection of political violence, while the use of purely illegal or violent means (or the threat thereof) is typical of disloyal opposition. Thus, various political oppositions under different types of political regimes, democratic or not, could be located on a two-dimensional conceptual framework of ends and means.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Political Opposition



What explains the formation and transformation of political oppositions? The key role of elite structure and political institutions is undeniable. The major difference between parliamentary and various presidential systems seems 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, so it is no surprise that they are likely to produce a principal opposition, unlike parliamentary systems. Elite structure varies between 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). American political scientist John Higley produced the following typology of elite structure: (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. But a similar typology might be made to correspond to types of political oppositions. For example, high elite integration diminishes the potential for principal opposition and makes more likely a cooperative bargaining

strategy between the opposition and the government, while low elite integration provides more incentives for a principal opposition. 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.

Opposition Dynamics in Russia, 1989-2004

The evolution of various sections of political opposition in Russia could also be interpreted through the prism of this conceptual framework. During perestroika under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, increasing elite differentiation, 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. But the potential of the opposition was ruined after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991. The ideocratic Soviet elite was replaced by a divided elite against the background of conflict between President Boris Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet. The over-concentration of presidential power at the expense of the legislature logically ended up as a zero-sum game 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. On the one hand, the broad and ill-defined powers of the executive within the super-presidential system strengthened principal opposition. On the other hand, a deep economic recession and multiple political crises (including the Chechen wars) contributed to the fragmentation of elite structure. This has ambivalent effects on the opposition: Although political opposition of different colors flourished in Russia from 1993 to 2000 (this resembling to some extent the notion of “nothing but opposition”), its major problems remained unresolved.

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 on by American political economist Albert O. Hirschman, the choice of opposition strategies lies between “exit” (passive protest), “voice” (active protest), and “loyalty” (preservation of the status quo). Although Russian opposition parties tried to use all these strategies, none of them brought definite achievements. For a principal opposition, the only condition of pursuit of their goals was to win presidential elections. Neither legislative dominance (in the case of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) in the State Duma from 1996 to 1999) nor influence on the composition and policy of the government (in the case of Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov’s cabinet in 1998 to 1999) 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 crises. 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 largely negligible.

The beginning of Putin’s presidency in 2000 had a decisive impact on political opposition in Russia. Shortly afterward, the structure of the elites changed dramatically; elite integration sharply increased and elite differentiation became very limited. Thanks

to these developments, the new ruling group around Putin overwhelmingly dominated Russia's political scene, and all remaining elite sections (parliamentary factions, political parties, media, business, and regional leaders) have had to agree on their subordinated role or have lost their elite status entirely. Given that the likely institutional effects remained the same as in 1993 to 2000, the loss of autonomy and/or resources by elite sections in Russia led to the diminishing 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 due to the scare resource base and the threat of use of force from the ruling group. For the semi-opposition, co-optation into the regime resulted in the loss of its identity due to the lack of distinctiveness between itself and 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, as well as the lack of meaningful alternatives to Putin in the 2004 presidential elections serve as the most explicit examples of these trends.

The dynamics of major development factors and the key features of political opposition in Russia are represented in Table 1.

Table 1. 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

Communists, Liberals, and Democrats: Three Ways to Defeat

The organizational and ideological development of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) looks zigzagged from disloyal opposition (during the period when it was banned from 1991 to 1992), through an ambivalent semi-loyalty during the violent conflict of September and October 1993, and subsequently becoming a loyal opposition within the framework of parliamentary and electoral politics. The KPRF claimed a monopoly on representation of left-wing and nationalist voters, so the party's policy

positions were inconsistent in programmatic terms. The impact of institutional effects on the political strategy of the KPRF was contradictory. The party needed to maximize mobilization of its supporters to take control over all powerful positions as well as to preserve its dominant position on the political market and the party's own organizational unity.

No wonder, then, that the KPRF presented itself as a "real" opposition. It used various techniques, including an attempt to impeach Yeltsin in 1999, not to mention relatively successful electoral campaigning including the 1996 presidential elections. But the Communists were unable to get the main prize; victory in the 1996 presidential elections was impossible. This is a reason for the ineffectiveness of the opposition voice strategy; it was little help in achieving the KPRF's goals. For these and other reasons, the KPRF leaders announced a plan of "implementation into power", thus presenting elements of loyalty and systematically rejecting meaningful decisions for changing the status quo. In tactical terms, this strategy brought some gains to the KPRF, but the Communists lost strategically. Although the share of the KPRF votes in 1999 slightly increased, the Communists could not secure their dominant status in the legislature. The Communists did not affect major parliamentary decisions, so they soon lost the role of veto-wielders and turned into a cosmetic opposition.

The KPRF tried to return to a voice strategy and actively opposed some Kremlin-induced bills; it was effectively punished. The Kremlin revised the distribution of committee chairmanships in the legislature, and pushed the KPRF out of these positions. The grand failure of the KPRF in the 2003 and 2004 national elections was a logical extension of this process. The Communist opposition was a major Kremlin target during the parliamentary election campaign. There were various attacks on the Communists, 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% of the votes, was the most effective). Subsequent events, such as the internal schism in the party ranks in fact only preserved the status quo in terms of the KPRF's policy positions, structure and organization, and 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 subsequent marginalization.

The Russian liberals (proponents of free market and minimalist state intervention in the economy) during the 1993 parliamentary elections organized the coalition Russia's Choice (VR), which combined the status of a 'party of power' with an ideology of radical market reform, and inherited some of the resources of the former democratic movement. Soon after the relatively unsuccessful campaign, 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. The strategy of loyalty did not bring benefits to the liberals due to the extremely unfavorable socio-economic context, while the costs of the strategy were significant. The liberals backed the ruling group but they did not affect its composition and only partly affected some policies. The general public saw them as responsible for government failures, and they soon lost popular support. For these reasons, during the 1995 parliamentary elections,

DVR lost heavily and seems to have been relegated from the premier 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, faced with this major threat, the liberals demonstrated an organizational cohesiveness. On the eve of the 1999 State Duma elections, they created the new coalition of minor parties and organizations called the Union of Right Forces (SPS). 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 won and soon transformed itself into a full-fledged party. The SPS remained a semi-opposition, however, after 2000, the new ruling group needed liberal allies in the parliament only from time to time, while the influence of the SPS on the decisionmaking was fairly limited. Although the SPS backed Putin during the 2000 presidential elections, only a few of its representatives were rewarded with prominent posts and then broke ties with their own party. Even liberals in the government remained loyal to the Kremlin and oriented toward an alliance with the 'party of power'. The Kremlin's attacks on big business during the campaign also weakened the SPS. The failure of the SPS in the 2003 elections was almost similar to DVR's results in the 1995 electoral campaign, and brought the party to 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. The 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 in its current status, or whether it will transform into something else. But it is clear that the very project of liberal semi-opposition has failed.

Unlike the liberals, since its emergence as an electoral coalition in 1993 Yabloko presented itself as the principal democratic opposition, and explicitly criticized not only governmental policies, but also the political regime as such. During the first State Duma, due to high party fragmentation, Yabloko was able to affect some legislative decisions and used its parliamentary status to articulate alternative proposals. 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. Under the parliamentary system, such a party with a moderate ideological position could become a likely ally for a governmental coalition. In Russia's super-presidential system, however, opportunities for coalition building were limited.

Due to these limitations, the exit strategy was the only available way of survival. Yabloko refused to choose the lesser evil whenever the party had to choose. 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. In the eyes of its activists and supporters Yabloko was not a party which could implement its own goals. Yabloko's leaders invested serious efforts into building up the party organization, but in the context of the 1999 campaign, after the beginning of the second Chechen war, Yabloko's strategy was completely out of place. In 2000 to 2001, Yabloko faced a deep organizational crisis. These hardships drove Yabloko to a change of strategy: from 'exit' to 'loyalty' to the ruling group. Yabloko opposed some governmental policies, but mostly supported Kremlin proposals; its criticism of the president and the political regime

softened significantly. In fact, Yabloko left the niche of principal opposition in order to escape marginalization. But the democrats had little chance of becoming a semi-opposition either. 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 Khodorkovsky 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.

Concluding Remarks: Is There Any Chance for Opposition?

The extinction of political opposition in Russia after the 2003 and 2004 national elections resulted in bitter self-criticism among politicians. There are efforts toward further coordination of the residual opposition parties in the formation of an umbrella organization called Committee-2008 as well as joint anti-Kremlin protests by Communists, democrats, and some liberals. The rise of anti-democratic trends in Russian politics might produce incentives for the emergence of a coalition of negative consensus among the opposition, as happened during the anti-Communist mass mobilizations of 1989 to 1991. Some liberal observers have considered the prospects for opposition in Russia given possible regime destabilization in the wake of its ambitious modernization project, including tough social reforms. Yet although such a scenario is still possible, in this case it will not be the loyal principal opposition which has the best chances, but rather the semi-loyal or disloyal opposition. Although parties and movements in the latter category are negligible in Russian politics, their potential has not yet been tapped. Minor groups like anti-globalists, or the National Bolshevik Party led by Eduard Limonov (who serves as one of the most active opponents of the Kremlin's social reform in 2004), 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 with Russia's opposition in the early twentieth century). The Kremlin is aware of this threat, and its recent attempts to establish a puppet-like "opposition" based on leftists and nationalists as well as loyal liberals aims to split and thus weaken possible protest.

The chances for loyal opposition related to the possible breakdown of the imposed consensus of elites might lead to new intra-elite conflicts and, therefore, to an appearance of influential opposition allies. If intra-elite conflicts cannot be resolved, this will produce favorable political opportunities for an opposition. The imposed consensus of Russia's elite in early 2000s became possible because of the Kremlin's tactics of selective punishment of some elite sections and the selective co-optation of others. Such a cartel-like equilibrium might be stable only if resource bases of elites support the exchange of loyalty to the status quo. As yet, the resource inflow is sufficient for Russia's elites, thanks to high oil prices on the world market. However, elites could mobilize additional resources through the use of political institutions. Constant Kremlin efforts to establish a mechanism of elite organizational continuity with the help of a monopolist 'party of power' might result in the total extinction of the opposition for decades. This scenario is probably the most desirable outcome for Kremlin. But what is good for the Kremlin is not equally good for Russia's future.