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Russian Liberalism in Crisis? Khodorkovsky Revisited

David White*

Abstract

The electoral decline of liberal parties has been a key feature of post-Soviet politics in Russia. Using Mikhail Khodorkovsky's critique of Russian liberalism as a starting point for analysis, it is argued that a lack of cohesion and unity has undermined support for liberal-democratic forces. Ultimately, however, exogenous factors over which the liberal parties have had no control (the marginalisation of opposition, the restriction of media access and the huge imbalance of resources available to political parties in Russia) have played the major determining role in the liberals' decline. It is argued that Russia's two main liberal parties during the Putin years were targeted by the regime because they were *opposition* parties. In Russia's electoral authoritarian system, political *opposition* has been systematically excluded and fragmented, the aim being not just to restrict but to close off any potential opportunities.

Keywords: Khodorkovsky, liberal, Yabloko, SPS, electoral authoritarianism.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the elections to the Russian State Duma in December 2003, the then Deputy Chief of Staff of the President's Executive Office and architect of United Russia's successful campaign, Vladislav Surkov, claimed that the defeat of the two liberal parties, Yabloko and *Soyuz Pravykh Sil* - SPS [*Union of Right Forces*] marked the end of an era. "The historic mission of the liberal parties in Russia," declared Surkov, was over (Shakina, 2003). Similarly, most post-election analyses suggested that the two parties would, to paraphrase Trotsky, be confined to the dustbin of post-Soviet history. The liberals were finished as an electoral force and would now return to their traditional historical role of "an embattled and marginalised fragment in Russian society" (Rutland, 2003). With some prescience, Andrei Ryabov suggested that as far as Putin was concerned the two parties belonged to 'the heritage of the Yeltsin era' and that, following their electoral defeat, the Kremlin would be keen to cultivate new 'opposition' parties on its own terms (McGregor, 2003).¹

After the electoral dust had settled, a further obituary for Russia's liberals came from a rather more unexpected source – the former sponsor of the main liberal parties. In March 2004, whilst awaiting trial on charges of tax evasion and fraud, former Yukos CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published *The Crisis of Liberalism in Russia*, a withering critique of Yabloko and SPS. Khodorkovsky accused liberal politicians of misleading the people about the economic reforms of the 1990s and of ignoring those who had suffered hardship as a result of such reforms. Khodorkovsky's 'prison note-book' treatise remains a compelling yet, it will be argued here, incomplete account of the decline in support for liberal-democratic parties in Russia. More than eight years later, however, the critique does provide a useful framework for analysing the decline of the liberal parties. After all, Khodorkovsky knew the

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1 Following the disintegration of SPS in 2008 the Kremlin gave its backing to the creation of the 'Kremlin-loyal', Right Cause party.

parties well and had provided both with financial support. Moreover, and as Sakwa (2011b) observes, even whilst imprisoned, Khodorkovsky “has proved himself an active and acute observer of Russian politics”.

After 2004, the decline of the liberal parties continued apace. In 2008, facing massive debts to the state for unpaid electoral broadcast fees, SPS was persuaded by the Kremlin to disband (in return for writing off the debts) and to merge into the new ‘Kremlin-friendly’ liberal party, Right Cause. Yabloko meanwhile has continued to plough a lonely social-liberal furrow, barely even registering on opinion polls. The replacement of Grigory Yavlinsky by Sergei Mitrokhin as party chairman in 2008 did nothing to halt the party’s decline. Disaffected members of Yabloko and SPS joined the Solidarity movement, an organisation that has, to date, largely rejected electoral politics, focusing instead on street protests and blogging activities.²

This article seeks to explain the decline in support for liberalism in Russia, in the form of organised liberal-democratic parties at least.³ It is argued that, whilst Russian political culture is an unconvincing explanation for this decline, the strategic mistakes of key liberal actors, the lack of unity in the broad liberal camp and Khodorkovsky’s widely shared assertion that the liberals are tainted in the minds of ordinary Russians by the failed economic reforms of the 1990s, are certainly valid. Nevertheless, these factors go only part of the way in providing a full and coherent explanation. Instead we need to look to exogenous factors over which the liberal parties have had little or no control (the marginalisation of opposition, restricted media access and the huge imbalance of resources available to political parties) to better understand the decline of Russia’s liberal parties. Ultimately, the two main liberal parties, Yabloko and SPS, suffered not because they were *liberal* parties but because they were *opposition* parties. The Kremlin has been keen to cultivate liberal parties in the past as evinced by its original backing of SPS and its support for Right Cause. Russia’s electoral authoritarian regime is, however, intolerant of outright opposition. SPS might still exist had its leaders remained loyal to the Kremlin, whilst Yabloko owes its existence to the fact that it has tempered its criticism of the regime.

The notion that the demise of the liberal parties is indicative of a more general decline in support for liberal-democratic ideals and can be seen as reflective of the authoritarian turn under Putin is challenged here. Whilst Russia’s liberals may face an uncertain future, developments since the publication of Khodorkovsky’s treatise, notably the creation of the Solidarity movement and the Party of People’s Freedom (PARNAS),⁴ suggest that a realignment of liberal forces and an increase in support for liberal parties in Russia may be possible. Moreover, the large-scale protests which took place in Moscow following the flawed parliamentary elections of December 2011 indicated that the Russian middle classes, the natural constituency for the liberal parties, are not as acquiescent and passive as might have previously been imagined and that the social base of support for liberal parties was growing.

Russian political culture: Incompatible with liberal democracy?

In one of the most memorable lines from his treatise, Khodorkovsky suggested that Putin was neither a liberal nor a democrat but was still “more liberal and democratic than seventy percent of our country’s population” (Khodorkovsky, 2004). Yabloko and SPS had not failed in 2003 because

2 Solidarity did put forward seven candidates for the 2009 Moscow State Duma elections, but all seven were rejected by the Moscow electoral commission.

3 Defining Russian political parties is not unproblematic. Here I refer to the two parties (Yabloko and SPS) as both liberal and democratic. There exist, however, two distinct strands of liberalism in Russia: social liberalism represented by Yabloko and *economic* liberalism represented in the 1990s by Russia’s Choice and Democratic Choice of Russia (DVR) and from 1999-2008 by SPS. Gel’man (2005) prefers to refer to these two strands as ‘liberals’ (Russia’s Choice, DVR, SPS) and democrats (Yabloko). And so whilst the names may differ, both Gel’man and I recognise the division.

4 PARNAS’ is derived from the party’s Russian name, [*Partiya Narodnoi Svobody*].

the Kremlin discriminated against them but because, for the first time, the Kremlin denied them its support. In other words, the liberal-democratic parties could not hope to gain access to the State Duma without the Kremlin's helping hand. There simply were not enough liberal, democratically-minded people to vote for them. Implicit in this argument is the notion that Russian political culture is incompatible with notions of liberalism and democracy. As the two political parties most clearly associated with the objective of achieving Western-style liberal-democratic norms in Russia, it was hardly surprising, therefore, that Yabloko and SPS had failed in their mission.

The link between political culture and democratic development is well chronicled. Democracy, argues Lipset, "requires a supportive culture, the acceptance by the citizenry and political elites of the principles underlying freedom of speech, media, assembly, rights of political parties, rule of law, human rights and the like" (Lipset, 1997). In the classic text on the subject, Almond and Verba (1963) assert that political culture is a key determinant of democratisation.

For some, however, Russian political culture is antipathetic to many basic democratic norms and values and is instead supportive of authoritarian methods of rule. Sergeev and Biryukov (1993) suggest that Russian political culture is based on the notion of *sobornost*, a pre-political, historic attachment to co-operative activity, hostile to notions of individualism and pluralism.⁵ Brzezinski (2001) argues the case for history and culture in shaping contemporary attitudes towards democracy. Russia's history of Mongol domination, followed by the emergence of a supreme state to which society was entirely subordinated has engendered a culture in which democracy is unable to flourish. No country, argues Brzezinski, can adopt effective democratic institutions without the necessary cultural and historical underpinnings. Diamond (1999, p. 215-6) makes a similar point, suggesting that a normative commitment to democracy is primarily shaped by history and early socialization experiences. Whilst in some countries (Spain, Greece, the Czech Republic and Uruguay, for example) democratic consolidation is facilitated in part by national political traditions, social structure and experience of a previous non-authoritarian regime, others, including Russia, are "haunted by the authoritarian, alienating and distrusting past".

However, the notion that Russian people are in some way preternaturally inclined towards authoritarian forms of rule and reject democratic values can be challenged on two levels. First, the use of political culture as an explanatory variable is problematic. In terms of cause or effect, Barry (1978, p. 51-52) argues that it is better to think of political culture as developing from political and socio-economic processes rather than being a determinant of those processes. Democracy, therefore, may help to facilitate the development of civic culture as much, if not more than civic culture acts as an aid to democratisation. Elkins and Simeon (1979) suggest that, too often, political culture is the explanation of first rather than last resort and warn against failing to account for social, economic and political structural factors when attributing causal properties to political culture. Whilst not altogether denying a role for political culture in shaping political behaviour and political development, it will be argued here that it is possible to identify clear structural and agential causal factors that explain the decline in Russian liberalism.

Second, historically and culturally deterministic approaches are not borne out by the post-Soviet experience. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the majority of the Russian public has endorsed democratic values and rejected undemocratic alternatives (Rose, Munro & Mishler 2004).⁶ Support for democratic norms has even led some to argue that the Russian people have assimilated democratic values more readily than has the political elite (Colton & McFaul, 2002, p. 117-118; Shevtsova, 2003, p. 264-265).

5 *Sobornost* is derived from the word *sobor*, a word with multiple meanings of cathedral, council, and the simple gathering in of people or of things that had previously been scattered.

6 Asked to indicate how they would like their country to be governed by marking a ten-point scale ranging from complete democracy to complete dictatorship, three-quarters of respondents endorsed democracy. More than two-thirds rejected undemocratic alternatives. New Russian Barometer XIII, March 2004, quoted in Rose, Munro and Mishler (2004, p. 201).

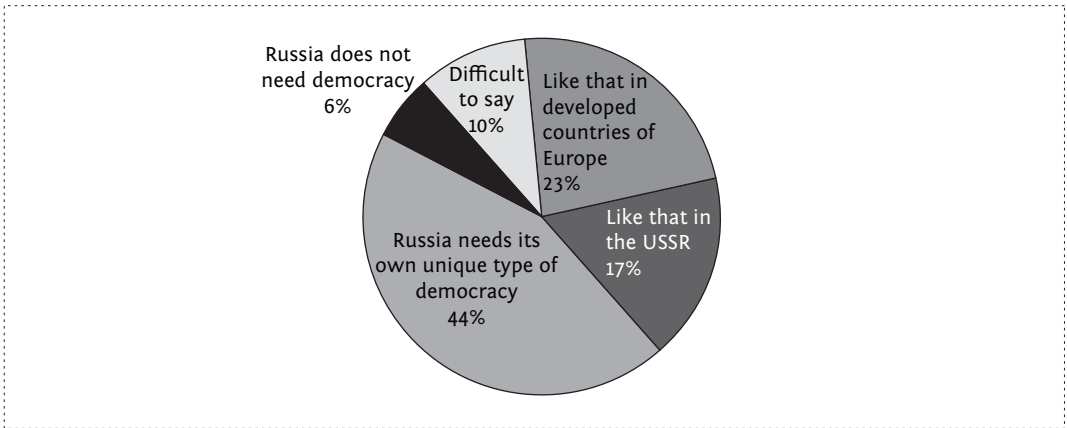


Figure 1: What kind of democracy does Russia need?
 Source: Levada Center nationwide survey, June 2010, N=1,600.
 Available at: <http://www.levada.ru/archive/gosudarstvo-i-obshchestvo/rossiya-i-demokratiya/kakaya-demokratiya-nuzhna-rossii>

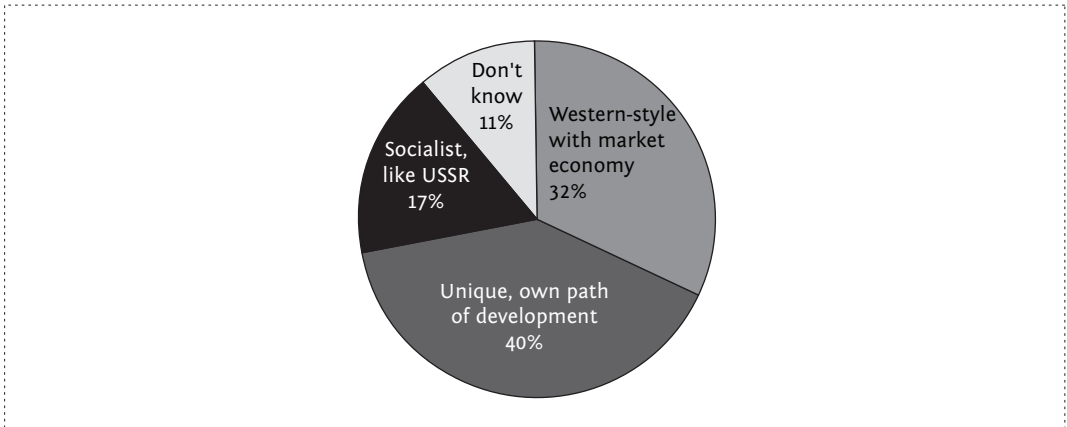


Figure 2: What type of state do you want to see in Russia?
 Source: Levada Center nationwide survey, 18-22 December 2009, N=1,600 (from Russia Votes, www.russiavotes.org)

Opinion poll figures (see Figure 1) suggest that Putin may well be more liberal and democratic than *twenty-three* percent of the Russian people (those who do not think democracy in any of its guises is necessary or desirable and those who would like to see a return to the Soviet Union) rather than the *seventy* percent suggested by Khodorkovsky. Moreover, Putin may be *as* liberal and democratic as the *forty-four* percent who would like to see Russia adopt its own unique democracy (presumably something akin to the notion of sovereign democracy promulgated by, among others, Vladislav Surkov). This, however, leaves almost a quarter of respondents favouring the development of Western-style liberal democracy in Russia.

When asked the question, ‘what type of state do you want to see in Russia?’ again the majority favour a ‘unique Russian state’, one that takes into account the country’s culture and traditions. However, almost a third of respondents opt for a Western-style democracy with a market economy

(see Figure 2). The political culture argument, that the Russians are undemocratic in outlook and, therefore, not prepared to vote for a liberal-democratic party, is unsustainable. Why then is this potentially large pro-democratic constituency, as large as anything enjoyed by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) in its heyday, not voting for Russia's liberal-democratic parties? Should we, as Khodorkovsky suggests, look to the actions of liberal actors for the answer?

Russia's tainted liberals

Smuggled out of Matrosskaya Tishina prison in northern Moscow by Khodorkovsky's lawyers and published in *Vedomosti* and the *Moscow Times* at the end of March 2004, *The Crisis of Russian Liberalism* was a curious document, seen by some as an attempt to make peace with the Kremlin and by others as the first step in staking the author's claim to political leadership (Belton, 2004; Kagarlitsky, 2004; Latynina, 2004). The main thrust of his argument was that Russia's liberals had acquired a 'powerful taste for creature comforts' during the 1990s and had effectively lost touch with the majority of the Russian people. The liberals had, he argued, concerned themselves with the ten percent of Russians ready for radical change but had forgotten the other ninety percent. As a result, liberalism in Russia had been thoroughly discredited. It was no surprise, argued Khodorkovsky, that the Russian people had said their 'resolute and dry-eyed "goodbye"' to the two parties in 2003. Association with the hugely unpopular and iniquitous economic reforms of the early 1990s had tainted the liberals in the eyes of ordinary Russians. This was indeed a coruscating attack on the very parties Khodorkovsky had been funding up to his arrest, although as Sakwa points out, as one of the major beneficiaries of the loans for shares privatisation, Khodorkovsky's criticisms are somewhat disingenuous, if not downright hypocritical (Sakwa, 2009, p. 270-271).

Notwithstanding Khodorkovsky's apparent inability to recognise his own guilt in the privatisation process, the argument that the main cause of the liberals' demise was their association with the economic reforms of the 1990s remains a potent explanation. Single-mindedly pursuing economic reform, the liberals effectively turned their backs on the vast majority of the Russian people and would have to wait a very long time for forgiveness. Essentially, argues Khodorkovsky, the liberals lied to the public about what they would gain through privatisation and turned a blind eye to the catastrophic social consequences of economic reform. The outcome of these actions was the discrediting of the concept of liberal democracy in the eyes of most Russians, the reforms having been carried out in the name of liberalism and democracy. Analyses of the 2003 parliamentary elections explained the decline of Russia's liberal parties in similar terms. It had become obvious by 2003, argued Olga Dergunova, head of Microsoft Russia, "that our people have not tasted the full flavour of democracy and, if they have, managed to become disenchanted with it" ("Business Regrets," 2003). Yabloko leader Grigorii Yavlinskii agreed that the Russian public did not hold the concept of democracy in the same high regard as, for instance, stability and security. "When most people saw what democracy looked like," argued Yavlinskii, "they changed their minds about it" ("The Russian Elections," 2003).

For Khodorkovsky, the discrediting of these two concepts was down to the behaviour of the liberals as much as the reforms process itself. In the 1990s, he argues, "no one took up education, healthcare and housing reforms, or targeted support of the poor and the indigent, all issues upon which an enormous majority of our compatriots depended on and still depend on now" (Khodorkovsky, 2004). The argument here is somewhat flawed, however, since Khodorkovsky fell into the familiar trap of using the catch-all 'liberal' term to refer to the two distinctive economic and social liberal strands in Russia. Khodorkovsky's argument that liberals had grown rich whilst ignoring social welfare was essentially the accusation that Yabloko had been consistently levelling at the *economic* liberals for over a decade. Yabloko vice chairman, Sergei Ivanenko, whilst welcoming Khodorkovsky's intervention, stressed that his arguments regarding privatisation, the 1998 economic crisis and 'many things that

“the democrats” did’ were entirely in line with Yabloko party statements over the years.⁷ Nevertheless, the inability to distance the party from market reforms favoured and promulgated by the economic liberals has been a consistent and frustrating issue for Yabloko. Former State Duma deputy Tatyana Yarygina (personal communication, March 13, 2003) accepted that this had proved difficult for the party:

Unfortunately, liberal ideas in Russia are understood either as programmes of the World Bank or as Gaidar’s policies. We have to explain to people that this is a mistake and that our liberalism offers social programmes and social guarantees.

It is certainly true that Yabloko consistently promoted policies that might have been expected to have some resonance with the kind of disaffected voters Khodorkovsky had in mind. The raising of the minimum wage, increasing state sector wages and pensions and making employers legally responsible for delayed wages were all key Yabloko policies. The inability to get its message across was, however, a problem largely of the party’s own making. A classic example of Yabloko’s failure to engage with the Russian electorate came in 1995 when the party’s poll ratings suggested a possible electoral breakthrough. The party’s detailed election manifesto *Reformy dlya bo’lshinstva [Reforms for the majority]* was hardly designed to attract the floating voter. It is doubtful whether the ‘majority’ possessed either the patience or the required economic acumen to wade through the two-hundred pages of policy recommendations, ‘complete with a voluptuous statistical apparatus’ and graphs depicting such phenomenon as ‘the dynamic of real monetary supply M0 and M2’ (Fish, 1997, p. 206). It is, therefore, understandable that the Russian electorate never really picked up on the subtle yet significant divisions between the two liberal-democratic strands and the social-liberal Yabloko was effectively tarred with the same brush as the economic-liberals.

For Khodorkovsky, the liberals simply lost touch with the majority of the Russian people and discredited liberal democracy in the process. In a particularly colourful passage, Khodorkovsky points to the readiness of the liberals to forget all about the Constitution “in exchange for another serving of sturgeon and horseradish” (Khodorkovsky, 2004). He might also have referred to the 2003 SPS election broadcast featuring Boris Nemtsov and Irina Khakamada reclining in first class airline luxury, tapping away at their laptops. This was hardly an image likely to endear to them to the Russian public with fresh memories of the economic collapse of the late 1990s.

Although flawed, Khodorkovsky’s argument that Russia’s liberals still remain tainted by the mistakes of the 1990s cannot be ignored. One of the main tasks facing Russian liberals today (and a theme to which we will return) is the challenge of ridding themselves of such associations.

Problems of unity and strategic errors

The failure of parties within the broad liberal-democratic movement to form effective electoral coalitions or create a single united party was a persistent and much discussed phenomenon in the first decade of post-Soviet Russian politics (Sakwa, 1996, p. 110; Fleron, Ahl & Lane, 1998, p. 233; Bacon, 1996, p. 218). Elsewhere in the post-communist world, elite cohesion and the ability of elites to unite around a broad ideological appeal have been identified as key determinants of the relative success or otherwise of centre-right parties. Both Hungary’s Fidesz party and the Czech Civic Democrats were formed around cohesive elites able to reach and maintain consensus on policy and strategy, thus acting as a nucleus around which the broader centre-right movement was able to coalesce. In contrast, the lack of cohesion amongst the Polish centre-right elite has been attributed as a key factor in the

⁷ Ivanenko, S (interviewee) (2004, 29 March). *Ekho Moskvy [Echo of Moscow]* radio. Retrieved from Yabloko web site: www.eng.yabloko.ru/Publ/2004/radio/040329_ekho.html

failure of the Solidarity Electoral Action bloc (Hanley, Szczerbiak, Haughton & Fowler, 2008, p. 425-427; Szczerbiak, 2004). While not directly analogous (the key Russian liberal parties occupying centre-*left* as well as centre-*right* positions on the political spectrum), the path followed by the Russian liberals bears some comparison with the Polish centre-right.

Speculation over the possible creation of a unified liberal bloc in Russia was rife in the run-up to the 2003 parliamentary elections, and the failure to form an effective electoral coalition was identified by some as being at the root of the subsequent elimination of liberal parties from the State Duma for the first time. Academic and former economics minister Evgeny Yasin (2003) suggested that a party competing on a single liberal-democratic ticket would easily have passed the then five percent threshold and that “seeing the conflict in the democratic camp, many of their supporters decided not to vote”.

Conflict between the social and economic strands of Russian liberalism has always existed.⁸ Such divisions have often simply been attributed to the personalities of the leaders of the main parties. Political ambition and personal differences between party leaders have, it is argued, prevented parties from coming together for the greater good (Weir, 1998; Rutland, 1999, p. 49; Danks 2009, p. 316-317). It is certainly true that deep personal enmity between key actors (notably between the *social-liberal*, Yavlinsky and the *economic-liberals* Boris Nemtsov, Anatoly Chubais and the late Egor Gaidar) contributed to the persistence of the division. However, to ascribe the ‘crisis of liberalism’ to agential factors is simplistic. Although sharing some common objectives, SPS (from 1999 to 2008 the representatives of the economic strand) and Yabloko represented fundamentally different political traditions, had separate and partially mutually exclusive constituencies and often adopted contrasting approaches in their relationships with the regime.

In Russia, it has been customary to refer to both Yabloko and SPS as parties of a ‘rightist’ inclination. However, from its inception, Yabloko sought to distinguish its policies and ideology from those of the economic liberals. The party’s very first manifesto stated that Yabloko opposed the policies of the market *at any price*. Its ideology was *liberal* but distinct from the ‘vulgar liberalism of the government’ (many of whom were members of Gaidar’s Russia’s Choice party).⁹ Whilst accepting that both parties are part of the liberal tradition, Yabloko’s Sergei Mitrokhin argues that the ideology of SPS was geared towards orthodox 19th century liberalism, which denies the state a major role in the economy and lacks a defined social aspect to its goals. Mitrokhin argues in contrast that Yabloko’s ideology stresses the state’s responsibility for creating a society of equal opportunity and protecting its citizens from the vagaries of the market (Mitrokhin, 2001). Although the SPS leadership traditionally sought to play down such differences as a barrier to working together, there was recognition that such differences were real; Irina Khakamada (2001) characterised SPS as a ‘party of the bourgeoisie’ and Yabloko as ‘a party for the protection of rights’.

For most of the period from 1993 to 2008, a clear division also existed in terms of the economic and social liberals’ respective relationships with the regime, Yabloko maintaining an opposition stance whilst the economic liberals expressed a greater degree of support for both Yeltsin and Putin. Fighting its first parliamentary election campaign in 1999, SPS enjoyed the tacit and sometimes open endorsement of then Prime Minister Putin. The party played the Putin card for all it was worth, announcing that it would support the Prime Minister in the presidential campaign and would not field a candidate against him. Only after 2003 when SPS, under the leadership of Nikita Belykh, moved into a more overtly oppositionist stance, was there an opportunity for the parties to come together. By this time however, and with both parties failing to meet the electoral threshold in the 2003 elections, Yabloko had moved into a position of ‘constructive opposition’, a more pragmatic and occasionally supportive approach towards the Putin administration.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the divisions between Russia’s economic and social liberals see White (2006, p. 71-106).

⁹ *Blok: Yavlinskii-Boldyrev-Lukin, Predvybornaya platform [Yavlinskii-Boldyrev-Lukin Bloc, Election Platform]*, Moscow (1993, p. 3-5). This was effectively Yabloko’s first party programme.

The fractious relationship between Yabloko and SPS meant that each camp devoted almost as much time and resources to attacking each other rather than the regime or the other parties. A recurrent theme for Yabloko was that they could not co-operate with those involved in the economic reforms of the 1990s (a barb aimed at Chubais and Nemtsov in particular), while Yabloko in turn was damaged by negative SPS campaigns in 1999 and 2003 (Hale, 2004, p. 1015). As one Yabloko official stated, “how can you merge with someone who keeps elbowing you in the ribs?” (Ilichev, 2003, p. 3).

The extent to which these divisions help to explain the decline in support for both parties is difficult to quantify. Kryshtanovskaya (2003) argues that there was little doubt that, by the time of the 2003 parliamentary elections, the electorate had finally grown weary of the inability of the liberals to unite and that Yabloko had failed to recognise that whilst voters accepted that differences existed between the two parties, they would gladly have supported a single liberal democratic party. In contrast, Yavlinsky asserted that a merger would have done more harm than good and that a large proportion of traditional Yabloko voters would have voted ‘against all’ rather than for a united liberal party (McGregor, 2003). Opinion poll data from 2003, however, supports neither contention conclusively. The vast majority of the electorate were actually indifferent on the question of liberal unification, although those with a higher education (normally taken as a key indicator of support for the liberal parties) did express a slight preference for a unified party.¹⁰

Whilst the lack of elite cohesion within the broad Russian liberal movement may not, therefore, have been the major determinant in the parties’ electoral decline, the policy of resisting unification, favoured by Yabloko, almost certainly contributed to the failure of both parties to gain representation in the State Duma in 2003, triggering Khodorkovsky’s critique. Given both parties’ share of the vote, a combined vote would have surely taken a notional unified party past the five percent threshold.¹¹ Unlike their counterparts in Hungary and the Czech Republic, Russia’s liberals were unable to construct a broad ideological narrative with the aim of appealing to a larger portion of the electorate. Instead, like the centre-right in Poland, the inability to present a unified front may have contributed to the Russian liberal parties’ electoral decline.

Problems of internal cohesion, organisational problems and strategic errors have also been identified as factors in the decline of the liberal parties, particularly in the case of Yabloko (White, 2006; Hale, 2004). Several key figures left the party between 1995 and 2001, having clashed with Yavlinsky over organisational issues, for co-operating with other parties or for accepting governmental posts.¹² However, such departures received only fleeting media attention, and whilst they may have diverted the party’s attention from more pressing concerns, they were unlikely to have a lasting, damaging effect on the public perception of Yabloko. Indeed one analyst, referring to the departure in 2001 of Vyacheslav Igrunov, seen by some as second-in-line to Yavlinsky, suggested that his loss together with his followers may have proved beneficial in the long term, freeing the party from further internal battles (V. Pribylovsky, personal communication, March 11, 2002). Strategic errors, particularly during elections campaigns, were, however, more damaging to Yabloko. In 1999, the party was unable to formulate a clear policy on the conflict in Chechnya, thereby failing to attract the support of those opposed to the war whilst leaving itself open to accusations (notably from Chubais) of being soft on terrorism (White, 2006, p. 111-113; Hale, 2004, p. 1010-1014). In 2003, campaigning in the shadow of the Yukos affair and very much on the back foot, the party’s election broadcasts were ill-conceived, two key themes being Yavlinsky’s involvement in the 500 Days programme (aimed at bringing about rapid market reform in the dying days of the Soviet Union) and the party’s claim to be acting in the name of the intellectual elite. Such messages were no more likely to find favour with the electorate than the images of SPS leaders flying in first-class luxury.

10 Data taken from a Public Opinion Foundation survey, 25 September, 2003. The survey details are no longer available on the internet but the headline figures are cited in White (2006, p. 96).

11 Yabloko received 4.32%, SPS 3.97%

12 For more details of Yabloko’s internal divisions see White (2006, p. 162-165) and Hale (2004, p. 1003-1009).

Questions of cohesion, strategy and unity remain priorities for Russian liberals in Putin's third term. As will be noted below, there is some evidence, in the form of the Solidarity movement and the Party of People's Freedom, that Russia's traditionally fractious liberals may well be able to overcome their differences and unite in a meaningful sense.

The crisis of Russian liberalism: An outcome of electoral authoritarianism

It is argued above that whilst political culture is not an entirely persuasive variable, the negative associations with the economic reforms of the 1990s, the failure of the liberals to unite, and strategic errors can be seen as factors which go some way to explaining the crisis of liberalism in Russia. They do not, however, tell us the whole story. To understand fully the decline in support for liberal parties in Russia, we must consider the political context in which these parties have operated.

Throughout the 1990s the academic consensus was that whilst Russian democracy was badly flawed, the system was essentially democratic. Since the turn of the century, however, there has been growing recognition that the Russian regime is neither democratic nor wholly authoritarian but is located at some indeterminate point in between. Categorising Russia's political system as 'non-democratic' is hardly contentious. In 1999, the Freedom House *Freedom in the World* report ranked Russia as 'partly free' with a score of 4 for political rights and civil liberties (countries with rankings of 1.0-2.0 being considered 'free' and those with rankings of 6.0-7.0 categorised as 'not free'). By 2005, Russia was ranked 'not free' (with a political rights score of 6 and a civil liberties score of 5), a category in which it has remained since.

A conceptualisation of the Russian political system under Putin increasingly used by a number of scholars is the 'electoral authoritarian' model.¹³ Such a regime may hold multiparty elections, but liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness are violated to such a degree as to negate the democratic nature of electoral politics. Elections merely become instruments of authoritarian rule (Schedler, 2006). An electoral authoritarian regime requires compliant institutions: legislatures which act as rubber-stamping chambers; a neutered judiciary; a restricted media; and non-competitive elections (Schedler, 2010, p. 71-73). These features can be clearly identified in the Russian case. Since 2000, the Russian State Duma has become increasingly subordinate to executive power. The numerical dominance of United Russia has effectively ensured a stifling of debate on the floor of the chamber and control of parliamentary committees. Former president Dmitry Medvedev may have spoken about combating 'legal nihilism' (Sakwa, 2011a, p. 285), but the judicial process remains highly politicised and is enforced selectively. The media is constrained to a far greater extent than ever it was in the 1990s. Self-censorship is prevalent and most journalists have little option but to toe the editorial line, which is itself determined by pressure and interference from the regime (Oates & McCormack, 2010, p. 132). Finally, elections have become predictable affairs with only the margin of victory for United Russia rather than the actual outcome being in doubt. Opposition parties have been marginalised, leaving elections to be contested between Kremlin-loyal and 'semi-opposition' parties.¹⁴

13 See, for instance: Gel'man (2012), Ross (2005,2011), Golosov (2011), Brown (2009), White (2012), Hein (2011). Many of the contributions to the special issue on party politics in Russia in *East European Politics*, 28 (4), 2012, are based on the premise that the Russian political system can best be conceptualised as 'electoral authoritarian'.

14 *Spravedlivaya Rossiya [A Just Russia]* and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) can be seen as 'Kremlin-loyal' parties. Some may disagree with the characterisation of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) as 'semi-opposition'. However, as March (2002, pp. 240-248) argues the CPRF has provided 'cosmetic' opposition under Putin, using the rhetoric of opposition but at the same time willing to do deals with the regime behind closed doors. As Gel'man (2011, p 13) points out, the CPRF appears to have no clear political goals beyond preserving their current status. For a conceptualisation of the role of political parties in Russia's electoral authoritarian system see White (2012).

Under Putin's presidency, Yabloko and SPS were effectively managed out of existence, starved of media access and compelled to compete against parties with access to massive administrative resources. On occasions, they were the victims of electoral manipulation and outright fraud. The 2003 State Duma election effectively marked the end of both parties as parliamentary forces and provides an example of the constraints under which the liberal parties operated. The elections were contested in the wake of Khodorkovsky's arrest, an event that greatly damaged the two parties both financially and politically. The Yukos affair dominated the 2003 campaign. The 'Chechnya card', so crucial to the success of both United Russia and Putin in 1999 and 2000, was replaced by the 'oligarchs' conspiracy'. At a time of popular *schadenfreude*, when most ordinary citizens were "rubbing their hands in glee" at the crackdown on some of Russia's richest business elite, the regime was choosing to "stir up the embers of the people's loathing of the new rich" (Voshchanov 2003). It was in this context that Yabloko and SPS contested the election against parties which, in the main, included strong anti-oligarch rhetoric in their programmes.

The fact that the liberal parties failed to revive their fortunes after 2003 is due, in part, to regime machinations. Both Yabloko and SPS, until its demise in 2008, were regularly refused registration to compete in regional elections, often on the basis of minor irregularities whilst the established parliamentary parties faced less rigorous scrutiny.¹⁵ Shortly after the disbanding of SPS, the party's leader Nikita Belykh was, in effect, co-opted by the regime with the offer of the governorship of Kirov. At the time, Belykh was seen as a likely leader of the nascent Solidarity movement and certainly opposition colleagues were hugely disappointed at his move. The creation in 2009 of *Pravoe Delo [Right Cause]*, a Kremlin-friendly, constructive opposition party suggested that the regime required both a supportive liberal party (the role originally envisaged for SPS) and a means of diverting potential support for Yabloko.¹⁶ Finally, Putin's consistent discourse about the mistakes made during the 1990s served to undermine support for the liberal parties who were associated in the eyes of many of the electorate with flawed and unpopular economic reforms.

Ultimately, Yabloko and SPS suffered because they were both *opposition* parties. As Schedler (2002, p. 42-43) notes, a key characteristic of an electoral authoritarian regime is its strategy of excluding and fragmenting political opposition, with the aim of not simply restricting but closing off any potential opportunities. It has been clear since the *Orange Revolution* in Ukraine in 2004-5 that the Kremlin has not been prepared to tolerate any possible opening for opposition forces, liberal or otherwise, and has created a political environment in which opposition parties are unable to compete fairly with pro-regime parties. This lack of tolerance has manifested itself in the nurturing of the *Nashi* movement, created to counter the type of youth opposition movements that had successfully operated in Ukraine. It manifested itself in the creation of a second pro-Kremlin party, A Just Russia, positioned slightly to the left of United Russia and designed to consolidate support for the government and president in parliament. And finally it has manifested itself in the marginalisation of liberal political parties. The decline of Russian liberalism is, therefore, more about the regime's desire to eliminate meaningful opposition than reflecting a lack of support for liberal-democratic values in Russia. As Gel'man (2008, p. 927) argues, the demise of party competition under Putin and the Kremlin's desire to exert comprehensive control over political parties may even lead to the eventual extinction of opposition parties.

The hastening of the electoral decline of Russia's liberal parties can, therefore, be seen as an outcome of the establishment of electoral authoritarianism in Russia. The liberals are no longer a force in Russian politics because the Kremlin did not want them to be a force. In the early period

15 A report on the regional elections of March 2009 by the independent election monitoring organisation Golos found that the overwhelming majority of de-registered parties and candidates were from the opposition (GOLOS, 2009).

16 In 2011, the billionaire oligarch, Mikhail Prokhorov took control of the party with the backing of President Medvedev. Prokhorov was ousted from the party in the autumn of 2011 after making criticisms of the government and United Russia and hinting that he would take the party in a more independent direction.

of Putin's presidency, the parties were tolerated and, in the case of SPS, positively promoted. The Kremlin may have liked the idea of a small contingent of liberals in the Duma to provide democratic legitimacy and, more practically, because they were rather better at drafting legislation than many of the counterparts in the other Duma factions. However, by 2003 when the dominance of United Russia in the parliament was complete the Kremlin felt it no longer needed the support of the liberals. Pressure was brought to bear on SPS to merge into a new 'safe' liberal party following its adoption of a more overtly oppositionist stance under Belykh's leadership, whilst Yabloko is tolerated by the regime so long as it continues to refuse to cooperate with the 'non-systemic' opposition.¹⁷

Where now for Russia's liberals?

On May 7th, 2012, Vladimir Putin was inaugurated for his third term as President of the Russian Federation. From the previous December, liberal leaders and activists had played a major role in the organisation of the unprecedented, large-scale street protests that took place primarily in Moscow but also in other major Russian cities. Although there was a strong anti-Putin element to the protests,¹⁸ the main focus of the protesters was for free and fair elections following accusations of electoral manipulation and falsification during the elections to the State Duma at the beginning of December 2011. The *For Fair Elections* protests brought together people from across the political spectrum together with many thousands of politically non-aligned protesters. Although some nationalist speakers were shouted down and some speakers treated more respectfully than others, the clear overall mood was that highlighting flawed elections and holding the regime to account was more important than disputes between different political factions.

Whilst the protests were not a vehicle for a single political grouping, the Solidarity movement took the lead in organising meetings and mobilising support. Solidarity can be seen as the first successful attempt to bring together the previously fractious strands of Russian liberalism. The genesis of the new movement was a conference on the *Agenda for the Democratic Movement* in April 2008 attended by members of Yabloko and SPS, together with activists from smaller parties and movements. The 'united democratic movement', Solidarity was officially founded in December 2008, consisting of former SPS members who refused to join the merger to create Right Cause and Yabloko members who had become disillusioned with what they perceived as their party's increasingly diluted opposition stance and the leadership's refusal to co-operate with SPS. Although eschewing a formal leadership structure, Solidarity's two best-known figures were initially former Deputy Prime Minister, Boris Nemtsov, and former chess grandmaster, Garry Kasparov.¹⁹ Reflecting the fact that Solidarity brings together representatives of Russia's two distinctive strands of liberalism, of the thirty members of the movement's political council, seven are former members of SPS, five were formerly in Yabloko and four are members of Kasparov's Citizen's Front organisation.

Although some tensions do exist within Solidarity,²⁰ the movement has held together remarkably well to date given the troubled history of post-Soviet liberalism. One activist (personal communication, November 5, 2010) explained that this sense of 'solidarity within Solidarity' was born of necessity:

17 It is widely thought that the regime encourages the channelling of funds to Yabloko, sufficient to keep the party afloat but not enough to allow it to fight effective campaigns. See White (2012, p. 219).

18 Up until September 2011 it had remained unclear whether then President Medvedev would seek to serve a second term or whether Putin would return as the regime's candidate and certain victor in the presidential elections of March 2012. The announcement at United Russia's congress on 24th September 2011 that Putin would accept the party's presidential nomination had already served to crystallize opposition to the regime.

19 Kasparov has not played a prominent role in the organisation since its inception.

20 As was revealed in a series of interviews with Solidarity activists and the author in July and November 2010

Just imagine that a British Labour Party supporter and a Conservative Party supporter met each other by chance in a weird, wild country like Russia. What would they do? They'd go to the pub or for a cup of tea together. This is the same in our movement. We are all people of basically democratic views and we are forced to be together to work against the current regime. We share the same broad goals and accept the methods of our work and as a result we feel comfortable being together.

Similarly, Ilya Yashin (personal communication, November 2, 2010) accepts that whilst he enjoys a close working relationship with Boris Nemtsov, they do not necessarily agree on ideological and policy issues:

[Nemtsov] had a birthday party a few months ago and one of the guests said, "Mr Yashin, when Mr Nemtsov is prime minister, where will you be?" Of course, I answered, "in opposition."

Solidarity, however, remains a social movement rather than a political party and has a relatively small membership, estimated at around 3,000. Whilst it has developed a regional network of activists with over fifty branches throughout the Russian Federation, there has been little desire from within its ranks to transform itself into a political party, largely for fear of exacerbating existing ideological divisions but also because its activists tend to see its primary role as one of mobilising popular support for a broad anti-regime movement.

Further attempts have been made to unite the disparate liberal opposition forces. The People's Freedom Party, known in Russia by its abbreviated name, PARNAS, was founded in December 2010 by Boris Nemtsov of Solidarity and the leaders of three other existing political movements; Mikhail Kasyanov of the Russian People's Democratic Union, Vladimir Ryzhkov of the Republican Party of Russia, and Vladimir Milov of Democratic Choice. Like Nemtsov, the three leaders, although clearly aligned to the liberal-democratic opposition, have experience of working in or close to the government.²¹ Few in the new party believed that it would be allowed to register to compete in the parliamentary elections of 2011. Moreover, many Solidarity activists viewed any attempt to do so (involving the accumulation of 45,000 members in half of Russia's regions, the minimum requirement for registration) as being a drain on valuable resources. Nevertheless, the party went ahead with the project in the fairly certain knowledge that registration would be denied. As Ilya Yashin (personal communication, November 2, 2010) stated:

When we don't take part in elections our opponents say, 'why do you criticise when you didn't even try to take part in this election?' So we will do everything to register the party and I am sure they will refuse us and after this we will have the moral right to criticise the system.

As expected, in June 2011 the Justice Ministry refused to register PARNAS, citing alleged discrepancies with the party's statutes and the membership list submitted. Since its foundation and despite its failure to become registered PARNAS had achieved opinion poll ratings of between two to three

21 Kasyanov was Prime Minister under Putin from May 2000 until his dismissal together with the entire cabinet in February 2004. In 2006, he co-founded the Other Russia coalition with Garry Kasparov. Milov had been Deputy Minister for energy from December 2001 to October 2002, when he resigned after President Putin vetoed his plans to restructure the state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom. For much of the 1990s, Vladimir Ryzhkov served as a Deputy of the lower chamber of the Russian parliament, the State Duma, as a member of Russia's Choice (1993-95) and Our Home is Russia (1995-99), both pro-presidential parties. In 1998, Ryzhkov turned down the offer of the post of Deputy Prime Minister for social issues. After the failure of Our Home is Russia to pass the threshold for parliamentary representation in 1999, but having regained his single-mandate seat, Ryzhkov briefly joined the pro-Putin Unity faction before being expelled for refusing to vote for presidential bills in the Duma. Ryzhkov remained in the Duma as an independent deputy and was re-elected as an independent for the Barnaul region in 2003. After the electoral law was changed to require all candidates to be elected from lists submitted by political parties, Ryzhkov's ten year tenure as a parliamentary deputy came to an end in 2007.

percent.²² Whilst these ratings appear modest, in the spring of 2011 they were higher than those for Right Cause and Yabloko and only a point behind those of A Just Russia, all of whom were registered parties. At the time of writing, the future for PARNAS was unclear and it remains to be seen whether something essentially created as a vehicle for exposing the perceived inequities of the political and electoral systems can be transformed into a functioning, institutionalised party capable of competing effectively in elections.

After the December 2011 parliamentary elections, the Russian liberals have maintained a high degree of unity by focusing on procedure rather than policy. The challenge will be to continue to do so throughout a third Putin presidency. As van de Walle (2006) argues, the unification of opposition, although often seen as a watershed in the ousting of an incumbent, is not just a *cause* of transition but is also a *consequence* of the growing *probability* of transition. Opposition cohesion increases as an opposition victory appears more likely. Transition is a ‘tipping game’ in which opposition co-ordination plays a key role. While ever the incumbent appears unassailable, as Putin has consistently appeared, opposition cohesion is unlikely. Faced with an unassailable incumbent, individual opposition actors tend to choose the secondary gains of minor opposition party leadership to the larger but more uncertain gains associated with being leader of all opposition (van de Walle, 2006, p. 77-86). This has certainly typified the development of the Russian liberal movement. However, if the incumbent begins to lose some of the sheen of unassailability, indicated by declining personal poll ratings and weakened electoral showings by supporting parties, then opposition cohesion, and with it, prospects for a successful opposition challenge increase. The heightened degree of opposition unity during the winter of 2011-12, coinciding with a marked decline in support for Putin, Medvedev and the United Russia party should not altogether surprise us.

Conclusion

Although a partially incisive analysis of the decline in support for liberal parties in Russia, Khodorkovsky’s treatise remains flawed. It is argued here that the notion that Russian political culture can help to explain this decline is not borne out by the evidence. A significant proportion of the Russian electorate has supported liberal parties in the past and continues to hold liberal-democratic ideals. Khodorkovsky’s assertions that the performance of some of Russia’s key liberal actors during the 1990s, when they “turned a blind eye to social realities when conducting sweeping privatisation” (Khodorkovsky, 2004), and their inability to create a united liberal-democratic party are certainly more plausible. The liberals (particularly key actors such as Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov) remain tainted, rightly or wrongly, by their association with the economic reforms of the 1990s. Should PARNAS crystallise into a functioning political party with the capacity and the ability to compete electorally it may be prudent to select its primary leaders from a generation free from associations with the Yeltsin regime. The question of unity remains a serious challenge for any new liberal force in Russian politics. Although both Solidarity and PARNAS provide tentative evidence of the ability of a broad liberal alliance to hold together, neither has yet been challenged by the need to put forward a coherent and ideologically broad political platform. Moreover, the Yabloko party continues to remain outside the alliance, even to the extent of banishing party members for participating with Solidarity.²³

An object lesson in the dangers of not developing a unified institutional centre and the failure to provide cohesive and disciplined leadership can be given by the Polish centre-right. Solidarity Electoral Action was briefly able to unite the Polish centre-right and was rewarded with electoral victory in 1997. This was to be its high water mark, however. It remained a loose conglomerate of various

22 Data from the independent polling agency the Levada Centre (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011062904.html>

23 Both Ilya Yashin and Andrei Piontkovsky were excluded from Yabloko after they became involved with Solidarity.

parties and movements. Marian Krzaklewski, the architect of Solidarity Electoral Action, had called for all existing parties to dissolve and create a single united party, but this was resisted by leaders of smaller parties fearful of losing their identity in an organisation dominated by the Solidarity trade union (Szczerbiak, 2004, p. 69). This pattern has been replicated in Russia where three of the PARNAS leaders still head their own micro-parties.²⁴ As Szczerbiak argues, Solidarity Electoral Action ultimately failed not because of ideological differences, which were largely surmountable, but because it was unable to resolve the issue of unity and remained weakly institutionalised. Once in government and with popularity ratings in decline, individual parties with little institutional incentive to stay deserted the bloc. Szczerbiak (2004) refers to Solidarity Electoral Action as representing the Polish centre-right's best and possibly last hope. It is tempting to see PARNAS in similar terms and, whilst it may still be able to develop into a cohesive and institutionalised party, the comparisons with its Polish counterpart – weak institutionalisation and inadequate political leadership – are striking.

Drawing on Khodorkovsky's critique, the ability to shake off associations with the hated economic reforms of the 1990s and the creation a unified cohesive liberal-democratic party are important tasks for the Russian liberals, and it remains within their power to address these issues. The most significant challenge they face, however, is one over which they have little control: surviving and competing in an electoral authoritarian system. Nevertheless, whilst elections in an electoral authoritarian system may be entirely one-sided affairs existing primarily to provide legitimacy for the regime they may, as van de Walle (2006) suggests, provide opportunities too. The challenge for Russia's liberal opposition is to focus on achieving institutional cohesion and unity in readiness for such an opportunity.

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²⁴ Mikhail Kasyanov leads the Russian People's Democratic Union, Vladimir Ryzhkov the Republican Party of Russia (RPR) and Vladimir Milov Democratic Choice. In June 2012 RPR and PARNAS were formally merged to become RPR-PARNAS.

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