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SURVEY: RUSSIA

Who needs democracy?

The parliamentary sort is dead, and civil society is only just beginning to come alive

"I'LL tell you why we have no democracy," says Boris Nemtsov, suddenly dropping his customary nonchalant swagger and looking serious. "We spilled too little blood for democracy."

It is a bright January afternoon, a few weeks after the election that wiped Mr. Nemtsov's liberal-democratic party, the Union of Right Forces (SPS), off the political map. Yabloko, the party of social democracy since the first Duma in 1993, was extinguished too. Both fell short of the 5% needed to form a Duma block. The pro-Kremlin United Russia got just over two-thirds of the seats, giving it total control. Two other Kremlin stooge parties, the long-running Liberal Democrats (nasty nationalists) and the newly created Motherland (slightly less nasty nationalists), both of which were formed to cater for hardline voters, shared the rest of the seats with the fading Communists, the only group that might conceivably count as an opposition.

The state-run media favoured United Russia; one channel showed, in full, Mr. Putin's 29-minute speech to party activists on the eve of the campaign (itself of dubious legality, because he is not allowed to campaign).

Regional leaders also pulled out all the stops, the most eager ones claiming turnouts 20-30% higher than the national average. There were reports of government employees being obliged to vote for the Kremlin's party.

That may have helped to keep the liberal parties below the 5% threshold, but their real problem is that nobody wanted to vote for them. "They are the ones to blame," says Alexander Yakovlev, who as Mikhail Gorbachev's right-hand man helped engineer the end of the Soviet regime, "for not working on the creation of a social-democratic base, for not attracting those who should have been on their side doctors, teachers, pensioners."

Many members of SPS and Yabloko agree. For years they played elite-level politics. They often supported the government's economic reforms, so voters saw little to set them apart from those in power. Last year, some now think, the two parties could have tried to win over the growing middle class on issues such as private health care and education. Instead, they wasted their time and money attacking each other.

And, perhaps most damaging of all, voters associated them with oligarchs such as Mr. Khodorkovsky, who openly financed both parties. With the Yukos affair unfolding in the months leading up to it, the Duma election became the voters' first chance to show their anger over the plunder of the 1990s.

All the pro-Kremlin parties capitalised on Mr. Khodorkovsky's arrest.

Indeed, the fear of a new rise of nationalism, stirred by Motherland's and the Liberal Democrats' strong results, may be overblown. Their virulently anti-oligarch line, with calls for heavy windfall taxes on the oil companies an extreme version of current government policy probably appealed more to voters than their slogan "Russia for Russians".

Liberals wring their hands. The elderly but still spry Mr. Yakovlev, working doggedly to publish 60 volumes of secret Soviet records even as the FSB gradually cuts off his access to the archives, reminisces: "I, like a romantic, like a naif, fought for the creation of parliamentarianism, so that there would be alternatives, so that people could choose. I overestimated the readiness of people for that choice...But what happened after 1991 was never in my imagination." Mr. Nemtsov, equally romantically, argues that had more people died fighting for democracy, as they did in the American civil war or the French revolution, Russians would defend it harder now. "People don't look a gift democracy in the mouth," he quips.

Parliamentary democracy, then, is dead. United Russia, a collection of political vehicles for various national and regional leaders, is by no means homogeneous, but its internal debates are held behind closed doors instead of on the floor of the Duma. The leaders of Yabloko and SPS are either in denial or in other jobs (including government ones). A "2008 Committee" has been formed to fight for clean elections next time round, but it is an elite talking-shop, not a popular movement.

Is the Kremlin cut off from the people? Not entirely. Ella Pamfilova, a former social-security minister who in 1994 broke with Boris Yeltsin, in 2002 became head of Mr. Putin's human-rights commission, which also includes bona-fide human-rights activists. She thinks that in principle the president does believe in human rights, even press freedom.

Among her successes she cites a bill now being drafted to create a civilian inspection of prisons, draft amendments to restrict officials' power to mess businesses around, and better conditions for Chechen war refugees in tent camps. Other lobbyists have won such things as legislation against human trafficking. An American-Russian lobby group, the Transatlantic Partnership Against AIDS, is beginning to make political and business leaders aware how disastrous the disease could become. Mr. Putin's nomination of Vladimir Lukin, one of Yabloko's top men, as his human-rights ombudsman is another good sign.

But this sort of "civil society" is a co-opted one, say other activists. "You can achieve certain concrete things," explains Tatiana Lokshina of the Moscow-Helsinki Group, a leading human-rights body, "but it allows the authorities to ignore the real, big issues, anything that's painful to the state." Those who protest about the war in Chechnya, nuclear waste and labour rights face all manner of harassment and threats. Yet perhaps their worst enemy, she says, is something much more powerful. "Putin is truly very popular. In many respects we're fighting against society itself." And for Russian society, democracy and human rights are not a high priority right now.

However, Mr. Putin's popularity is not quite what it seems. Although polls show his personal approval rating to be a solid 80% or so, far fewer people think his government has done well on most individual

issues, even on the economy. Nor are they too confident that it will do better in future. His trick, borrowed from the tsars of old, is to shift the blame on to his underlings: state television frequently shows him sternly ticking off hapless officials for some failure or other. But now that he is seen to be more in control, he may get more of the blame if things go wrong.

If he does, the opposition parties are in no shape to capitalise on it. Mr. Putin's succession, and quite possibly his successor's succession, will be decided within the Kremlin. (He insists that he will not change the constitution to seek a third term, and many believe him.) A political opposition will have to be built over many years, from the grassroots. But the grassroots is already becoming an interesting place.

In Ryazan, a three-hour train ride south-east of Moscow, Grigory Shvedov is walking around with a digital camera, taking photographs of every single lamp-post he can find. The lamp-posts display posters about the war in Chechnya, soldiers' memorials, abandoned widows and children, each emblazoned with an accusatory "How much?" Mr. Shvedov records how well each poster has been placed and how it looks from the street.

Don't get despondent, get even

Ryazan is the site of one of Russia's first scientific experiments in civic activism. After a decade of conflict in Chechnya and a series of terrorist attacks in Russian cities, Russians have no sympathy for Chechen rebels, and little for ordinary Chechens: racism runs deep, and the media subtly encourage it. Memorial, a leading human-rights group, has decided to try instead to get people worked up about what the war is costing them: the taxes they pay, the sons and brothers who die serving there, and the lies that their government tells them about it.

This should be an explosive issue. Officially the second of the two wars in Chechnya, starting in 1999, has killed around 5,000 soldiers; according to the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, a nationwide network of voluntary help groups, the real figure is nearer 12,000. The deaths continue even though officials insist that the "military phase" is over.

The size of the military budget and even the military presence in Chechnya are secret. Hazing and brutality in the army are rife, possibly killing hundreds of soldiers each year and causing many more to desert or go insane. Last winter there was an outcry when some young recruits died after officers had made them stand outside without coats for hours.

Young men go to enormous lengths to avoid the draft, paying bribes of \$3,000-5,000 if they can find the money, and spending as long as possible in education (the draft ends at 27) if they cannot. That alone produces an extraordinary economic distortion: between 1992 and 2000 the number of colleges in Russia increased by 75%, but many of them, education experts say, are of poor quality, there to satisfy their students' hunger for staying alive as much as their thirst for knowledge. Those who do serve often come back brutalised and alcoholic.

Many join the police or other agencies, with the result, says Ms. Lokshina, that police brutality is becoming more widespread; there are even signs that torture techniques invented in Chechnya are spreading elsewhere.

So it is no surprise that 87% of Russians have heard of the Soldiers' Mothers, according to a poll by Human Rights Watch. Relatives of missing soldiers, and veterans and widows who cannot get their benefits, invariably turn to their local committee. That makes for a powerful civic force. In 1995 the union collected 1.5m signatures against the first war in Chechnya.

But campaigns have made no headway and apathy has set in. These days anti-war demonstrations in the centre of Moscow pull in only a few hundred people. "We've exhausted everything," says Valentina Melnikova, the energetic, motherly chairwoman of the union. "The people in power won't react. They were made by TV. They're virtual people." Earlier this year the union formed a political party, hoping that a handful of Duma deputies might give it more clout. But the omens are not good: a small-businessmen's party formed for the most recent Duma elections polled only 0.3%.

Mr. Shvedov, about half the age of his fellow board members at Memorial, is trying a different approach. With help from American advisers, he and the enthusiastic young activists at Memorial's Ryazan chapter designed a campaign. They hired a local sociologist to pinpoint the sensitive issues in another city, the campaign chosen was about the plight of orphans, to encourage foster-parenting and road-test the material with focus groups. They found, for instance, that people react badly to posters showing how many schoolbooks one tank shell would buy, because they do not think the army should be kept short of funds, but that they are moved by images of soldiers' suffering. The activists plan to hold public meetings, produce a mini-newspaper, distribute stickers, maybe launch a letter-writing drive. They have exact targets for how many people should see their campaign, how many newspaper articles should appear about it, how many of those should be positive, by how many percentage points public opinion should change.

Compared with the wordy open letters and principled stands of the Soviet-era dissidents who still dominate Russian civil society, it is all very 21st-century, as is Mr. Shvedov's language. "The information space has changed a lot," he says, pointing to the profusion of advertising that his posters have to compete with. "When there are a dozen signs and logos on a street corner you can't hang a 40-page report there. You need commercial methods of delivering information and tracking its effect on the clients." If the pilot scheme shows those methods to be successful, Memorial will think about choosing an issue for a national campaign.

Modern activism could help to make Russian democracy grow. As Russians become better off, they are getting keener to challenge the authorities whether it is over Chechnya, pollution or education standards. But to keep doing this they will need funding. And right now, Russian philanthropists are scared. After Mr. Khodorkovsky's arrest, every organisation supported by his Open Russia Foundation was visited by tax inspectors. Some NGOs had been discussing a similar endowment with the

Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the main business lobby group, but "all that is suspended now," says Ms. Lokshina.

Foreign support for activists is discouraged too. America's Agency for International Development, one of the biggest donors, has provisionally agreed to pull out of Russia by 2007. Last year the Peace Corps and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's mission to Chechnya left after their operating agreements were cancelled. The Open Society Institute, an international pro-democracy foundation run by George Soros, a famous financier, closed its Moscow office after its landlord demanded a tenfold increase in rent and sent in a gang of thugs. "For everything that we do now, we have to think about how easy it would be to drive us out," says the Moscow director of one western agency. "The willingness of people in power to take different sides has all but vanished." Mr. Putin has plenty of ideas about how to engage with the West, but taking handouts is not one of them.