

Political Zombies Are Mounting Comebacks

By [Alexy Bratersky](#)

September 28, 2011



Union of Right Forces co-founder Chubais, left, and Yabloko co-founder Yavlinsky, second right, in a 2003 photo. **Igor Tabakov**

Vladimir Putin's bid for the presidency is expected to catapult him back to the top spot after four years in the White House. But then, he never really left the Kremlin — unlike many other politicians who have announced comebacks in recent months.

The list includes Yabloko's Grigory Yavlinsky, Rodina's Dmitry Rogozin, the liberal Union of Right Forces and even Andrei Bogdanov, a leader of the behind-the-scenes political battles that ousted cheeky newcomer Mikhail Prokhorov as Right Cause leader.

The resurgent shadows of the political past indicate that the country's party system — rigid and Kremlin-controlled — lacks diversity, independent analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said.

But others said the trend is stillborn because the only people interested in reviving their old

careers are the politicians themselves.

Nikita Belykh, the country's most senior liberal who serves as Kirov governor, [pointed out](#) the main problem in commenting on Right Cause's collapse this month, writing on his blog that when striving for a strong party, it makes sense to build from the ground up — something the returning politicians are loath to do.

Union of Right Forces

Other than Putin, the Union of Right Forces is the most recent comeback hopeful. Its former members announced plans to revive the party in mid-September, days after the Right Cause convention that ended with Prokhorov's ouster.

The party, created in 1999 and a vehicle for liberals led first by Boris Nemtsov and later by Belykh, merged into Right Cause at its inception in 2008 under apparent Kremlin pressure.

Its former members mostly sided with Prokhorov in his clash with Bogdanov, which left Bogdanov in charge and Right Cause without any hope of clearing the 7 percent threshold to win seats in the December elections to the State Duma.

Rosnano chief Anatoly Chubais, architect of the 1990s privatizations and co-founder of the Union of Right Forces, gathered former party members on Sept. 21 and proposed restoring the party — apparently with the Kremlin's blessing.

The meeting was not public but was widely [reported](#) by leading newswires and media outlets, including Interfax and Gazeta.ru. The reports said the party might return after the Duma vote and run in the next elections in 2016.

"I am sure that the issue of establishing a strong, right-leaning party will become unavoidable, and liberals should be ready for it," Chubais wrote last week on his LiveJournal blog.

Further bringing himself into the spotlight, Chubais on Wednesday criticized Putin for dismissing Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, saying the prime minister was putting the economy at risk with the ouster.

Bogdanov has not commented on the possible split within Right Cause. A prominent political consultant who created several minor parties in the 1990s, he kept a low profile throughout the 2000s, surfacing twice — to deny ousted Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, now a Kremlin opponent, leadership of Right Cause in 2004, and then to run as a spoiler candidate against Dmitry Medvedev in the 2008 presidential election. He won 1.3 percent of the vote.

Bogdanov has said his takeover of Right Cause was provoked by Prokhorov's authoritarian management policies, but analysts say the incident was orchestrated by the Kremlin, which authorized Prokhorov's leadership of the party in June but later grew displeased with his work.

Yabloko

The return of Yavlinsky, who left Yabloko's leadership to Sergei Mitrokhin in 2008, was much

more prosaic. The 59-year-old politician, a former amateur boxer who made a name for himself with his economic initiatives during perestroika, was elected to lead Yabloko's electoral list for the Duma elections earlier this month. Mitrokhin backed the decision.

The 2007 Duma elections left the country without public politics, "but now they might be back, and I'm going to participate," Yavlinsky said during a party convention on Sept. 12.

Yabloko, which garnered 1.57 percent of the vote in 2007, can count on 10 to 12 percent this year, Yavlinsky said.

Rodina

Rogozin's comeback was the trickiest of all — and the first to be botched. The media were full of reports of his looming return for weeks, saying he would serve as frontman for a "civilized nationalist movement" at the elections and lead his old party, Rodina, now part of A Just Russia, at the polls.

Rogozin, 47, Russia's envoy to NATO, topped the Rodina electoral list in 2003. It was a leftist party at the time, but he rebranded it into a nationalist one for the Moscow City Duma vote in 2005, possibly with the Kremlin's blessing. However, the party grew too popular, and in 2006 the Kremlin merged it into A Just Russia, a spoiler for the Communists, and awarded Rogozin a sinecure in Brussels.

Rogozin's new public movement (not a party), Rodina-Congress of Russian Communities, was registered in August and proceeded to join Putin's All-Russia People's Front, an election group affiliated with the ruling United Russia party.

Rogozin gave a heated nationalist speech in early September at an international political forum in Yaroslavl attended by Medvedev but announced two weeks later that he would not give up his NATO job. He also urged his supporters to side with United Russia.

Gazeta.ru, citing sources it said were close to Rogozin, reported that he had asked for the post of Duma deputy speaker as a reward for campaigning for United Russia and against A Just Russia, but the authorities had declined. A Just Russia has fallen out of favor with the Kremlin for stealing votes from United Russia.

What's Next

Although Rodina and the Union of Right Forces are at opposite ends of the political spectrum, analysts and political activists interviewed by The Moscow Times downplayed the parties' futures by citing similar proverbs.

"You can't swim in the same lake twice. You can't get the old Rodina back," said Yevgeny Roizman, an anti-drug activist who was in Rodina's Duma faction in the early 2000s.

Incidentally, Roizman joined Right Cause at Prokhorov's request and quit alongside him.

"You shouldn't pour new wine into old wineskins," Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said about the Union of Right Forces.

"A revival of the old guard is needed by the old guard itself," Mukhin said, adding that the party has no charismatic backers left other than Chubais, who remains unpopular with voters.

As for Yavlinsky, he is back because the party's rank and file think he is more likely than Mitrokhin to get them into the Duma, Mukhin said. He said their hopes might materialize because Putin feels "sympathy for the politician," but did not elaborate.

Mikhail Vinogradov, an analyst with the Petersburg Politics Foundation, a think tank, said Yabloko is seen by the Kremlin as a replacement for Right Cause able to sweep the liberal vote. But he said the party's main hope for success was access to "administrative resources," not public support.

Analysts agreed that the country's seven-party system leaves much to be desired, with neither liberals nor nationalists having serious representation in the Duma.

Calls to revive the Union of Right Forces, for one, are an attempt by the ruling elite to show that the country's political system has "diversity," said Belkovsky, the analyst.

But he said such attempts are useless under the current system, where parties are tightly controlled by the Kremlin. "It would actually be profitable for the Kremlin to loosen the reins, but the problem is that the system wouldn't be able to handle it," he said by telephone.

Nationalists, who unlike the liberals with Right Cause have no political vehicle at all, may side with United Russia by getting Rodina members to run on United Russia's ticket, Viktor Militaryov, a nationalist-leaning analyst, wrote on his LiveJournal this month. However, no prominent nationalists made the party list announced on Sept. 25.

Moreover, Rodina's history makes it unlikely that the nationalists will be allowed to influence policies within United Russia. Meanwhile, the liberal constituency will be reluctant to back any Kremlin-linked party.

"It is hard to make a fool of liberal-minded people. They belong to an educated class that don't even vote in elections," said analyst Mark Feygin, a former ally of liberal reformer and late Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, who co-implemented with Chubais the economic reforms of the 1990s.

The country needs a strong liberal party to implement unpopular economic reforms, and it needs one soon, said Belykh, who was appointed Kirov governor after leaving the Union of Right Forces in 2008. He refused to trade his governorship for Right Cause's top post this year.

Belykh said a liberal party would be doomed without public support, which can only be obtained through hard work on the grassroots level.

"We might try to build a strong party from the ground up, taking part in municipal and regional elections to build influence and reputation," he said on his blog. But, he added, no one is doing that right now.

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