The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What Did Russia's Opposition Do When Yabloko Was Thrown Off the Ballot? Keep Fighting Itself.

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August 14, 2026



Chairman of Russia's Yabloko political party Nikolai Rybakov meets with journalists and supporters after a hearing of the Supreme Court. **REUTERS / Yulia Morozova**

Imposter syndrome is a psychological pattern where a person doubts their skills, talents, or whether they deserve their success. How, then, would one describe the reverse? The Dunning-Kruger effect? Arrogance? A miscalculation?

The Russian opposition is a story of both at once, often to the same audience. It presents itself to the public at home and abroad, as well as foreign policymakers, as a government-in-waiting despite having neither the authority nor the influence it claims. When anyone asks what the movement has actually achieved through years of activism, it may brush off the question entirely, or present its powerlessness as a reason to support it. Little can be done, we are told, beyond publishing YouTube videos for audiences back home.

The Russian public is exhausted by the war. Look no further than state-controlled pollsters, whose popularity ratings for President Vladimir Putin dropped to their lowest since 2022. Peek at the mountains of content by creators, business owners and unhappy mothers describing economic and social instability. There is even a spike in online searches about how to leave Russia ahead of the mobilization Ukrainian authorities warn could take place in September.

Against this background, it is unsurprising that Yabloko, a party that spent years struggling to clear the five percent threshold needed for a seat in the State Duma, found itself at the center of the anti-Putin movement.

Then, on August 10, the Supreme Court annulled the registration of Yabloko's federal list of over 400 candidates following a lawsuit brought by the small nationalist party Rodina. The spurious grounds were foreign funding, "extremism" and copyright violations in campaign material. Five weeks before the vote, the state removed the only registered party running on "For Peace and Freedom" over something as trivial as intellectual property, in a country whose cinemas screen pirated Western films.

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Thousands of miles away, Yabloko's plight has become yet another cause for another split in an opposition that, while largely viewed as one cohesive unit by people outside Russia, is beset with division and rarely able to agree on anything.

The first camp is made up of hopeless romantics, be it the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) or any of its affiliates. Every election is an opportunity for them, the self-appointed patron saints of the "beautiful Russia of the future," to bless the next potential savior inside the country. In 2024, that was Boris Nadezhdin. In 2026, it was Yabloko.

The second is the skeptics, spearheaded by the Free Russia Forum, who are open about their view that fair elections are impossible in Russia and thus consider the main meaningful resistance against the Kremlin to be the Ukrainian army. In a letter signed by its members, the group asserted that pinning their hopes on any one candidate or party was naive at best and at worst even benefits the Kremlin.

Both camps have lost more to this regime than most of their critics ever will. My quarrel is not with who they are, but with what their methods keep producing.

It would be unfair to say nobody among them understands the public they address. Plenty do and some even agree with them. Alexander Shtefanov, a documentarian designated a "foreign agent" for filming in occupied Ukraine to disprove the Kremlin's claims to be denazifying the country, condemned the annexation of Crimea and the invasion, yet opposes returning Crimea to Ukraine and paying reparations. That is not a fringe position among the Russian public. While Navalny's demands for reparations were cut from the Russian version his memoir for "editorial reasons," Shtefanov merely says the quiet part out loud.

Sure, the FBK views corruption as the essence of the current evils. But would Putin's regime not be more effective had it been non-corrupt? And what proud Russian patriot is going to

rally behind fellow brethren who wish to arm a country he was for years taught to see as lesser in its essence and an enemy meant to be destroyed?

Because yes, the public is tired of the war, but not because Ukrainian blood is being shed or international law violated. They are tired because Ukraine is now able to strike back. Support for the war held relatively steady for years, until now. Many had no qualms about vacationing in Crimea, or buying the stolen properties of Ukrainian families from Mariupol. Yet now, when queuing at a petrol station (something Ukrainians have had to do before) is becoming a fact of life, we are flooded with videos of tearful apolitical bloggers, letting us know that they simply "can't handle it anymore."

In 2024, the exiled opposition threw its weight behind Nadezhdin — and Nadezhdin was disqualified. In 2026, it threw its weight behind Yabloko — and now Yabloko is off the ballot. Twice now, the same move. Yabloko's chairman spent the run-up to the hearing trying to distance the party from "unwanted" support, in what looked very much like a last attempt to survive.

The Kremlin's supporters were thus handed the gift of having their asinine views that any domestic opposition is something foreign and purchased reinforced. Granted, Yabloko would very likely have been removed somehow anyway, but the argument was never that the FBK's endorsement was decisive. What matters is that it was issued by people carrying none of the risk on behalf of people carrying all of it, while spending the majority of the time fighting with each other online. After Nadezhdin, no changes have been made to a tactic that keeps on resulting in failure.

Meanwhile, the keyboard wars continue. When Andrey Volna, a Russian surgeon volunteering for Ukraine, weighed in, Ilya Yashin dismissed his opinion, stating that no one cares what Volna and his colleagues support "in [their] snake pit." Set that beside the question of what Yashin's own camp has done for Ukraine, Russian audiences, domestic and international, are yet again witnessing their leaders fighting over the hide of a bear that isn't even dead yet.

Boris Bondarev, the only diplomat who resigned in 2022 over the invasion, described the opposition's behavior best: suggesting changes to the old methods, which are clearly not working, only earns the whines of "And what specifically are you proposing? Do you have a ready plan? No? Then don't get in the way."

Even pro-Kremlin bloggers have noticed. As Sergey Markov, ironically declared a "foreign agent" by the very government he supports, put it: "It was the relocators who finished off the eternal genteel oppositionists." Markov is right, because the message that the government is corrupt has stopped being news to anybody even mildly engaged in Russian politics.

None of which means the skeptics are right to throw the elections under the bus. Yabloko, a party named after a fruit, caused enough of a stir for the Kremlin to deprive it of even suffering an electoral humiliation like Ksenia Sobchak in 2018, going instead to the highest court of the land, but it clearly means that something has to change.

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The legendary military strategist Carl von Clausewitz observed that popular resistance fails in isolation: it must stay diffuse rather than condense into a body an army can crush, and it must be tied to a conventional force capable of real damage. The fight against Putin is a war: asymmetric and multidimensional in its essence, taking place on the ballot, on our screens and on the frontline. All of these factors are load-bearing. Such deserves the seriousness of a well-planned campaign, because lives are at stake.

It is simply impossible to go head-to-head with an enemy whose resources dwarf your own, while lacking cohesion. But coming together asks something of each camp that neither wants to give.

From the skeptics, it asks them to end their pretense that domestic elections are pointless to discuss. Nobody is asking them to campaign. They are being asked to acknowledge that elections are happening: the state cared enough about one of the last remaining mechanisms for Russians to express their displeasure to dismantle it five weeks before the vote and to talk about it, for one cannot claim to be working toward a Putin-less future for a public and simultaneously announce that its political life does not interest you.

We who oppose the Kremlin shouldn't get overexcited about the smallest sliver of domestic hope if we don't use that same intensity of emotion to decry Western institutions for failing to enact harsh enough punishments on the Kremlin. As youths chanting "shame" outside of the Supreme Court showed, you will never appeal to a people you grind down into smithereens for practicing an innate human emotion.

And from the hopeful camp it asks the harder thing: to admit the country may not care about your core calling anywhere near as much as they need it to. What moves people, as we increasingly learn, is not accountability over the stolen billions, but the provision of modern comforts and fulfillment of its national ego.

That is the electorate. Those are the terms. And that is why the country they envision returning home to rule does not especially want them and why whoever eventually unseats Putin may not be one of them. If imperialistic self-righteousness is what prevents the goal of a prosperous Russia of the future from materializing, then perhaps avoiding the question of supporting Ukraine against its oppressor and taking a spiritual journey into oneself might be of value.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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