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## Squabbling, perceived arrogance led to failure of Russia's liberal reformers.

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MOSCOW \_ Russian liberals weren't supposed to end up quite like this.

They were once the hope of Western capitalists and advocates for democracy. But on Sunday, Russia's two reform parties were all but kicked out of the state Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, after failing to win enough votes.

How they went down wasn't pretty: squabbling, mismanaging their campaigns and turning off impoverished voters with their upper-class airs. Blocked out of Kremlin-controlled television coverage, what little of the campaign message they got out lacked focus.

By the time they melted down, they had indeed become the hope in the eyes of many Russians \_ the hope of the vulgar rich, the crooks and weak-willed intellectuals.

Without those parties \_ Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces \_ the Duma is virtually a rubber-stamp legislature for President Vladimir Putin. It's dominated by parties allied with him and houses a growing number of virulent nationalists.

"The prospect is bleak," said Masha Lipman, editor of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Pro et Contra Journal, a quarterly journal on policy affairs.

Until Sunday, a look at the two parties would have revealed the idealized New Russia: young, urban business people and intellectuals with economic sense and social awareness.

The Union of Right Forces represented big business, having pushed most for free trade and Western-style changes.

Yabloko was the party of urbanites, artists and intellectuals. It pushed for social liberalism and human rights, along with market changes, free trade and an independent judiciary.

But the two parties came to represent something else in the popular mind: privilege, corrupt wealth and arrogance. They had influence on Russian policy during a decade in which life expectancy for men in Russia fell by five years (as of 2000). Per capita national income fell by a quarter from 1992 until 1999, although it has since partially recovered.

The parties had a small but important place in parliament in past years. Before Sunday, they held just over 10 percent of the Duma's 450 seats. The Union of Right Forces had good contacts in the government because several members were top economic bureaucrats. Officials from the parties supplied Putin with ideas for many of the changes the president has carried out.

The two parties seemed like a good match. Political experts often suggested they merge to ensure getting the 5 percent of the vote necessary to stay in parliament. But the parties have long refused, focusing on their differences instead of common goals.

Even more divisive was the feuding between the leaders of the two parties \_ Anatoly Chubais of the Union of Right Forces and Grigory Yavlinsky of Yabloko.

"Two groups of democrats saying nasty things to each other," Lipman said. "The liberal constituency was disgusted."

So were working-class Russians, who were fed up with the excesses of the country's brash, decadent "oligarchs" \_ the small group of billionaires who managed to get hold of formerly state-controlled businesses for a fraction of their true worth. Ordinary Russians felt cheated as they watched the crooked and well-connected make huge sums of money from shady privatization deals.

(EDITORS: STORY CAN END HERE)

Chubais is considered the architect of such privatizations of state-owned industries under President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s. So political analysts considered it a blunder that the Union of Right Forces kept him as its leader.

Financing from oligarchs didn't help, either. Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces received money from billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former CEO of the giant Yukos oil company who's now sitting in jail under charges of fraud and tax evasion.

The West has criticized the tycoon's arrest, suggesting that it was a way for Putin to remove him as a political force or scuttle a planned Yukos merger. But Russians fed up with the privileges of the newly rich \_ and big business, for that matter \_ strongly supported Putin's crackdown.

The parties also put out few issues or concrete plans. Instead, they clung to their yuppie New Russia theme in a society that resents wealth. One advertisement showed Union of Right Forces leaders chatting in the cushy white leather seats of a private jet \_ not exactly endearing to a Russian earning \$300 a month.

Despite free-market improvements and legislative reform, many Russians don't notice much progress that "liberalism" has made in their lives.

"The liberals talked about democracy and freedom, but did nothing," said Sergei Markov, an analyst at the Institute of Political Studies, a pro-Kremlin research institute in Moscow.

Alexei Rogov, 28, a Web designer from Arkangelsk, called Yabloko "no good at all," adding that it was a party that doesn't really know what it wants to be.

The Union of Right Forces disappointed a former supporter, Vyacheslav Novikov, 65, of Moscow.

"They were good guys, young, and I thought they'd be able to do something," he said.

That's why both he and Rogov prefer the misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party, led by ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

It's parties like his that worry reform-minded Russians. They fear that it will team up with the nationalistic Motherland party and exert pressure on the dominant party, United Russia, to roll back or slow down a number of reforms.

So what now? Leadership of the parties is up in the air. In the long run, survival of liberalism may mean scrapping the parties and starting over again, Lipman said.

"It will take a concentrated effort of democratic forces \_ which are already fragmented \_ to come together to form a new party on the ruins of the old ones," she said.

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