
The Troubled Rebirth of Political Opposition in Russia

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Vladimir Gel'man
European University at St. Petersburg/University of Helsinki

In the 2000s, most experts considered the role of political opposition in Russia as peripheral at best. But with the protest wave of 2011-12, opposition actors and movements reentered the political arena. What factors contributed to this development? How did the opposition respond to major challenges and resolve its internal contradictions? What are its current prospects? This memo presents an account of the trajectory of opposition politics in Russia. It analyzes its major organizational and strategic problems and pays special attention to the difficulties of maintaining a “negative consensus” against an increasingly harsh authoritarian regime.

A Comeback of the Opposition?

In the mid-2000s, the decline of opposition politics in Russia was so steep and clear that an article entitled “Political Opposition in Russia: A Dying Species?” was met with few objections. At the time, the impact of the opposition was peripheral at best.¹ United Russia, the “party of power,” dominated the legislature. Representatives of the opposition exerted almost no influence on decision-making. Opposition parties and candidates received a limited share of the vote during (unfair) elections. In essence, the political opposition in Russia was driven into a very narrow ghetto, and spectators were gloomy about the prospects of its rebirth.

However, as a result of the protests in Moscow and other cities in 2011-2012 that brought together hundreds of thousands of participants, the Russian opposition was able to multiply its ranks, revitalize its leadership, secure a “negative consensus” against the ruling regime, and move to the forefront of Russian politics. Opposition activists became legitimate electoral actors, and some even managed to receive a decent number of votes during elections. The public voice of the opposition became louder, and the Kremlin was forced to focus on intimidating its rivals and their supporters rather than simply ignore them.

¹ Vladimir Gelman, “Political Opposition in Russia: a Dying Species?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, 3 (2005), 226-46.

The Russian opposition is still far from achieving its goals, however. It remains bitterly divided, opening the door to divide-and-rule tactics by the Kremlin. It has been coerced by authorities in various ways and has not managed to develop a clear positive agenda.

Pathways Out of the Ghetto: The Trajectory of the Opposition

The term “opposition” is used in very different contexts in present-day Russia, as in other non-democratic regimes. This analysis limits itself to what is commonly regarded as the “non-systemic” opposition, comprising those organizations, movements, and/or politicians that aim to change the authoritarian regime in one way or another. In this respect, “non-systemic” opposition is democratic opposition, irrespective of the ideological stances of its various segments. Its major difference from the “systemic” opposition is that systemic actors might oppose certain policies but are not inclined to struggle for regime change. Systemic and non-systemic oppositions are not entirely separate actors and are often linked to each other. However, their strategies differ widely: the former serve as fellow travelers and junior partners of the authoritarian regime (even as the risks associated with their potential disloyalty are sufficiently high), while the latter position themselves as explicit rivals to it.

As often happens, the rebirth of the political opposition in Russia in the 2010s resulted from structural changes not directly related to the opposition as such. To some extent, this consisted of a shift in political opportunity during Dmitry Medvedev’s interregnum presidency. But it also emerged as a side effect of the opposition’s own strategic choices.

The effect of generational change played an important role in giving latent public demands explicit form. Disagreements between “fathers” and “sons,” a perennial feature of the Russian political landscape, arose as representatives of the post-Soviet generations that grew up in the 1990s and 2000s came to the forefront. These new activists found it easier to build a negative consensus against the authoritarian regime with ideologically distant brothers-in-arms. While opportunities for leadership change were blocked within the ruling elite, in the opposition camp leaders from the younger generation could bring about a revival. During the 2011-2012 mass protests, older opposition leaders were overshadowed by their younger counterparts. This process was symbolically completed in 2013, when the opposition party RPR-PARNAS, co-chaired by 53-year old Boris Nemtsov and 55-year old Mikhail Kasyanov, nominated 37-year old Alexei Navalny as its candidate for the Moscow mayoral elections.

A second major factor contributing to the rebirth of the Russian opposition was the “modernization” program that Medvedev announced during his presidency. Although this consisted of a chaotic and inefficient set of half-measures, it was accompanied by

loud liberal rhetoric and a number of moves by the Kremlin that signaled openness in decision-making, public involvement in preparing policy recommendations, and a more “progressive” style of governance. The weakening of pressure by authorities on civil society, along with some attempts at dialogue with the public, opened room for civic initiatives to extend the scope of the opposition agenda and allowed its leaders to speak more loudly without running the risk of getting stigmatized as “enemies.” Previously closed political opportunities were replaced by a partial and illusory liberalization that gave rise to the politicization of civil society, which became the milieu for the new opposition.

The third factor contributing to the rebirth of the political opposition in the 2010s was a major shift in the opposition’s political strategy. The opposition not only shifted its style of criticism toward the regime, it overhauled its entire agenda. A new populism became the cornerstone of resistance against the regime as a whole. The opposition condemned the country’s rulers as inefficient, corrupt, and incapable and unwilling to pursue positive change. Several anti-corruption campaigns launched by Navalny and other activists reflected a growing public demand for change and also provided grounds for cooperation among various groups of regime critics. The campaign against “crooks and thieves” in Russia in the 2010s fostered a negative consensus against the regime among the opposition and within society at large. It extended beyond organizational and ideological boundaries and served as the least common denominator when it came to demands for political change. Containing a populist opposition strategy is a daunting task for any authoritarian regime. In Russia, the regime’s choice has been not to employ large-scale repression but to rely mainly upon media manipulation while buying the loyalty of its citizens.

The three sources of change in the opposition camp – generational change, expanding political opportunity, and the populist shift – merged during the 2011-2012 protests and reinforced each other. While the Kremlin underestimated the challenge from the opposition, the latter was able to take advantage of the 2011 parliamentary election campaign. Tactical voting for “anyone but United Russia” and effective negative advertising contributed to the politicization of a large number of voters, and large-scale electoral fraud became a trigger event for mass protest. Their scope was unexpected to both the Kremlin and the opposition; even in their wildest dreams, opposition leaders could not have imagined tens of thousands of protesters in Moscow’s streets, with slogans shifting from “Fair elections!” to “Putin, go away!” The protest wave put an end to the previously marginal status of the opposition and paved the way to a new role. At the same time, these changes gave the Russian opposition numerous “growing pains” and led to multiple challenges that they responded to in often imperfect ways.

Beyond Negative Consensus

It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that the opposition in the period of the 2011-2012 mass protests became a victim of its own success. It was poorly prepared to solve new tasks organizationally or strategically, and it had little experience and a limited capacity for cooperation. The course of events at the time was so rapid that the opposition had neither the time nor the resources to defeat the regime. Not only did the regime avoid any elite defection, even the systemic opposition refused to cooperate with protesters. The “non-systemic” opposition’s strategy was to boost the standing of all political parties other than United Russia, but these parties themselves had no incentive to support anti-regime protests; if the opposition dethroned Putin, the systemic opposition might not survive the subsequent regime change. Finally, protests mobilized via the Internet and social media failed to be sustained beyond one-off events to become a more durable enterprise.

Under these conditions, the Kremlin took the initiative with relative ease. The opposition failed to counter the “tightening of screws” by the authorities, who increased legal regulations and publicly discredited the opposition. Nonetheless, the protests of 2011-2012 resulted in the liberalization of rules for registering political parties and candidates. Subsequently, the opposition pursued two different approaches to sustain mobilization: supporters of street protests attempted to increase the number of demonstrators, while critics of this approach insisted that party-building and electoral struggle were the only viable strategies. In the end, both approaches failed: mass protests exhausted themselves rather swiftly, while sub-national elections brought the opposition only limited success.

Still, even this success exceeded the Kremlin’s expectations. While authorities counted on the opposition to receive at best individual seats in regional legislatures, in numerous mayoral elections officially sponsored candidates lost to various opposition rivals. In April 2014, five candidates in Novosibirsk that were endorsed by systemic and non-systemic opposition groups established an alternative pre-election coalition around Communist Party member Anatoly Lokot, who won the mayoral race. In the Moscow mayoral elections in September 2013, the incumbent, Sergei Sobyenin, hoped for an easy victory, as Alexei Navalny, his major challenger, initially enjoyed just limited support. This is why Navalny, who was undergoing a criminal trial during the campaign, was able to squeeze through the “municipal filter” as local deputies from United Russia officially endorsed his nomination. The Kremlin presumably wanted to dispose of Navalny after the polls, but it underestimated his potential and the election results exceeded virtually all predictions. Officially, Navalny received 27 percent of votes, against 51 percent for Sobyenin, who barely escaped a run-off. Navalny rightly argued that the time was not ripe for rebellion; he canceled post-election protests but urged his supporters to be ready “to light the fire” when he called upon them.

Challenges and Alternatives for the Opposition

In 1990, American political scientist Alfred Stepan discussed the lessons of Latin America's anti-authoritarian opposition for postcommunist Europe.² A quarter-century on, these lessons seem highly relevant to present-day Russia. Stepan considered the role of opposition actors in democratizing authoritarian regimes to be as follows: (1) resisting co-optation into the regime; (2) guarding zones of autonomy vis-à-vis the regime; (3) undermining the regime's legitimacy; (4) raising the costs of preserving the status quo; and (5) creating a credible democratic alternative.

The Kremlin's approach has likely turned more citizens and organized collective actors into enemies, making tasks 1 and 4 easier for the opposition. However, tasks 3 and, especially, 5 are more complicated. The fact that these tasks have remained unresolved hinders the transformation of the opposition into the center of gravity for all regime dissenters and independent social actors. Political and economic actors who distance themselves from the Kremlin and the systemic opposition still tend not to endorse the non-systemic opposition; neither does that large portion of sub-elites who do not share the Kremlin's priorities for whatever reason. The opposition's relative isolation has been driven not only by the risk of oppression but also by the assessment of ordinary Russians that the opposition is not a viable alternative. Even for some regime critics, the preservation of the political status quo is considered the lesser evil as compared to the possible collapse of the regime, which will not necessarily bring positive changes.

Moreover, the populist strategy that forms the basis for a negative consensus has its limits, since it prevents the formation of a positive agenda. Unlike the ruling elite, the opposition does not benefit from taking deliberately vague and uncertain positions on heavily divisive political and policy issues. At the same time, firmer stances risk undermining the negative consensus they have established.

Finally, while condemning the regime and calling on Putin to step down, the Russian opposition has yet to prioritize a fundamental revision of the key rules of the game imposed by the Kremlin. These include: (1) the president's unilateral monopoly over the adoption of key political decisions, (2) a taboo on open electoral competition among the elites, and (3) the de facto hierarchical subordination of regional and local authorities to the central government (the "power vertical"). The opposition has not stated openly and directly the rejection of these elements of the system as its major goal. Its position on these issues remains vague and uncertain, thus demonstrating the disjuncture between the opposition's populist political supply and the Russian public's political demands.

These challenges became more salient in 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the resulting aggravation of Russia's conflict with the West over Ukraine. Recent

² Alfred Stepan, "On the Tasks of Democratic Opposition," *Journal of Democracy*, 1, 2 (1990), 41-49.

political developments provoked by Russia's aggressive foreign policy have posed a major blow for the opposition. Since March 2014, not only has the scope of abuse and repression against the opposition (and threats thereof) dramatically increased, the opposition's own mode of operation has taken on a different dimension. With the Russian public largely enthusiastic about the Kremlin's approach toward Crimea, Ukraine, and the West, the opposition has lost the initiative. On the one hand, the negative consensus against the regime has weakened (if not entirely disappeared), and only part of the non-systemic opposition openly rejects the Kremlin's policies. On the other hand, the organizationally and strategically weak opposition has failed to propose alternative solutions to the country's problems and inserted them into the public domain. The political opposition's impact on Russia's domestic (let alone international) agenda has been diminished, while the Kremlin's harsh targeting of the "fifth column" has been met with little resistance. As a result, opposition parties and candidates were not allowed to run in September 2014 sub-national elections, the organizational potential of the opposition was challenged, and its very capacity to serve as organized political dissent came under question.

Despite a high degree of public support for the Kremlin at the moment, public demand for change will likely increase over time. However, the present decline of the leading figures of the 2011-2012 protests means that these demands may be satisfied by other anti-regime actors under different slogans (and not necessarily democratic ones). In any case, a challenge to authoritarianism in Russia can only arise from below if the opposition is able to consolidate and mobilize a large number of regime opponents. A negative consensus against the status quo is a necessary yet insufficient condition for this mobilization. Examples of regime change in other countries suggest that in order for an opposition movement to achieve its goals, it must cooperate with a number of social groups and potential allies among the elites. It is too early to say whether the opposition in Russia will be able to utilize new opportunities if and when they occur. But the impact of generational change is not negligible, and new opposition leaders will be able to learn some lessons from the previous experience. The main slogan of opposition rallies – "Russia Will Be Free!" – should be perceived not just as a call for action but as a key item on Russia's political agenda for the foreseeable future. Russia will indeed become a "free" country. The question is when, how, and at what cost.