

Political Opposition in Russia: A Troubled Transformation

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IN THE MID-2000S, THE DECLINE OF OPPOSITION POLITICS in Russia was so sharp and undisputed that the title of an article I wrote at the time, ‘Political Opposition in Russia: A Dying Species?’ (Gel’man 2005) met with little objection. At that time, the impact of the opposition was peripheral at best. The ‘party of power’, United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*—UR), dominated both nationwide (Remington 2008) and sub-national (Ross 2011) legislatures, and the few representatives of the opposition exerted almost no influence on decision making. The share of votes for the opposition parties (in far from ‘free and fair’ elections) was rather limited (Gel’man 2008; Golosov 2011). Even against the background of the rise of social movements in Russia, anti-regime political protests were only able to gather a minority of 100 or so participants, while environmental or cultural protection activists deliberately avoided any connections with the political opposition, justly considering being labelled ‘opposition’ as an obstacle to achieving positive results (Gladarev & Lonkila 2013; Clement 2013). In other words, political opposition in Russia was driven into very narrow ‘niches’ (Greene 2007), if not into ghettos, and spectators were rather gloomy about the chances of its rebirth.

Ten years later, Russia’s political landscape looks rather different. Protest meetings in Moscow and other cities in 2011–2012 brought together hundreds of thousands of participants under political slogans, and the Russian opposition was able to multiply its ranks, to change its leadership, to reach a ‘negative consensus’ *vis-à-vis* the *status quo* political regime, and to come to the front stage of Russian politics. Some opposition activists became legitimate actors of electoral politics, a few of them succeeded in receiving a visible share of votes during the (still unfair) elections, the public voice of the opposition became louder and the Kremlin was forced to turn from ignoring its rivals to intimidating them and their supporters. However, the Russian opposition is still far from achieving its goals: it is still bitterly divided by internal contradictions (thus opening doors for the Kremlin’s divide-and-rule tactics); it has been harshly coerced by the authorities; and it is unable to develop a clear and positive agenda.

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What were the causes of the rebirth of the political opposition in Russia in the 2010s, and what are the factors that continue to drive this process? How and why did the opposition respond to major challenges and resolve (or not resolve) its problems? And what future is there for the political opposition in Russia? This article focuses on these and other related issues. First, I will present an account of the evolution of opposition politics in Russia in the 2000s and 2010s, and then consider its major strategic and organisational challenges and alternatives *vis-à-vis* the experience of the democratic opposition in authoritarian regimes worldwide. Some implications and possible scenarios for the future of the Russian opposition are discussed in the conclusion.

Since the term ‘opposition’ is used in very different contexts in present-day Russia as well as in other non-democratic regimes, I will limit the analysis to what is commonly regarded as the ‘non-systemic’, ‘principal’ (Linz 1973) or ‘subversive’ (Barghoorn 1973) opposition—those organisations, movements and politicians which seek a change of authoritarian regime. In this respect, the ‘non-systemic’ opposition is also a democratic opposition (Stepan 1990), irrespective of the ideological stances of its various segments. Its major difference from the systemic opposition, ‘semi-opposition’ (Linz 1973) or ‘sectoral opposition’ (Barghoorn 1973), is that systemic actors can oppose some policies in certain areas but are not inclined to struggle for major regime changes. Systemic and non-systemic oppositions are not comprised of completely separate actors and are often linked with each other even in terms of personnel. However, their strategies differ widely: the former serve as fellow travellers and junior partners of authoritarian regimes (even though the risks associated with their possible disloyalty are a real possibility) while the latter position themselves as explicit rivals to the regime. The non-systemic opposition played a decisive role in the process of democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s from Latin America to Eastern Europe (Huntington 1991; Przeworski 1991; Greene 2007); but what is its role in contemporary Russia?

Pathways out of the ghetto: the trajectory of the new opposition

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), and to some extent reflected shifts in the political opportunity structure (Tarrow 1994) during the interregnum period of Medvedev’s presidency (Gel’man 2013), but also emerged as a side effect of the opposition’s own strategic choices. These interrelated factors reinforced each other.

The conventional wisdom of political scientists states that the demand for democratisation arises as a side effect of economic growth, which encourages aspirations for greater political rights among the rising urban middle class and drives it onto the political arena (Przeworski *et al.* 2000). The Russian experience provides rather mixed evidence (Treisman 2011; Rogov 2013), and also leaves open the question of the mechanism of conversion of public demands for change from a latent to an explicit form. At least in terms of opposition politics, the effect of generational changes has played an important role in this conversion. The disagreements between ‘fathers’ and ‘sons’ were typical for the Russian reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, which were conducted by the representatives of the generations of the 1960s and 1970s (Gel’man & Travin 2013), and they were also crucial for the 2010s when the representatives of the post-Soviet generations who had grown up in the 1990s and in the 2000s came to the front stage of Russian politics. These disagreements not only affected differences in the attitudes of politicians of various age cohorts (Zimmerman

(*et al.* 2013) but were also related to the political context and the collective experiences of these generations.

For those who had grown up after the Soviet collapse, the whole frame of reference related to the Soviet experience and its aftermath was a more or less distant past and major conflicts such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 or Yel'tsin's disbanding of the parliament in 1993 were rather insignificant. For the younger generation of the opposition, the *tabula rasa* approach was instrumental in building a negative consensus against the authoritarian regime and finding a common language with their ideologically distant brothers-in-arms. More importantly, the representatives of the generation of the 1970s, who had dominated the Russian political scene in the 2000s, both among the ruling group and among the opposition, were oriented towards the past in their strategies: the former actors attempted to preserve the political *status quo* and the latter sought revenge for past losses.

However, those who entered the political scene in the 2010s looked to the future and aimed to play leading political roles themselves. Although among the ruling groups opportunities for leadership changes were blocked, in the opposition camp only new leaders from the younger generation could bring some hope of revival after the major decline in the 2000s. It is thus no surprise that during the period of the 2011–2012 mass protests, the previous opposition leaders from the 1970s generation were overshadowed by their younger counterparts: this process was symbolically completed in July 2013, when the opposition party, the Republican Party of Russia–People's Freedom Party (*Respublikanskaya partiya Rossii–Partiya narodnoi svobody*—RPR–PARNA), co-chaired by 54-year-old Boris Nemtsov and 56-year-old Mikhail Kasyanov, nominated the 37-year-old Aleksei Naval'nyi as its candidate for the Moscow mayoral elections.

The other important factor which greatly contributed to the rebirth of the Russian opposition was the course of 'modernisation', announced by Dmitry Medvedev during his presidency. Although this modernisation was just a chaotic and inefficient set of half-measures, such as renaming the militia as 'police' (Taylor 2014), it was accompanied by loud liberal rhetoric and a number of moves by the Kremlin which seemed to demonstrate genuine intentions (or illusions) to create more openness in decision making, public involvement in preparing policy recommendations, and a more 'progressive' style of governance. In contradiction to the Kremlin's original intentions, these moves led to unintended consequences for the opposition. The weakening by authorities of pressure on civil society, and some attempts at dialogue with the public, opened room for civic initiatives (which in the 2000s were localised and self-restrained to a limited number of issues) to extend the scope of their agenda and speak more loudly without risks of being stigmatised as 'opposition' (Robertson 2009; Clement 2013).

Moreover, various consulting bodies and expert councils promoted by the Kremlin were used by the activists to place a number of critical issues (ranging from human rights to legal reforms) on the agenda of policy discussion. The previously closed political opportunity structure was replaced by partial and illusory liberalisation which gave rise to the politicisation of civil society which in turn became a milieu for the new opposition. Given the partial and illusory nature of Medvedev's 'modernisation', any outcome of conflicts between the state and civil society brought the latter into the opposition camp. If authorities openly lie to the public and avoid any compromises, the activists are forced to enter the political arena. The case of the Khimki forest protests was typical in this respect: the local environmental movement failed to stop a highway construction project in a green belt close

to Moscow, and Medvedev's promises to satisfy its demands remained just empty words. It is no wonder therefore, that the leader of this movement, Yevgeniya Chirikova, became one of the most visible figures among the younger generation of the members of the Russian opposition (Petrov *et al.* 2014).

Even when the authorities satisfied public demands, as in the case of cancelling the Gazprom tower construction project in the centre of St Petersburg, which had been vigorously opposed by local cultural activists (Dixon 2010), this led to the extension of demands and to attempts to elevate them to the level of policy making. In addition, liberalisation gave birth to a variety of new independent movements, ranging from media (such as the private internet-TV channel, *Dozhd*) to mushrooming internet-based communities such as the 'Blue Buckets' (against the abuse of traffic rules by government officials) or 'Dissernet' (whistle-blowers for cases of plagiarism in officials' dissertations). These processes were spontaneous side effects of modernisation, but when in September 2011 Putin announced his return to the presidential post in 2012, expectations of a reduction in political opportunities left civil activists no other choice than to align themselves with the opposition. In other words, the opposition's recruitment pool has been greatly increased by large numbers of Russian citizens who feel they have been deceived by Medvedev's promises to deliver political reforms (Greene 2013; Robertson 2013).

Finally, the third factor which contributed to rebirth of the political opposition in Russia in the 2010s was the major shift in the opposition's political strategy. The opposition not only shifted the focus of criticism toward the regime but overhauled its entire agenda. Instead of the advancement of abstract ideas (democracy and human rights) or struggles against specific policies, the new form of populism became a cornerstone of resistance against the regime as a whole. The opposition condemned the rulers of the country as inefficient, corrupt and incapable of pursuing positive changes, intentionally inhibiting any progress (Lassila 2013). Several anti-corruption campaigns, as launched by Naval'nyi and other activists, not only reflected the growing public demand for changes (Belanovsky *et al.* 2011; Chaisty & Whitefield 2012; Rogov 2013), but also provided grounds for cooperation by various groups of critics of the regime.

In a sense the Russian opposition used a strategy of consolidation not too dissimilar to that employed by the progressive movement in the United States in the early twentieth century, democratic movements in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, and the anti-Communist opposition in Russia during the period of *perestroika*. In the last years of the Soviet Union, claims of abuse of power by the Communist leaders and struggle against the privileges of the Soviet *nomenklatura* served as more efficient tools of anti-regime mobilisation than the liberal rhetoric of dissidents and human rights activists (Fish 1995; Urban 1997). The campaign against 'swindlers and thieves' in Russia in the 2010s performed the same functions: it fostered a negative consensus against the regime among the opposition itself and within society at large, beyond organisational and ideological boundaries, and served as a minimal common denominator in demands for political changes.

Containment of a populist opposition strategy is a daunting task for any authoritarian regime. In Russia's case, the regime's choice not to employ large-scale repression but to rely mostly upon media manipulations while buying the loyalty of its fellow citizens, which had initially established high public support of the *status quo* (Treisman 2011), no longer brought desired results after the 2008–2009 economic crisis (Chaisty & Whitefield 2012). As Adam Przeworski (1991, p. 58) put it, 'authoritarian equilibrium rests mainly on lies,

fear, or economic prosperity'. In Russia in 2011–2012, economic prosperity came under threat, fear of disequilibration was diminished due to effects of generational changes and the influence of Medvedev's modernisation, and the blatant lying of the Kremlin's propaganda lost its efficacy as a tool for containment of the opposition. The asymmetry of the populist strategy turned the previous dimension of political conflict, between a strong regime and a weak opposition, into a new one between a hostile state and civil society, thus undermining the legitimacy of the Russian regime, similar to the subversive anti-Communist opposition in Eastern Europe before 1989 (Kharkhordin 2005).

These three sources of change in the opposition camp, the effects of generational changes, expanding political opportunities, and the shift to a populist strategy, merged together in the wake of 2011–2012 protests, reinforcing each other. While the Kremlin underestimated the opposition's challenges, the latter was able to take advantage of the miscalculations and the sluggishness of the campaign for the 2011 State *Duma* elections (Gel'man 2013). Tactical voting for 'anyone but United Russia' and effective negative advertising contributed to the politicisation of a large number of voters, and large-scale electoral fraud (Enikolopov *et al.* 2013) became a trigger event for mass protests. Their scope was unexpected both for the Kremlin and for the opposition itself: the opposition leaders even in their wildest dreams could not have imagined dozens of thousands of protesters in the Moscow streets, their slogans suddenly shifting from 'For Fair Elections!' to 'Putin, Go Away!'. The wave of protests put an end to the previous marginal opposition and opened the way to its new role. These changes caused numerous 'growing pains' and multiple challenges for the Russian opposition, and its responses to these challenges have not always been up to the mark.

Beyond negative consensus

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to state that the Russian opposition in the period of the 2011–2012 mass protests became a victim of its own success. It was poorly prepared to solve its new tasks, both organisationally and strategically. In organisational terms, it was a rather loose conglomerate of relatively small groups and public figures, with little experience and limited capacity for cooperation. Strategically, the opposition had no developed plans and aimed only to organise new protest actions and to maximise the number of their participants. Indeed, the course of events was so rapid that the opposition had neither time nor resources for any other activities. As such, there were some possible moves it did not consider seriously, while its hopes of overthrowing the regime from within were rather optimistic. Thus, the idea of nominating Naval'nyi as a candidate for the 2012 presidential elections was ultimately rejected and Yavlinsky—who was proposed as a presidential candidate by his *Yabloko* party—received little support among the opposition. Instead, some opposition leaders attempted to bargain with the Kremlin through Alexei Kudrin (who was considered as a possible liaison) but these attempts were premature: the scope and duration of mass protest mobilisation in late 2011 were insufficient, and the Kremlin felt strong enough to reject any proposals for roundtable talks *à la* 1989 in Poland. Not only had elite defection from the regime's side been avoided, but even the systemic opposition refused to cooperate with protesters.

The political parties which became major beneficiaries of the opposition's strategy (based on their slogan 'vote for anyone but United Russia'), had no incentives to support anti-regime protests: if the opposition were to dethrone Putin, then the Communist Party of the

Russian Federation (*Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) or Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*) might not survive the following major regime changes, while preservation of the political *status quo* was fairly risk-free for them. Only second-rank representatives of the systemic parties (such as Ilya Ponomarev or Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov (the father–son pair from Just Russia)) ultimately joined the protesters. In a similar way, other segments of Russia's elite remained untapped by the opposition: even its secret admirers among businessmen and officials did not openly endorse it. To put it bluntly, during the 2011–2012 protests the opposition's ranks were enlarged by engaging those with an implicit dislike of the Kremlin, rather than its own loyal followers.

The opposition tried to compensate for the deficit of organisational resources and strategic vision through the mechanism of 'connective actions' (Bennett & Segerberg 2012), mobilising its supporters through the Web and social media, and exploiting individual linkages and everyday contacts as substitute 'collective actions' which maintained protest mobilisation through the use of organisations and ideologies.¹ Even though these mechanisms have been widely used in numerous recent protests across the globe (ranging from the Occupy movement to the Arab Uprising), the Russian experience demonstrated the limits of connective actions if and when protest mobilisation goes beyond one-off events and becomes a more durable enterprise.

Initially, social media brought a large number of protesters to Moscow streets, online broadcasts of meetings of protest organising committees attracted public attention and the list of speakers in protest meetings was based upon results of internet voting, but then the weaknesses of connective actions became apparent. The recruitment pool of protesters mobilised *via* social media was exhausted very quickly: already in February 2012 a survey of participants of anti-regime meetings demonstrated that most of them joined the protests in their early stages (Smyth & Soboleva 2014). Even though weak ties can be easily mobilised *via* the Web in times of emotional upheaval, they are insufficient as a tool of organising an efficient resistance to the regime without the mechanism of collective actions. In September 2012, when the declining trend of mass mobilisation became apparent, Naval'nyi urged his supporters to attend protests as if it was their job. The problem was that the Web and social media provide few incentives for such behaviour, and unsurprisingly the number of protesters in Moscow alone went down from 210,000 in December 2011 to 5,000 in July 2013 (Treisman 2013, p. 256).

Under these conditions, the Kremlin took back the initiative with relative ease, and the results of the 2012 presidential elections came as a huge blow to the opposition. Given its lack of strategy, it was faced with the threat of marginalisation against a background of the 'tightening of the screws' by the authorities (toughening of legal regulations, public discrediting of the opposition, and criminal prosecution of some of its activists). However, the protests of 2011–2012 resulted in the liberalisation of the registration of political parties and in extending room for participation in elections (Golosov 2012), and these new opportunities became calls to action for the opposition. The discussion among the opposition in 2012 demonstrated two different approaches: while supporters of the street protests attempted to increase the numbers of participants of mass actions (and provided slogans such as 'March of the Millions'), their critics suggested party-building and electoral struggle as the only viable alternative to this strategy. Actually, both approaches failed: mass

¹On their role in 'colour revolutions', see Tucker (2007).

protests were exhausted rather swiftly, while elections brought the opposition little success. Even Chirikova, who had built solid local support in Khimki, received only 17.5% of votes in the mayoral elections in October 2012; this was very slight progress in comparison with the 2009 mayoral race, where she received 15% of the votes (Petrov *et al.* 2014).

In fact, the opposition occupied a visible but rather minor niche in Russian electoral politics (Greene 2007): it was able to secure the votes of core supporters but had few chances to attract broader segments of the electorate, including those voters who had very critical views of the authorities. Thus, the opposition's participation in elections helped the regime maintain the political *status quo* and minimise risks (Gandhi 2008). Public opinion surveys and focus groups demonstrated a similar trend: even the relative decline of the regime's mass support did not result in an increase in support for the opposition (Obshchestvo 2012; Levada 2013a).

Meanwhile, opposing the regime on a regular day-by-day basis required a more or less stable form of coordination of separate anti-regime groups with various origins and platforms. But what had been proposed as a new coordination mechanism by some opposition activists ended up a failure. The Coordinating Council of the Opposition (*Koordinatsionnyi Sovet Oppozitsii*—KSO) was widely announced as a new democratic forum whose members were to be chosen in free and fair elections. Every Russian citizen could nominate himself or herself to the 45-seat council, and everyone could vote at the numerous polling stations across Russia and abroad. The campaign included live TV debates on *Dozhd*, and the voting procedure was organised around quotas for ideological camps (one-third of KSO seats were reserved for liberals, left-wingers and nationalists in equal proportions).

Despite the fact that more than 81,000 electors cast their votes in October 2012, and that the elected members of the KSO were able to argue that they represented not only themselves but also their supporters, the positive effects of the four-month election campaign were limited, to put it mildly. The problem was that the newly-elected KSO lacked an agenda. Although the KSO was initially proposed as the major collective organiser of protest actions, and a representative body for possible roundtable talks with authorities (as desired by some opposition activists, similar to events in Poland in 1989), none of these functions were relevant by the time the KSO was elected. The scope of protest actions had not expanded but decreased, and many leading positions in the opposition movement continued to be held by individuals who had not been elected to the KSO. As for potential bargaining with the Kremlin, these dreams were premature to say the least. It is unsurprising that the KSO spent hours in endless debates (which were broadcast online), and adopted a number of resolutions, but barely affected political developments beyond the narrow circles of its members and their personal followers. It was finally dissolved in October 2013 when its term came to an end and it lacked a quorum. Although the experience of the KSO was not completely useless, the resources of the opposition (including time and effort), which were in short supply, had largely been wasted.

By 2013, the Kremlin had seemingly minimised the threat from the opposition, and the latter's successes were rather modest: at best, they could gain individual seats in regional legislatures (for example, RPR–PARNAZ in Yaroslavl in September 2013) and make no more trouble for the Kremlin than systemic opposition parties. But these expectations proved to be wrong in the case of the Moscow mayoral elections. Initially, the incumbent,

Sergey Sobyanin, hoped for an easy victory; surveys predicted no serious competition and even his major would-be rival Naval'nyi, the most popular and capable leader of the new generation of the opposition, initially had the support of no more than 10% of Moscow voters (FOM 2013; Levada 2013b).

A landslide victory in fair elections would greatly enhance the regime's legitimacy, discourage the opposition, and show voters that there were no viable alternatives to the *status quo*. This is why Naval'nyi, who was undergoing a criminal trial during the campaign, was able to squeeze through the 'municipal filter' (local councillors from UR officially endorsed his nomination). In addition, he was released from prison the day after the court passed its sentence. Apparently, the Kremlin wanted to sacrifice Naval'nyi after the polls, but it underestimated his potential; he organised a very active electoral campaign based around young, dynamic, creative and energetic staff, attracted a large number of devoted volunteers, effectively used crowd-funding techniques, and mobilised a sizeable number of voters beyond the opposition's core supporters. The election results exceeded virtually all predictions: officially, Naval'nyi received 27.3% of votes, and even though Sobyanin's result (51%) allowed him to escape a run-off, perceptions of fraud in his favour were unavoidable. However, Naval'nyi justly argued that the time was not yet ripe for revolt; he cancelled post-election protests but urged his supporters to be ready 'to light the fire' when he called for such actions.

Despite Naval'nyi's electoral defeat, he achieved extraordinary success at the polls, gaining the votes of more than 600,000 Muscovites. Not only did he become the sole undisputable leader of the opposition, but his campaign also converted the potential of connective actions to collective actions in the real world of electoral struggle. Building electoral machinery—with its division of labour, centralised structure and systematic day-by-day hard work—was essential for the organisational development of the opposition. Last but not least, Naval'nyi's appeal in the eyes of ordinary voters greatly extended the pool of potential opposition supporters, even among those Russians who think he may turn out to be another authoritarian leader. Naval'nyi's rising fame and popularity (Levada 2013c) soon became a major headache for the Kremlin; most probably, its strategists deeply regretted their decision to hold fair elections instead of adopting the previous practices of arbitrarily excluding rivals and manipulating the election results. Naval'nyi's rise was indicative of the increasing troubles facing the Russian authorities; but it also became clear that major challenges lay ahead for those members of the opposition who sought an end to the regime.

Challenges and alternatives for the democratic opposition

In 1990, Alfred Stepan discussed the lessons of Latin America's anti-authoritarian opposition for post-Communist Eastern Europe (Stepan 1990). A quarter of a century on, these lessons seem to be even more relevant for present-day Russia. Stepan considered the role of opposition actors in the process of democratisation of authoritarian regimes to be the following: first, resisting co-optation into the regime; second, guarding zones of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the regime; third, disrupting the regime's legitimacy; fourth, raising the costs of preservation of the *status quo*; and fifth, creating a credible democratic alternative (Stepan 1990, p. 44). While the Kremlin's approach was likely to turn more citizens and organised collective actors into enemies, thus making the first and fourth easier for the opposition, the third and especially the fifth tasks were more complicated. Maintaining the negative

consensus against the regime remained a major achievement of the opposition even before the wave of 2011–2012 protests (White 2011), but little advancement was made beyond it.

The very fact that these tasks remained unresolved hindered the transformation of the opposition into the centre of gravity for all regime dissenters and independent social actors. Those political actors who distanced themselves from the Kremlin for a variety of reasons (such as Alexei Kudrin or Mikhail Prokhorov) did not identify themselves with the opposition and instead developed their own political projects (the Committee for Civic Initiatives and the Civic Platform party, respectively), thus leaving room for further political manoeuvres. Even though a sizeable part of Russia's sub-elite groups did not share the Kremlin's priorities (Afanasyev 2009), almost none of them openly endorsed the opposition. Although Naval'nyi has sporadically been supported by business this has not changed the overall picture very much. The relative isolation of the opposition has been driven not only by the risk of oppression by the regime but also by the perceptions of Russian citizens (Levada 2013a).

Even for regime critics, the preservation of the political *status quo* is considered a lesser evil to that of change (Rose *et al.* 2011), and the opposition is not perceived as a viable alternative. Moreover, the opposition and its supporters face the problem of planning horizons: understanding that the struggle against a well-entrenched authoritarian regime will most probably take a good deal of time and effort, which may demobilise dissenters, and push them towards 'exit' rather than 'voice' (Hirschman 1970) (and the easiest form of 'exit'—leaving the country—is harmless for the Kremlin). It remains unclear to what extent the opposition will be able to keep its current followers and attract new supporters.

The populist strategy which formed a basis for negative consensus also has its limits. It prevented the formation of a positive agenda for the opposition, especially when it had to go beyond condemning the Kremlin, and position itself on salient and divisive policy issues. Unlike the ruling group, the opposition could not deliberately adopt vague and uncertain positions, whereas taking a more solid stance risked undermining the negative consensus. Immigration became the main stumbling stone in this respect. While Naval'nyi cautiously supported the anti-immigrant 'Russian March' and endorsed moderate nationalist groups (Naval'nyi 2013), liberal-minded intellectuals (for whom protection of minorities was a kind of sacred cow) widely blamed him for such a stance and denied his moral authority to be a leader of the opposition (Akunin 2013). However, some observers argued that his strategy of maximisation of public support required a shift toward the policy position of the median voter, whose stance was considered to be nationalistic and patriotic (Mironov 2013). This dilemma cannot be resolved in a satisfactory way, and internal contradictions within the opposition are likely to increase in the future.

The KSO experience also demonstrated the organisational weakness of the opposition, which developed as a side effect of the lack of influential autonomous organisations in Russia in general. While in a number of other authoritarian regimes religious communities, students' associations or trade unions serve as major allies and organisational milieus for the opposition, in Russia no such entities emerged after the Soviet collapse, whether in business, media or civil society. Thus, creating a formal umbrella organisation—such as the KSO—would not automatically multiply the opposition's mobilisation potential for protests or be of much use for electoral campaigns. The experience of the democratic opposition in some countries demonstrates that the most efficient strategy is not organisational consolidation but rather 'concerting', the combination of various methods of struggle

against an authoritarian regime and the mutual support of different segments of the opposition and of their potential allies, who through various means are able to ‘rock the boat’ of the political *status quo*. This means that opposition actors would have to seek the support of different cross-sections of the population; they would also have to refrain from publicly attacking one another in order to accomplish their principal goals; in addition, they would have to demonstrate their ability to reach tacit compromises and their willingness to be ideologically flexible.

Finally, even though Stepan (1990, p. 47) justly argued that ‘a consensus [of the opposition] would be reached about rules of the game, though not about its results’, the current situation in Russia is different. While condemning the regime and claiming that Putin should leave office, the Russian opposition has yet to raise to the top of its agenda a fundamental revision of the key rules of the game, which are the following: the president’s unilateral monopoly over the adoption of key political decisions; a taboo on open electoral competition among the elite; and the *de facto* hierarchical subordination of regional and local authorities to the central government (the ‘power vertical’). Although these revisions cannot be launched until a major power shift occurs in Russia, the opposition’s uncertainty in this regard gives some grounds for concern about the risk of replacing one authoritarian regime with another, if and when the Russian opposition is able to obtain its goals. Moreover, some experts note that many supporters of the opposition are interested not in democracy but in new, strong and more effective authoritarian leadership (Chaisty & Whitefield 2013).

Nevertheless, despite the rejection of key democratic institutions (such as the separation of power and/or the protection of minorities) by many Russians, public support for free and fair elections as the basis of the regime’s legitimacy is widespread (Hale 2011). If so, then the desire to put an end to the electoral authoritarian regime serves as a minimal common denominator both for the opposition and its supporters and leaves some hope for the possible evolution of public attitudes during the process of democratisation. Yet the disjuncture between the populist political supply from the opposition and uncertain political demands from the Russian public presents a significant challenge, thus increasing the complications and risks involved in possible regime changes, not dissimilar to those Russia faced after the collapse of Communist rule in 1991.

The agenda for the future

Even in the autumn of 2011 few observers expected that in the course of two years the Russian opposition would become a meaningful political actor, able to mobilise a visible number of supporters and to receive a significant share of votes in elections. While these successes are impressive if one takes into account the almost ‘zero point of departure’ of the mid-2000s, they are not so obvious if one projects the current state of affairs into the future. In fact, any discussions about the opposition’s prospects should also consider the political strategies of the regime. Although some analyses of crises of electoral authoritarian regimes place emphasis on the major impact of their ruling groups (Way 2008), one should also admit that authoritarian rulers often change their strategies in response to challenges from the opposition (Tucker 2007; Bunce & Wolchik 2010; Gel’mans 2013). However, the study of the relations between regime and opposition in Russia is problematic as there are numerous unknown variables, including the state of public opinion which has been distorted

by the effects of preference falsification (Kuran 1991; Rogov 2013) and speculation about the possible use of coercion against the protesters (Davenport 2007).

The regime's approach to the opposition after the 2011–2012 protests brought the Russian rulers partial success: the Kremlin was able to avoid the spread of contentious actions beyond capital cities and among a broad selection of social groups, and prevent its potentially disloyal allies from joining the ranks of the opposition. Furthermore, the officially sanctioned participation of some opposition politicians in regime-controlled elections weakened the potential for protests (Gandhi 2008), thus decreasing the immediate risks for the regime. The politics of fear initiated by the Kremlin, which involved intimidation by means of threats of repression and the public discrediting of the opposition, culminated in further 'tightening of the screw'. 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. Political developments provoked by Russia's aggressive foreign policy have posed a major blow for the opposition. Not only has the scope of abuse and repression against the opposition (and threats thereof) dramatically increased, but the opposition's own mode of operation has taken on a different dimension so it 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 organisationally and strategically weak opposition has failed to propose alternative solutions to the country's problems and to insert them into the public domain. The opposition's impact on Russia's political agenda has been diminished, while the Kremlin's targeting of the 'fifth column' has been met with little resistance. Meanwhile, the public applauded Russia's aggressive foreign policy and Putin's approval rating climbed above 80%, according to numerous surveys (FOM 2014; Levada 2014). The Kremlin, in turn, effectively used this moment to correct its errors in the electoral arena: competition in sub-national elections was almost eliminated, so that the September 2014 sub-national elections more closely resembled hegemonic authoritarian regimes (Howard & Roessler 2006) than the practices of electoral authoritarianism (Panov & Ross 2013). As a result, opposition parties and candidates were not allowed to run, the organisational potential of the opposition was challenged, and its very capacity to serve as a source of organised political dissent came under question.

The increasing pressure on leaders and activists, the harsh legal constraints on non-governmental organisations, social media and the internet, and an aggressive Kremlin-sponsored propaganda campaign may inhibit the development of the opposition. But the Kremlin, in its turn, is far from being invincible: potential challenges to the *status quo*, driven by some exogenous shocks, could arise not only in Moscow but in other regions and cities (Treisman & Dmitriev 2012), even irrespective of opposition activities, and they could lead to disequilibrium in the current balance between regime and opposition.

The forecast for regime versus opposition dynamics in Russia and beyond has suffered from two extreme scenarios. The first, the *status quo* bias, assumes that there will be a preservation of the current state of affairs virtually by default. From this perspective, the Russian opposition is doomed to occupy a minor niche in the life of the country which presents no serious challenge to the regime. The second scenario, in sharp contrast, envisages the possibility of a sudden collapse of the regime at any moment. Even in this case, the opposition's chances of success are not guaranteed. Even though a clean cut is

better than a festering wound, as conventional wisdom goes, the regime's collapse could lead to the replacement of one authoritarian regime by another, and it would probably not bring about Russia's democratisation, but would rather signal a regime change from bad to worse.

However, the prospects of the regime and the opposition look rather different if one perceives recent developments from the wider perspective of Russia's political dynamics. From this perspective, one may consider the 2011–2012 protests as the first (necessary yet insufficient) step towards the country's 'creeping democratisation' (Przeworski 1991, pp. 69–72): as a complex, incremental and sometimes quite lengthy process of transition from authoritarianism to democracy through a series of strategic interactions between the ruling group and the opposition, who adjust their strategies in response to each other's moves. Ruling groups may agree to partial regime liberalisation at certain points, under pressure from the opposition, and then—given increasing pressure and the regime's inability to eliminate liberalisation—accept an extension of the scope for political participation, which, in turn, may lead to deepening divisions within the ruling group and to an increasing role for the opposition in the political process.

Further developments may involve different options, among which are a compromise between the reform-minded section of the ruling group and the moderate section of the opposition (like the one that was achieved by the Polish roundtable talks in 1989), as well as the ruling group's initial steps towards regime democratisation, which allow it to hold power through competitive elections (as in South Korea in 1987) (Huntington 1991). The process may even develop into a series of electoral competitions with a playing field that becomes more even over time, guaranteeing a peaceful transfer of power to the opposition (as in Mexico between 1997 and 2000) (Greene 2007). Such trajectories have resulted in success stories of democratisation in some countries and there is no reason to rule them out in the case of Russia; although creeping democratisation is often inconsistent and sometimes takes several attempts before it is successful.

The challenge to authoritarianism in Russia may arise from below only if the opposition is able to simultaneously and cumulatively consolidate and mobilise a large number of regime opponents on the basis of a negative consensus against the *status quo*. The experience of creeping democratisation in a number of countries suggests that in order to reach their goal, the opposition requires cooperation with a number of social groups and the mutual support of their potential allies. So far, the current state of affairs in Russia is nearly the opposite, but it will not necessarily continue indefinitely: despite a high degree of public support for the Kremlin at the moment, public demand for change is likely to increase over time. 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). However, it is too early to discuss whether or not the opposition will be able to utilise these opportunities if and when they occur.

The collapse of the Communist regime in Russia occurred at a time when many observers took it for granted that a worldwide process of transition to democracy would also affect the post-Soviet states, which were doomed to become democratic more or less by default. These naïve expectations proved to be wrong, and after two decades of authoritarian regime-building the Kremlin has come close to shutting the window of opportunity for democratisation. However, public demand for political changes is likely to grow over time, thus increasing the opposition's chances (although no one can guarantee that it will make

effective use of them). After all, the impact of generational changes is not negligible, and the new leaders of the opposition will be able to learn from past mistakes. This trend offers some hope that Russia will not repeat the same flight from freedom that happened in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s. Therefore, the main slogan of opposition rallies—‘Russia Will Be Free!’—may be perceived not just as a call for action but also as a key item on Russia’s political agenda for the foreseeable future. Russia will indeed become a free country. The key question is when and how this will happen, as well as what the costs will be of Russia’s path to freedom.

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