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Opposition Fatigue

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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After Tuesday's protest in Moscow, the opposition has announced a respite from these types of rallies, probably until October. Although the speakers at Tuesday's rally alarmed protesters with predictions of impending social unrest this summer, there was no sign that they were prepared to address the problem. More likely, they are looking for ways to benefit politically from the unrest, particularly after the people's disgust with the government grows once transportation and utilities fees are hiked in late July. In addition, a new federal law will go into force at about the same time that will commercialize many elements of the health care and education sectors.

By effectively announcing that they are taking a summer vacation from protests, the opposition leaders run the risk that a new set of leaders and coalitions will emerge in the fall to take their place.

The problem with current opposition leaders is that despite their rhetoric to the contrary, most of them do not actually oppose the regime's economic and financial policies. Their tactic is to wait and let Russia's leadership take the political heat when new economic turmoil

rattles the country, oust them from power and continue on with little change.

But can such a strategy succeed?

The gravity of the leadership crisis within the opposition coalition is evident from a dispute that arose over the "Free Russia" manifesto hastily prepared by some of the opposition leaders for Tuesday's march. The manifesto essentially explains how they will put democratic institutions in place after Putin steps down from power. But they don't explain how Putin will give up power before his presidential term ends or why he would want to or have to do so. What's more, the manifesto has no practical value. Under certain conditions, the liberal opposition could gain some access to power. But it is almost impossible to believe that when the long-awaited moment arrives, the manifesto signatories will consider themselves bound by any previous agreements or manifestos.

Since some members of the Left Front opposed the manifesto, one of the movement's leaders, Sergei Udaltsov, was forced to emphasize social problems in his speech at the protest. Udaltsov called for higher salaries and the right to strike and free education. At previous rallies, he, like his fellow opposition leaders, spoke only in general terms and with slogans such as "Russia without Putin," "No to corruption" or "Putin is a thief." But by taking a tough stand on specific social issues in the rally address, Udaltsov seems to be trying to distinguish and separate himself from opposition leaders like Boris Nemtsov, Garry Kasparov, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Ilya Yashin.

But a policy consists more of practical decisions than eloquent speeches. Opposition leaders have failed to make such decisions or to initiate a campaign against the government measures that will come into force this summer. They also missed the opportunity to invite to the protest stage representatives from the educational community to speak about the problems they are encountering with the current reforms. Instead, we saw only the usual people spouting the usual slogans.

In the end, protesters repeated all the familiar slogans on Tuesday, but with markedly less enthusiasm than before. They have clearly grown tired — not of the protest movement, but of its leaders.

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