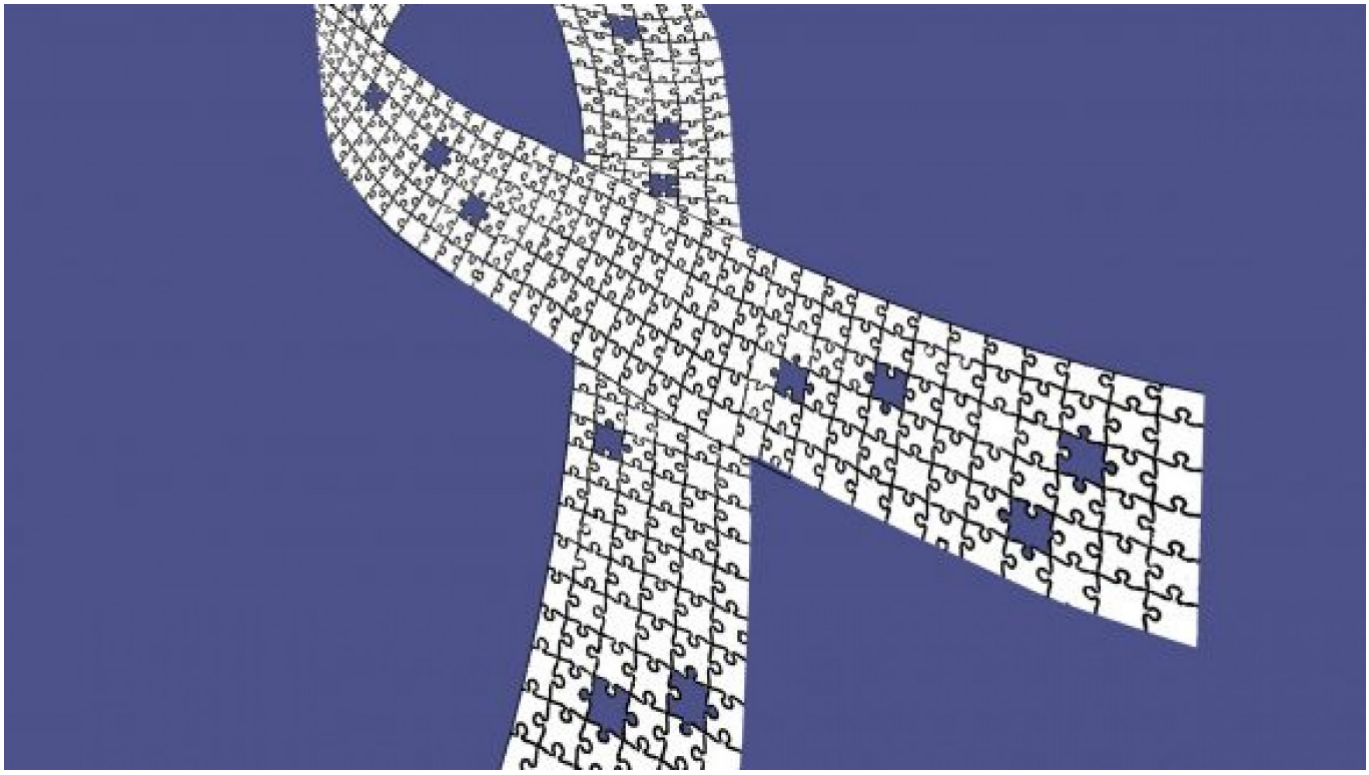
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Opposition's Coordination Council Is Pointless

By Georgy Bovt

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This week's election for the Coordination Council marked a defining stage in the development of the opposition movement. Some might consider this a step forward, but I have my doubts. In fact, from the very beginning, I have been skeptical that an opposition movement with its current leaders and vague agenda could ever be effective. Thus, I did not take part in the voting for the Coordination Council. From the moment I heard about it, the very idea of holding this online election seemed strange and pointless.

Of the 170,012 people who registered to vote, the identities of 97,727 were verified. Of this number, 81,801 ended up voting, according to the elections commission's website. (The authorities might even charge the organizers with illegally disclosing personal data.) Predictably, prominent blogger and anti-corruption whistleblower Alexei Navalny won the most votes. His fellow council members include well-known opposition figures such as Gary Kasparov, Ksenia Sobchak, Ilya Yashin, Dmitry Gudkov, Yevegnia Chirikova, Boris Nemtsov and Dmitry Bykov.

But the election was riddled with problems. For example, the registration process itself was overly complicated, and the overwhelming majority of Russians had no idea they were even being held. That makes the newly elected Coordination Council vulnerable to criticism by the authorities, who might justifiably ask: Whom does the council represent? Does it have enough standing for the authorities to conduct substantive talks with it?

At the same time, some were content with this election, pointing to the fact that it was free and fair, in contrast to the State Duma and presidential elections. It gave voters a chance to fulfill their desire to participate in an honest political process. In this sense, I agree that the election was worth observing because it was the first attempt anywhere in the world to hold a purely Internet-based democratic election for a "shadow government."

But at the same time, I am afraid that the Coordination Council is not capable of turning the marginalized opposition movement into a nationwide phenomenon that the general public would take it seriously.

But what exactly is this Coordination Council? Its 45 members represent ideologically incompatible factions of the opposition movement — from nationalists to socialists to self-described democrats. It would be safe to assume that most people who voted for the council don't have a clear idea of its function. Is it some type of alternative parliament? Is it a body formed to hold talks with the authorities, or is it simply an organizational committee for staging rallies against President Vladimir Putin?

The council needs to define its mission. Otherwise, all of its activities are meaningless, and it is doomed to fail. It is also unclear how the council will be funded, how and for what reasons it will convene and what its permanent structures will be.

The council has not even developed a general tactic for continued joint action. It is already clear that people have lost interest in joining mass rallies if the only purpose is to shout "Putin resign!" with no result. They are looking for a different, more effective approach.

The opposition leadership is more focused on itself and the internal relations between its various factions. It is also more interested in winning PR points than in achieving the solid support of the electorate. This is one explanation why opposition candidates did so poorly in regional elections on Oct. 14.

Indeed, opposition leaders are not willing to work at the level of municipal legislatures to earn grassroots support. They are not ready to fight over the long term. The one possible exception was Chirikova's mayoral run in Khimki, just outside Moscow. But she had too little experience with political campaigns to stage a strong fight. If she had approached the task more professionally, and if the opposition had expressed strong solidarity and provided her with more assistance, she would have likely received a higher percentage of the vote.

Most Russians view political parties as benefactors whose primary function is to provide social security, help people cope with specific everyday situations and provide protection against abuses by the authorities. Paternalism has always been a defining feature of Russian politics, and any politician who wants popular support must take this into account. This includes opposition leaders who must first offer a better plan than the monopoly ruling party for solving the problems of most concern to their constituents, regardless of whether they

personally view those issues as the most important priority.

In this regard, they would do well to consider the social programs of the Palestinian militant group Hamas. Hamas was formed in the 1980s as a social support network helping the poor, oppressed and disadvantaged. Only with time did it transform into a political party capable of winning elections. To gain power in Russia one day, the opposition should start taking a few organizational lessons from Hamas — but without the violence, of course.

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