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Where the Opposition Stands One Year On

By Georgy Bovt

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The political opposition marked the one-year anniversary of its formation with a rally on Lubyanka Ploshchad across from FSB headquarters. Saturday's crowd was not as large as those that gathered one year ago. This rally was not sanctioned by the authorities, and many people did not attend for fear of being detained or bludgeoned by riot police. However, even if the demonstration had been sanctioned, it is unlikely that organizers would have achieved the same numbers as were witnessed a year earlier on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova. Political analysts are now wondering: Why did the opposition movement suffer such a rapid and devastating defeat?

The main reasons cited include the inability of opposition leaders to develop a program and slogans capable of winning over thousands or even millions of supporters, the opposition movement's weak organizational capacity and its burdensome internal squabbles. Observers contend that instead of mounting formal, substantial protests and doing the necessary organizational legwork, the opposition became distracted with holding a series of headline-grabbing street rallies.

But endless street performances to the refrain of "Russia Without Putin" cannot serve as the sole ideological basis of the opposition struggle. What's more, when the authorities provided greater opportunities for participating in the political process, the opposition either failed to use them or to produce any tangible results. In almost every instance where opposition candidates ran in October's regional elections, they garnered only scant support. The one exception was the mayoral race in Khimki, where opposition leader Yevgenia Chirikova won 20 percent of the vote.

At the same time, opposition members believe they have not completely lost the fight. They believe that Russia will never be the same again and that the dissatisfaction with the regime will surface in other ways. They are also unhappy that the eternally passive Russian people are clearly not ready to support opposition parties or to participate in street protests. It is true that conformism has long been a part of Russian public culture. And on top of this, voters are disillusioned with political parties and elections as effective institutions.

But it would be wrong to underestimate the influence of the authorities, who have actively worked for the past six months to dampen the opposition mood. Legislators passed a series of repressive laws restricting rallies, limiting the activities of nongovernmental organizations, controlling the Internet and so on. Opposition leaders were also singled out for repressive measures. Just Russia party member Gennady Gudkov was stripped of his seat in the State Duma. The entire party was strongly discouraged from having any further association with street protests. That Duma faction split as a result, and party leader Sergei Mironov publicly denounced the "street activity" of fellow party members.

The authorities used repressive measures to frighten or discredit opposition leaders, searching the home of Ksenia Sobchak, publishing the wiretapped telephone conversations of several leaders and bringing criminal charges against others. For example, leftist protest leader Sergei Udaltsov was charged with accepting money from Georgian politicians to organize mass rallies in Russia. Anti-corruption whistle-blower and leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny is now under investigation on suspicion of white-collar crimes.

At the same time, opposition member and billionaire businessman Mikhail Prokhorov and former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin — both of whom could conceivably have given a respectable face to the opposition — have stepped into the shadows and shown no interest in leading the protest movement. Clearly, both realize that they also could be subjected to repressive measures by the authorities, and lacking confidence that the masses would come to their aid in such an event, they have opted not to take the risk.

In light of this, the Russian opposition today faces two main issues that will affect its further development.

The first is its ideological platform. It is increasingly clear that in a country such as Russia that is so deeply permeated with paternalistic and leftist attitudes, only the leftist opposition has the potential to mount mass protests, whether it is the as-yet-unwilling Communist Party or some other group rallying supporters around the struggle for social justice.

The second issue concerns leadership. The authorities are carrying out a type of "selective breeding" of the opposition by pressing criminal charges or publishing information meant to discredit its leaders. They also indirectly highlight the reason the opposition has failed

to gain ground: Not without reason do people lack faith in its leaders. But in emphasizing that point, the authorities only increase the public's demand for a new generation of politicians with moral integrity who are worth supporting.

However, that emphasis on formulaic morals and values might lead to a call for "a national spiritual revival" — or, in short, nationalism. If such a movement does take shape, it would probably have a leftist, pro-Communist bent. If this comes to pass, the Kremlin might deeply regret that it did not permit the controlled development of the "Bolotnaya Ploshchad movement." At least that movement has leaders with whom negotiation and some form of compromise are possible, leaders who could be integrated into the existing political system with some hope of success. But in their efforts to discredit and dismantle the opposition, the authorities might have already crossed the point of no return.

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