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Putin's Crimea Move Cripples Opposition

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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An opposition march in Moscow in February 2014.

During his triumphant speech on Crimea's annexation earlier this week, President Vladimir Putin stressed that his policy was supported by an "absolute majority of Russians," saying those who opposed it were "national traitors" acting on behalf of Western countries.

While such a bold statement was embraced by some as a sign of national unity, as most Russians did in fact welcome Crimea's annexation, it was taken by opposition activists who are already in the minority as a hint that Putin's domestic policy may become just as aggressive as his foreign policy, with fears of political persecution and repressive legislation.

"There is nothing we can do now; there are absolutely no tools for the opposition to influence the political situation," said Sergei Davidis, an opposition activist and a member of the Solidarity movement.

"Society is clearly divided into two parts, but it is impossible to reach the majority who see those who oppose Putin's policy as enemies," he said.

It is not just society that has been divided over the issue of Crimea, but the opposition movement itself, which has been struggling to regain its balance after steadily losing influence in recent years.

The Crimea situation has split members of the opposition because they all belong to different parts of the political spectrum — from radical nationalists to moderate liberals. Earlier, they had almost managed to find a mutual solution to oppose the Kremlin, but now the Crimea issue has made that more difficult.

Now, nationalist forces, including outspoken Kremlin opponent Eduard Limonov, are organizing pro-Russian rallies in support of Crimea returning to Russia, leftist movements like the Left Front are picketing the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow demanding the return of Crimea to Russia, while liberal groups are attending anti-war demonstrations to call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.

Although the anti-war march held a day before the Crimea referendum gathered many more people than expected, some say that it should not be seen as an achievement of the opposition, because the opposition movement is doing nothing to consolidate its supporters.

"The success of the latest anti-war march offers some hope and shows that despite considerable pressure, the opposition still has significant potential in large cities," said Ilya Yashin, an opposition activist and member of the RPR-Parnas party who gave a speech at the march.

Yashin's comments hinted at the wave of opposition sentiment that began to grow in Russia after Putin announced in September 2011 that he would run for a third presidential term. That December, tens of thousands flooded Moscow squares to protest the results of State Duma elections that they said were falsified.

A peak in opposition activity came on the day before Putin's inauguration on May 6, 2012, with thousands marching down Moscow boulevards to protest his rule.

But a rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad that day turned violent, with clashes between police and protesters. Dozens were detained and tried over the incident.

Since then, authorities began to act more harshly toward opposition members, putting activists in jail, adopting repressive laws restricting public rallies and cracking down on NGOs and independent media.

As a result, the opposition movement lost momentum and its influence has waned.

A recent VTsIOM poll showed that even in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the opposition was traditionally backed by more people than in other Russian regions, most people now supported Putin and his policy in Crimea.

Putin's approval rating has now reached its five-year maximum, with 75.7 percent of Russians supporting him — 15 percent more than in the beginning of 2014.

Such a high approval rating of the president's work is connected primarily with the situation in Ukraine, the pollster said, adding that some 71 percent of Moscow and St. Petersburg

residents supported Putin.

At his address to lawmakers and government officials on Tuesday, Putin said Russia's foreign policy would be based on the will of the majority, marginalizing all those who have a different opinion.

"Russia will have to make a difficult political decision, taking into account both internal and external factors. What do Russian people think?" Putin said. "As in any democratic society, there are different points of view but the position of the majority — I would like to emphasize of the absolute majority — is obvious. "

The Crimea issue gave Putin a "tactical advantage," Yashin said, adding that Putin's rating was growing because many people in Russia were nostalgic about the Soviet Union.

"But few people notice that Putin contradicts himself," Yashin said, "since on the one hand he rebukes Soviet leaders for totalitarianism, and on the other hand he calls for the Soviet Union's restoration."

The outlook of opposition activists and the liberal-leaning part of Russian society has been mostly bleak on the situation in Ukraine, with the Kremlin taking aggressive measures not to allow a repeat of the Maidan scenario in Russia.

Observers say Russia has been willfully ignorant of the current Kiev authorities and has refused to recognize them because the Kremlin was scared that Ukraine's protests would revitalize the opposition in Russia.

"Of course, Russia's authorities were scared by Maidan; that is why they started a large-scale propaganda campaign portraying Ukraine's opposition as some radical forces," Davidis said, adding that the crackdown on the opposition and independent media in Russia left no room for any opposition activity.

Two of Russia's top independent media sources, the Dozhd television channel and Lenta.ru news website, have come under fire in recent months.

Additionally, people jailed for taking part in an anti-Kremlin rally in 2012 have been sentenced to prison terms, while a protest in their support led to opposition leader Alexei Navalny being placed under house arrest.

"Of course, the opposition movement is very demoralized by authorities' actions, such as repressive laws, multiple criminal cases against opposition activists, media pressure, and the arrest of Navalny — the only person who could consolidate opposition forces," said Masha Lipman, a political analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center.

"I do not see any chances for reviving the protest movement in Russia, because there are no people or groups trying to unite people," she said.

With Navalny being isolated from recent events while on house arrest, authorities further cut him off by blocking access to his popular LiveJournal blog, leaving him no opportunity to address people in Russia. The move came after he said the referendum in Crimea should not be held.

It seems Navalny found a way around his court-imposed isolation, however.

On Thursday, The New York Times published an op-ed in which he called on Western states to approve more serious sanctions against Russia, suggesting the sanction list be expanded to include Russian oligarchs who own property abroad.

Navalny's placement of his op-ed in the Western newspaper could be perceived by some as evidence of Russia's own limited sources of information.

But Davidis said that regardless of Navalny's statements, and even if Navalny were free, the situation would mostly remain the same.

"The opposition would be more organized, but we still would not be able to make any real changes," he said.

Both activists and observers said the Kremlin's policy toward the opposition would likely become more severe.

"Putin will do whatever he wants now," Lipman said, while Yashin said he saw Putin's recent speech as a signal to law enforcement authorities to start political persecution.

He expects new criminal cases and provocations against opposition activists soon, he said.

Both Yashin and Davidis said they were not ready to speak about any of the opposition's plans for the future, even about new anti-war demonstrations. They said the opposition would probably decide on its next move after public euphoria over Crimea's annexation subsided.

"History shows that such aggressive and large-scale moves as annexation of another country's territory accelerate the collapse of a political system." Davidis said.

"There will be no Maidan in Russia any time soon, and it would take years for our society to change, but the decision to annex Crimea has reduced the number of years it will take," he said.

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