

Public Spats Over Ukraine Reflect Lack of Unity in Russian Opposition

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"Russia Without Putin" slogan of Russia's opposition movement has turned into an "empty mantra" and lost its value," wrote a member of Eduard Limonov's opposition party The Other Russia.

A public clash between a dissident politician and veteran rock musician this week over Russia's role in the Ukraine conflict reflects the broader lack of consensus among the opposition, pundits said.

"Whenever the opposition has to tackle fundamental problems such as what Russia is, who its friends and enemies are in the world and what we all stand for, the opposition disintegrates into little splinters," Anatoly Gorbunov, director of the Institute of Systemic Political Studies think tank told The Moscow Times.

"It is much easier to unite against President Vladimir Putin than to formulate an alternative vision and identity for Russia," he said in a telephone interview from Yekaterinburg.

No More Russia Without Putin

In a startling but little-reported post this week, a member of longtime Kremlin critic Eduard Limonov's unregistered opposition party The Other Russia wrote on his blog that the "Russia Without Putin" slogan that over the last decade has become one of the symbols of Russia's opposition movement has turned into an "empty mantra" and lost its value.

"The president has started to make steps in the last years that deserve respect. It is difficult to deny Putin's accomplishments, such as preventing a war in Syria, victorious Olympic Games in Sochi and the reunification of Crimea with Russia," Alexei Pesotsky, a member of the St. Petersburg executive committee of the party wrote in his LiveJournal blog.

It was a post that just a few years would have been unthinkable from The Other Russia, which replaced Limonov's banned National Bolshevik Party when it was outlawed in 2010. More than 100 members of that party were jailed from 1999.

Pesotsky said that liberals had privatized the slogan that Limonov's followers had come up with in 2004, rendering it meaningless.

"The liberals just want to get rid of Putin and make the 1990s and all their lost privileges come back," he wrote.

Soured Alliances

Three years ago, members of The Other Russia joined forces with liberal forces led by liberal figures like Boris Nemtsov, Mikhail Kasyanov and Garry Kasparov amid large-scale anti-government street protests.

The alliance proved successful, with the united opposition succeeding in gathering tens of thousands of people on central Moscow squares under the "Russia Without Putin" banner. But Limonov's party split from the rest of the movement almost as soon as the mass protests began in 2011, accusing the other factions of cooperating with the government in order to slowly stifle the protest sentiment.

Today they are utterly at odds, with Nemtsov calling Limonov "an old fart" in a recent interview with The Moscow Times and publicly accusing Limonov of cooperating with the Kremlin. The opposition movement is once again fractured, with opposition parties having virtually disappeared from the country's public agenda.

Trading Places

In a telling example of how quickly figures can drift between opposite poles of the political spectrum in Russia, Limonov, whose pro-freedom of protest rallies have recently begun being authorized by authorities after years of being violently dispersed by police, this week entered into a mudslinging match with formerly Kremlin-friendly rock musician, Andrei Makarevich of the band Mashina Vremeni, who has criticized the Kremlin's policies in Ukraine.

In 2010, Makarevich came under criticism from the opposition for attending a meeting at a cafe he helped set up between then-President Dmitry Medvedev and a group of other rock

musicians, where they drank beer and chatted.

However, after condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea in March, the musician recently came under fire from government-loyal figures for performing a concert at the invitation of pro-Kiev volunteers in the eastern Ukrainian town of Svyatogorsk for refugees who had fled the ongoing conflict between pro-Russian insurgents and Ukrainian forces.

After the concert, Makarevich was called a traitor who has "taken the side of the enemies of the Russian Federation" by State Duma deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov. Limonov called Makarevich "a mediocre pop musician" suffering from the male menopause and said he "must be punished by Russia" in a column in Izvestia.

In a crude response, Makarevich offered to show Limonov proof of his sexual prowess. Limonov declined the offer Thursday, saying that "the man has demonstrated his baseness and moral depravity" in an interview with the Govorit Moskva radio station Thursday.

Internal Schisms

The divisions are not only among different factions of the opposition. Some members of The Other Russia Party have publicly expressed their disapproval of Limonov's policy of advocating direct Russian military involvement in eastern Ukraine. Several party activists went to fight on the side of pro-Russian insurgents in Donetsk — one of whom was killed in fighting near Luhansk last week — but many others decided to leave the party.

According to Dmitry Treshchanin, who was an active member of the now-banned NBP in the 2000s, the party changed drastically in 2007, when the government unleashed extreme pressure on its regional branches. After that, the party became a typical Moscow establishment, he said.

"The party's goal was always to get another Russia at any cost. This included cooperation with Putin," he said in a phone interview.

"In addition, Limonov has aligned himself with people who have constantly failed him," he said.

Limonov denied the accusation, telling The Moscow Times in an interview Thursday that "the dogs bark, but the caravan goes on."

"The party is changing, but we are as united as ever in our cause," he said.

No Positive Agenda?

According to Gobunov, the squabbling between government critics reflects the broader problem that the opposition in Russia can only unite against the government but not in support of an alternative path for the country's development.

"The main problem is that whenever someone suggests a positive policy, all the rivals begin to criticize it so as not to let any one of the opposition leaders become dominant," he said.

"While the Ukraine conflict is ongoing, the opposition discourse has become based

on emotions, so I don't expect anything positive to happen in this respect until the Ukraine situation is settled," he added.

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