

Russian Opposition Must Stop Playing the Fool (Op-Ed)

By [Ivan Sukhov](#)

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It was almost painful to read the comments made by Russia's opposition leaders in response to the national elections held on Sept. 13. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny said it best when he compared the elections in Kostroma — the only region where the Democratic Coalition was permitted to take part in the gubernatorial race — to a chess game at which the opposition sat down to play with its hands tied and its eyes blindfolded. Navalny said that now the opposition will have a tough time explaining itself to those who had earlier warned that it was pointless to take part in any contest under such conditions.

Frankly, it is not clear that the opposition can have a meaningful conversation with anyone at this point, and it will be an incredible accomplishment if the Democratic Coalition can muster more than a handful of supporters at the protest march in Moscow slated for Sept. 20.

However, there is nothing new in people turning out to protest the status quo, and not in support of the individuals who positioned themselves as opposition leaders. That was the case at the peak of the protest movement in 2011–12. Those demonstrators were more

protesting election fraud than they were voicing support for Navalny, Ilya Yashin, or other opposition figures.

The point is not that the opposition's resounding defeat came as a surprise to anyone. It was entirely expected, and even elicits feelings of empathy considering the imposing administrative machinery it was up against.

Perhaps the behavior of the opposition leaders was also predictable, although there was some hope that they would break free from that pattern. Instead, they reacted to the election results as if nothing unusual had happened. Once again, they explained to their supporters why they took part in elections that they had no chance of winning and shared their plans for the future.

And, of course, they plan to remain leaders of the opposition as part of that future. At least Yashin announced that they have no plans to leave Russia and that they invite everyone to join their small band of freedom fighters. In other words, opposition leaders are saying that nothing has changed.

That same tiny band of freedom fighters will take part in the next elections also, knowing in advance that they will have to voluntarily don handcuffs and a blindfold.

It remains unclear as to how this band of freedom fighters plans to ever achieve victory with this tactic. Their promise that "Russia will be free!" sounds about as convincing as the government ministers who claim that the economy will soon rebound, despite doing nothing to reverse the negative trend.

It would brighten the mood of many Russians if, on the morning after such an election defeat, some of these charming, educated and intelligent opposition leaders would say to themselves: "Enough of playing the fool in this highly orchestrated Kremlin farce. From now on, we will do everything differently."

That does not mean the opposition should refuse to play such a chess game at all and, before its feet are also tied, stand up, flip over the board and call for the overthrow of the constitutional order.

No, they should continue to play, but they should first untie their hands.

That is an extremely difficult task, but it is not impossible.

There is an obvious problem with the fact that the Russian opposition sees itself as an absolute minority. No one speaks more often than the opposition of the notorious 86 percent support that the ruling regime enjoys and the tiny 14 percent for "those with common sense."

But that is the same as saying that victory is impossible because 14 percent of the vote is the most any opposition candidate could ever hope to garner. What's more, that 86 percent majority would categorically refuse to talk with representatives of the insignificant 14 percent. That minority is like an entirely different people who just happen to live in Russia along with everyone else.

But that ghetto where the Russian opposition resides came into existence not only through

the paradoxically massive efforts by the authorities to quash such an inconsequential opponent, but also as a result of the snobbish attitude the opposition has held toward the very people whom it purports to represent and whose support it must somehow win.

As for the members of the majority, they would not vote for Yashin or Navalny even if the presidential administration gave the opposition unrestricted access to elections throughout the country. And yet, they are also not overly pleased with the officials whom they continually vote into office.

Therefore, opposition leaders should focus not on maintaining their image as handsome, smart guys who would transform Russia if only the tyrannical powers would let them and the indifferent population would support them.

There are mountains of work to be done: They need to get out and ask the people — including members of that 86 percent — what they really want and don't want. And they should strive to finally understand why the Russian people were so jubilant over the annexation of Crimea but show no reaction to the crackdown against independent NGOs and oppositional political parties.

They should then develop a new platform based on whatever the people demand — even if that means formulating it in the language of Channel One commentators rather than the more eloquent phrasing of opposition columnists. If one set of tools does not get the job done, set it down and pick up another.

They should search for information channels, investors within the business community — while it still exists — and sympathizers among officials of all levels. They need to build an electoral machine as efficient as that of United Russia.

That might seem like an almost impossible task, but it is the only option if the opposition has any hope of achieving political victory, and not simply playing court jester at Kremlin-controlled elections for several more years.

After that, they can follow the example of those before them by emigrating abroad and selling their memoirs as charismatic politicians whom the forbidding and unruly Russian mob had driven from their homeland.

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