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Russia's Political Opposition Must Get Its Act Together

By Reid Nelson

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Any postmortem of Russia's recent regional elections should begin with hearty and sincere praise for those in the opposition who had the courage and invested the time necessary to run, and worked to support campaigns and protect the vote. Given the state of affairs in Russia today, theirs is not only a dangerous undertaking, it is often thankless and always seemingly Herculean.

A number of seasoned campaign veterans were involved in running this year's Parnas campaign. So, they are now doing what good campaign strategists do after an election: assessing and evaluating what worked, what didn't work and determining where to go from here.

In looking forward and charting a course for the near future, they may want to consider first looking back considerably further than this election, and examine where the opposition was several years ago.

A good place to start is a panel discussion held in 2008 in Washington, D.C. at the American Enterprise Institute, where panelists Vladimir Ryzhkov, Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Kara-Murza and Oleg Buklemishev discussed that year's Russian presidential election. Michael McFaul, who would later become the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, was also present.

It's striking how the issues raised by the opposition panelists then — unfair barriers to entry, vote manipulation, lack of access to media, the need for a unified opposition and more street demonstrations, oppression of opposition supporters — are largely those still being raised today.

But after seven years, can it be said any real progress has been made in building a stronger, more viable opposition? It would be a hard case to make.

Except perhaps for the brief, bright glimmer of Navalny's 27 percent showing in the Moscow mayoral election in 2013, the opposition is essentially where it was seven years ago — low support among the populace, no durable, experienced nationwide organization and pretty much the same leaders.

At that 2008 gathering, McFaul cited other countries where opposition political forces managed to build strong organizations under much more oppressive conditions than those existing in Russia.

He also noted "Most successful democratic movements have not had democracy as the ideology of the opposition; that is usually a means to another end."

"Democracy is a very hard thing to mobilize people around," he added. "They [other successful opposition movements] had other mechanisms for mobilization that did not depend on the state giving them the chance to participate in elections."

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We can only dream where the opposition in Russia might be today if it had heeded McFaul’s advice and taken to heart his observations back then.

If the progress made over the last seven years is any measure, the current strategic approach of the opposition is not working and it's time to at least discuss some radically different paths forward.

First, reverse the current strategic mindset. Though many would deny it, there is a top-down mentality that pervades the entire political spectrum in Russia, from the ruling regime through the democratic opposition. There is a deep conviction among many opposition leaders that change only happens from Moscow, thus rendering regional organization building and outreach efforts irrelevant.

The democratic coalition ran a good, issue-oriented campaign in Kostroma. But can anyone seriously expect to be successful in regional elections running candidates parachuted in from Moscow? This is not a successful long-term strategy for a party.

Had the opposition been organizing in Kostroma for the last seven years, it's a sure bet that any leaders emerging as candidates out of that effort would have fared far better Sunday than

the opposition managed.

Second, find an effective mobilizing ideology. Develop a platform that communicates clearly and directly to people how their lives will improve if opposition candidates are elected.

For a long time, the manifesto on the Parnas website was "free all political prisoners," followed by a series of demands for structural democratic reform. The party's latest platform is a slight improvement.

Needless to say, few Russians get up in the morning and wonder how many political prisoners might be freed that day. They worry about the same things every human the world over worries about: adequate health care, their pension, their kids' education, putting more food on the table.

To be viable, a political party must speak loudly and explicitly to those types of concerns.

Third, work to create a more democratic party. Democracy may not be a good mobilizing ideology, but it's a great way to build an effective political organization.

Parties serve as a means of aggregating citizens' concerns and addressing them through policies. The policy formulation process should include substantive input from the grassroots level of the organization, where activists can conduct direct citizen outreach and help develop prescriptions that resonate with citizens. This creates greater solidarity and a sense of common purpose throughout all levels of the organization.

Fourth, organize and mobilize at the local level — continually. A party gains legitimacy by proving it can be a relevant and positive force in people's lives. That cannot be accomplished by showing up every election cycle and making the case for votes.

Even in the most difficult times it is possible to organize to achieve some sort of good, particularly at the local level where such efforts have more impact.

Producing tangible, positive results for people in their communities legitimizes the party, develops leaders and demonstrate the value of collective organizing and mobilization.

Finally, as a kind of general guiding principle: Focus more on people and less on Putin. Democratic transition depends only in part on credibly challenging the legitimacy of the ruling authority.

Whether or not you believe Putin's approval ratings are as high as polls indicate, there's no doubt he remains the most popular political figure in the country. It makes no sense to try to build a political movement based primarily on simply being opposed to such a figure.

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Take the issue of corruption. It can be used to demonstrate that the regime is full of bad people (Putin focused), or it can be used to show how much corruption is costing citizens in unbuilt kindergartens, kilometers of unpaved roads, and unopened new medical clinics (people focused).The latter approach is likely to be much more effective.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky said, "I believe that the problem in Russia is not so much with the president on a personal level. The problem is that the overwhelming majority of our fellow citizens don't understand that they're the ones who have got to be personally responsible for their own fate themselves."

It seems unlikely that a "bottom-up" democratic transition will ever occur in Russia. However, liberalization will eventually come, and consolidating and sustaining democratic change must come from the bottom. That means fundamentally re-engineering the way Russian citizens relate to government, political parties and democracy itself.

The opposition should be the architect and builder in that re-engineering project. But a change in the mindset of Russian citizens won't come about by preaching the virtues of democracy. It will happen through empowering grassroots activists to demonstrate the effectiveness of organizing and mobilizing to make a positive impact on communities.

Let's hope that project starts now. Russia cannot afford, and the Russian people certainly do not need, another seven years of unorganized drifting and pointless bickering by the opposition.

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