

In Declaring Navalny Extremist, Russia Has Crossed a New Rubicon

Declaring all opposition figures enemies of the state and illegal entities precludes any chance of dialogue: there might have been a place at the table for a non-system opposition activist, but not for an extremist.

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Alexander Demianchuk / TASS

The Russian state is apparently determined to outlaw all organizations linked to opposition leader Alexei Navalny as "extremist."

A final court ruling on the matter is due at the beginning of June, but there's little doubt what the outcome will be. The Federal Financial Monitoring Service has already included the organizations on its list of extremists. Even before that, the organizations had ceased their

operations and online activity. Navalny's associates are facing the very real possibility of criminal prosecution.

Nor is it likely to end there. A [bill](#) already passed in its first reading by the State Duma would ban anyone from running for parliament if they have worked for or supported an organization classed as extremist. People who registered on the website of a rally in support of Navalny are starting to [be fired](#) by state sector employers, even if they didn't actually take part in the rally.

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This is all an important milestone in the history of the Russian political system. Now any form of politics that is not controlled by the Kremlin attracts the attention of the siloviki (security services) and is essentially outlawed. The domestic policy bloc within the presidential administration, which had been responsible for tackling — and sometimes liaising with — the real Russian opposition, i.e., the part of it operating outside of the system, has lost this area of responsibility. Support for the Kremlin is becoming the only legal political action.

Having declared Navalny's organizations extremist, the Russian state has elected to fight them using the simplest method: brute force. Previously, the label of extremism was, as a rule, applied to those who really did seek to seize power by force, such as Eduard Limonov's banned National Bolshevik Party. At the same time, members of such organizations were not officially banned from politics: anyone who wanted to could try to run for office, though of course, in reality, a range of obstacles would prevent them from registering their candidacy.

With regard to those intending on effecting peaceful regime change, the Kremlin took a more subtle approach, creating the impression of political action rather than force. Opposition figures were rarely allowed to run in elections, their parties were unable to obtain official registration, and it was virtually impossible to hold a protest in a suitable location. But all of these refusals were always blamed on the opposition activists themselves: that they had made mistakes when collecting signatures in support of their candidacy, or when applying to get their party registered or to hold a protest rally. There was a dialogue, albeit a very limited one: have your protest — but on the public square of our choosing, rather than yours.

The real opposition in Russia was pushed outside of the system long ago, but previously that just meant that certain figures and organizations didn't have access to appear on federal TV channels, for example, or to take part in most electoral campaigns. The line between the "in-system" and "non-system" opposition was monitored by the presidential administration, which thought up barriers, stopped in-system and non-system politicians from getting too friendly, and led the fight against the opposition in the information arena.

From time to time, the presidential administration might relax these rules and allow one of Navalny's supporters, or even Navalny himself, to run for office. It was important for the status of the presidential administration's political bloc that the fight against the non-system opposition should be waged using political methods — at least formally.

This gave state officials the opportunity to show that only they knew where to apply and ease pressure, where to loosen the reins, and where to veto in order to prevent the opposition from having any realistic claims to power. Without the non-system opposition, there would be no

strong presidential administration.

Now, even that limited dialogue and attempts to engage the non-system opposition in play are becoming impossible: officially, it will soon be classed as collaborating with extremists and enemies of the state. The [bill](#) that would ban former members of organizations labeled extremist from running for election will throw up an impenetrable wall between the non-system opposition and legal politics. The security services have long been trying to regain their influence over political life in Russia to Soviet-era levels. Now, the siloviki's message as they return to politics is that the civilians are simply no longer coping with the task.

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The presidential administration has conceded key ground to the siloviki for several reasons. The popularity of both Putin and the ruling United Russia party has declined drastically in the last few years. Before, the non-system opposition didn't really pose a threat in elections. Now that some unlikely candidates have been elected by pure chance, with the opposition and even select individuals starting to cause real headaches for the authorities, attempts to play games with the opposition have become a dangerous business.

Concern within the regime has also risen sharply. The Kremlin genuinely fears that Western countries headed by the United States will use non-system candidates and street protests to try to topple the current Russian leadership. As a consequence, domestic opponents are being declared enemies of the state, and the security bloc has stepped up to deal with them.

The presidential administration itself has helped to bring this situation about, making increasingly frequent use in recent times of the services of the siloviki to break up protests and put pressure on the non-system opposition. These targeted efforts have effectively become institutionalized.

Navalny's organizations have predictably come under fire before anything else. They are known throughout Russia, and their effectiveness was comparable to that of the in-system parties. With their help, opposition activists have started to emerge in the regions who are capable of getting elected as deputies in large cities, and the tactic of "smart voting" has started to cause real problems for the regime. And, finally, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation's investigations have reached the activities of [Putin himself](#).

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Declaring Navalny's organizations extremist is a tactical move by the authorities that solves all of these problems: there will be no more nationwide structures, no more inconvenient candidates, and no joining forces with the in-system opposition through "smart voting." And at the same time, the state is demonstratively punishing those who have supported Navalny in any way: by signing up to the website of a street protest calling for him to be released from prison, for example. That website was hacked, and data sent to employers. People were subsequently made examples of by being [fired](#) — including from the Moscow metro — to reinforce the illegal status of the non-system opposition.

Support for the ruling regime is becoming the only legal political action. Even pro-Putin figures who are not considered sufficiently manageable are experiencing pressure from above, and the in-system parties are turning irrevocably into bureaucratic branches of the Kremlin's political bloc.

More importantly still, declaring the opposition enemies of the state and illegal entities precludes any chance of dialogue: there might be a place at the table for a non-system opposition activist, but not for an extremist. The Russian power system is becoming incontrovertibly monolithic, and any voices not entirely in tune with the chorus are automatically declared to be enemy.

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