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Maxim Katz Wants to Unite Russia's Splintered Opposition. That May Be Easier Said Than Done.

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Maxim Katz. **George Malets / flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)**

To his critics, Maxim Katz's ideas for uniting Russia's anti-Kremlin opposition are as realistic as a unicorn.

Katz proposed last month what he calls "a concrete plan" to ensure that Putin is removed from power and asked opposition figures, including allies of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, to unite behind it.

"The Russian opposition should unite as a cohesive front and issue clear recommendations and concrete proposals for action," the activist and blogger told The Moscow Times by video interview from Tel Aviv.

"We must collectively oppose Putin through this process, and I am currently working to

persuade everyone to support this initiative."

A year and a half since Russia invaded Ukraine and launched into a relentless crackdown on what remained of its domestic opposition, Russia's leading Kremlin critics are now either in exile or imprisoned.

With President Vladimir Putin expected to run for a fifth term virtually unchallenged next March, opposition activists are now grappling with how best to convey their message to domestic audiences.

However, it appears that it was easier to call for unity than to actually create a united front among the Russian opposition, which has long been known for its infighting.

"In politics, the most crucial factor is trust," journalist Michael Naki said during a recent live-streamed debate with Katz. "We cannot engage with those whom we do not trust, especially when they employ the same tactics repeatedly — rather than opposing Putin, they end up fighting against other representatives of the opposition."

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Katz, 38, is one of Russia's prominent opposition figures.

His supporters argue that the opposition movement should set aside their disagreements and come together in unity ahead of crucial elections.

But his political career has been marred by several scandals involving people with whom he has collaborated. As a result, some see him as an unlikely candidate to unite liberal forces.

"It is really hard to communicate with him," a well-known opposition figure told The Moscow Times, requesting anonymity to speak candidly about a colleague.

"Katz is very talented, but his history is full of conflicts with attacks on his opponent's personality."

Born in Moscow and raised in Russia and Israel, Katz began his political career in 2012, when he was elected as a municipal deputy in Moscow.

From there, he joined the Russian Opposition Coordination Council and served as deputy chair of Navalny's 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign. He then ran for Moscow City Duma in 2014 and served as ex-State Duma deputy Dmitry Gudkov's chief of staff during the 2016 parliamentary elections.

A former poker champion who played to "gain financial independence," Katz today runs a growing YouTube channel where he discusses Russian politics and criticizes Russia's invasion of Ukraine to an audience of 1.9 million subscribers. He says his videos receive around 6 million views from inside Russia every month.

Katz argues that "political media resources with a large number of Russian viewers" — including Navalny's team and that of exiled businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky — should

“unite and develop a strategy for working with [our audiences].”

At the same time, Katz said, opposition figures should take advantage of their audience of about 30 million people in Russia who oppose the war and who watch independent political voices as a form of political capital.

"We have no influence on political decision making, we have no influence on people in the State Duma and government bodies. We are an external force. But we become noticeable ... when we all come together," Katz told The Moscow Times.

According to political scientist Alexander Morozov, Russia's opposition is hindered more by its coordination problem than its willingness to be united.

"If we discuss Russia's opposition movement, it consists of completely different groups and it's evident that they cannot all unite. Nonetheless, this doesn't imply there should be conflicts or misunderstandings among them. Coordination would facilitate their efforts when engaging with the European Union, national governments, civil organizations, and international groups," Morozov said.

Opposition leaders also discussed Russia’s future this month at a meeting in Berlin.

According to activist Anastasia Shevchenko, around 200 people representing Russian opposition groups agreed to start a joint campaign against Putin in the face of the presidential election.

“We agreed on the idea of how we will behave in the so-called presidential elections in Russia,” Shevchenko said.

Gudkov, who was present at the conference, said those who signed on to the coalition “will definitely negotiate with all political forces.”

While the names of those who will join the coalition have not been made public, the opposition has had some disagreements over possible cooperation.

Katz said he had agreed with Khodorkovsky to meet in London this month to discuss his proposed plan. Maria Pevchikh, the chair of the board of Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), as well as Navalny’s chief of staff Leonid Volkov, were also invited but apparently refused.

“Maxim, no means no,” Pevchikh added during yet another discussion between Navalny’s allies and Katz on X (formerly Twitter).

“We will not go to meet you in London. And please stop selling pink unicorn snot to the people listening here," Pevchikh added, in a metaphor apparently illustrating the absurdity of Katz’s ideas.

Personal conflicts may have also played a role.

Volkov, who in 2013 was accused of sexually harassing Katz's now-wife, said this month that “Maxim [Katz] has no plan.”

Navalny himself blasted Katz's call to unite in a message from prison last month.

"Our position on the 2024 presidential election will be formed when the whole picture is clear: candidates, campaigning, and observers," Navalny said.

Katz, he argued, "is very wrong in offering us his own solution to these problems. He sees the most important thing as the creation of some kind of public coalition. ... Go to hell with your coalitions."

"It's an imitation of [political] activity. It's fake. Instead of work, people organize a presidium to sit in it and look important," Navalny said.

In response, Katz said that he and Navalny have "very different understandings of what is happening."

"I believe that there are no elections in Russia at all — all the procedures that take place in Russia are not elections... [but] we must use every opportunity," Katz said.

Despite the Navalny team's rejection, Katz said creating a broad coalition of Russian opposition groups is likely to help to strengthen their message to the West, including the question of sanctions against Russians in response to the war.

"There is no unified sanctions strategy — they [sanctions] are implemented in entirely different ways," Katz said, referring to the recent ban on bringing cars with Russian registration plates to a number of European countries and continuing to buy Russian oil and gas.

The coalition is also likely to help with coordination with Western institutions such as the European Union, said Katz, who has discussed the future of Russia and Russian emigres with Western figures including Finnish lawmakers.

Related article: Russian Political Activist Katz Jailed 8 Years in Absentia for Spreading 'War Fakes'

According to Katz, one of the problems the Russian opposition faces is its inability to engage in dialogue with the EU as a united front due to the lack of a common representative.

"The main thing that surprises me is that the European Union has no strategy whatsoever on how to deal with Russia," he said. "I don't know of a single Western politician who has a strategy."

According to Katz, his main task in Russia's post-Putin future will be "the establishment of a large liberal party."

"This party should have a presence in cities across Russia, actively compete for parliamentary and mayoral positions, and secure representation in the State Duma," Katz told The Moscow Times, adding that it should "wield significant influence within Russia, championing the ideals of a democratic, liberal course for the country.

“Ultimately, the goal is to firmly embed the concept of a liberal, democratic Russia within the fabric of our society.”

Katz has been accused in the past of sabotaging the opposition as well as acting in favor of Moscow City Hall and the Kremlin.

“I’m not an agent [of the Kremlin],” he said, calling the accusations “basically nonsense.”

“Unfortunately, Russian opposition activists very often foolishly act in the interests of the Kremlin, [but] it’s very unlikely that anyone does this because Putin gave them money or something,” he said. “Those who do this are simply doing it out of stupidity.”

Yet whether he can establish a political party in Russia is still up in the air.

This year, a Moscow court sentenced Katz to eight years in prison in absentia on charges of spreading “fake news” about the Russian Armed Forces.

When asked if he plans to return to Russia, he said he “will go back as soon as it becomes possible."

“The system is very unstable now — it could collapse at any moment,” Katz said.

“It's possible that in a year or two, we will already be in Russia, and we will be able to conduct political activities there quite calmly — but maybe it will take more time.”

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