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Ilya Ponomaryov: ‘We Have to Capture the Kremlin. There Is No Other Way’

By Pippa Crawford

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Ilya Ponomaryov. **Ilya Ponomaryov / Facebook**

LONDON — Ilya Ponomaryov is in a good mood.

Speaking to The Moscow Times in London, the former Russian lawmaker turned controversial opposition figure orders tea, joking that his tastes were unchanged by the fatal poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, who he says was a personal friend.

Ponomaryov has been in exile since 2016, when he moved to Kyiv after being charged with embezzlement and later impeached for failing to perform his duties.

He today claims to be the spokesperson of the National Republican Army (NRA), a paramilitary group trying to overthrow President Vladimir Putin.

As a member of Russia’s State Duma in the early 2010s, Ponomaryov defied Russia’s deepening authoritarianism. He was the only person to vote against the annexation of Crimea

and the so-called "gay propaganda bill."

Yet the 48-year-old former tech magnate's critics maintain that he was part of the establishment during Putin's consolidation of power.

"As far as I see it, there are 20% of the Russian people who strongly support the war, 20 who are strongly against it, and the rest are neutral. And this 60% are our people," he says.

"The way to unlock their potential is to capture the Kremlin. There is no other way. These people will listen to just about anyone, as long as they are in the Kremlin."

When pressed to confirm whether the Russian people would have a choice in his proposed power transition, he says unflinchingly: "Absolutely not."

"Right now, their hands are tied, and they don't know they can do things."

Ponomaryov now sits in the Congress of People's Deputies, a Russian shadow parliament based in Poland that is not formally recognized by any state. Since February 2022, he has been a member of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces.

In his recent book "Does Putin Have to Die? The Story of How Russia Becomes a Democracy After Losing to Ukraine," he argues that a coup d'etat followed by a carefully managed transition is the surest way to establish free and fair elections in the country.

Ponomaryov's plan is not without precedent. In June, mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin managed to capture a military headquarters and the southern city of Rostov-on-Don with little resistance.

The politician tells The Moscow Times that he was unfazed by the eventual failure of Prigozhin's mutiny.

"For us, everything that happened with Prigozhin was a very positive thing," he says. "Because Prigozhin acted as our proof of concept. He did exactly what we said we would be doing and it worked... it's still possible."

Ponomaryov wants to attack from the top down, with little regard for popular consent. This model has its detractors — and activists worry that ethnic minorities and existing grassroots resistance movements in Russia's ethnic republics are being left out of the conversation.

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When asked about decolonization, Ponomaryov says that calls to break from Moscow would have to come "from within the republics themselves."

Ponomaryov admits he is "not a military man," yet his plan hinges on military backing. He claims to be in close contact with four battalions of Russian volunteers within the Ukrainian army that receive "around 1,000 applications a month."

In previous interviews, he has been grilled over his refusal to name his sources in the NRA, an

organization he endorses but has not joined. Messages allegedly originating inside the group are posted on Ponomaryov's YouTube and Telegram channels, including a manifesto and footage of explosions at munitions factories and railway lines within Russia.

Ponomaryov insists that anonymity is needed to protect the NRA. He says that "at least 12" of his friends or colleagues have been assassinated over the course of his political career. In 2017, Kyiv gave Ponomaryov personal protection after former Russian lawmaker Denis Voronenkov was shot dead on his way to meet him in a presumed FSB hit.

The NRA has claimed responsibility for the assassinations of pro-war blogger Vladlen Tatarsky and Darya Dugina, the daughter of far-right ideologue Alexander Dugin.

Ponomaryov supported the assassinations and told Meduza that "anyone who participates on the other side of the war is considered a legitimate target [for the NRA]."

When asked how he defines "participates," Ponomaryov clears his throat.

"Let's just make it clear that it was not me who organized the assassinations. These are people who I think are heroes and who are doing the right thing, but it's not me," he says.

"The NRA defines legitimate targets as everyone who is financing the war, organizing the war as government civil servants, those who own the companies who produce weapons, and those who are in any place of the chain of war."

He asserted that family members of people in this category who are not personally involved would be considered "civilians" and would not be targeted.

"I wouldn't support that," he says.

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) denied Ponomaryov's version of events and blamed Ukrainian special services for the car bombing that killed Darya Dugina.

By pushing for a military coup in Russia, Ponomaryov goes further than fellow dissidents Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Garry Kasparov, and he claims they uninvited him from a summit over security concerns.

Ponomaryov was Khodorkovsky's deputy during his time at Yukos Oil, and the two remain close friends despite their ideological differences.

"I don't see a contradiction there," Ponomaryov tells The Moscow Times.

"I would say that my political position is way closer to Kasparov's. I very much hope we will soon see a public alliance between us. We are getting closer every day, we already have a lot of joint events. Because, politically, the views are close. In terms of my personal relations with Garry, he is my colleague. Khodorkovsky is my friend."

Kasparov, the 13th World Chess Champion, recently posted on X (formerly Twitter) that he supported using frozen Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine. Yet this is a far cry from Ponomaryov's open talk of assassinations and secret battalions.

Ponomaryov argues that behind closed doors, many Russian opposition figures support armed resistance.

“Among the general opposition crowd, I would say it’s half and half [for and against armed resistance],” he says. “Leaders are more moderate because they have more to lose, and are usually more cautious. So I would say around one-third [of leaders favor armed resistance]. But a lot of people even from this one-third say: ‘Ilya, we are totally with you, but we cannot say it in public.’”

Ponomaryov has an uneasy relationship with supporters of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, stemming back to his time in government.

The politician blames individuals close to the jailed opposition leader for misrepresenting his role in the introduction of Russia’s 2012 internet restriction bill, which tightened online censorship.

“By that point, it was impossible to simply block [a bill],” argues Ponomaryov, looking to change the subject. “I tried to channel it in a certain direction to avoid the heat. Later, that was used against me.”

“It was my political mistake,” he acknowledges. “If I had my time again, I wouldn’t touch it. Because it happened anyway, with later bills.”

Navalny’s recent 20-day disappearance during a prison transfer fueled concern that the Russian opposition movement could find itself without its most prominent figure.

Ponomaryov says he feels confident that Navalny’s followers would eventually find common ground with his faction of the opposition.

“I do not think there is too much division,” he says. “Right now there is disconnect between [opposition] leaders, who are fighting with each other because of their personal ambitions. We are all competing for recognition from Brussels. But once there is recognition of the government in exile and a political alternative to Putin, I believe that division among the Russian opposition will virtually vanish.”

Ponomaryov says he sees similarities between himself and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the Belarusian government-in-exile. Yet he adds that negotiations with her team have not been straightforward.

“None of the groups I am working with are active on Belarusian territory,” he says. “I have good relations with the Belarusian opposition, but officially, they want nothing to do with the Russian opposition, because they have a lot of nationalist elements inside their ranks.”

He says he had also considered trying to convince longtime Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, one of Putin’s closest allies, to take up resistance against the Kremlin.

“But it didn’t happen, and now we are at the point of no return,” he says. “Now with the sanctions, his dependency on Moscow is so high that he cannot do much. Lukashenko uses his territory to attack Ukraine, but he is not participating directly. Which is why the Ukrainian government decided: ‘We are not fighting with him’.”

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Ponomaryov does not try to present himself as the future leader of a democratic Russia. He laughs off comparisons to Charles de Gaulle, the wartime leader of the French government in exile.

"Where there are comparisons with de Gaulle, only our model is the same. There has to be a military component, a resistance component, and a political alternative. I am not planning to run for any elections in Russia."

Instead, Ponomaryov tells The Moscow Times: "I see myself as the mastermind behind the political transition.

"If the person who designs the transition period then participates in the election, he has a temptation to put things in his favor, to win the elections. There is a conflict of interest. And that's what happened in 1993 with Boris Yeltsin."

Finishing his tea, Ponomaryov comes across as a defiant, yet isolated figure. Yet this may change. On Friday, Ponomaryov is meeting U.K., EU and Ukrainian policymakers at a London conference on British and global security following the Russia-Ukraine war.

"Putin is not as strong as he looks," says Ponomaryov. "He's a rich man, but money doesn't buy you friends who would fight and die for you. It buys you business partners."

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