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Russia's Opposition, Past and Future: A Conversation With Jan Matti Dollbaum

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Russian opposition figures lead a march in Berlin, Nov. 17. **Moscow Times Reporter**

Political scientist Jan Matti Dollbaum is a prominent scholar of contemporary Russian politics whose research focuses on activism and opposition movements in Russia. An assistant professor at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, Dollbaum is also the co-author of "Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?"

The Moscow Times spoke with Dollbaum in December about how Russia's opposition has evolved since the invasion of Ukraine and what lies ahead for these movements as the conflict potentially approaches its conclusion in the new year.

The Moscow Times: What is the Russian opposition today? Who are the groups and people that represent the opposition?

Jan Matti Dollbaum: The full-scale invasion of Ukraine added an extra layer to this question.

Before, I would answer your question by responding: Do you mean the Moscow opposition or the people in the regions? Are you talking only about the liberals we see in the West, or about other groups like nationalists, leftists and eco-activists? Nowadays, the next level is those who are inside and those who are outside of Russia. The group of people that we tend to think of as the opposition are now outside the country — that's mostly liberals who come from the capital, like Navalny's people. This is a very small group, but it has the most attention in the media and among Western politicians. However, we know there are many others, and at the same time, the exiled opposition seems to be losing touch with those who remain in Russia. Of course, it's also important to consider the Ukrainian perspective.

Why does it matter who the Ukrainians think represents the Russian opposition?

From an academic perspective, it probably doesn't matter much. But I think it matters from a discursive point of view since there is an ongoing battle over who is the legitimate representative of Russians in the West, such as in the case of Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza and others holding a demonstration in Berlin, where they try to show themselves as the 'good Russians.' Ukrainians are contributing a lot to this discussion. Some of them say those individuals are not 'good Russians' and fear that they are also imperialists but with a different kind of guise. From a Ukrainian perspective, it's an understandable suspicion.

You've researched and written a lot about activist and opposition strategies in Russia, such as during elections and protests. How would you describe the strategy of the exiled opposition, especially since the start of the war in Ukraine?

I think they're trying to do two things. The first is to talk to the world about Russia and what kind of country Russia has the potential to become. Broadly speaking, they're trying to separate Putin's regime from the Russian people as they push against the narrative of collective guilt. They are offering ideas for a different kind of Russia with alternative policies. That's a reasonable but very difficult thing to do.

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Along with this, they're trying to influence Western sanctions policy in a way that harms the regime but doesn't hurt ordinary people, because they are seeing very clearly that these sanctions are what angers Russians at home. Since they see Russians in Russia as their future electorate, they also cannot do as much for a Ukrainian victory as the Ukrainians would want, for instance donating to the Ukrainian army. The second thing the opposition is doing is broadcasting information to the Russian public, mainly through YouTube and Telegram. They are providing alternative media where they talk about the true costs of the war for Russia. So, I think these are two ways in which they can take action. A major way they tried to act before the war was through mobilizing Russians in Russia. But they understandably can't do that kind of political organizing anymore, so that part is missing.

Nevertheless, we did see coordination between the exiled opposition and what remains of an opposition inside Russia during the 2024 presidential election. Yekaterina Duntsova and Boris Nadezhdin both unsuccessfully tried running for president. We saw a sudden burst of enthusiasm and solidarity among anti-Kremlin Russians at home and abroad.

Yes, you're right. The squabbling died down and everyone in the opposition was more or less behind Boris Nadezhdin. However, I think people knew it wouldn't change anything short term. That kind of mobilization is less about bringing about change and more about showing people that they're not alone in their views, and that there are many others like them. It's an emotional appeal to keep spirits high. Nadezhdin was obviously not going to become president and he did not pose a threat to the regime. This was more of an internal strategy for the opposition. Of course, if they were to change their position on violence as a political tool and their willingness to engage in it, then things might be different.

Are you suggesting Russia's opposition could begin to see violence as a useful tool for enacting political change? That would sort of jar with their liberal-democratic branding.

I think violence is the only way this regime can be overturned from the outside. Or something may happen on the inside, which is unlikely. You're not going to overthrow Putin by protesting at noon during the presidential election. It's an interesting question: Should the opposition use their energy to persuade the Western public and politicians as they wait out the regime's natural end and just keep up morale? Or should they try to find ways to more effectively disrupt, sabotage and find allies who are capable of using violence?

I think real, though not necessarily democratic, change could come from someone like [late Wagner mercenary leader Yevgeny] Prigozhin. I think that's why Mikhail Khodorkovsky was open to supporting him during the rebellion last year. Maybe he's since regretted it, but his intuition was right. If you want to make an impact, you need guys with guns. Of course, that's highly risky and so not everyone wants to go down that path. A more realistic option might be to wait and see whether Ukraine can pull off a victory in the war. Though that, too, looks increasingly unlikely.

Let's talk about Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). Since Navalny died in February, his allies seem to be somewhat in disarray and quarreling with others more than usual. FBK is undergoing changes, but it's not clear what the end result is yet.

FBK was created around Navalny. That was its whole evolution. It was supposed to be a political engine. It wasn't a party. However, it kind of had a functional equivalent of a very highly personalized party that, unlike a real party, doesn't have to care, really, about what the members want. It was more of a firm or a corporate party. But it was still very focused on Navalny as the leader. Even while he was in prison, Navalny acted as a kind of spiritual leader and FBK continued to function as before. But when all of that breaks down, it's less clear what purpose FBK serves. Of course, they have resources and connections. But their biggest asset was the ability to mobilize people, which they can no longer do in Russia. All they can do now is try to influence politicians in the West and broadcast messages to Russians. In that regard, they're not really different from others who try to do the same, like Khodorkovsky or Maxim Katz. They're just one among several organizations that are doing the same thing now and they've lost their exceptional status since they've lost their exceptional person.

What about [Navalny's widow] Yulia Navalnaya?

Yes, she has tried to step into the role of leader. But we don't know enough about how people view her or whether or not her attempts to become a new leading face of the opposition have been successful. She's doing good work and she's definitely more palatable than all of the

squabbling men. But it's not clear how she's viewed in Russia by different people.

You mentioned FBK as having served as a kind of corporate party for Navalny. Speaking of parties, what about the systemic opposition in Russia? I mean the Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party, A Just Russia and New People. Do they matter anymore?

They might become important as organizational shells at some point, as things that have labels and a legal entity, as well as established resources and networks in the regions that can be appropriated by other people. They might matter in the future, as we saw with Prigozhin, who wanted to take control of the St. Petersburg branch of A Just Russia. He wasn't interested in any ideology this party promoted, but rather saw it as a power resource in political competition. In that sense, systemic opposition parties could become important again.

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So, theoretically, someone like Prigozhin could come along and exploit the organizational networks and resources of these parties to lead a political movement.

Yes, some kind of disgruntled regime figure. Maybe someone like [Moscow Mayor] Sergei Sobyanin or others who have political ambitions that cannot be realized under Putin. Once Putin is gone, we'll see changes. These parties may provide a platform for ambitious counter-elites. They won't necessarily be 'opposition' in the sense that we understand the opposition today. They may be regime figures who want to establish their own authoritarian system.

Looking ahead, if the war in Ukraine ends next year, which looks increasingly likely, what might the implications be for Russia's liberal opposition?

If a pause to the war would look like it's looking now, under the same regime, which is trying to sell the outcome as a victory, then I think little to nothing would change. You have a regime that still feeds on the well-nurtured narrative of a beleaguered 'fortress Russia' that needs to defend itself and that has achieved major gains in the so-called 'denazification' of Ukraine. And if Western countries lifted sanctions as part of a ceasefire or peace deal, then the opposition may have an even harder time, since Putin could claim that he's restoring connections with the rest of the world. Putin would be stronger domestically. In that scenario, it's possible the opposition would play a more diminished role than it does now, if that's possible at all. If the war ends with Russia's military defeat, which looks unlikely, then the opposition could play a much bigger role. However, I think broader democratic transformations would still need to happen in Russia for them to have a real shot at filling Putin's place. In either case, when all of the problems of the war start to really bite, when war veterans return home and start demanding more just treatment, all of the trauma will begin to surface. In the long run, that might undermine the regime, and it might bring opposition to the fore that we don't even know of yet. The soldiers' wives [movements] are one example. I don't know how that would translate into the liberal opposition in exile having more direct political influence, but we might see other actors, domestic ones, become stronger.

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