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Russia's Opposition Has Representation in PACE. Can They Achieve Anything?

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Strasbourg, FRANCE — Can some of Russia's most prominent exiled opposition figures provide political representation for the millions of Russians who oppose President Vladimir Putin and his invasion of Ukraine?

The newly formed Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) hopes to achieve just that, advocating for Russian wartime emigres as well as Russians living under the Kremlin's repressions at the official European level.

But while it is seen by some as a long-overdue step in elevating the status of the Russian opposition in Europe, critics argue that it has neither the structure nor the power needed to make a meaningful difference, and that its selection of members was fundamentally undemocratic.

PACE's move to engage in formal dialogue with Russian opposition figures came "at a time when Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, repression inside the country deepens and the prospects for democracy appear distant," President Petra Bayr said.

"One day," she said, "a different Russia can return to Europe — not by rhetoric, but by transformation. "It is our responsibility to be ready to support it when the window of opportunity opens."

At the group's first meeting in Strasbourg, the body of which was closed to the press, Bayr told The Moscow Times that discussions focused on support for Ukraine, political prisoners in Russia, issues affecting the Russian diaspora and how the platform should proceed.

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However, PACE did not establish internal rules or a formal agenda for the group before the Jan. 29 meeting.

Bayr said that it would be "up to the Russian groups themselves" to determine and organize their next steps.

"We will try next time, with all the content we collected, to have a priority that's fine for everybody. And to continue with a concrete program step by step. And we also have to work in parallel on procedural issues: when they want to organize elections, how to organize that," she said.

Pussy Riot founder Nadya Tolokonnikova told The Moscow Times that her priorities at the Platform were "support of Ukraine, the dismantling of the Russian imperial apparatus — this is feminism, rainbows and unicorns."

Opposition figure Garry Kasparov called for infrastructure to give anti-Putin Russians a means to signal their support for or elect their own representatives, as well as the group's intention to provide practical support for Russians abroad.

"We do not know if it is possible to allow people in Russia to vote secretly ... but the main thing is that we must find a way to represent hundreds of thousands of people who, again, have no representation today," the former chess grandmaster said.

"They have to choose us, and we have to fight for them," he continued.

Kasparov also highlighted the "double discrimination" faced by anti-Kremlin Russians: hit by sanctions and suspicion abroad and legal persecution at home.

While the Platform includes figures like former political prisoners Vladimir Kara-Murza and Oleg Orlov and exiled businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, it has faced criticism for the fact that its members represent only a narrow slice of the Russian opposition, both in the diaspora and inside the country.

Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), arguably the most powerful Russian

opposition group, refused to take part in the Platform, citing a lack of transparency and accusing PACE of imposing restrictive conditions and allegedly favoring certain political groups.

Soon after the meeting ended, former Navalny ally Lyubov Sobol wrote — and then deleted — a post on X in which she outlined what she claimed each of the present members' priorities for the group were, most of which line up with what the others discussed after the meeting.

She also claimed that Khodorkovsky had prepared a written plan for the group's work that she and some other participants had not seen, and noted that three Indigenous representatives were not in attendance.

Chances for success?

While some critics have argued that the group could achieve limited successes, others believe it is doomed to fail.

The notoriously fractured Russian opposition has been plagued by infighting since even before Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and some critics question whether or not the group will be able to hold itself together.

A further limitation is the Platform's lack of real legislative or policymaking power.

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"PACE is not a parliament, it's an assembly. It has no legislative powers," exiled political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann, who is not part of the Platform, told The Moscow Times. "Its voice is important because it consists of representatives of national parliaments. So when the assembly passes a resolution on something, this is seen as a collective position of the parliaments of the member countries. The importance is clearly a moral one or a political one."

Schulmann said the group could be considered a success if it finishes its one-year term without any major scandals or disruptions and influences PACE resolutions that could be viewed as favorable to Russians abroad.

She also cast doubt on their ability to organize elections from exile, saying she found it hard to imagine elections that are "both reliable and safe."

"What you win on the side of safety, that is, if you make the whole thing anonymous, you lose on the side of legitimacy. But what you win on the side of openness, you lose on the side of safety," she said.

Former Russian diplomat Boris Bondarev was even more skeptical, saying the group had "put the cart before the horse" by appointing representatives who had not been elected by anyone.

He said Russian opposition figures needed to achieve democratic legitimacy for them to ever achieve their goal of wielding power in Russia, but that this would not happen through the PACE Platform.

“Individuals and small groups are not fit for that task. Only a political movement with wide participation and membership can do something like that,” he told The Moscow Times.

Bondarev argued that the Russian opposition has never been able to articulate a comprehensive vision of a Russia without Putin.

“[They need to show] a kind of other Russia, an alternative Russia. Not just people, not just some individuals, but an alternative anti-Putin or no-Putin Russia,” he said, citing Charles de Gaulle’s leadership of the Free French during World War II as an example of how an exiled movement could present itself as a credible national alternative.

“These particular people are unable to sit together because there are so many personal tensions and a very long history of feuds,” he said. “But the system can be defeated only by another system.”

Dr. Ekaterina Zibrova, a research associate at the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, views the situation differently.

One-third of the Platform’s seats were reserved for representatives of Indigenous peoples and national minorities in response to criticism that the Russian opposition replicates Moscow-centric power structures and sidelines Indigenous voices.

Zibrova said it was “unclear to what extent PACE understands the rights of Indigenous peoples,” but that their recognition as part of the Platform allowed them to articulate their unique needs.

While she called the quota for Indigenous representatives a “symbolic gesture,” she conceded that “symbolic gestures are just as important as material ones, especially when no material gestures are foreseen in the future.”

Zibrova told The Moscow Times that the “only positive result” of including Indigenous people in the Platform was “the visibility of Indigenous people and their needs.” She said that it was “symptomatic” for Europe, “where Indigenous Peoples are being seen for the first time as a vital part of Russia's ethnic dynamics.”

Despite the criticisms of the Platform’s structure and legitimacy, many of the delegates said that its mere existence was a notable achievement.

That sentiment was summed up by Tolokonnikova, who told The Moscow Times it was “mind-blowing” that the body existed.

Or, as Schulmann put it: “Something is better than nothing.”

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