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Russia's Opposition Doesn't Know How to Quit Kremlin-Style Chauvinism

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Ruslan Kutayev. **@DIFFERENT_PEOPLE / YouTube**

The suspension of Ruslan Kutayev from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces should have been straightforward. His remarks, which effectively justified so-called "honor killings" and described LGBTQ+ people as "outcasts and perverts," crossed a clear line.

But the episode has exposed a broader crisis within Russia's democratic opposition, one that cannot be solved by the removal of one individual. No real alternative to Putinism can emerge without a clean break from the Kremlin's chauvinism and its aggressively imposed patriarchal order.

Kutayev, who leads the Assembly of Peoples of the Caucasus, argued that LGBTQ+ people from the North Caucasus should keep their identity private rather than publicly associate it with their ethnicity. On the topic of "honor killings," he said decisions about a woman's fate —

whether to punish, marry her off, or even kill her — are matters for the family to decide. He also promoted conspiracy theories, suggesting that Russia's Vladimir Putin was brought to power by actors in the United States, including "Zionists."

After the backlash to his statements, Kutayev said he had been misunderstood and insisted in a follow-up interview that no one has the right to take a life. His earlier remarks, however, reflected a coherent worldview.

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The Kremlin has spent years building a political identity around the persecution of marginalized, vulnerable groups. It has framed a non-existent "international LGBT movement" as an extremist threat and decriminalized domestic violence under the banner of "traditional family values," using social conservatism as a weapon of control.

It has dismantled ethnic activism at the same time, forcing its leaders into exile or prison and banning the similarly non-existent "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement" as an extremist organization.

If the Russian opposition claims to be a true alternative to the regime, it must offer something fundamentally different from the status quo.

Instead, we are increasingly seeing the same Kremlin-style patterns of intolerance and imperialism repeated by those who claim to oppose it.

What's more, there are glaring inconsistencies in how the Russian democratic forces and exiled media address these lapses. While a veteran Chechen activist's comments might draw outrage from these camps, that same outrage is absent when prominent liberal figures express imperialist or islamophobic rhetoric.

Following Kutayev's comments, the Free Russia Forum said it "consistently opposes all forms of antisemitism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination and hate speech." Its statement did not name Kutayev directly, but the implication was clear.

Yet when the Ukrainian politician and Crimean Tatar leader Refat Chubarov raised concerns about alleged anti-Muslim rhetoric from another figure associated with the Free Russia Forum, the group's reaction was notably muted.

This inconsistency reflects a broader double standard. Some forms of prejudice draw immediate condemnation, while others pass with little comment.

The issue extends to questions of territory and power. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a leading opposition figure and member of the same PACE platform, has repeatedly argued against the right of Russia's regions to self-determination. Over the years, he has said he would be prepared to defend Russia's territorial integrity by force if necessary.

In 2013, he said he could describe himself, to some extent, as a nationalist and would be

willing to fight to keep the North Caucasus within Russia. In 2022, he reaffirmed that "Crimea and Donbas are Ukraine. The North Caucasus is Russia."

More recently, he said that a region separating from Russia might be acceptable only under strict conditions — otherwise, "there is no alternative to deploying troops."

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But who determines when a population is sufficiently "well-informed" or "democratic" to make such a decision? How many times must a vote be repeated if it produces an outcome that others reject?

The Kremlin, too, invokes referendums to justify its actions. Its defenders point to the lack of fairness in those votes. After decades of propaganda and repression, however, it is unclear how a genuinely free expression of public will could be established — or who would be trusted to validate it.

When the leading critics of the Kremlin focus on the Kremlin's own stance on territorial integrity and social hierarchy, they fail to offer a new vision. It is the same absence of an alternative approach, just packaged in a different aesthetic.

Similarly, when Vladimir Kara-Murza says he does not want his country to break apart, the sentiment is understandable, but his position carries a Russia-centric bias that sidelines the aspirations of the many peoples who live in it.

That dynamic was visible when Kara-Murza controversially suggested that ethnic Russians might find it "psychologically very difficult" to kill Ukrainians because of cultural proximity, while other ethnic groups might not.

Though Indigenous rights activists argued that such statements reinforce imperial assumptions and shift responsibility for the war's atrocities away from ethnic Russians, the episode did little to affect Kara-Murza's standing within the opposition. He was later announced as a member of the PACE platform.

These cases point to a shared political grammar built on hierarchy, centralization and selective empathy.

Replacing Vladimir Putin will not resolve these tensions on its own.

A different political framework would require a clear break with the Kremlin's ideology — with patriarchal norms that leave women vulnerable, with intolerance toward LGBTQ+ people and with an imperial mindset that treats Russia's regions as inseparable by default. It would require recognition of the right to self-determination as a principle, not a conditional possibility.

It would also require consistency. A commitment to human rights that does not change depending on political convenience or cultural prejudice.

If critics of the regime, including figures such as Kutayev and members of the Russian

opposition, continue to mirror its prejudices and imperial instincts, they are not building a new Russia or new North Eurasia — they are simply positioning themselves to manage the existing one.

A true alternative only begins where the resemblance to the dictator ends.

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