

ON THE POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF AN OPPOSITION

David White



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In 2010, for the first time since 2003, the opposition in Russia raised its head. However, this is not the systemic opposition everyone is used to talking about. It is a non-systemic opposition. I am sure that there are certain shifts taking place in terms of a modern Russian opposition. Opposition forces are now trying to come together, and this has not happened in Russia for quite a long period of time.

We have now seen a proposal to create a new party put forward, which I think has been named 'The people's freedom party', at the initiative by Nemtsov, Kasyanov, Milov and Ryzhkov. And, of course, it is far too early to say what would come of that. I do not think that this party is likely to gain enough strength to actually compete in the 2011 parliamentary elections, but I don't think they particularly want to anyway. I

think they are trying to make a point here — this is a new political project and they can use it to start a new campaign geared towards highlighting the lack of effective elections. Today, opposition movements in Russia have more grounds for optimism than they did last year or two years ago, for instance.

Against the background of non-systemic opposition, whatever has, to date, been called systemic opposition has lost the features characteristic of a political opposition force.

The flip side of such an interference on the part of the authorities into the opposition's affairs may be uncontrolled protest actions, similar to what happened on Manezhnaya Square on December 11, 2010. In my opinion, these protests were the result of the Kremlin's tacit support of various nationalist movements. I don't think that these protesters were pursuing any specific political goals. However, the Kremlin, by encouraging the activity of such groups in the past, has effectively allowed them to swerve out from under its control, thereby creating a serious internal political problem.

The State should not take on the role of the organiser of youth movements. This does not happen in Western democracies. Young people in the West decide for themselves what they want to do. However, in Russia, the authorities tend to take on the task of implementing a certain youth policy and, in doing so, encouraging only those movements

thousand of its supporters into the streets at the end of October, 'Nashi' brought around 40 thousand people to the streets at the end of November in order to celebrate the Day of National Unity with a march through the streets of the capital.

State authorities should not undertake the task of implementing youth policies or the task of creating an opposition. Moreover, the authorities are simply not capable of creating a viable opposition movement. The creation of the Public Chamber was an example of how the State, believing that civil society is not sufficiently mature in Russia, took on the responsibility to establish an institution that is purportedly responsible for representing the interests of civil society.

However, civil society is not established in such a way. Any such attempts are nothing short of profanation. **The authorities cannot create a counterbalance in the form of a strong opposition due to the same reasons that the State cannot create its counterbalance in the form of a civil society.** Such a party should take root in society and maintain a certain solidarity with it.

One could argue that 'Spravedlivaya Rossiya' was created as a kind of systemic opposition party, but I actually spoke to some members of that party when I was in Moscow about a month ago, at which time I asked them if they considered themselves to be an opposition party. They said that they

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that are loyal to the Kremlin. If there is a need, 'Nashi' can do something to support the regime. At least, in contrast to the opposition movement 'Strategy 31', which managed to mobilise only around 2

did. I asked them if they were opposed to the prime minister or to the president, to which they answered 'Absolutely not'. I then asked who they are in opposition to, to which they answered 'Edinaya

Rossiya'. Well, that's not actually being in opposition. That is merely challenging another party's power, as it be, to become in favour of the president and the prime minister.

President Medvedev tends to talk a lot about political liberalisation and wanting to create space for opposition. **If you want to democratise, which it seems that Medvedev certainly does, an opposition is an absolutely essential component of a democratic state.** However, I have serious doubts as to whether Dmitry Medvedev understands what really needs to be done in order to ensure the successful process of forming opposition parties. Actually, not very much is needed to achieve that. Political parties need to be given a chance to honestly compete with each other during elections. There should always be an alternative to the ruling party, and there is no such alternative observed in modern Russia at present.

If you are looking for an opposition, a good place to look would be right within the ruling elite or the regime itself. Most authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes (and I classify the Russian regime as the electorate authoritarian regime) - most regimes like that tend to come to an end not because of external pressure from opposition movements (although it sometimes partly because of that), but this usually happens due to tensions within the regime itself and between the various actors within the regime. At the moment, there does not appear to be any evidence that this is happening in the Russian case. However, for instance, if the economic situation were to worsen, if the prices of oil were to plummet, this might very well exacerbate tensions within the elite. And then some form of opposition might actually emerge from within the people close to the president and the prime minister.

The battle against corruption can become a certain catalyst of this process, because corruption is a problem that needs to be resolved before the Russians will be able to start the process involved in the country's democratisation, which has repeatedly been mentioned by Dmitry Medvedev. No further development of Russia is possible without first resolving the problem of corruption. However, at present, corruption permeates the whole Russian society, not just the political life of the country. It is so deeply engrained in Russian social life that I am not even sure that President Medvedev has the tools that are required to fight it – there are just too many people who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. As a result, the project concerning the country's modernisation, which was proposed by Dmitry Medvedev, may be jeopardised. ■

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ALL CALM WITH SUBTERRANEAN STIRRINGS



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I believe that, in 2010, the political opposition has become more active in discussing various issues. On that note, one cannot say that the liberal opposition has become stronger as a political force. The protests of the movement 'Strategy 31' have attained only moderate success and this has not become a movement that is really popular among everyday Russian citizens. At the same time this strategy has created a beacon for media in Russia and abroad, a key big PR success that attract attention to the state's repressive measure.

As well, in terms of the angry youth we have been seeing, I think that it is very interesting that, for a very long time, people in Russia were in denial about the country's actual demographic situation. At least it is known that the country was losing vast amounts of people, when in actual fact, the borders were opened to people coming from the South Caucasus and Central Asian regions, who effectively made up for such population losses. Furthermore, with mass immigration into societies, we usually see moments, when the class struggle is eclipsed by an ethnic struggle and, if we listen to why these people are rioting, it all becomes very clear. However, this strategy became a certain beacon for the mass media both in Russia and abroad. It was essentially a huge PR success that managed to attract attention to the repressive actions on the part of the state.

Property developers in Moscow and the Moscow Region are interested in bring-

ing in workers from the South Caucasus and Central Asia so that they don't have to observe the Russian Labour Code and so they can pay far lower wages and treat such migrant workers like slave labourers. They do not respect these people's rights. This is the case now, even though we have large numbers of unemployed Russians right in Moscow and the Moscow region, who also lack the skills to do any other jobs apart from such kind of construction work. Thus, this paradox creates some degree of animosity and tension.

In terms of whether Russia will eventually develop political parties that are distinct from 'Edinaya Rossiya', I do not think that this is possible, although there are certain shifts in this direction. **I think that now, already within the elite themselves, there are many people who are just playing along with developments and don't really believe in the system in its current form.** I think that new opposition political parties in Russia will likely be formed perhaps in several years or maybe even later than that, at such a time when the key leader of a given party disappears from the political scene and there is a split in the actual leadership of that party. As well, people will try to use political resources around the system, one of which could be the 'Edinaya Rossiya' movement. I don't see 'Edinaya Rossiya' having an allegiance within it at this point. I think that people's allegiance to it is rather thin, and I think that it will take a lot of time for it to develop more characteristic form beyond that. ■