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THE STATE OF RUSSIAN OPPOSITION IN TIMES OF WAR IN UKRAINE

ABSTRACT

The main aim of the article is to analyse the concept of the Russian opposition before and after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. We establish how and why the Russian opposition has been changing in the last decades.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first part a phenomenon of the Russian opposition is showed. The second part is the analysis of the evolution of the Russian opposition since 1990s. The third part presents the composition of the Russian opposition in 2022 and its reaction to the war in Ukraine.

We hypothesize that Putin's regime has been constantly combating and weakening the opposition in Russia in recent years. As a result, in modern Russia the systemic opposition is no longer existent and the non-systemic one is fragmented, chaotic and almost entirely outside the Russian Federation. What is more, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, has no impact on strengthening the Russian opposition and creating cooperation between its main factions and the oppositionists do not speak with one voice. The article consists of the diagnosis of the contemporary Russian opposition, showing its structure and pointing out its weaknesses.

The article is based on desk research, historical method, institutional approach, and comparative analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to D. Kumar opposition “[...] can be understood as resistance to the power of state when that power is exerted oppressively. Opposition “[...] means a system of constitutional checks and balances guarding against power abuse and methods employed to modify the actions of government” (Kumar, 2014, p. 165). Also E. Bulmer emphasizes that opposition “[...] usually means the official opposition – that is, the main, largest opposition party, from which the leader of the opposition is chosen.. Bulmer claims that “[...] opposition parties include, besides the official opposition, any other parties in the legislature not supporting the government” (Bulmer, 2021, p. 6). Opposition parties can also include parties that are not represented in the legislature.

However, opposition considered as official opposition cannot be present in dictatorships, which are “forms of exclusive, unlimited and extraordinary, but intrinsically temporary, political power of an individual or group, established in situations of serious political crisis or paralysis of the ordinary institutions of power [...]” (Juszczuk & Wasiuta, 2021, p. 186). Dictators, to maximize the probability of survival in office use instruments such as i.a.: co-optation, repression, censorship, propaganda etc. (Przeworski, 2023, p. 979).

Taking into account above-mentioned, as well as considering works of scholars (Fischer, 2022; Kolesnikov, 2022; Domańska & Chawryło, 2022; Skach, 2021) the Russian Federation can be seen as an example of dictatorship. On the other hand, scientists (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023) and columnists (Dettmer, 2023; Seddon, 2023; Ziener, 2023) even after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which is considered to be a turning point of evolution of Russia from autocracy into dictatorship, have been examining Russian opposition. The latter means that even though Russia has been recently recognized as dictatorship, the opposition and oppositionists are still present in this country.

The aim of this article is to present the concept of Russian opposition before and after the war in Ukraine. We analyse the evolution of this concept, establishing how and why the Russian opposition has been changing in last decades. We hypothesize that in recent years the opposition in Russia has been constantly combating and weakening by Putin’s regime. In addition, both in 2022 and in 2023 the Russian opposition was fragmented, chaotic and almost entirely outside the Russian Federation. It does not exist as an organized phenomenon. There are only its representatives, most of whom moved to the West after Russia’s full-scale invasion on Ukraine began.¹

¹ The article is an outcome of our presentation, that was given on 16 June 2023 in Coral Bay (Cyprus) during international conference “Cyprus and Lithuania: Challenge and Necessity for European Unity in the Shadow of the War in Ukraine” organized by the Strategy International. This article covers a one year of war in Ukraine and includes theoretical aspects of functioning of the Russian opposition in the last decades. The article was sent to the Editor in January 2024. Since that time, the authors have been developing the topic through the analysis of the actions taken by the Russian opposition and have been broadening a main hypothesis presented in this article. The outcome of it is an article entitled “Fake

The article is based on desk research, historical method, institutional approach, comparative analysis.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. THE GENESIS OF OPPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

A peculiarity of Russia is its political system, which historically cannot withstand political competition. Therefore, there are short-lived periods of democracy ending in one form or another with the destruction of competition. A systemic opposition is a political luxury for the political process in Russia. Starting in the late 1990s, Russia got another chance to create a political process understandable to the rest of Europe, which implies competition in the middle of the political system. This process also includes the existence of an opposition and the peaceful transfer of power through the electoral process from one political actor to another. However, Russian society did not take another chance to build a transparent political system with predictable political practices.

During the period of perestroika (1986–1991) in Russia, as well as in the other post-Soviet states the foundations for the democratisation of electoral procedures and for the development of a loyal structural opposition were laid. In addition, in these times democratic movements and civil society development took place. Analysis of V. Gel'man (2005) shows that the process of extirpating of the opposition in Russia has been started in 1991. The collapse of the Soviet Union made that opposition's potential was destroyed.

Over the past 20 years, the Russian opposition has never come to power. As a result the circulation of the elite, which is inherent in a democratic political system, according to the elite-counter-elite principle has been blocked. The political situation in Russia somehow determines the level of Russian academic and expert discourse on the prospects of the opposition movement. Some scholars believe that in contemporary Russia there is a moderate opposition, which tries to cooperate with the government; a parliamentary opposition and a radical opposition (a combination of parties, NGOs and movements, not represented in the State Duma), which is constitutional and seeks a full renewal of the current government, radical systemic changes to the political system (Medvedev & Borysenko, 2008).

Supporters of this approach realize that, firstly, the parliamentary opposition is a part of the authoritarian political system of the modern Russian Federation. Secondly, almost all opposition parties, represented in Russian parliament, were formed with the direct participation of the Presidential Administration (Davydenko, 2012).

Other scholars, within the discourse on the nature and specificity of the activity of Russian opposition do not see manifestations of radicalism and systemic political changes in that part of the opposition, which is not a part of the representative authorities. The latter is deprived of the opportunity to participate in the formation of political decisions. In that case scholars define it as extra-systemic/non-systemic (Bol'shakov, 2011).

The activities of the State Duma from 1999 to 2003 coincide with the beginning of Vladimir Putin's political era. In 2000, Putin was elected president. Then the elite structure

solidarity? Actions taken by the Russian opposition since the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine," which will be published in "Polish Political Science Yearbook."

in the country dramatically changed. The achievement of a forced consensus increased elite integration while diminishing elite differentiation (Gel'man, 2003). As Gel'man claims:

Having forced the parliament, the political parties, the business community, the mass media, and the regional leaders to choose – obey or lose their elite status – the ruling group had established its complete and unconditional dominance. Whereas a fragmented elite left the opposition some hope of success, elite consolidation based on “forced consensus,” especially given an unfavorable institutional context, threatened to send the opposition into oblivion [...] (Gel'man, 2005, p. 13).

As a result since 2000, according to Gel'man (2005, 13) previous “[...] political actors were either being incorporated into power and thus ceasing to be an opposition or thrust to the periphery of the political process, thus losing the status of actors [...]”

Liberal centre-right parties, oriented towards Western values, disappeared from the parliamentary system, lost influence and were eventually marginalised. The Russian democratic opposition was moving towards non-systemicism. The government was promoting the development of right-wing radical opposition movements (ours and others) and was slowing down and atomising the evolution of centre-right political forces.

With this practice, the ruling elite group has secured full and unconditional domination. It forced all segments of the Russian elite, which were represented in parliament, as well as political parties, business, the media, the regions, to either adopt the status of subordination or disappear from a political scene.

After the 2003–2004 election campaign, the Russian government finally monocentred itself around Putin. As a result in the beginning of the 21st century in Russia there was no opposition neither systemic nor nonsystemic.

According to Gel'man (2015, p. 177):

Ten years later, Russia's political landscape looked rather different. Protest meetings in Moscow and other cities in 2011–2012 brought together hundreds of thousands of participants under political slogans, and the Russian opposition was able to multiply its ranks, to change its leadership, to reach a negative consensus vis-à-vis the status quo political regime, and to come to the front stage of Russian politics. Some opposition activists became legitimate actors of electoral politics, a few of them succeeded in receiving a visible share of votes during the (still unfair) elections, the public voice of the opposition became louder and the Kremlin was forced to turn from ignoring its rivals to intimidating them and their supporters [...].

These changes were caused by three main factors. The first one was the generation changes. The representatives of the generation of the 1970s, who were present in the Russian political scene in the 2000s, were replaced by the new generation of young political leaders. They, in the contrary to their predecessors, looked to the future and did not concentrate on preserving the political status quo and seek to revenge for past losses. The second factor was the course of modernisation, announced by Dmitry Medvedev during his presidency (Gel'man 2015). The third factor involved in rebirth of the political opposition in Russia in the 2010s was the major shift in the opposition's political strategy.

The opposition not only shifted the focus of criticism toward the regime but overhauled its entire agenda. Instead of the advancement of abstract ideas (democracy and human rights) or struggles against specific policies, the new form of populism became a cornerstone of resistance against the regime as a whole (Gel'man, 2015, 180).

The representatives of the opposition condemned those who were in power accusing them of inefficiency, corruption and incapability of pursuing positive changes (Lessila, 2013). These words were followed by actions such as anti-corruption campaigns, which were organized by Navalny and other activists (Rogov, 2013). Although the evident changes in Russian opposition took part in the beginning of 2010s, the same opposition did not have a developed plans and aimed only to launch new protest actions. What is more, in 2012 the Russian opposition had different opinion on how they should work. Supporters of the street protests wanted to increase the number of participants of mass actions. On the other hand, their opponents were for party-building and electoral struggle. Interestingly, both the approaches failed (Gel'man, 2015).

The Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity (October 2013–February 2014) radically affected the situation in the Russian Federation. Putin started a rampant anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda, which led to support for Putin and his policies. It severely hit the Russian opposition which lost the strategic initiative.

Since March 2014, not only the scale of discrediting the opposition and threats of repression against it have increased dramatically, but also political agenda has changed.

On the one hand, the negative consensus against the regime has weakened (if not completely disappeared). In that case, only a part of the non-systemic opposition has openly rejected the Kremlin's agenda towards Ukraine and its vision of the Russian Federation's place in the new world (Gel'man, 2015). Moreover, the organisationally and strategically weak opposition was unable to offer the authorities an alternative solution to the country's problems. The opposition's influence on the domestic political agenda (let alone the international order) has diminished, and the Kremlin's fierce attack on Ukraine and the West has not met with particular resistance from either the opposition or the public. As a result, opposition parties and candidates were not given the opportunity to take part in the regional elections held in September 2014, and the opposition's organisational capacity and ability to act was called into question.

The actions of opposition were reduced to anti-war protests against the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. One of them was held in Moscow on 15 March 2014. Reuters reported that 30,000 people took part in the anti-war rally on that day (Tsvetkova & Bush, 2014). In March 2017, nationwide protests took place simultaneously in more than 100 cities across the country. The opposition organised protests against corruption in the Russian government (Bershidsky, 2017). A poll by the Levada Centre found that 38% of Russian respondents had supported the protests and 67% had believed that Putin was 'fully' or 'largely' responsible for high-level corruption (Institutsional'naya korruptsiya i lichnyy opyt, 2017).

Protests continued in 2018 with a trend towards radicalisation. A record number of protesters were arrested on 5 May 2018, two days before Putin's inauguration. Mass rallies took place in more than 60 cities across Russia. Since July 2018, rallies and protest demonstrations against the planned increase in the retirement age have been organized almost every week-

end. Such events took place in almost all major cities of the country, including Novosibirsk, St Petersburg and Moscow. These events were coordinated by all opposition parties with the communists playing a leading role. Trade unions and some individual politicians (including Navalny) were also organisers of social actions (Heintz, 2018).

On 23 January 2021, protests were held across Russia in support of Russian opposition leader A. Navalny, who was poisoned, detained and then jailed after returning to Russia on 17 January 2021. Just days before the protests, an investigation of Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation was released, accusing Putin of corruption. The video received 70 million views in a few days (Pavlova & Light, 2021).

After Navalny's imprisonment, the prominent opposition activists received the offer from the government. They had a choice between leaving for the West or the East, i.e. a non-negotiable option of emigration (the West) or penal colonies (the East). Among those who left Russia were politicians and journalists such as e.g.: L. Sobol, D. Gudkov, I. Zhdanov, A. Soldatov, I. Borogan, R. Badanin. The wave of repression was also linked to the Duma elections in September 2021 (Trojanovski, 2021).

At the end of the 20th century, political scientist A. Stepan analyzed the struggle of Latin American opposition against authoritarianism and highlighted their relevance for post-communist Europe (Stepan, 1990). This analysis is adequate to contemporary Russia.

2.2. RUSSIAN OPPOSITION IN 2022

Opposition against president Vladimir Putin can be considered as: oppositional parties in the State Duma, which are usually more or less loyal to the government and president Putin (i.e. the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, Just Russia) and various anti-system oppositional organisations, which are perceived as anti-governmental and anti-presidential and, in the same time, their members are not members of governmental bodies (i.e. Yabloko, People's Freedom Party, Russia of the Future, Liberty Party of Russia, as well as the Russian Opposition Coordination Council, the Other Russia, various non-governmental organizations).

This typology was also present in the Russian Federation in 24 February 2022, when the war in Ukraine started. Before 24 February 2022, Russian opposition was chaotic and acted in an unsystematic way. Since 24 February 2022, Russian opposition started to look for allies. As a result, the outbreak of war made that nowadays we can distinguish three environments of Russian political opposition. They create their own visions of Russia after the end of war in Ukraine and try to spread them abroad.

The first and the oldest of the contemporary oppositional communities is Free Russia Forum, which was established in 2016 in Vilnius by G. Kasparov and I. Tyutrin. It is a large oppositional organization of Russian oppositionists in exile. Free Russia Forum try to create intellectual alternative. On this basis the new Russia will be established. Since its establishment Free Russia Forum organizes twice a year a conference of Russian opposition in Vilnius. Their postulates includes mainly abolishing of Putin's regime and bringing back territorial integrity of Ukraine and setting free the territories, which are occupied by Russia. Since 2016, Free Russia Forum has organized 11 conferences. These conferences gathered Russian oppositionists, who live abroad and representatives from Ukraine and other states. In February 2023, the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation recognised Free Russia Forum as an undesirable organisation (Free Russia Forum, 2019).

After the beginning of the war in Ukraine, on 27 February 2022 Russian Anti-War Committee was created. Most of its members are the former members of Free Russia Forum. Their founders are mainly politicians (i.e. G. Kasparov, M. Khodorkovsky, L. Sobol) and economists (i.a. S. Guriyev, S. Aleksashenko). Russian Anti-War Committee claims that: Russian war in Ukraine is a criminal act, which is started with no consent of Russian society. It believes that every Russian should do everything possible to halt this war, organises humanitarian help for Ukrainians, helps Russian emigrants abroad, coordinates actions of oppositionists from Russia (Russian Anti-War Committee, 2023).

The third oppositional community is Navalny's Team. It was established by the leader of Russian oppositionists A. Navalny. Most of the members are connected with Anti-Corruption Foundation, which was established by Navalny in 2011. In 2019, Anti-Corruption Foundation was delegatized in Russia. Representatives of Navalny's Team are far from all the other oppositional organisations, and they declare no cooperation with them (Bahr, 2022).

From time to time Free Russia Forum, Russian Anti-War Committee and Navalny's Team communicate. However, it should be emphasised that they also criticize each other. In September 2022 Ilya Ponomarev, a member of Free Russia Forum criticized Anti-War Committee for no support for armed forces. Moreover, supporters of Navalny's Team accused Ponomarev of unjustified radicalism and encouraging Russian to abolish Russian government in an armed struggle.

2.3. DIAGNOSIS OF RUSSIAN OPPOSITION A YEAR AFTER THE BEGINNING OF A WAR IN UKRAINE

During the war in Ukraine a number of events, in which the Russian opposition was engaged, took place. However, most of them were only meetings that were organised by Russian oppositionists in Poland and Germany. Western politicians believed in Russian opposition. They were considered as a tool to fight against Putin's regime. Nevertheless, hopes related to success of Russian oppositionist movements were shattered. The questions are why Russian opposition failed and has no influence inside Russia, becoming rather an assistant to the current regime than a critic of it? To answer these questions it is necessary to diagnose the contemporary Russian opposition.

First of all, in the Russian Federation there is no longer an organised opposition. It is caused by the Kremlin, which has systematically suppressed it. Some activists were forced to leave Russia and moved to the Western European countries. Some others became inactive. Groups created by Navalny, Khodorkovsky, Kasparov or an activist Ponomarev have not even announced their common declaration on the war in Ukraine. They do not speak with one voice and have no impact on situation in Russia. As a result, the Russian opposition might be considered not as critics of Putin's regime but as a sort of its accompanying persons.

There is no connection between the Russian opposition and society. Those, who call themselves Russian opposition have no impact on the situation in Russia. The Russian opposition did not devote energy, time and resources to build horizontal ties and networks. In a country of 140 million inhabitants, there is no organisation or initiative with an extensive network in the regions, activists or simply people united by one idea (Pahlke, 2023).

Instead of creating grassroots movements, Russian opposition is focused on creating media platforms. Kremlin has already spent billions on propaganda through the media. Even

new media platforms are still controlled by Kremlin and Russian opposition cannot rely on them and use them as tools in fight against Putin's regime. As a result, the platforms, which Russian opposition mainly rely on are not tools of significant influence (Popov, 2022).

Another problem of the Russian opposition is not having a plan to change the system in Russia before and after 24 February 2022. It makes that the Russian opposition has no strategy and waits for someone else who will overthrow Putin. They do not seem to have understood the dramatic changes in the world after 24 February and continue to do the same as before. There is still a sense that the Russian opposition is rather detached from reality. In fact, the avoidance of any responsibility for the fate of one's country, even at the planning level, is now the hallmark of those who call themselves the Russian opposition (Sabarwal, 2023).

Another issue is an image of typical Russian oppositionists. They are considered to be wealthy people who live abroad and gain funds (from international society) and fame. Conferences organised by the Russian opposition, as well as interviews with their leaders and private meetings might be catchy in the West but have no impact on situation in this state and worst of all, make no attempt to influence it (Popov, 2022).

As it was mentioned before, there is no integration among various groups of the Russian opposition. There is also no capability of minimal coordination or interaction. But also there is no encouragement for any joint action and no one from within tries to create it. The lack of interaction within the Russian opposition does not allow it to increase its own effectiveness and to have more effectiveness in opposing the regime in Russia (Sabarwal, 2023).

Political or socio-political movements say nothing about who and in what way should take over the authority in Russia. There are no candidates for political leadership. As a result, no one knows who has the support of Russian opposition as a future president of Russia (Chernokov, 2022).

It seems that the Russian opposition is used to the 'hothouse conditions' that have been created for them outside Russia for decades. Many conditions and opportunities have been created for them only because they were against Putin's regime not because of their personal, organisational and professional qualities. Now the situation is changing and many among the Russian oppositionists are finding that the struggle for resources is becoming more and more difficult and that the subject of opposition becoming less interesting to the public (Popov, 2022).

In many years, the Russian opposition does not notice the political reality. Wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria and Ukraine were considered by them as something that can be justified and explained. Each time, the so-called Russian opposition (with some exceptions) acted as a tool to whitewash the Russian authorities. Instead of cooperating with the public and explaining the absurdity of military action on the territory of other countries, the Russian opposition tried to agree for itself on additional preferences or the absence of sanctions. This worked for many years. The organisations and media that called themselves the opposition gained greater access to offices and became increasingly integrated into the system of power relations in Russia. In these circumstances, Russian opposition tried not to be a subject of sanctions and get some preferences rather than explaining to the Russian society absurdity of these wars. As a result, some oppositionist organisations and media gained some privileges in Russia (Ostrovsky, 2022).

Last but not least, in recent years, the impression has been given that the Russian opposition is operating entirely within the framework of the deal offered to it by the authorities. The opposition has not proposed any proactive measures, projects or actions. Urban plan-

ning, anti-corruption, the new constitution or other topics that Russian oppositionists have worked on in recent decades have not at all explained or analysed Russia itself. Indeed, for those who had been abroad for a long time due to persecution, the opportunities for research were limited. However, in the contemporary world there is a lot of online tools enabling to receive information. However, there have been few attempts to understand and analyze today's Russia and Russian society (Popov, 2022).

3. CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the contemporary Russian opposition shows that since 1990s it has been having its ups and downs. The most important obstacle to its development was president Putin and its vision of the Russian empire. As a result, the systemic opposition in Russia practically vanished from the Russian political scene, whereas the non-systemic opposition has been constantly weakening. Thus in 2023, in Russia there is no such thing as the opposition.

Nowadays, the Russian opposition is a peculiar phenomenon. The non-systemic one is famous for organising meetings and interviews with their leaders abroad. Indeed, most of the Russian oppositionists were forced to leave Russia due to Putin's regime. However, since that time, it is difficult to find any of their success. The lack of success is strictly related to the fact that the Russian opposition is fragmented and chaotic. Its leaders do not speak with one voice. They are far away from Russia and the Russian society not only in a geographical way, but also mentally. For a decade the new wave of oppositionists has not created any grassroots movements. Instead of it, they put too much time and efforts in establishing media platforms, which have no significant influence on changes in Russia. At the same time the non-systemic opposition has no plan for future Russia.

Taking into account the above-mentioned it seems that the Russian Federation is a perfect example of a state which transferred from authoritarian regime into dictatorship, making that people who in the first place had enough energy and courage to fight against Putin's regime in 2010s, in 2023 have no idea how and in what way they should use their potential. The lack of a constructive and realistic order for the future, disables the opposition to become a centre for consolidating dissidents and independent social actors. The relative isolation of the opposition is also due to the fact that Russians do not see the opposition as a viable alternative to the Putin's regime. As a result, there is no meaningful democratic alternative to this regime at the moment.

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