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Opposition in authoritarian regimes – a case study of Russian non-systemic opposition[1]

Abstract: According to Juan Linz, authoritarian rulers permit limited, powerless political pluralism and organization of elections, but they make it very clear that a change in power is impossible and the opposition cannot take over. Elections in authoritarian regimes are a part of nominally democratic institutions and help rulers to legitimize the regime. They are not free or fair, and therefore do not present any opportunity for the opposition to win and change the political system afterward.

The question could be asked, what kind of action the opposition should undertake in order to improve its strength. That is the main problem nowadays for non-systemic opposition in the Russian Federation. On the one hand, the opposition has a problem gaining access to elections, but on the other hand, it knows that even if it could take part, the elections would not be democratic.

This article tries to shed light on the strategies of the non-systemic Russian opposition and the possibility of its impact on Russian society when the government tries to marginalize, weaken and eventually destroy the non-systemic opposition.

The paper provides a critical analysis of the literature and documents on the topic.

Key words: non-systemic opposition, authoritarianism, Kremlin, protest movement

With reference to its title, the text aims to examine non-systemic opposition in Russia. Therefore it is necessary to explain in detail what kind of opposition we are speaking about and what type of authoritarian regime Russia can be counted among.

Non-systemic opposition – a question of terminology

In the Russian context, there are three terms used to describe groups criticizing Vladimir Putin's political system. These are as follows: non-

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systemic, anti-systemic and extra-systemic opposition. The controversies linked to the usage of these terms with respect to democratic opposition in Russia were mentioned by Ivan Bolshakov in his article (Bolshakov, 2012, pp. 82–92). I rejected the generally accepted definition of non-systemic opposition, which refers to those groups which are denied registration or function outside parliament. This different definition of non-systemic opposition stems from the fact that its structure is heterogeneous and it cannot be satisfactorily described by a simple classification for licensed and unlicensed parties. For example, the non-system opposition surely is represented by Gienadij Gudkow, who until 2013 was a member of the “Just Russia” party, which is a part of the State Duma. Hereafter, I will use the word non-systemic opposition with respect to those parties whose leaders and members declare they are striving to change the system created by Vladimir Putin.

The Putin System

In connection with the foregoing, it is necessary to determine what governance type the ‘Putin system’ is, and what actions of the non-systemic opposition are possible.

Many Russian[2] – and also Western[3] – political scientists have been trying to accurately define the regime in Russia since the time Vladimir Putin came to power. Without doubt, it is easy to get confused by the terminology used to describe Russian political system. It is worth emphasizing that the undemocratic character of the political regime in Russia is the common basis of all terminology. It was in 2005 when, for the first time, Freedom House described Russia as an “unfree” country. However, since then, the system has evolved in terms of the lack of freedom on many levels.

[2] Aleksander Łukin, Aleksiej Zudin, Kirił Chołodkowski, Jelena Szestopał – these authors’ concept is presented in the further part of this text.

[3] W. Zimmerman, *Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin*, Princeton 2014; S. A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement. Power and Opposition in Putin’s Russia*, Stanford 2014; J. Hartmann, *Russland: Einführung in das politische System und Vergleich mit den postsowjetischen Staaten*, Häftad 2012; C. Ross, V. Gelman (eds.), *The Politics of Subnational Authoritarianism in Russia*, Farnham–Burlington 2010; R. Sakwa, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the he Medvedev Succession*, Cambridge 2011; G. B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*, Cambridge 2010.

Experts denote that the system built during Vladimir Putin’s reign can be named a hybrid regime.[4] Marc Plattner, a joint editor of “Journal of Democracy” and a vice-chairman of “The National Endowment for Democracy” (NED) notes that the term of hybrid regime is a vast one (Imrussia, 2015). It comprises notions such as “competitive authoritarianism” (terminology used by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way), the “non competitive authoritarianism” of Andreas Schedler, and “hegemonic electoral authoritarianism” of Larry Diamond.[5]

It is worth noting that electoral authoritarian regimes, as opposed to closed authoritarian systems, allow multiparty electoral competition (Diamond, 2002, p. 25) and can be subdivided into hegemonic authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes. It is the level of competition that is the essential distinguishing element between the two aforementioned subtypes. Both regimes hold elections but in hegemonic authoritarian regimes their outcome is known in advance, while in competitive authoritarian regimes the elections are truly contested and the opposition candidates have real chances to win (Guliyev, 2012).

Another criterion of difference is applied by Levitsky and Way, who point out that closed authoritarian regimes receive only –7 (the worst score) on the Freedom House political rights index or a –8 or worse on the “Polity Score” which ranges from +10 (full democracy) to –10 (full autocracy) (Guliyev, 2012). To make a better distinction between competitive authoritarian and hegemonic authoritarian regimes, we might agree that the latter describes countries where the winning party or candidate receives 70% of the votes or more.

In 2015, during an interview given to Denis Volkov from the independent “Levada-Center organization,” Marc Plattner described the Russian regime as a hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime (Imrussia, 2015).

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Numerous authors have addressed the subject of hybrid regimes: Schedler (ed.) (2006), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colo.; Diamond (2002), *Thinking about Hybrid Regimes*, “Journal of Democracy” 13, no. 2 (April): 21–35; Levitsky, Way (2007), *Competitive Authoritarianism: The Origins and Evolution of Hybrid Regimes in the Post-Cold War Era*, Manuscript; Roessler, Howard (2009), *Post-Cold-War Political Regimes: When Do Elections Matter?*, in: *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition?*, ed. S. Lindberg, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore; Schedler (2009), *Sources of Competition under Electoral Authoritarianism*, in: *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition?*, ed. S. Lindberg, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

To clarify this description it is necessary to make reference to the term of “full authoritarianism” used by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. Regimes with no competition are those that can be counted among “fully authoritarian” regimes. In this category, the authors list both closed authoritarian regimes, such as China, Saudi Arabia and Cuba, and also hegemonic regimes where the democratic institutions function formally, but in practice play only a decorative role (Imrussia, 2015). In the latter category, opposition is marginalized or repressed and has no chances of winning elections (Levitsky, Way, 2010). Nevertheless, there are several degrees of repression that can be identified in hegemonic regimes. Although Russia is not among the most repressive regimes, no power shift through elections in this country is presently possible. According to Shevtsova, since 1999, the opponents in presidential elections have not been actual candidates but “Kremlin sparring partners” (Shevtsova, 2012, p. 20).

In Plattner’s opinion, electoral manipulations, the extension of the presidential mandate and the successful process of succession are permitted in order to maintain the stability of the regime built during Vladimir Putin’s time. Russian experts also emphasize the authoritarian nature of the Russian system. Aleksey Zudin and Kiril Kholodkovski speak of a monocentric system, which manifests itself in the existence of a single decision-making centre (Słowikowski, 2010, p. 42) The common denominator in the views of many Russian political scientists and experts on the political regime in Russia is the conviction that power is of a personified nature, that the administration is organized vertically, that it is impossible to change the Russian authorities through elections and that control on the part of the political elite is increasing.[6]

It is true that this is a system in which technically elections do exist, but it is not possible to change governments by way of elections. The political scientist Andreas Schedler says that “[b]y organizing periodic elections [authoritarian regimes] try to obtain at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy, hoping to satisfy external as well as internal actors. At the same time, by placing those elections under tight authoritarian controls they try to cement their continued hold on power. Their dream is to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty” (Schedler, 2002, p. 37).

[6] Władimir Gelman, Jelena Szestopał, Kirił Chołodkowskij, Aleksiej Zudin, Aleksander Łukin.

Andreas Schedler also mentions the mechanisms that help the electoral authoritarianism to keep the *status quo*. These are:

1. Creating reserved positions for key decision-makers to eliminate potential threats, while letting voters fill official positions that are not within crucial policy areas.
1. Splitting or marginalizing inexperienced opposition parties through killing, banning, or disqualifying candidates or excluding them via electoral laws (e.g. “nationality clauses”).
2. Preventing opposition from disseminating campaign messages via media, public space, etc. and repressing their civil and political liberties, often through violent means.
3. Controlling composition of the electorate through informal disenfranchisement (such as registration methods, identification requirements, and discriminatory voting procedures.)
4. Intimidating voters from exercising free choice or attempting to buy the vote of the poor.
5. Introducing electoral fraud or institutional bias into elections through “redistributive” vote counting or rules of representation in order to hold on to power even when losing votes.
6. Removing elected officials from power or holding them subordinate to the rulers’ “tutelary” powers.

Action strategies of the opposition

The strategy of non-systemic opposition activity in Russia depends to a large extent on opportunities that are given by the system and on finding the vulnerabilities that could threaten its *status quo*. Taking into consideration, that “authoritarian equilibrium rests mainly on lies, fear, or economic prosperity”(Przevorsky, 1991, p. 58), the opposition should focus on accelerating the process of the system’s loss of balance.

Juan Linz’s typology introduces an interesting distinction showing the action strategies of the opposition against the ruling class. The author segregates the opposition into loyal, semi-loyal and disloyal categories. The semi-loyal, as opposed to the disloyal, accepts the legal means of political battle and rejects political force, while the disloyal one also applies political violence (Linz, 1978, pp. 27–38). The political scientist Adam Przevorsky notes: “the classical problem of any opposition ... [is] how much to oppose and by what means. If the opposition does notoppose – does

not present alternatives and struggle energetically for them – then the representative powers of political institutions – theircapacitytomobilizeandincorporate – is weak... But if the opposition does oppose vigorously, democracy may be threatened” (Przevorsky, 1991, p. 98).

Opposition candidates and parties sometimes protest and boycott the elections in hegemonic regimes if they notice that the competition is not fair, and in order to reject the electoral victory of the incumbent or ruling party.

The opposition may then create a multiparty coalition, support a chosen presidential candidate from the opposition and also start anti-government protests to disturb the elections (Howard, Roessler, 2006, p. 370). “Once the decision to contest elections has been made, opposition parties must decide whether to form pre-electoral pacts in an effort to defeat the incumbent. At each of these moments, opposition parties face coordination dilemmas. Electoral boycotts delegitimize the regime only if most (if not all) opposition parties agree to stay away from the contest. Pre-electoral coalitions increase the likelihood of incumbent defeat only if most opposition candidates agree to coordinate so as to not divide the opposition vote” (Howard, Roessler, 2006, p. 370).

The approach of Russian non-systemic opposition groups or actors to the process of elections is not explicit. In 2011, before the elections to the State Duma, the PARNAS party had recommended taking part in the elections, but to spoil the voting cards; whereas a part of the “Solidarity” movement’s members encouraged boycotting the elections; Alexei Navalny advised to vote on anyone apart from “United Russia” members, convincing people that the ruling party is the party of “cheaters and thieves” (Кондратьев, 2012, p. 19).

In 2014, before the regional elections, Navalny said that there are no simple strategies on participating in the elections that could be expressed in one phrase. He recommended boycotting elections where no honest candidates are allowed and where the probability of falsification is high, but participating in the elections in districts where one can find a reasonable candidate (Навальный, 2014).

The way of acting in the face of a crisis is listed among the most important typologies of Albert O. Hirschman. He assumes that “exit,” “voice,” and “loyalty” can be used as strategies of the opposition. They are described as follows: “exit” – that is to say “doing small things” (oppositional activities without serious challenges against the existing political reality, or a complete withdrawal from politics); “voice” – that is to

say the mobilization of the masses (mainly of the electoral mass); “loyalty” – that is to say negotiations with the ruling group and cooptation as a consequence of coming to power (Hirschman, 1970).

However, none of these strategies guarantee success. “Exit” by the opposition indicates its consent to being marginalized, “voice” and attempts to mobilize the electorate can result in repressions by the ruling group and the “loyalty” strategy is unacceptable in the case of non-systemic opposition. Clear success, and simultaneously the chance to achieve opposition objectives, could only come from winning the presidential elections.

Opposition after the protest movement of 2011–2012

According to Vladimir Gelman, the situation of the Russian non-systemic opposition parties changed in the last 10 years (Gelman, 2015, p. 177). In 2005, the author wrote an article about the opposition in terms of a “disappearing species” in Russia (Gelman, 2005, pp. 226–246). The opposition was then sidelined to a narrow niche and stayed there just like in a ghetto (Greene, 2007) it was even unable to gather more than 100 participants in order to join anti-regime protests. The situation of the non-systemic opposition changed with the protests of 2011–2012 which managed to gather more than 100,000 participants. The opposition leaders then became recognized by a part of society and the Kremlin was forced to change its tactics against the non-systemic opposition. It moved from ignoring the phenomenon to applying intimidating and marginalizing tactics.

The effect of economic growth that made the middle class aspire to greater political rights was one of the most important factors in the change.

Another important factor in the evolution of the non-systemic opposition in Russia was generational change. It was reflected in the changed formulation of fundamental national issues by politicians from the Soviet generation and those who had grown up during post-Soviet times. That “conflict” not only made the politicians from the older age group adopt a different approach to sociopolitical reality, but also influenced the whole political context and the collective experiences of those groups. For those who grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union, all references to the USSR and 1990s belonged more or less to the past, and they

were focused on building consensus in the battle against the authoritarian regime. At the same time, members of the 1970s generation who dominated the political scene in Russia in 2000, both in the ruling camp and in the opposition camp, were focused on the past, resentments and revenge for past injustices (Gelman, 2015, p. 179). Those who entered the political scene in 2010 looked mainly to the future.

Although leadership change became blocked in the ruling camp, the younger generation of activists in oppositional circles gave hope for this circle’s recovery. Hence, in 2013 the PARNAS party supported Alexei Navalny’s candidature for mayor of Moscow.

Another key factor contributing to the rebirth of the opposition in 2010 was the “modernization” promoted by Dmitry Medvedev in 2009. Though that “modernization” was chaotic, inefficient and only symbolic, it was however accompanied by a liberal rhetoric, demonstration of the will to increase the engagement of society in recommending pivotal decisions in the State and a more “progressive” ruling style. The weakening pressure on civil society, shy attempts at dialogue with various groups opened the door for social initiatives and encouraged Kremlin opponents to formulate requests without fear of being stigmatized as the “opposition.” The activity of a nascent civil society became obvious during a protest against a highway construction in Khimki. Some of the slogans then entered the political space, and activists such as Yevgeniya Chirikova became among the most recognized faces of the Russian opposition (Швец, 2015).

This apparent liberalization gave rise to many independent circles, such as the Dozhd channel; or “Society of Blue Buckets” aimed against the privileged status of officials, politicians, and businessmen, who overused emergency blue flashers.

Lastly, a further factor that was pointed out by Vladimir Gelman was the strategy change made by the political opposition. Instead of focusing on abstract slogans concerning the necessity to develop democracy and human rights in Russia, the opposition focused on the overall criticism of the regime. Leaders such as Alexei Navalny, Ilya Yashin, Siergiej Udalcow and the now deceased Boris Nemtsov condemned the governing class for being corrupt, inefficient, unable to bring positive changes and also for inhibiting any progress. According to Gelman, that change was revealed through the large anti-corruption campaigns of Navalny, or cooperation attempts of many circles of Russian activists that were criticizing the Putin regime.

Three factors influenced the size of the 2011/2012 protests: generational change, the growth of political opportunities in time of Medvedev, and the new populist strategy of the opposition emphasizing the gap between a hostile state and civil society. These changes also created new challenges that, at times, outgrew the opposition. It was, above all, poorly prepared to tackle new strategic and organizational tasks.

In terms of organizational weakness, the non-systemic opposition constituted a conglomeration of loosely combined groups and of public figures with little experience and limited capacity for cooperation.

Strategically, it was not prepared for these new circumstances, either. It focused only on organizing new protests and on maximizing the number of participants. The opposition could not cope with the rapid pace of events and still manage other activities.

In addition, the parties of the so-called systemic opposition did not wish to cooperate with the non-systemic opposition out of the fear that any change in the regime could threaten their position on the Russian political scene. Only Ilya Ponomarev, Giennadij and Dmitry Gudkov, who represented the systemic party “Just Russia”, joined the protesters and their requests.

Other segments of the Russian elite, namely the businessmen that were silently supporting the activists and protesters in 2011/2012 were not brought into play by the opposition. As a result, that circle grew only to include the people who were already against Kremlin.

The opposition tried to compensate for the lack of organizational resources by mobilizing society through the Internet and social media, by using individual connections and everyday contacts to substitute collective actions. Nevertheless, it was insufficient to use only these means in order to create a long-term strategy, and the opportunities to mobilize society by means of the Internet were quickly used up. People were easily mobilized in moments of emotional shock, but the opposition mistakenly used protest as a long-term strategy.

A project aiming to create *“The Russian Opposition Coordination Council”* (2012–2013), which was supposed to be an attempt to form a coalition, and to provide a common platform for the activities of different opposition parties as well as to establish a democratic coalition (2015–2016) also failed. Conflicts and disputes that arose during common projects in those groupings tarnished their image in the Russian society.

Vladimir Gelman and Galina Michaleva also drew attention to another weakness of compromise searching attempts among oppositional groups.

According to the opinion of political scientists, it blurred the objectives of particular political parties and their vision of State. As Vladimir Gelman says, “the populist strategy that forms the basis for a negative consensus has its limits, since it prevents the formation of a positive agenda. Unlike the ruling elite, the opposition does not benefit from taking deliberately vague and uncertain positions on heavily divisive political and policy issues” (Gelman, 2014).

Thus the two principal strategies of non-systemic opposition, out of which the first was designed to increase the support for mass protests and, thanks to that, to promote the slogans of the opposition, and the second to create a party structure and prepare for electoral battle, failed.

Quickly enough, mass protest fatigue and elections brought no success to the opposition. Non-systemic opposition could attract supporters of those principal political slogans, but could not garner support from a wider electorate, not even from groups that were against the regime. According to opinion polls (Levada, 2013) and focus group research, loss of support for the Kremlin did not bring more support for the opposition (Echo.msk.ru, 2012). According to opinion in Russian society, the opposition mistakenly identified the most urgent expectations of the people and was unable to represent their interests. It only focused on the personal factor and slogans emphasizing the necessity of Vladimir Putin’s resignation.

Alfred Stepan examined the anti-authoritarian opposition in Latin America in terms of post-Communist Europe (Stepan, 1990, pp. 41–49). This analysis is still highly applicable to contemporary Russia. Stepan noted that the approach of opposition actors in democratizing authoritarian regimes are to: (1) reject cooptation into the regime; (2) guarding zones of autonomy vis-à-vis the regime; (3) weaken the regime’s legitimacy; (4) increase the cost of preserving the *status quo*; and (5) build a trustworthy democratic alternative.

As Vladimir Gelman said, the Kremlin itself facilitated the first and the fourth approach by making enemies out of more citizens, as well as out of organized collective actors. Nevertheless, the third and especially the fifth tasks are more complex. These two unfulfilled tasks block the opposition from becoming the center of gravity for all regime protesters and independent social actors. The non-systemic opposition is still not endorsed by political and economic actors that are against the Kremlin, the systemic opposition and a large group of sub-elites that don’t agree with Kremlin priorities.

The risk of oppression and the disbelief of ordinary Russians in the opposition have pushed it into isolation. According to some regime critics, preserving the political *status quo* may be less harmful in comparison to a possible collapse of the regime that may not necessarily be advantageous (Gelman, 2014).

Kremlin Actions

The situation is one where the opposition carries the weight of all the discrediting and weakening actions taken by the Kremlin, as well as by regime supporters. One of the aspects of their strategy is to demonize the opposition in the media and to make important public officials call it “*a Fifth Column*”, traitors of the nation, or agents serving western countries interests and businesses, and not Russian ones.

Furthermore, there is a number of legal actions that block the opposition from freedom of action, such as tightening of legislation on non-governmental organizations (the so-called statute on foreign agents), extremism, Internet censorship (the Internet is one of the most useful tools for promoting opposition opinions), public gatherings etc.

In addition, in 2016, the Kremlin decided to create a formation called the ‘National Guard’ to fight opponents of the regime labelled ‘internal enemies’. The National Guard will be used, among others, to disperse protest movements and will also be able to use heavy equipment for this purpose. Guardsmen will be permitted to shoot at people without prior warning, in dangerous or life threatening situations concerning other people or officials of the new armed unit.

Alexei Makarkin notes that the creation of that formation is linked to the question of elections to the State Duma (taking place in September 2016), but also to disappointing social-economic forecasts that could lead to a social protest (Newsru.com, 2016).

Restrictions on the possibility of competition against the ruling elite through universal suffrage create a limitation for the opposition. These restrictions are as follows: difficulty in registering an opposition party (for example, Alexei Navalny’s “Progress Party”), refused access to elections, high electoral threshold (5%), and electoral fraud assuring the victory of groups and candidates supporting the present political system. The incumbent regime still uses fraud, repression, and other illiberal means “to create an uneven playing field between government and opposition” (Levitsky, Way, 2002, p. 55).

Conclusion

Considering all the aforementioned circumstances, linked to the situation of the non-systemic opposition in today’s Russia, can we assume a possibility for the system to change through elections, or for the opposition to efficiently mobilize the society?

The situation of the opposition in the authoritarian system is the result of several factors which include the actions of the government, strategies chosen by opposition activists to deal with an oppressive regime and their ability to reach out to the society and attract followers. In case of the Russian political system, the non-systemic opposition has to cope with the increasingly rigorous methods of attacking it by the Kremlin in recent years. Moreover, it has to answer the question of what is the best strategy under the system built by Vladimir Putin, and how to mobilize the masses to fight against the regime. The analysis in this article shows that so far all the actions undertaken by the non-systemic opposition which aimed at increasing the number of its followers and becoming a real force that could threaten the Putin system, have failed.

As Vladimir Gelman rightly points out, the opposition will be able to confront authoritarianism in Russia only by consolidating and mobilizing a large number of regime adversaries. A ‘negative’ consolidation against the *status quo* is necessary but also incomplete, and may hinder any action taken. The history of countries that have undergone regime change reveals that the opposition can achieve its goals only by cooperating with social groups and by being endorsed by potential allies among the elites. It is too soon to state if and when the new opportunities will be used by the opposition.

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Opozycja w reżimach autorytarnych – stadium przypadku na przykładzie rosyjskiej opozycji niesystemowej

Streszczenie

Według Juana Linza, autorytarni władcy dopuszczają ograniczony i bezsilny pluralizm polityczny i organizację wyborów, ale jasno pokazują, że zmiana władzy jest niemożliwa, a opozycja nie może przejąć władzy. Wybory w reżimach autorytarnych są częścią nominalnie demokratycznych instytucji i pomagają władzom legitymizować panujący reżim. Wybory nie są wolne ani uczciwe, a zatem nie stanowią szansy dla opozycji, aby wygrać i zmienić system polityczny w ich następstwie.

Można zadać pytanie, jakiego rodzaju działania powinna podjąć opozycja w celu wzmocnienia swojej pozycji. Jest to obecnie główny problem niesystemowej opozycji w Federacji Rosyjskiej. Z jednej strony ma ona problem z uzyskaniem dostępu do wyborów, ale z drugiej strony wie, że nawet gdyby mogła wziąć w nich udział, nie byłyby to wybory demokratyczne.

Artykuł stara się rzucić światło na strategie niesystemowej opozycji rosyjskiej i możliwości jej wpływu na rosyjskie społeczeństwo, w warunkach gdy rząd próbuje marginalizować, osłabiać i ostatecznie niszczyć niesystemową opozycję.

Artykuł przedstawia krytyczną analizę literatury i dokumentów na ten temat.

Słowa kluczowe: niesystemowa opozycja, autorytaryzm, Kreml, ruch protestacyjny