

The Russian Movement Against Putin: Imagining a Different Russia

Vision and Motivation

“I believe it would be only correct for the [United Russia party] congress to support the candidacy of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for president of the Russian Federation,” Dmitry Medvedev announced.¹ It was September 2011, and Medvedev had been president of Russia for nearly four years – four years of rhetoric about reform, modernization, and even “genuine democracy.”² Now, however, no doubt



Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev

could remain that this rhetoric had been hollow from the start. Putin smirked, “This agreement was reached between us several years ago,” confirming that Medvedev’s presidency had indeed been no more than a scheme to circumvent Russia’s constitutional ban on three consecutive terms of office.³ Putin had already served as president from 2000 to 2008, and now Russians realized that he could hold the office again until 2024 – much longer than any Russian leader since Joseph Stalin.

A wave of dismay swept through the country. Many who had hoped “that Medvedev would become a genuine president...that we might see some real democracy” now faced a “point of no return.”⁴ Resentment grew as “people saw that the leadership had been fooling them...for four years.”⁵ The prospect of a twelve-year Putin presidency was unnerving; as one young Russian said, “I don’t want to live my whole life only knowing Putin as president!”⁶ It was a turning point that would reignite the Russian opposition.

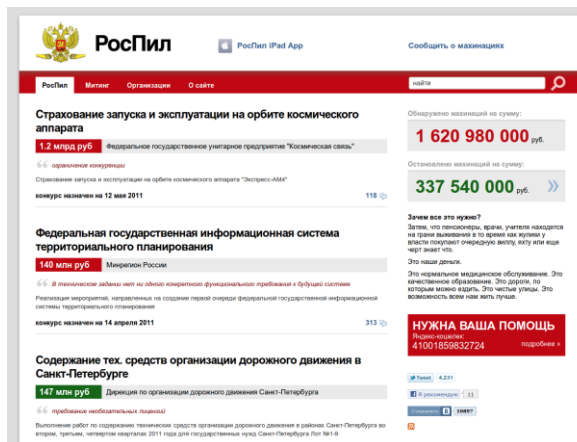
A nearly unprecedented street protest movement arose in the wake of December 2011 parliamentary elections, which were widely seen as rigged in favor of Putin’s United Russia party. “For the first time,” one protester exclaimed, “we’ve realized that the people don’t all worship Putin, as we’ve been told. That we are not alone...The king is naked!”⁷ Tens of thousands of Russians turned out, bedecked in the white ribbons that became the symbol of their movement, to chant “Russia without Putin!” After Putin’s re-election in March 2012, still more descended on the streets in protest.

Despite the ensuing crackdown on dissent, a diverse range of ordinary people has steadfastly continued to work towards a different Russia. As opposition leader Alexei Navalny says, “I want to change life in the country. I want to change the way it is ruled. I want to do things so that the 140 million people who live in this country, who have oil and gas coming out of the ground, do not live in poverty or dark squalor and live normally like a European country.”⁸

Goals and Objectives

The movement against Putin has many facets: efforts to put endemic corruption on the national agenda, struggles to reveal the truth of Russia’s military involvement in Ukraine and Syria, initiatives to highlight rigged elections, and campaigns to preserve the environment in the face of government plans to hand over forests and rivers to oligarchs with political connections. Uniting these efforts is the conviction that ultimately, success cannot be reached “without serious political change,” as Navalny says.⁹

Corruption, an issue that affects all Russians, has been a major focus of the anti-Putin movement. In fact, Navalny's rise to fame began with his online investigations of corruption, as he sought to prove "what was stolen, who stole it, where the money went, and who in government is responsible."¹⁰ In order to do so, he bought tiny amounts of stock in companies such as Transneft, the state oil transport monopoly, to gain access to documents that would provide insight into their finances.¹¹ His online reports grabbed Russians' attention, and his RosPil website, launched in 2010, went a step further by enabling ordinary people to serve as watchdogs for government corruption. The site allowed readers to submit government procurement documents for investigation into suspicious purchases, such as \$60,000 worth of mink coats that St. Petersburg authorities claimed were for patients at a psychiatric institute.¹² Readers promptly flooded the Federal Anti-Monopoly Agency with thousands of complaints, resulting in the annulment of seven million dollars' worth of government contracts within just three months.¹³



Screenshot from Navalny's watchdogging website RosPil

Other activists have worked to highlight election fraud. Grigory Melkonyants, deputy director of Russia's only independent election watchdog organization, Golos, launched an interactive digital map in advance of the 2011 parliamentary elections in order to mark instances of fraud.¹⁴ Despite attempts to input false information and to bring the site down, the map soon became one of the 20 most popular websites in Russia.¹⁵ During the elections, it was flooded with 7,000 reports of fraud across the country.¹⁶ Together with other reports of rigging, this helped to fuel the massive protests that followed. According to Melkonyants, "Those who previously would have hardly bothered to vote at all became fully fledged citizens, aware of their rights."¹⁷

More recently, activists have thrown themselves into battle with Putin's media machine after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, as well as its military intervention in Syria on behalf of embattled president Bashar Al-Assad. They seek to counter Kremlin statements that Russian troops are not present in eastern Ukraine or on the ground in Syria. In order to bolster his fiction that any Russian soldiers in eastern Ukraine are there as volunteers, Putin has made military deaths in peacetime a state secret. Activists, however, are determined to reveal the truth. "We are part of an information war against our enemy, which happens to be [the Russian government]," one says.¹⁸



Unmarked soldiers in the Crimean capital, Simferopol

Groups like Cargo 200¹⁹ have published lists of the dead after turning up social media posts by grieving relatives of dead Russian soldiers, as well as photos of soldiers' graves and trucks carrying the dead from Ukraine to Russia.²⁰ Activists have also used satellite maps and social media to geolocate Russian troops in Syria, revealing Putin's mode of "'hybrid warfare,' where there is the official, open part, and the

hidden, unofficial part.”²¹ Murdered opposition leader Boris Nemtsov expressed the anger surrounding the hidden deaths of Russian soldiers in Ukraine on the very day he was killed: “Why are Russian soldiers being killed while you, Mr. Putin, disown these soldiers and lie, saying that they are not involved in fighting? How can you, as commander in chief, disown them? How dare you remain commander in chief after that?”²²

While political issues may motivate more educated, urban Russians, in the country’s heartland, it is economic and environmental causes that spark action. Since 2012, for instance, residents of the fertile “Black Earth” region of the southwest have fought against a Kremlin-backed nickel mining project that they say would be “a genuine ecological catastrophe.”²³ According to one local, “People really didn’t understand why they and their land should have to suffer to make yet more money for some super-wealthy businessman, who doesn’t live anywhere near the region.”²⁴

Meanwhile, as the price of oil and the value of the ruble have plummeted, economic woes are fueling other protests. A new freight tax that would benefit Putin-allied oligarchs drove truckers to plan a nationwide protest including the blockade of highways – a remarkable move from a conservative constituency that had traditionally been part of Putin’s base of support. “The authorities want to take everything from us,” one trucker said. “They want to take our hard-earned money to line their own pockets.”²⁵ Days before the protests were set to begin, the government announced a freeze on the tax hike.²⁶ However, ordinary Russians’ economic struggles have fueled growing discontent, and it is clear that while the movement against Putin may evolve, it is sure to continue.²⁷



Russian truckers protest in St. Petersburg

Leadership

Alexei Navalny has stood at the vanguard of Russia’s opposition since the 2011-12 protests around the parliamentary and presidential elections. Indeed, he has been called “the man Vladimir Putin fears most.”²⁸ While he was not the first activist to target corruption, he was the first to do so in an accessible way and to galvanize mass support.²⁹ Moreover, unlike other anti-Putin leaders, Navalny was neither a wealthy celebrity nor a politician tainted by association with corrupt government administrations. As one Russian wrote, “He is someone who has gone it alone against massive state machinery based on theft, lies, and a whole range of inhuman and inhumane activities.”³⁰

As Navalny’s following grew, he began to be seen as a viable political alternative to Putin, although some are wary of his wholehearted embrace of Russian ethnonationalism. In the fall of 2013, he won 27 percent of the vote in Moscow mayoral elections – an impressive second-place finish to the Putin-backed incumbent, particularly since Navalny was shut out of the mainstream media throughout his campaign.³¹ Today, however, the Kremlin bans independent parties such as Navalny’s and continues to hamper him with politically-motivated court cases. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that in at least one of these cases, the Russian government violated Navalny’s right to a fair trial.³² These continued convictions could disqualify Navalny from future political races, however these efforts have

not hampered his political aspirations.³³ In December 2016, he formally announced his intent to run against Putin in the March 18, 2018 election.³⁴

Outside Russia, exiled dissidents Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Garry Kasparov have also been leading voices against Putin. Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, spent a decade in prison after he began funding political opposition parties. Upon his release in 2013, he fled to Europe, where he founded the Open Russia Foundation, which aims to "help forces in Russia that share [his] ideological views to attain political representation under the next regime."³⁵ However, many Russians are distrustful of someone who became wealthy at a time when millions were plunged into poverty in the wake of "shock therapy" economic reforms.³⁶

Garry Kasparov, a former chess world champion, headed The Other Russia, an anti-Putin coalition launched in 2006. One of Putin's fiercest opponents, he too fled Russia in 2013 in fear of arrest. Since, he has become known as "the sharpest critic of the Kremlin in the West," and he has also made headlines for his critique of the West's "political and moral capitulation" to Putin.³⁷ However, well-known names like Kasparov and Khodorkovsky are only one part of the movement against Putin. Despite



Garry Kasparov, dissident and former chess world champion

the understandable ongoing exodus of dissidents, many Russians are determined to remain and fight for their country. As one says, "If your neighbor has better wallpaper and nicer furniture, you don't just move into their apartment. You try to improve your own home, right? So that's exactly what I plan to do here."³⁸

Civic Environment

Putin's Russia is a country where the media is under tight control, corruption and economic inequality flourish, and dissidents are vilified as foreign agents, tried on trumped-up charges, imprisoned, and even assassinated. Soon after Putin took office in 2012, the government pushed through a barrage of laws to bolster his impending crackdown. These included increasing penalties for violating laws on protests; forcing non-governmental organizations receiving any foreign funding to label themselves as "foreign agents;" criminalizing libel; and, re-defining high treason.³⁹ As additional vague laws on extremism have passed, the government's power to punish those who express dissenting views has only grown.

Under Putin, the media has been transformed into a weapon used to bolster the Kremlin's policy agenda and attack opponents. The state or Putin's allies own most media outlets, and they serve as direct outlets for government propaganda.⁴⁰ Indeed, one anchor on a state-run channel openly says, "Now any propaganda...is essentially journalism."⁴¹ Particularly

since the invasion of Ukraine, state media portrays Russia as the target of a Western conspiracy to "eliminat[e]...the Russian people as an entity in world history" and attacks dissidents as American agents – a "fifth column" of "national traitors."⁴² With 94



Vladimir Putin addresses a press conference

percent of Russians dependent on state media for news

on Ukraine, the media's influence has contributed to an increasingly toxic environment of hostility towards dissent.⁴³

Dissidents face not only public opprobrium but also harsh retribution from the government. In 2012, leftist Sergei Udaltsov was accused of conspiring with foreign interests to orchestrate a violent uprising, evidenced by a grainy video purported to show Udaltsov in a secret meeting with a Georgian politician.⁴⁴ Two years later, he was sentenced to four and a half years in prison. Similarly, Alexei Navalny has faced multiple charges of embezzlement – widely seen as fraudulent – and received two suspended prison sentences. In an echo of Soviet-era repression, retribution has even extended to activists' families; in 2014, courts handed Navalny's brother, Oleg, a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence. When the sentence was read in court, Navalny shouted with tears in his eyes, "Why are you jailing him?" "This is a dirty trick. To punish me more?" Analysts concurred that the sentence was indeed a means of "tak[ing] a family member hostage."⁴⁵

Imprisonment is not the only consequence of dissent. The independent journalist Anna Politkovskaya was shot to death in her apartment building in 2006; the next month, former Federal Security Service officer turned whistleblower Alexander Litvinenko died of poisoning in London. Three years later, human rights activist Natalia Estemirova was found dead in a car trunk, and whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky died in custody after a brutal beating. However, it was Boris Nemtsov's murder in 2014 that marked a turning point. "We have long been used to smear campaigns, criminal charges and even beatings, but this has taken things to a new level," one activist said. "We are all in a dark forest now, and anyone who opposes Putin is in danger."⁴⁶



Candles, flowers, and messages left near the site of Boris Nemtsov's assassination

The government has made even ordinary Russians who are not active in the opposition movement into examples, sending a warning that any sort of protest will not be tolerated in Putin's Russia. 600 people were arrested in demonstrations on the eve of Putin's May 2012 inauguration, and a string of two dozen court cases and prison sentences followed. "People were chosen from various age groups, social status, and professions in order that every Russian could recognize himself behind the bars in that courtroom," said a human rights lawyer. "The relative guilt or innocence of any particular defendant was irrelevant. It was intended as a deterrent to the whole society, and the message was clear: go to a protest rally, and this can be you."⁴⁷

Message and Audience

While liberal, middle-class activists in Moscow tend to be more focused on "abstract ideas, like freedom and a sense of worthiness," residents of the conservative heartland adjust their message to highlight issues that affect people's daily lives.⁴⁸ As one environmental activist says, "It's very easy to get people to take action when their health [or] the health of their children is threatened. It's harder to get them involved when it concerns more abstract concepts, even like vote fraud."⁴⁹

The Internet has proven to be a powerful tool to raise public awareness of political issues and enable activists to come together. "Before, we would all have been isolated from one another, with no way of

finding out if what they said on television was true,” one activist says. “Now almost every home in the village is linked to the internet. This makes it easy to organize ourselves.”⁵⁰ A campaign to prevent the construction of a massive highway through ancient woods in the town of Khimki demonstrated just how effective digital activism could be in facilitating protest, as it ultimately led to the suspension of the highway project. “For me,” one of the campaign’s leaders said, this “was when the protest movement began in earnest” – proof that ordinary Russians could create change.⁵¹

Social media and blogs were key tools oppositionists used to organize the wave of protests against rigged parliamentary elections in December 2011. It was a user on LiveJournal, Russia’s most popular blogging platform, who proposed the symbol of the white ribbon that quickly caught on.⁵² Then activist Ilya Yashin posted a Facebook event to set up what became a massive protest in Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square.⁵³ Not only had the election fraud initially been publicized through the Internet, including the Golos digital map, the subsequent mass mobilization was also organized through digital tools.



White ribbons quickly became a unifying symbol of protest in Russia.

The Kremlin has recognized the power of the Internet as well, and, in response, enforced a national blacklist of banned sites and required all Russian ISPs to provide direct, unrestricted “backdoor” access to national security services.⁵⁴ A 2015 law required companies processing personal data on Russian citizens to store this data on local servers – a move observers believe will make it easier for the government to spy on its citizens.⁵⁵ While the Kremlin pressures companies such as Twitter, Google, and Facebook into giving up data, it also makes use of the Internet as a propaganda tool, even funding an army of “trolls” who spread pro-Putin messages in the comments of English-language news sites.⁵⁶

However, Putin’s repression has not managed to stifle one message that has worked its way into the national consciousness: Navalny’s characterization of United Russia as “the party of crooks and thieves.” Initially a spur-of-the-moment remark during a February 2011 radio interview, it quickly turned into a slogan that not only demythologized the ruling party but also encapsulated public attitudes. Within two years, the majority of Russians agreed that this was an accurate description of the party.⁵⁷

Outreach Activities

The struggle against Putin has reached beyond Russian borders as activists have worked to raise global awareness of Putin’s repression. For instance, the punk group Pussy Riot attracted international attention during their show trials and subsequent prison sentences for a February 2012 protest inside Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, staged in opposition to Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill’s



Pussy Riot protest in Red Square, Moscow

unabashed endorsement of Putin’s presidency as a “miracle of God.” According to the husband of one of the group’s members, “Pussy Riot is a machine placed inside the media. It’s designed to draw attention in the West to what’s going on in Putin’s Russia. And the group has succeeded.”⁵⁸

Russian activists have also traveled outside the country to spread their message. A roster of prominent figures, including Boris Nemtsov, Yevgenia Chirikova, and Vladimir Kara-Murza, actively lobbied for the Magnitsky Act, passed by the US Congress in late 2012 to deny visas to and freeze the assets of Russian officials thought to be responsible for Sergei Magnitsky’s death.⁵⁹ The Russian government retaliated by banning US adoptions of Russian children and blocking certain American officials from entering Russia due to their alleged human rights violations.



Sen. Ben Cardin sponsored the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act

Activists outside Russia have joined in the fight, with Ukrainians launching multiple online projects aimed at debunking Russian media propaganda. The [StopFake](#) and [FakeControl](#) websites curate, fact-check, and translate falsified Russian news stories while using social media to crowd-source instances of misinformation. Russian activists have praised their efforts, with one saying, “It’s very satisfying to observe Ukrainians catching our propaganda and lies and consistently proving them to be such.”⁶⁰

Russians and Ukrainians in the diaspora are also part of the movement against Putin, calling on their local institutions to deny a platform to pro-Putin figures. For instance, when two Russian singers who had expressed support for Putin’s policies in Ukraine came to London in October 2014 to hold a concert, local Russians and Ukrainians launched a campaign in protest, calling them “propaganda tools for the international treaty-breaking Russian government.”⁶¹ While the concert was held, a similar campaign in Canada succeeded. The Toronto Symphony Orchestra dropped pianist Valentina Lisitsa from its April 2015 concert schedule after activists drew attention to her tweets echoing Russian propaganda that portrays Ukraine as overrun by Nazis.⁶²

While the movement against Putin faces growing repression, these activists are unwavering in their commitment to the struggle. As one says, “It is the minority who always make history.”⁶³ Navalny expresses the determination that keeps the movement going: “Like anybody involved in opposition politics in Russia, I know that Putin’s government has no boundaries and will stop at nothing. I know this, but I’m not afraid.”⁶⁴

Learn More

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