



Russian Opposition in Exile Disunited Ahead of 2024 Presidential Election

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A few months before the Russian presidential election scheduled for March 2024, political disputes have heated up among the Russian opposition in exile. The most important issues centre on positions on voting in the election and communication strategy with Russians at home. The growing divisions within the Russian opposition in exile are weakening its already limited ability to influence the situation in Russia. This further strengthens Vladimir Putin and his ability to continue the war against Ukraine.

Characteristics of the Russian Opposition. The repressive policy of the Russian authorities means that most of the leaders of the non-systemic opposition (that is, not controlled by the regime) [have found themselves abroad](#) or serving long prison sentences (e.g., [Alexei Navalny, 19 years](#); Vladimir Kara-Murza, 25 years; Ilya Yashin, 8.5 years). At least four groups can now be distinguished among the exile opposition: Navalny associates, the so-called “old” opposition, including Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Garry Kasparov, activists, and independent politicians, such as Ilya Ponomarev and Maksim Katz.

Members of Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation are the most important group, but they are dispersed. Vladimir Milov and the former president of the Foundation, Leonid Volkov, live in Lithuania. The Foundation’s lawyer, Lyubov Sobol, works in Armenia, and its current president, Maria Pevchikh, works in London. The goal of Navalny’s team is to secure the release of political prisoners, including Navalny himself, and to win power in Russia through elections after the fall of the current regime.

Members of the “old” opposition, who left the country even before the invasion of Ukraine, organise Anti-War Committees, conferences on the future of Russia (e.g., the Free Russia Forum), and are also active commentators in Western media and participants in meetings with EU and U.S. representatives.

Activists, on the other hand (members of Russian civil society, human rights defenders, environmentalists, and

columnists, including Ivan Preobrazhensky and Ekaterina Schulmann) do not have their own political representation but are socially engaged, for example, in helping Russians who have fled the country. They are also working to tighten sanctions against the Russian elite. They declare that they are ready to return after the end of Putin’s rule and support Russia’s political and social transition.

Independent Russian politicians residing abroad have their own agendas and rarely enter into coalitions, seeing themselves as the future leaders of Russian politics after Putin’s fall.

The common denominator of the expatriate opposition is opposition to Putin and the Russian war against Ukraine. Almost all of them maintain virtual channels of communication with their compatriots, especially through Telegram and the YouTube platform. There is no reliable research on public support in Russia for the émigré opposition. According to its representatives, they reach 15-30 million compatriots with their message. By contrast, there are about 109 million registered Russian voters, of whom 2 million are outside the country.

Disputes within the Opposition. The most important problem for the Russian opposition is the question of leadership and representation of Russian interests. Old personal grudges make it impossible for the opposition to act together. Navalny and Katz’s dispute goes back to 2013, when the latter headed Navalny’s campaign for Moscow mayor. Divided and fragmented, the exiled opposition is

unable to formulate a single strategy of action or common representation and operates on a one-to-one basis with institutions in the EU and the U.S. Members of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation are convinced that they are the ones with the moral right to leadership because they represent Navalny, who was poisoned by Putin and is being held in prison as a political prisoner. They tend to be reluctant towards joint initiatives, hoping to win the most public support in Russia after losing the war with Ukraine. Navalny's leadership, on the other hand, is questioned by Maksim Katz and some Russian activists.

Another issue dividing the representatives of the opposition in exile is the question of Russia's future. Most of the émigré opposition declares that it is in favour of a peaceful transfer of power and democratic transition inside the Russian Federation, while preserving its territorial integrity (without Ukrainian Crimea). Ponomaryov, a permanent resident of Kyiv, takes a different view and does not rule out dividing the state into different parts, depending on the political aspirations of the individual republics. At the same time, he argues that the current Russian elite must be forcibly removed from power. The politician believes that at the right moment in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, armed resistance will move into Russian territory. That is why he finances and supports the Svoboda Legion of Russia, in which Russian soldiers voluntarily fight on the side of Ukraine. Ponomaryov was also the initiator of a so-called Congress of Deputies, organised three times in Warsaw. It is made up of former representatives of various levels of government in Russia who are opposed to the war in Ukraine. The task of the deputies is to prepare the legal basis for the operation of the transitional parliament for the moment of the change of power in Russia.

The Attitude Towards the Russian Presidential Election.

A debate within the opposition on the 2024 presidential election in Russia was started by Maksim Katz, who believes that the timing of the election should be used to undermine Russians' support for Putin, even though Putin has not yet declared a run for election. According to him, one should vote for anyone but Putin. Katz calls for the opposition to unite and establish a common strategy of action and communication with compatriots. This position was supported by Khodorkovsky, but not by Kasparov, who has boycotted all Russian elections (parliamentary and presidential) since his departure from Russia in 2013.

Most of the opposition in exile is of the opinion that, under a dictatorship, citizens' participation in the vote will only increase Putin's legitimacy and position. This position has been supported by Alexei Venediktov (the long-time director of the Moscow radio station Echo), Michael Nacke (blogger), and Mikhail Fishman (host of the independent TV channel

Dodzh'). Furthermore, they stress that the hopes of citizens for an imminent change in Russia should not be unnecessarily raised. Navalny's team believes that the Katz proposal should be rejected, although Navalny himself is still considering whether to call on Russians to vote. After all, if all the candidates put forward are in favour of [continuing the war against Ukraine](#), then calling for a vote would expose the émigré opposition to the charge of supporting Russian aggression. However, a clear stance was taken by Ponomaryov and representatives of the Congress of Deputies. They issued a statement on 20 October saying that the participation of opposition representatives in the pseudo-elections would be open aid to the regime. In their view, Putin should be considered an illegitimate leader. They therefore called on Russians not to participate in the elections, which they described as illegal, illegitimate, and criminal.

Conclusions. The perspective of next year's presidential elections in Russia has highlighted the difficulties so far in cooperating and agreeing the *modus operandi* between various groups among the Russian opposition in exile. Conflict and internal divisions are reducing its political legitimacy both at home and abroad. Although the majority of opposition-minded Russians are against participating in the presidential election, the lack of a plan of action will lead to more grumbling and frustration among Russians who disagree with Putin and the war in Ukraine. One idea could be to agree on ways to cooperate during the election campaign (e.g., by promoting common content on social media) and to propose conditions for a possible candidate for the future president of the Russian Federation (e.g., ending the war against Ukraine).

The lack of consensus among the opposition will make it easier for the Russian authorities to weaken its information message to Russians at home. Should the situation on the Ukrainian front deteriorate and the impact of anti-war and anti-regime content increase, Putin may decide to cut off or significantly restrict YouTube activity in Russia. This will make it more difficult for the émigré opposition to communicate with their compatriots and convince them of the changes in the Russian Federation. If the Russian authorities succeed in holding the elections without major protests it will strengthen the authoritarian system in Russia and prompt the Russian government to resume another wave of mobilisation and increase military action in Ukraine.

Calls by the EU and the U.S. for Russian opposition unity could be seen as biased and taking sides in the political dispute. Western countries, on the other hand, should emphasise that elections in Russia are not democratic and are part of a plebiscite on support for Putin.