

Of Jackals and Hamsters

DIVIDING LINES IN RUSSIAN POLITICS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

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Speaking to a gathering of his supporters at the height of Russia's 2007–08 election cycle, President Vladimir Putin depicted his opponents as follows:

They need a weak, sick state. They need a disorganized and disoriented society, a divided society – in order to fix their deals beyond its back ... [They] scavenge like jackals at foreign embassies ... counting on support from foreign foundations and governments, instead of their own people's support.

Putin's labelling of the opposition as jackals quickly became part of political folklore, together with numerous other catchy jargonisms the Russian leader has produced since 1999.

At the same time, the invective clearly was in line with the nationalist anti-liberal direction that Russian politics has been taking since the final years of Putin's second presidential term. There were people – mostly NGO activists and "anti-systemic" opposition leaders – who perceived this phrase as addressed to them. They were probably insulted, scared, and dismayed. However, these groups were a tiny minority. Most Russian citizens, even those who did not support Putin, obviously thought of themselves as being on the inside of the "Us" versus "Them" boundary that the president was drawing. The enemy image was deliberately created in extreme fashion to intensify antagonism and ensure maximum consolidation around the national leader.

Fast forward to the end of 2011. Addressing a December protest meeting in Moscow, Aleksei Navalny, a leading Russian opposition blogger and anti-corruption activist, said in apparent reference to pro-government activists:

They may call us microbloggers, web hamsters. I am a web hamster, and I will bite their heads off!

A derogatory label that had emerged out of pro-government circles had now become an identity marker for many opposition supporters. Ironically referring to themselves as “hamsters,” they were eager to declare that they were no longer on the same side as Putin’s government. Moreover, when Putin scornfully referred to the white ribbons worn by protesters demanding fair elections as “contraceptives,” it caused a wave of indignation, significantly contributing to the political mobilization against the regime.

There is no doubt that Putin’s harsh rhetoric continues to be effective in relation to a significant part of the population. Most experts agree that Putin won the March 2012 presidential election by a safe margin, even without the added fraudulent votes. However, what is new is that people who previously would not have even thought about his invectives as referring to themselves are now eager to confront the authorities by saying, “Yes, you are right, we are against you!” This tells us something about the new political situation in Russia.

This change in attitude signifies the indisputable rise of an alternative way of speaking on behalf of the Russian people, which the opposition is now eager to employ. But this observation also prompts some basic questions that need to be answered before we can really evaluate the prospects for Russia’s democratization.

Speaking in the Name of the People

It is obvious that the dividing lines in Russian politics have changed. In the past, the line between “Us” and “Them” used to separate the Russian nation, taken as a whole, from the dangerous outside world, which included the expansionist and interventionist West, terrorists, and others. Pro-Western liberals, who were continuously ostracized by official propaganda as a “fifth column,” were deliberately depicted as insignificant, a voice representing no social group within Russian society, even a minority. This facilitated marginalization of the democratic opposition.

Today, however, the most important dividing line appears to run right across the body politic. On one side of this line is “the party of swindlers and thieves” – the nickname for the ruling United Russia party that Navalny coined in February 2011 and that has since been taken up as an immensely powerful rhetorical weapon by the entire range of opposition parties and movements. These forces, on the other side of the line, can no longer be described as marginal puppets of the West. The most far-reaching tectonic shift that happened in Russian politics in the last couple of years is that protesters can now legitimately put forth a claim to represent the nation as a whole. And they indeed have done so, asserting that “we are not the opposition, we are the people!”

This bold claim, shared by a significant number of people who support each other by constantly communicating online and in person, provides Putin’s opponents with something that in constructivist literature would be called “ontological security.” This term refers to the people’s ability to give meaning to their lives and activities by

anchoring them in positive emotions and experiences shared with other members of society. Ontological security is about how safe we feel in our understanding of our own identity, the value of our life, and our social status. Being a marginalized opposition activist who stands up for abstract norms, which are not shared by wider society, is a very ontologically *insecure* situation. Even if one deeply believes in these norms and receives support from abroad, everyday life as an outcast in one's own local environment can only be sustained by the staunchest of idealists. Having a chance to share one's position with thousands of like-minded people, even if they still are a minority, changes a person's ontological security status dramatically.

Viewed in this light, it must come as no surprise that the recent protests demonstrated such an outburst of creativity, in which the key themes of official propaganda were replayed, subverted, and eventually turned against the authorities. Its key feature, apart from direct counterarguments against official accusations, was how protesters joyfully assumed the tags put on them by pro-government spin-doctors. Following Navalny's satirical lead, they would call themselves "web hamsters" or, in response to Putin's inopportune joke, bring huge condom-shaped balloons to demonstrations. When the prime minister accused U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of masterminding the protests, claiming that "the State Department invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the Russian elections," the protesters came out with posters asking (mostly in English): "Hillary, Where's my money?" When Putin referred to protesters as the "monkey people" from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, they responded by calling Putin Puu, an adaptation of Kipling's Python Kaa (a label evidently first devised by Dmitry Bykov, author of *Citizen Poet*, a much celebrated satirical series).

Such a feast of irony is only possible when individual protesters feel secure about their collective right to speak in the name of the people as a whole and against a presumably corrupt government. This stands in sharp contrast to the much more isolated – and therefore stylistically much more somber – protest actions of the previous decade.

Questions That Need to Be Asked

This profound change in the representation of the people in the Russian political scene is a phenomenon revealed by discursive analytical tools – by looking at political rhetoric and the ways in which various political forces present their claims. However, there are other significant questions that require deeper sociological research. Answering these questions would appear crucial to the strategies of all actors who wish to promote the democratization of Russia.

First, while it is clear that the dividing line has shifted in terms of representational politics, are there actually more people in opposition to the authorities now than there were five or ten years ago? The opposition can now more legitimately claim to speak in the name of the people, but this claim – like any political representation – is based on a fictitious assumption that "the people's will" exists as an empirical given, in the form of concrete political demands shared by the entire nation. In

fact, society is always divided. There are still many people in Russia who genuinely support Putin and United Russia, and they are probably even a majority. The recent protests demonstrated that the regime's claim to be the sole representative of the people is political fiction – but this was always obvious to any impartial observer.

In other words, it is not clear whether the change of political landscape is about people or entire social groups changing their political sympathies, or just about better communication among existing opponents of the regime (leading to more efficient mobilization). It may be the case that for most of the people who have been protesting in recent months, Putin's rhetoric never worked. It is even possible that the protest mobilization occurred first and foremost not because certain groups believe themselves to be worse off in recent years, but because they are better able to share their complaints and anxieties with like-minded people. In this view, the role of new technologies, especially web-based social networks, becomes a crucial factor for change.

Second, it is essential to understand who is now counted by the anti-government forces as part of "Us," and how this dividing line might shift in the future. So far, Putin's tactics consist of trying to link the protests to external intervention by repeatedly raising the specter of the Orange Revolution. This, however, could eventually backfire. A situation in which the liberal opposition would start to identify with "Orange" values (and perhaps even with the Arab Spring) is at least conceivable. For someone dismissing (on the basis of first-hand experience) the Kremlin's claim that the demonstrations in Moscow were paid for by the State Department, it would only be logical to conclude that similar conspiracy theories in relation to events in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and the Arab world are equally ludicrous. The image of people rising up for their freedom can then become a powerful mobilizing force.

If this were to happen, it would amount to yet another profound change in Russian politics. Among other things, it would most likely mean that the West would no longer be seen as expansionist and interventionist, but as a necessary brace against the corrupt authorities. Such a reconfiguration would be greatly facilitated by the fact that Russia still largely defines itself as a European country; the Western social and economic model still has wide appeal among the population.

However, it is also possible that a new dividing line would consolidate around a much smaller and closed community, centered on Russian ethnic nationalism. In this case, the anti-people's "Other" would include, together with corrupt authorities, non-Slavic migrants and the West. This combination appears paradoxical only at first glance – in fact, it is already articulated by the nationalist part of the political spectrum. This point of view accuses the government of bowing to Western pressure and becoming too soft on immigrants and other non-Slavic minorities. This rhetoric resonates rather widely among Russians. There is thus a realistic possibility that a strong democratic movement will emerge on the basis of an anti-liberal nationalist platform.

What about the recent ebb in protest activity after the presidential election and the seeming lack of perspective for the most recent, post-inauguration, outburst of street politics? This was to be expected and by no means makes the need for a better understanding of the Russian political landscape any less urgent. Even if predictions

about a next major wave of protests within a year or two do not come true, Russia has entered a new stage in its social and political development. The period when Putin was the only true politician is over, and the political field is going to be increasingly more dynamic and better structured. Under these circumstances, it is no longer possible to rely only on Kremlinological insights in trying to plan for the future. A wider spectrum of approaches, ranging from quantitative sociology to research focusing on discourse and identity, will need to be employed if we want to get a fuller picture of politics in Russia today.