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RUSSIAN OPPOSITION'S DISCOURSE DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Bachelor's thesis

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Abstract

The beginning of the war in Ukraine marked the defeat of the Russian opposition in the fight against the regime. Conducting protest activities became almost impossible, a large number of opposition leaders and Russian citizens were forced to leave the country. From the field of protests and attempts to conduct political activities, the opposition was forced to find itself almost exclusively in the field of speech and discussion. These and other conditions led to the emergence of reflection on their own mistakes. Trying to understand the reason for their failure, Russian opposition figures began to rethink the failed strategies of the past.

The aim of this work is to identify the main narratives and trends in the discussion of Russian opposition members.

For this, the concept of discourse analysis by Laclau and Mouffe was used in this work in order to point out major nodal points, which are formulated during the political confrontation and struggle for political influence.

The work collected various empirical data, which were thematically identified and analyzed. The identified narratives allow us to better understand the discursive field in which the Russian opposition is currently located. Such dominant motives as elitism or antagonism between emigrants and those who remained in Russia partly form the agenda of the protest movement. Awareness of one's own mistakes and their future correction can change the political course of a potential post-Putin democratic Russia and its civil society.

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Introduction

The military aggression of Russia in Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, led to the almost complete destruction of the opposition movement in Russia, but serious political repressions began even earlier, in particular, from the moment of the arrest of Alexei Navalny. This can be said based on the history of protests. A great example in this context will be the protests in support of Alexei Navalny in 2021, where, according to estimate data of news publications, from 110 to 160 thousand people took part (MBH-news, 2021). At the time of writing following work, Alexei Navalny is in prison, the Anti-Corruption Foundation (hereinafter ACF) organization and Navalny's headquarters have been recognized as an "extremist organization", and most of the opposition leaders have left the country. Thus, in just a couple of years, the difficulty of holding a protest has gone from difficult to impossible.

Despite attempts to resist the opposition, the Russian regime managed to liquidate various protest organizations, and "power centers" presented in the form of opposition governors and imprison human rights activists and opinion leaders. The outbreak of the war marked the failure of civil protest and opposition activity. Based on this, we can say that in the confrontation between the authorities and the opposition, the latter was defeated.

The question of understanding the reasons for this defeat among the opposition is extremely important. First, assessing the effectiveness of past strategies can act as a proofreader for future practices. The question of understanding the reasons for this defeat among the opposition is extremely important. First, assessing the effectiveness of past strategies can act as a proofreader for future practices. Graeme Robertson finds that "experience of previous struggle is important in shaping the protest leadership's ideas about the range of issues that represent opportunities for building a movement" (Robertson 2013: 13). Accordingly, not only the study of previous strategies of the opposition struggle in Russia, but also its rethinking by the Russian opposition movement is one of the most important studies of the possibilities of changing the character of the regime in the Russian Federation. Secondly, the Russian opposition has almost completely moved from the field of street protests and political actions to the sphere of discussion and expression on various online platforms. Thus, political competition is now, to a greater extent, determined by the statement and its significance among the audience, which, in turn, leads to the loss or increase in the influence of certain opinion leaders. For example, the figure of Garry Kasparov became more significant during the war, even though he left Russia eight years before the start of the war, and the role of Alexei Navalny decreased due to the fact

that he cannot conduct the same political activities as before, while in prison. Thirdly, one of the main receivers of the discussion is a citizen of Russia. The opposition is trying to create the trust of civil society in order to mobilize it later for protest activities, create an electoral group of followers, and so on.

These reasons make the study of this topic relevant. The task of the study is devoted to current events and fixes a certain situation in the designated chronological frame. Since the beginning of the war, academic materials on the discourse of the Russian opposition have not yet been formed. The indicated conditions in which the work was written make its content original. The main issue of the study is the task of understanding how the Russian non-systemic opposition is reflecting upon its own mistakes. Accordingly, the purpose of the study is to identify the most dominant narratives regarding past protests among the opposition.

The data is presented in the form of various media sources of information. First of all, this is text data — posts from Facebook, articles in opposition publications, tweets, etc. The second source of data is video and audio materials presented in the form of videos on YouTube and podcasts on various platforms.

The work consists of theoretical and practical parts. The first provides a brief overview of the theoretical approach. I chose Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe discursive theory because this approach, firstly, focuses on the struggle of different discourses around one specific topic and, thus, provides the conceptual base that I, as a researcher, need.

The practical part consists of the presentation of the collected data and their categorization according to thematic content. Each subheading has three components: defining the topic of discussion, giving specific examples and analyzing them.

In my work, I used various online resources. I primarily focused on the texts about the opposition, which were written by the opposition itself - by various organizations or opposition figures.

There were few such texts, however, they aroused great public attention.

Often, the rethinking of the mistakes of the past took place in connection with the events of the present. One of the information-gathering problems is self-censorship. As the study of Erpyleva and Saveljeva clearly shows, often the participants in social surveys, who adhere to a course different from the state one, either refuse to participate in the survey or deliberately mask their position, feeling uncomfortable answering political questions. They feel outside their “comfort zone” and finally just fear persecution by law enforcement agencies (Erpyleva&Saveljeva 2022: 13). The same could possibly also apply to people, who before actively participated in political life, but after increased repressions became non-active.

Below is a list of resources that I used in my work:

1. Ponars - (Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia) is an academical network, which specializes its research in politics, security, economics and society in Russia and Eurasia. The program holds conferences, events, debates, workshops, and also presents various types of analysis, that are dedicated to Russia and Eurasia and are also available on the official website. Available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/>

2. Meduza – The Meduza news portal is one of the leading opposition media that covers events in Russia itself and abroad. In addition to the news feed, the agency also regularly releases interviews and collated articles with political experts on economics, politics, and more. A significant part of the publications is also devoted to civil society and the opposition movement in Russia. Available at: <https://meduza.io/en>

3. Holod magazine – “Holod” is an independent media outlet, which is mostly dedicated to Russian affairs. As the creators of the magazine point out, the thematic range of articles is quite wide: from domestic violence to corruption scandals. In the framework of this work, I primarily use this journal as a valuable source of political analysis on civil society in Russia. Interviews with experts, longreads and political analysis provide useful insight into the life of civil society and the opposition. Available at: <https://holod.media/en/>

4. Republic - Republic is a media portal for the Russian-speaking audience. Portal materials are available exclusively in Russian. In terms of its functionality, the magazine is similar to the above sources (“PONARS” and independent media “Meduza” and “Holod”). Portal provides various longreads, analytical articles and interviews. Available at: <https://republic.ru/>

5. Different social media platforms – Twitter, Facebook, Telegramm channels. Social media acts as a platform for discussion and expression. The level of censorship in Russia and the lack of freedom of speech as such forces the public society and opposition leaders to use the Internet, and in particular social networks, as one of the main platforms for the dissemination of criticism, agitation, discussion and ideas.

This chronological framework is marked by the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (24.02.2022) and the end of the collection of information by the author of the work (14.05.2023) for subsequent categorization and analysis.

Previous literature about opposition

In this part of the thesis, I would like to make a brief review of the existing literature on the topic. One of the most important articles regarding the historical perspective of the Russian opposition seems to me to be the work of Vladimir Gelman.

Vladimir Gelman's article provides an interesting look into the past of the Russian opposition. In the literature review section, I would like to underline those parts of the article that seem to me as the most relevant in terms of my thesis. Written in 2015, the article describes the opposition between the "new opposition" - leaders who entered the political scene in the early 2010s, and the "old" opposition - those who were at the political forefront of the opposition in the 1990s and 2000s. Separately, Gelman highlights the generational divergence between the conditional "fathers" and "sons". Gelman names as the reasons for the emergence of a new opposition movement the modernization that was carried out by the authorities, as well as the change in the agenda of the opposition, which involved a populist approach to criticizing the authorities in general, and not on some specific issues, as it happened before.

Anti-corruption rhetoric has received a special place in the arsenal of methods of the political influence of the new Russian opposition.

Describing further the history of the protests of 2011-2012, Gelman also notes that the Internet has become the main source of recruitment of protest citizens, which was used by the opposition. Separately, Gelman notes the politician Alexei Navalny, who was able to attract not only opponents of the regime but also those who previously occupied a passive-neutral position. The consequence of this was a noticeable expansion of the circle of supporters of the opposition. The opposition was also characterized by a sharp and direct agenda, as opposed to the blurred ideological outlines of the regime. One of these components, for example, was a negative attitude toward migrants.

The topic of the next works that I would like to review is elitism.

One of the most significant works in the context of the opposition's mistakes seems to me to be Ilya Matveev's article (Matveev, 2012).

Using the approach of Laclau and Mouffe, Ilya Matveev, in his article "Two Russias", tries to determine the motivation of the protesters who took part in the rallies of 2011-2012. In the beginning, Matveev notes that protests could be seen as the object of public discourse and discussion. Matveev states that the predominance of political technologies created a persistent mistrust of public

life as such, which provoked the depoliticization of Russian citizens, but the protests of 2011-2012 were able to destroy this mistrust and mobilize the civilian masses.

However, later the protests themselves began to be viewed through the lenses of the ideology of “two Russias”. The content of the concept of “two Russias” is found already in its very name - First Russia, in this case, is the Westernized, pro-Western intelligentsia, which should lead the rest of the population, the protest and the pejorative “people”, who have attributed the qualities of ignorance and inertia.

The idea of two Russias divides society into a fictional minority and people, where the latter, being regarded as the “Other” remains completely unknowable for the educated minority. The minority is thus invited to “enlighten the people”, or to wait for the moment when the general education will make the change of power possible.

The perception modus of the two Russias is based on the field of culture, which prevails over the political and social factors. Therefore, writers, poets, actors, and other cultural figures became the leaders of the protest, leaving professional politicians behind.

Matveev also states that the idea of "two Russias" also serves as a convenient generalization for journalists, which makes its usage so widespread.

At the end of the article, Matveev gives a counterexample of the successful self-organization of “Bentler” fabrics production workers who were able to achieve their main demand, the recognition of their trade union. Despite that fact, Kalinin states, that they will never be considered part of the “cultural minority” from the perspective of the liberal opposition, “first Russia”. It is pretty clear that the idea of "two Russias" is based on differences in lifestyle, taste, and behavior. The position of an arrogant attitude towards the majority leads to a situation where only “enlightened intelligentsia” come out to rallies, and the majority of the population “silently sits at home and supports Putin”, which consequently leads to the political loss of the liberal opposition.

Similarly, to Matveev, Ilya Kalinin in his article also wrote about a certain elitism of the protest (Kalinin, 2017).

According to the historical specifics of the Soviet and post-soviet political situation, cultural space was regarded as the only possible space of freedom, which means that underground literature magazines, science, and humanities students club, and others became the source of main political action, accordingly to the liberal oppositions’ political myth. Thus, stylistic complexity, closeness to science, and knowledge in literature were opposed to the official, unspiritual, and poorly educated ideology of the state.

According to Kalinin, the defining characteristics of the protest were stylistic features that acted as fundamental demarcation lines. The demarcation in this context is not limited solely to taste preferences, but also rests on the existence of a common language based on irony and ridicule, conditional “sign language” that is available only to a certain circle of people who are familiar with that way of expression. An additional factor here is also the fact that the protests of 2011-2012, in many respects, were protests of prosperous and relatively rich people who opposed the authorities in the name of freedom, thus leaving the rest of society, the “poor”, out of protest. The right-wing orientation of the protest, insisting on freedom of business and market reforms, left most of the population indifferent. The focus on creativity, and the creative nature of the intelligentsia allowed the authorities to oppose the liberal protestors with the idea of the “common people”, which the opposition itself rejected as poorly educated masses. This allowed the authorities to use the figure of a “common man” as a lever of political influence, which brought the country's majority to its side, thereby leading to the defeat of the opposition.

Chapter I

1.1 Theory of discursive analysis

In the following part I would like to explain theoretical premises which I rely on. The focus of the work is on various practices of articulation and communication by the Russian opposition, which, from the author's point of view, would be most correctly designated as discursive practices. The very concept of discourse, according to Laclau, originates from the premise that any perception exists within a semantic field that precedes conceptual grasp through articulation (Laclau, 2015: 23). This implies that we are placed in a certain socio-cultural space that determines our language, thus rejecting the notion that people have fixed characteristics or essences.

Laclau also points out that the task of discursive analysis within classical structuralism was to uncover the “basic regularities” that determined the production of meaning in social life. However, in this case, we mean that the immutability of the system, “basic regularities”, cannot be fully constituted, “unless the system is a closed one”, which, in turn, indicates the impossibility of a closed totality (Laclau, 2015: 26). To put it simply, one of the main ideas of discourse theory is that a social phenomenon is never stable or complete. It's constantly being changed through the interaction with other discourses (Jorgensen&Phillips, 2002:17).

One of the most widely used approaches of discourse theory in political science is the conceptualization of power.

Laclau and Mouffe place the category of hegemony at the center of consideration of political power. The aforementioned impossibility of totality creates the situation of the existence of "floating signifiers". The political struggle is a discursive confrontation between different rival political groups to fix the signifier in a certain meaning, which is basically a concept of “hegemony” (Laclau 2015: 28).

Discourse in this context is a structural unity that emerges during articulation.

At all moments, signs are interconnected in chain, which is built from nodal points. Nodal points are a privileged sign around which other signs are ordered and acquire their meaning. Such concepts as „democracy”, „civil freedom”, „society” and others can be represented as nodal points in a democracy discourse (Jorgensen&Phillips 2002: 26).

In the case of the topic of this work, „Crimea”, „Opposition”, „Elite”, and others can be considered as such nodal points.

As competing groups, we can also consider the oppositionists who left and remained in Russia, as well as various organizations, such as the Free Russia Forum or Navalny's team.

The discourse of formation by the sum of signs, where each sign is represented as a moment by establishing relationships with other signs. This leads to the exclusion of all possible connections of signs with each other, thereby making an attempt to create a unified system of meanings - the field of discursivity (Jorgensen&Phillips 2002: 27).

Through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory we can see how a different set of discursive practices that are in a state of discussion with each other, passing a number of nodal points through a certain number of polemical iterations. The discussion passing through nodal points (the annexation of Crimea, the poisoning of Navalny, the beginning of the war in Ukraine) that determine the reflection of the liberal opposition regarding its own failure, can reveal a number of dominant narratives, which, subsequently, can become the basis for continuing resistance to its main opponent - Putin's regime.

Chapter II:

2.1 Representation of the empirical data

Taking into consideration the specifics of Russian politics, I need to pay attention to the difference between, so-called, systemic, and non-systemic opposition.

Political scientist Jeremy Ladd in his lecture “A Rock and Hard Place: The Russian Opposition in War” defines systemic oppositions as the parties who support Vladimir Putin's regime, but have “a small opposing function” towards United Russia. In other words, systemic opposition can be seen as a propaganda tool to create an expression of the regime's democracy. Non-systemic opposition, according to Ladd, is the “real opposition”, which means that those are organizations that actually oppose the rule of the United Russia party. Vladimir Gelman defies non-systemic opposition similarly, as “explicit rivals to the regime” (Gelman, 2015: 3).

An open question within the opposition movement is whether there was any "opposition" in Russia at all and what is meant by this concept. One of the most famous politicians, co-founder of such prominent political movements as “Oborona” and “Solidarnost” Ilya Yashin points out that the concept of "opposition" requires the ability to become "power in the result of legal processes", and notes that in today's Russia, there are no legal ways to change power, meaning by this the lack of fair elections, free media, civil society, etc. Yashin claims that the task of a politician in Russia “is, to tell the truth, and try to somehow change public opinion,” seeing it as more of a dissidence, not opposition (Holod, 2022).

The former head of the city of Yekaterinburg, Yevgeny Roizman, also speaks in similar to Yashin’s manner - “There is no opposition in Russia. There are honest and persistent people in Russia who do not give up” (Roizman, 2021).

The street protests with which Yashin himself began his career are more likely to relate not to traditional political activity, but to broader, social activities, at least in terms of a democratic state. But for the Russian opposition, it's different. They don't have access to democratic mechanisms and was forced all the time to be on the media and political periphery - the name of the most popular politician Alexei Navalny was banned from use in the media, and any attempts to participate in political processes at the legal level were suppressed by the authorities.

This work is about non-systemic opposition, but unlike Ladd, I, as the author of this work, focus more on individual leaders and their statements than on the movements as a whole. The non-systemic

opposition can also be divided into two parts - relocants, that is, those who left Russia and those who remained in Russia. The two most notable periods of emigration occurred in 2012 to 2014 - after the largest rallies after the presidential elections in Russia, as well as the last wave of emigration from Russia after the start of the war on February 24, 2022, and the introduction of a decree on partial mobilization on September 21, 2022. The wave of emigration associated with the war continues further at the time of writing.

However, the division of the opposition into two camps would be partly incomplete, since the anti-Putin emigration has already become a „multipolar world” - many organizations that have different leaders and hold events on different topics in different places from the Free Russia Forum to the media of Mikhail Khodorkovsky (Kashin, 2022). However, despite the fact that those who left often do not agree with each other on a number of issues, they still often share a position in favor of emigration from Russia between each other. This, in turn, gives rise to a dispute between those who left and those who remained.

Both sides represent different points of view and have different political and academic backgrounds, but both sides are bound together by belonging to the liberal opposition. The diversity of the sample allows us to have a broader view of the existing discussion and highlights more of the nodal points in an attempt to create a certain fixed, total discourse.

As stated above, the main task in data analysis is to identify discourse nodal points, which are passing through a variety of polemical iterations.

As a result of the research, I identified seven main themes that were associated with reflection on past opposition strategies. Some topics, such as decolonization, have taken on additional meanings than before and become more widespread.

Some others, such as elitism, have already been cited as a reason for the failure of the opposition movement in the past but still have not lost their relevance.

Presented topics are related to each other, and also, often, follow from one another.

2.2 Elitism of Russian opposition in the past

Elitism is perhaps one of the leading themes in the field of reflection on opposition's own mistakes. As a great example, I would like to consider the article by Leonid Gozman - Russian politician and a public movement Union of Right Forces president. During his 15-day arrest in september 2022, Gozman wrote an article titled “Reflection from behind bars: why didn’t we succeed?”. Rejecting

the correctness of geographical determinism, Gozman puts elitism in second place, since the opposition accused people of not sharing their beliefs, and also of not being ready for action. Gozman draws attention to the distinction and the idea of a certain “messianism” of the opposition - "We do good not together with them but for them." The loss of subjectivity of the group of “those” who did not take the side of the opposition was constituted by the oppositional discourse of neglect and underestimation. The reduced attitude towards them, who didn't openly join the opposition, was also expressed in pejorative “nicknames”, which are not directly mentioned by Gozman. The liberal opposition, according to Gozman, was incapable of showing "sympathy" towards the "fooled by propaganda", and "the disenfranchised and dependent" people of Russia. Gozman criticizes the lack of understanding among the liberal protesters and also mentions the importance of “love” for "real, existing" fellow citizens.

This statement also narrates that the opposition possibly had a certain image of an “ideal citizen”, who, although not on the side of the opposition itself, is, however, politically enterprising, anti-government, and educated.

This also includes the following paragraph from Gozman's article, which he refers to as a "representativeness error". Gozman writes that the experience of those involved in politics is limited and skewed when compared to "the general population". The division into “us” and “them” leads to the fact that active communication and discussion take place precisely with the former, leaving the latter out of the dialog. As an example of that, Gozman refers to social networks, where the user is free to independently choose his “friends” and block content that seems for him being unpleasant. Thus, a certain “artificial reality” is created, which, subsequently, is extrapolated to primary political reality - “at a rally, it begins to seem to us that everyone, the whole country, thinks like us.” Gozman sees this distortion as natural but points out that it was the reason for the lack of communication between the opposition and the people since many points from the opposition agenda were seen as obvious or, conversely, not worth talking about, since others would still not be able to understand (Gozman, 2022).

In his other post “Why are we they,” Leonid Gozman writes that “our fault is that our compatriots believed in all this great-power nonsense.” Gozman points to the arrogant attitude towards other residents of Russia from the oppositional minority – "Many of you - said that there was nothing to talk with them, (that) they are stupid, quilted vatniks". The pejorative term "vatnik" is more often used here as a thoughtless supporter of the Russian authorities, who is driven by the ideas of revanchism, and is also naive and believes in propaganda (Gozman, 2022).

One of the hosts of the podcast “Eto bazis” Alexander Zamyatin, who is also a former deputy of the Council of Deputies of the municipality of Zyuzino (Moscow), answers the question, which sounds like - “What is the main mistake of the Russian opposition?” takes out as the main point precisely elitism, also designating it as anti-democratism. Anti-democratism, according to Zamyatin, has always had an internal premise that Russia consists of “uneducated, incapable (for political action) masses of people”.

On the other hand, according to the idea of anti-democratism, there is a small number of “decent and competent” who should come to power. Zamyatin cites this as the reason for the failed strategies of various movements within the opposition.

Zamyatin also notes the inability of the opposition to dialogue with a wide audience, thus indicating the lack of skills in campaigning and educational activities among the opposition leaders. The consequence of the lack of appeal to a wide audience was that this audience was “persuaded to its side” by the Russian authorities.

Zamyatin notes that a certain correction on the mistakes was subsequently carried out - particularly, Alexei Navalny's movement was able to reverse the trend and attract a wide audience to his side (Eto Bazis, 2023).

We can say that one of the primary narratives of the opposition was a lack of understanding of what country they live in and who their fellow citizens are. This, of course, was facilitated by the location of the center of political power in Russia - the largest such centers are the capital Moscow and St. Petersburg. With access to a high standard of living and a good education, residents of the most developed cities had a false idea of living conditions in the periphery. Being the most wealthy and enlightened, they stand out sharply against the background of the rest of Russia and its population, thereby creating the impression of “backwardness”. These ideas are findable in wide culture, including jokes and stereotypes about the ones, who live outside of Moscow, which could be precisely grasped by the pejorative namings such as already mentioned “vatnik” or more precise in this case “zamkadish”.

It must also be remembered that the information distortion factor is mixed in, since most of the respondents in sociological studies, interviewees for various magazines, etc. are residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg, just like the majority of scientists and researchers conducting research and interviews.

This refers us to the protests of 2011-2012, which were partly led not so much by professional politicians as by public figures and writers.

As Kalinin notes, the inadequacy of such a view, firstly, gave the authorities the opportunity to delegitimize the protest movement, and, secondly, the cultural demarcation between the conditional “elite” and the rest of the population (Kalinin 2017:270).

Evidence in favor of a certain distance about the liberal elites can also be found in the study of Karine Clément. One of the informants of the sociological question directly comments on his attitude towards the liberal part of the population, saying that they are “spoiled” and “far from the people” (Clément, 2021: 219).

2.3 Decolonization

The topic of decolonization of Russia began to be actively discussed during the war, however, the very idea of decolonization appeared much earlier. In case of talking about the first understanding of decolonization, I would like to refer to Alexander Etkind book, particularly, “Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience”. In the book, Etkind describes the process of colonization of various ethnic groups living places by the Russian state, the formation of the language of self-colonization among Russian historians, and the attempts of literature to describe this colonization and self-colonization experience. The latter is one of the most important ideas of Alexander Etkind, according to which Russians are a self-colonized nation or, in other words, Russians were historically colonized by other Russians (Etkind, 2011).

The notion of decolonization seems to me to be divided into two main narratives. Firstly, this is the idea of the disintegration of Russia into different states. Secondly, it is also the idea that the regions of Russia should receive more autonomy and have significance against the background of the rest of Russia. The second idea suggests that in Russia, both official and oppositional discourse, relations between the metropolis and the colony have formed between Moscow and the rest of Russia. The second understanding of decolonization, however, is not popular among the opposition during the war in Ukraine.

At the moment, the main organization that most actively represents the idea of decolonizing as collapse of Russia into independent parts and leads in this discussion field is the Free Nation of Post-Russia Forum (hereinafter FNPF) The forum's goals, according to information on its official web page, are “the reconstruction and structural transformation of Russia, the economic and political

development of historical-cultural regions and autonomies, the full implementation of civil rights and freedoms, and peoples' social well-being" (Free Nations Of PostRussia Forum) The forum website also presents a map consisting of 34 states, where different historical and cultural areas are presented - Chuvashia, Ingushetia, Ural Republic, and others. However, the ideas of the post-Russia form also face criticism. The partisan media movement "Media Resistance Group" (hereinafter MRG) calls the Forum of Free Peoples of Post-Russia "a vivid example of the "fetishization" of new borders, without paying attention to what will happen there on these borders or inside them." MRG also indicates that the logic of "fair" decolonization is currently limited to only one feature — cultural and ethnic and does not take into account other features — gender, class, and physicality.

The authors also point out that the desire to revive the once former and great states threatens the rise of revanchism and nationalism. In the decolonization project proposed by the Forum, the MRG authors also see a desire to join the "world of first world colonies" and "the values of the Global North". In exchange for this, the authors of the article propose to prioritize "practices, living" over "rigidly fixed and unchanging identity".

Decolonization for them means not only a change in geographical boundaries and the liberation of ethnic and cultural minorities but also a change in certain patterns of thinking and interaction with others (MRG, 2022).

Blogger Mikhail Pozharsky, the author of Telegram and YouTube channels dedicated one of his videos to the issue of decolonization. Talking in the first part of the video about Edward Said and the experience of the Belgian colonization, in the last part of the video he criticizes both the liberal opposition in general and the specific action of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (hereinafter FAR) movement. Pozharsky claims that "social racism" is strong in Russia on the part of the intelligentsia class, which for the past three decades has been talking about "genetic slavery" and that "the people are not the same".

Pozharsky claims that the same people who left Russia continue to have the same conversations, but now also accuse the Russians of being "genetic colonizers".

Further, Pozharsky criticizes one of the actions of the FAR, in which the movement decided to create memes against mobilization, which were designed in accordance with how the authors of the pictures imagine memes popular among potential mobilized into the army.

Pozharsky criticizes the movement's approach, noting the fact that they "constructed for themselves the image of stupid" residents of Russia, "with whom should communicate in their language". Thus, Pozharsky notes that the discourse of decolonization has become a certain continuation of Russian

elitism. Referring to Alexander Etkind, Mikhail Pozharsky argues that in the historical perspective of Russia “some Russians colonized other Russians” and this tradition is also reflected among the modern liberal opposition (Pozarsky, 2022).

Analyzing the discourse of decolonization in general, we can say that, firstly, this issue was not given enough attention by the opposition before the start of the war, even though the supporters of the idea of decolonization are an opposition movement.

It is certainly obvious here, of course, that the representatives of Russian political parties implied a change of power without dividing Russia into small states formed according to any principles. The issue of preserving the Russian Federation in its current political and geographical form after Putin's departure and democratization, if not meant as obvious in itself, then at least was not clearly expressed on the agenda of the biggest opposition movements, for example, ACF.

Understanding decolonization as the collapse of Russia faces misunderstanding and criticism. In particular, the position of the former regions of Russia after the collapse, as well as who is the main beneficiary of this collapse, remains an open question (Golosov, 2023).

We also cannot say that before the start of the war, the protest movement considered the national characteristics, traditions and autonomy of the subjects of Russia as a fundamental point of its program. The situation of national minorities whose regional peculiarities were bypassed. For example, anti-corruption rhetoric was more common and widely practiced (Gelman, 2017: 180).

2.4 Ukraine acts as a line of demarcation between the opposition

The full-scale war in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea that preceded it, the military actions by the puppet governments Donetsk and Lugansk Peoples Republics against Ukraine during the 2014-2022 are, without much exaggeration, the main topic of the entire Russian opposition. However, within the framework of this thesis, it is necessary to narrow the general topic to specific nodal point.

In particular, the question of Crimea's belonging is formulated in the form of a short „Whose Crimea?” question, has become a certain way to determine the position of the interlocutor on the political spectrum.

In this regard, it is appropriate to cite as an example the 2014 statement of Alexei Navalny „Crimea is not a sandwich”, which subsequently became a catchphrase. According to the most common interpretation, this statement by Navalny meant a difficult political situation in connection with the

ownership of Crimea, since the peninsula cannot be easily returned to Ukraine after its occupation - "is a sandwich, or something to pass it on?" (Akselrod, 2021).

Garry Kasparov directly writes that even after the start of the war, the issue of the territorial belonging of Crimea is decisive - „the majority of the so-called Russian opposition cannot pronounce the words Crimea is Ukraine”. Continuing this theme, Kasparov writes that such behavior discredits the opposition and also accuses the latter of not stopping the government since the occupation of Crimea. We can say that Ukraine has become one of the moments that divided the Russian opposition. This, first of all, affected the cohesion, and, consequently, the mass character of the Russian protest. Supporters of one leader did not attend a protest organized by another politician, as they might disagree with his opinion on Ukraine.

The creation of conditional coalitions between the movements themselves was also often impossible for this reason.

Being at the center of discussion for eight years (since 2014), the topic of Ukraine has not received any unambiguous assessment from the majority of opposition politicians. Now, in the context of a military conflict, past positions on Ukraine have become the cause of mutual accusations and proceedings, which also split the anti-Putin movement into different parts.

2.5 Antagonism of those who left and those who remained

Even though the main outflow of Russian opposition leaders occurred precisely after the start of the war in Ukraine. However, many left Russia in 2011-2014, for example, Ilya Ponomarev, Garry Kasparov, and others.

However, for those in Russia, it was not only important to understand that a politician understands and knows the situation in the country, but it was also important to realize that he was with them within the same state.

Ilya Yashin, in his interview with Yury Dud, points out that, from his point of view, the authorities in Russia tried to force him to leave the country in various ways before putting him in jail.

According to Yashin, these attempts were carried out by the regime due to the specific nature of opposition leaders, because they being in prison could easily be "problematic political prisoners." Yashin refers to a case of Navalny, who is trying to change the situation inside the jail for the prisoners

and always writes a complain letters to different officials. From the words of Yashin, it may follow that the Russian authorities are interested in the emigration of opposition-minded citizens, as well as opposition leaders. Finding themselves outside the borders of Russia, cut off from civil society, they can no longer conduct political activities at the same level as before (Dud, 2022).

Later, Ilya Yashin was sentenced to 8.5 years in prison in the case of spreading “military fakes” (Meduza, 2022).

Maxim Katz, commenting on Yashin's decision to stay in Russia, says that although this is a „respectable decision”, he has a „different approach” as a strategy, according to which one must „preserve oneself and not suffer” In the case of this strategy, the politician's task becomes to save his life and health, while simultaneously trying to expand his audience and convey information to people, so that later on returning to Russia after the war, it opens up a possibility to create a party and take part in the elections (Kanevskaya, 2022).

The oppositionists who left decided to continue their political activities abroad, while those who remained in Russia either ceased to be activists or switched to safer strategies. The same applies to those who remain in Russia.

Both sides were forced to prove the correctness of their decision, which necessarily leads to a confrontation between the parties.

Ivan Kurila finds that both sides can be useful in different ways - the freedom of those who have left allows them to speak out in the media field (it should also be noted that large opposition media are based in Europe, for example, Meduza). The rest maintain connections within the country, and also know the mood within Russian society (Kurila, 2022).

The skepticism towards the opposition that has emigrated is also due to the suspicion that emigrants are forced to improve their situation, as well as the doubt that any changes are possible only within Russia itself (Davydov, 2022).

2.6 Underestimation of the regime

Unscrupulousness and the growing trend towards authoritarianism, which leaves no other way out than prison, emigration or other withdrawal from the political field (Morozov, 2013) were noted long before the current situation in Russia but were not taken seriously enough by the opposition. The underestimation of power is understood, first of all, as a lack of understanding of the nature and goals of the regime, as well as its repressive capabilities. Leonid Gozman also refers to this component,

saying that the opposition could not accurately assess what methods of repression the authorities can use, and also how far it can go in these methods, for example, increasing prison terms, fabricating charges, poisoning, etc (Gozman, 2022).

Vladimir Gelman points out not only not an underestimation of power in Russia but also its misunderstanding. Based on the example of the used turnover “social contract”, Gelman writes that this concept does not apply to the political situation in Russia. For the existence of a contract, organized agents are required, acting as single actors capable of fulfilling it, and, secondly, guarantees the fulfillment of the contract. Vladimir Gelman observes neither one nor the other in today's Russia. The use of classical concepts of political theory, like Hobbesian Leviathan, is meaningless, and the most appropriate examples for study are dystopian works of art, like W. Golding's "Lord of the Flies". This statement testifies to the existence of discrepancies about the nature of the regime that exists in Russia. Attempts to fit Russian autocracy into some familiar concepts from political theory are not relevant in the case of Russian power (Gelman, 2023).

An eloquent indication of this is also the change of critical pejoratives to the ruling power. The leitmotif of the 2010s about United Russia as a party of “crooks and thieves” was replaced by the expression “bloody regime” (Amzin, 2023).

2.7 Lack of trust

The topic of lack of trust is one of the most frequent in the discourse of the opposition. Two of the largest discussions fit into the precisely outlined chronological framework of this work. The first of them concerns the figure of an employee of the FBK organization Navalny - Leonid Volkov and the editor-in-chief of the Ekho Moskvyy radio station Alexei Venediktov. The conflict unfolded around the letter of Leonid Volkov, where he asks to lift the sanctions of the European Union from the co-owner of Alfa-Bank, Mikhail Fridman. The consequence of this was the statement of Leonid Volkov about his desire to take a break as chairman of the ACF International Fund (Belstat, 2023).

In the center of the second case is a letter from the prison of the politician Alexei Navalny in the direction of the oligarch, public and political figure Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Navalny condemned Khodorkovsky for collaborating with a PR man, Rostislav Mirzagulov, who "prepared an ideological base" for the persecution of Lilia Chanysheva, a former employee of Navalny's headquarters in Ufa (Navalny, 2023).

Leaving the details of both conflicts aside, authors propose to focus on the theme that unites them - the lack of trust between the representatives of the opposition. In Russia, there have previously been some attempts to unite the opposition based on an agreement on some specific issue, in particular, the demand for fair elections. One of the most famous examples of the unification of the opposition is the movement “For Fair Elections”, which united different groups - supporters of Navalny, “Left front”, Russian Unified Labor Front, “Solidarnost” and others (Lasnier, 2018: 362).

Clashes occur not only between political forces and associations. News portals can also be involved in conflicts with opposition politicians. This is clearly seen in the example of the conflict between Ilya Azar and Garry Kasparov.

Garry Kasparov, during an interview with the famous Russian journalist Yuri Dud, indicated that the publication deliberately ignored the activities of the Free Russia Forum controlled by Kasparov, and by making a report about it for the first time, according to Kasparov, deliberately sought to discredit it (Dud, 2023).

The lack of trust among opposition representatives is an important marker that characterizes the movement, both then and now. The lack of trust is, above all, one of the main reasons for the impossibility of uniting the opposition. Mutual accusations, the idea that one of the oppositioners could potentially cooperate with the authorities - all this and other reasons, in total, weakened the protest movement.

2.8 Inability to unite

The impossibility or possibility of uniting the opposition is one of the longest discussions within the protest movement.

In the recent history of Russia, there have also been exceptional cases of various opposition forces uniting, such as in 2011, when nationalists, environmentalists, LGBT representatives, and others appeared at the same rally (Green, 2014: 212).

But, later, the differences between the parties of the opposition turned out to be more significant than unification.

Alexander Zamyatin points out that there are two logics for uniting the opposition: moral and political. The first type of argument is based on the designation of general goals of a moral nature, in particular, the agreement that there is a common source of problems. Having rallied in the face of this problem,

all other differences should fade into the background. The incorrectness of this approach, from the point of view of Zamyatin, lies in the fact that agreement in moral assessments does not imply a consensus on the causes and ways of dealing with the problem. Political unification implies the creation of a liberal bloc, which is necessary to unite society and create diplomatic relations with the countries of the West (Zamyatin, 2023)

A certain desire for disengagement is indicated not only by the lack of agreement on several political issues but also by the lack of a certain consensus regarding the symbolism of the movement. A good example of this is the white-blue-white flag that appeared after the start of the war in Ukraine. One of the Azzeze Twitter users as well as a Russian designer from Berlin, Kai Kantonina, pointed out the need to replace the existing flag of Russia, removing red from the colors of the tricolor, which looked to him like a “blood red stripe”. The user explained this decision by the fact that the official tricolor was also, individually, tarnished by the current war in Ukraine (Sivcova, 2022).

Opinions regarding the use of the symbol are divided.

Some opposition leaders, such as Ilya Ponomarev, use the white-blue-white flag as a representative symbol. Others, like Mikhail Svetov, see the symbol as a means of discrediting and marginalizing the anti-war movement (Svetov, 2022).

The fragmentation of the movement is eloquently evidenced by the fact that after the destruction of some large opposition organizations, primarily Navalny’s headquarters, the most effective coordinators of the protest in military Russia were the movements “Vesna” and “Feminist Anti-War Resistance”, which previously seemed pushed to the periphery and deprived special attention of the opposition media.

The opposition movement in Russia has always been broken by many conflicting, competing groups that reproduced various discursive practices.

Competition and adherence to principles on a number of issues divided the opposition, preventing it from gaining a critical mass to oppose the Kremlin and, potentially, gain the attention of a larger mass. The division of the opposition also affected civil society. Opposition-minded citizens followed different leaders, resulting in potential disputes about what the potential political situation in future Russia should look like, whether democratic socialism or the libertarian system of anarcho-capitalism from the Russian Libertarian Party led by Mikhail Svetov, the existing government suppressed the protest.

Conclusion

This thesis is aimed at the Russian opposition discourse about its failed strategies during the war in Ukraine. Most of those who disagree with the regime were forced to leave Russia before and after the start of the war. This greatly narrowed the possibilities of protest and put the opposition in a situation where the only field of action was discussion, and hence reflection on the past.

As a main methodological approach, the Laclau and Mouffe discourse analysis theory was used.

To analyze opposition discourse, I gathered different types of information podcasts, posts, articles, and videos.

Later all of the empirical data was divided into different topics, according to data content.

The work focuses on the non-systemic, liberal Russian opposition.

I identified seven main narratives among the opposition outside and inside Russia.

According to the results of the work, we can say that many of the reasons for the failure of the opposition were identified earlier, but the old interpretations have acquired a new, broader meaning.

Based on the data, we can note that there is a tendency among the Russian opposition both in Russia and abroad to rethink the mistakes of past strategies.

We can argue that in some cases there are separate statements on this topic, but often the reflection on past strategies is tied to current events.

We can also say that only part of the opposition admits the wrong approach to their past protest strategies, but it was quite common to point to the elitism and anti-democratic nature of past movements as one of the main mistakes of the Russian opposition.

Based on the collected data, it can also be said that the main line of understanding of decolonization is the vision of decolonization as the disintegration of Russia into small states.

On many issues, no consensus was found, such as, for example, on the issue of attitudes towards Ukraine. Questions such as the one cited in "Whose Crimea?" turned out to be very difficult and ambiguous for the Russian opposition in the past.

It can be said that the Russian opposition is in a situation of mistrust towards each other. This leads to internal conflicts in which both politicians and news outlets are involved.

Different understandings of politics, in particular, the two approaches to unification cited by Alexander Zamyatin - moral and political, are in direct competition with each other and prevent the opposition from uniting, which was sometimes possible in the past.

The subject of disagreement, and, consequently, the reason for the impossibility of uniting with each other are also various symbols, for example, the white-blue-white flag that appeared with the start of the war.

Another proof of the high fragmentation of the opposition is the change from one influential organization to another. As an example, the paper cites the organization of the youth, the anti-war organization "Vesna" and Alexei Navalny's ACF.

Analyzing the data on a more general scale, one can say that discursive practices within the opposition indicate that the Russian opposition continues to face the same problems and difficulties as before.

Many issues that had previously been in the background became more relevant and discussed with the outbreak of the war.

The following study is relevant because it allows us to understand where the Russian opposition is now and how it understands its past strategies. This process can potentially become the basis for the creation of new strategies in the future or a partial change in old approaches.

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