

Follow up questions for Oleg Kozlovsky from his webinar presentation, “Political Defiance in today’s Russia: Its Successes and Challenges.”

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Question 1

From: John S.

What was the key element that shifted the dynamism from the opposition to the government in February 2012? Was it just that they got their act together in organizing mass demonstrations that they had been unprepared for initially?

Answer 1

From: Oleg Kozlovsky

I would say that yes, the mere fact of the government managing to organize mass rallies changed the perceived balance of power. Even many activists, who knew very well that these demonstrations were mostly fake, were affected. Perhaps, these rallies were more a display of regime's huge resources than of its public support, but it worked. In addition to the crowds, the government managed to "organize," or discipline, journalists who for a brief moment in December 2011 began to defy censorship and self-censorship rules. In January many of them were fired, others got quiet.

The other thing, I would guess, is the loss of momentum for the movement. There were only three big protests in two months; the regime realized that nobody was going to block government buildings, organize strikes or storm the Kremlin. It helped them overcome initial panic.

Question 2

From: Elena P.

Thank you, Oleg for the great presentation! I would also like to ask you about your personal estimations of the outcome of this movement. Do you consider that as the movement goes stronger there is also more hope for the situation to change or do you see it rather improbable to see the changes in the near future?

Answer 2

From: Oleg Kozlovsky

I am an optimist. I think that the fundamental changes in the society are virtually irreversible. As more people realize that the only way to overcome corruption, injustice and lawlessness is through real democracy and that it is attainable through their own active participation, change is inevitable. But it may take quite a long time and some of the factors (like the economic situation) are beyond opposition's control.

Question 3

From: Abraham M.

(A) What do you think about the role of music against dictator?

(B) Why were only two of the three women who sang in front of the church imprisoned? Why is the third woman free or out of prison?

Answer 3

From: Oleg Kozlovsky

(A) It's a very interesting thing. Until recently, only a handful of professional performers would invoke social or political themes in their songs. There was some unwritten deal between them and the regime: "we sing about anything but protest; you let us earn our money." In 2011 it changed with an increasing number of musicians sing and talk about their political views, criticizing Putin and his party, etc. For a moment, it looked like a new trendy thing. Several new and old bands produced very political--and popular--singles and albums that are quite popular. Many performed live at demonstrations and a well-known music critic was a host at one. Many amateur musicians also authored dozens songs and participated in special contests. A vast collection of such songs, both professional and amateurish, was gathered within a project called White Album. I hope to one day write something about it; I've even translated some lyrics into English.

(B) It's a complicated story. Here is what I think happened. All the three women were initially sentenced to prison, which caused outcry, both at home and abroad. The authorities realized that they had gone too far, but admitting it would be even more embarrassing. So they pretended that the problem was with the team of lawyers, which had allegedly overplayed political motives of the case but did a bad job protecting their defendants in the courtroom. The authorities managed to get one of the girls to replace these attorneys (who were indeed very outspoken and organized the international outcry in the first place) with quiet technocrats. As soon as she did it, her sentence was suspended. The two other women, although they have small children, remained in prison because they stuck with the original lawyers and refused to compromise.

Question 4**From: Karen O.**

Can you please comment on the current harassment of NGOs in Russia through a series of checks by authorities, and on the campaign to blame unrest on so-called "foreign agents" ? What tools can the opposition use to fight these tactics ? I also refer to the closing down of USAID, NDI and IRI in Russia.

Answer 4**From: Oleg Kozlovsky**

This campaign wasn't unexpected. In fact, a year ago I warned that the regime would launch a counteroffensive in three domains: public protests, the Internet, and NGOs. I wish I was wrong then. The campaign against civil organizations is unprecedented: hundreds NGOs, including all major ones, are visited by prosecutors, their documents checked and re-checked, their channels of funding cut. USAID office in Moscow was shut down at the request of the authorities, soon thereafter NDI and IRI were forced to evacuate their staff from Russia. Receiving 1 dollar from a US entity (even a private citizen) may result now in suspension and/or closure of an organization. Domestic donors are even more afraid to fund anything disliked by the government.

But at the same time, the vast majority of NGOs want to continue their work. I haven't yet heard of any local organization that said that they are closing down or changing their mission because of this pressure. They will have to find ways to engage better with local donors, to live on tighter budgets, to circumvent these new laws, when necessary. If this campaign continues, it may push many activists into underground, which will make their lives harder. Ironically, it will also make harder government's work because it will lose control over what these NGOs are doing. You can check, monitor or shut down a legally registered NGO, but it's much harder with an informal group or a secret club.

Question 5**From: Metta S.**

Can you say how strongly the US government is supporting the pro-democracy movement? What more would you like the US to do?

Answer 5**From: Oleg Kozlovsky**

There is visible ambivalence on the US government part regarding the Russia democratic movement. On one hand, they voice concerns over the increasingly repressive policies of Vladimir Putin and promise to support the civil society. On the other hand, they try to pretend that there is still an opportunity to cooperate with the Kremlin. Their undecisive position is seen by Putin as a weakness and he keeps pushing and pushing. When he expelled USAID, for instance, Washington pretended like nothing happened, and so three months later Putin banned all US funding for civic

NGOs altogether. One important test of US administration's willingness to do something about Russia's human rights record will be when they publish the Magnitsky list later this month. This is a list, created according to a new law, of people involved in grave human rights abuses in Russia. We will see how many and what kind of people they will put there. If the list is inadequate, we will try to convince congressmen to amend the law and make it more specific. This is where American public can really help; the voters and the media are our only real allies here against Realpolitik.

Question 6

From: Juan F.

It is not actually a question. I have enjoyed it very much and will continue thinking how to apply these insights to the situation of the opposition in Cuba, adapting them to a society much similar to the Soviet era.

Answer 6

From: Oleg Kozlovsky

I hope it will be applicable at least to some extent. Putin's Russia is certainly not the Soviet Union; it has some kind of a (semi-)market economy and more freedom, especially for living one's own private life. But many things, in particular the mentality, are very persistent.

Question 7

From: Mark B.

Do you think that rather than multiple parties in Russia trying to garner votes, a two party system would reduce the choices and thereby offer a better opportunity for change in ruling political party?

Answer 7

From: Oleg Kozlovsky

I think this question is highly theoretical, for a number of reasons. First, in real democracy, a party system is not designed by anyone to be "two-party" or "multi-party." It grows out of local conditions and changes and evolves over time. So, whatever I think about it isn't very relevant. Second, as we know, one of the main factors that influences how this party system evolves. In the US, the two-party system has appeared, to a large extent, as a result of using the first-past-the-post system whereas in most continental European countries proportional representation has led to establishment of multiparty systems. Russia has just switched from proportional representation back to a mixed system. In theory, it may result in formation of two "big" parties and any number of "small" ones. But here comes the third, empirical, consideration: in the current political system, none of the above works because all the real power belongs to the President and he makes sure that the opposition will not be allowed to unseat him. The executive branch effectively controls "systemic opposition" parties and prevents "non-systemic"

groups from winning anything. Only once this system is replaced with something more democratic, will the normal development of the party system begin. But conceptually, I think that a multi-party system is better at representing the different opinions within a society and is more democratic.

Question 8

From: Alexandra V.

Mr. Kozlovsky, you presented some attempts to go beyond Moscow with the Movement, and the way such attempts went into "hibernation" or even fell apart. How would you explain the fact that those endeavors to set up local "nuclei" of the Movement have not been successful, at least so far?

Answer 8

From: Oleg Kozlovsky

Alexandra, I think the problem was that these attempts were brief "sorties" for very finite and tactical purposes: to organize a march, to distribute leaflets, etc. Locals often responded to this and participated in these efforts, but they didn't feel any commitment to or ownership of these projects. As soon as the Muscovites left the town, local citizens were left in basically the same situation as they had had before. They were still waiting for someone to come again and solve their problems. What I think may be more effective is long-term capacity building, fostering local leaders, developing local resources. In other words, instead of giving them the fish (a protest), it is better to teach them how to fish (how to organize a protest on their own). But it's not so fun and exciting, of course.

Question 9

From: Babatunde O.

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Answer 8

From: Oleg Kozlovsky

Nobody can know it for sure, but much of it depends on how these movements act. The better organized they are, the better they maintain discipline and prevent violence, the

likelier is their success. In addition to Egypt or Syria we can refer to countries like Czechoslovakia or Poland that have also experienced similar dramatic breakthroughs, but managed to consolidate their democracies and are now better off than they had been. A lot depends, of course, on the regime: how monolithic or fragmented it is, how ready it is to shoot at crowds, how much it depends on the international community, etc. Removal of autocrats almost always comes with temporary political and economic instability, but it also gives an opportunity to make the country better, more democratic and more just. And there is just no other way: sooner or later all dictatorships fall, the question is what do we want replace them with?