

The West Is the Opposition's Albatross

By [Michael Marder](#)

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It would be halfhearted to blame the authorities alone for the impasse in Russian politics, which after the March 4 election looks, more than ever like a repeat of Leonid Brezhnev's era of stagnation. The problem with the opposition is that it has bought into a false dichotomy, a strained choice between nationalistic and pro-Western visions for the country's future. The West remains an ever-present reference point in Russia's political imagery, provoking strong reactions either for or against its influence, no matter how exaggerated or symbolic.

The identification of the opposition with the West is more than convenient for Kremlin ideologues. Leaders such as Mikhail Prokhorov or Boris Nemtsov, who strictly adhere to neoliberal socio-economic programs, are bound to appear at odds with the interests of the Russian people. The memory of the privatization fiasco of the 1990s is still too fresh for Western-style neoliberals to build a broad support base, even amid widespread allegations of election fraud.

A more crucial factor here is that the opposition has inherited the downside of the Western ideology they espouse, including market deregulation, monstrous income inequalities

and vanishing social security nets.

It is not that Putin's Russia is free of such phenomena. Rather, the argument is that liberal democracy no longer works. After the implementation of austerity measures in Europe and global protests against corporate capitalism, few are under the illusion that neoliberal ideology is likely to deliver on its promises. To jump onto its bandwagon is much the same as boarding a sinking ship, hardly a desirable alternative to the current status quo.

Putin's "political technologists" know full well how to capitalize on the shaky standing of the opposition. This was seen in the constant insinuations that Western powers funded mass protests against electoral fraud, or in Putin's victory speech, suggesting that his election prevented an externally orchestrated breakdown of the country. In these instances, the West clearly figures as a foreign threat in the official political discourse, while representatives of the opposition turn into mercenaries of this amorphous enemy.

Perhaps more important, though, Russia has become adept at painting its own actions in a favorable light against the backdrop of liberal democracy's worst excesses. The mass arrests and the police treatment of protesters after the March 5th rallies, for instance, were presented as more humane than the conduct of police in the United States when they cracked down on Occupy Wall Street protesters.

The deadlock in Russian politics should not be disheartening, but should open the window of an opportunity for thinking about alternative, homegrown political arrangements. If Russia must look elsewhere, as it has been tempted to do for centuries, its collective glance should travel further West — more specifically, southwest to countries like Brazil, which has been able to combine rapid economic growth with a fight against economic inequalities.

But in and of itself, the broadening of geopolitical imagination is not sufficient. It must be supplemented with sincere efforts to avoid giving prefabricated answers to the traditional Russian question, "What is to be done?"

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