
How To Survive In Russian Opposition Politics

A CONVERSATION WITH LEONID VOLKOV

Chief of Staff for Alexei Navalny

FLETCHER FORUM: *As a leading figure in the Russian opposition, you have unique experience in opposition politics. Yet, you began your career in software and information technology. How did you gravitate toward politics, and what skills and qualities are most important to such work? How have you made use of information technology in your political efforts?*

LEONID VOLKOV: This was quite a natural move. I used to be the top-level manager for Russia's fourth-largest software company, and I decided I had to care more about my city. I didn't like the people who represented me on the City Council, so I got myself elected to City Council exactly ten years ago, in the spring of 2009. And this was how it all started. I found myself as the only Independent on the City Council of Russia's fourth largest city, my home city of Yekaterinburg. I quickly realized what was going wrong with local politics. My IT background, my IT skills—these are the only ways the opposition can communicate with the voters. Putin's Kremlin is in control of all the other possible media—TV, radio, newspapers—so we can't get any kind of access to the television. The only thing we can do is reach out through social media, YouTube, mailing lists, all approaches that require a lot of information technology.

We have to be more sophisticated and outsmart the Russian government because we have few resources. We have to think of more sophisticated

LEONID VOLKOV, *born 1980 in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), holds an M.Sc. in Mathematics and PhD in Computer Science from the Ural State University. He served as an independent member of the Yekaterinburg City Council from 2009 to 2013, as Campaign Manager and Chief of Staff for Alexei Navalny, the leader of Russian opposition during his campaign for Mayor of Moscow in 2013 and for the President of Russia from 2016 and 2018. In 2016, he founded the Internet Protection Society, a non-profit organization that promotes Internet freedom in Russia using both political and technological tools.*

solutions, and IT helps a lot. What was my typical day when I was a top manager of an IT company? Well, I did five to ten conference calls, five to ten job interviews, a couple of larger meetings, fifty emails, or something like this. Now, as Chief of Staff for Alexei Navalny and political manager for political operations for Russian opposition, I'm doing five to ten conference calls, five to ten job interviews, a couple of larger meetings, couple of interviews with media, like fifty emails. It's pretty much all the same. It's a management role. It's all about dealing with people, managing people, hiring and firing them, motivating them, talking to them, explaining to them. That's what I did for ten of twelve years of my career in IT. I was a software engineer in the very beginning, but I was promoted quite fast to management-level positions. So that's what I continue doing now as a political manager.

FORUM: *In The Cloud Democracy, you and co-author Fyodor Krasheninnikov discuss the role of modern technology in democracy. What opportunities does modern technology offer for democratic processes, both in Russia and around the world? On the other hand, how can technology be manipulated to act as a barrier to democratic processes?*

VOLKOV: Technology is just technology. It shouldn't be overestimated, right? This world has seen many new technologies and all of them are somehow integrated and accommodated into all kinds of processes, including political processes. It isn't true that technology completely changes the way politics is done, but of course it significantly influences how it's done. For us, technology makes the existence of our political structure possible. It makes it possible to reach people who are not using media as an intermediary because they don't have access. Now, we have a way to overcome that. Or for instance, we can round up crowdfunding, which was impossible for any political organization in the previous century. We can use different technological tools to organize and to motivate our volunteers—sometimes we do gamification and other things.

I used to be a strong believer in the role of digital democracy, like electronic elections. But now, after getting some practical experience, after rethinking a lot of the things we wrote about in *The Cloud Democracy*, I'm not sure this will happen in the near future because of the issues of trust that are essential. There are many technical challenges we have to overcome. For instance, I am not a fan of all this blockchain hype. I don't really think that blockchain will dramatically change democracy. It will have its use, and at the end of the day, when all the dust settles, blockchain

will be used for public registries and some other applications. The scalable nature of it will still be quite limited. It's not like it will be a complete game-changer. But of course, you have to follow technological developments and always think how and where they could be applied to ease communication, to make politics better, to make the world a better place. I'm happy that I'm a part of this process because we have to be fast with innovation. For us, it's an issue of survival.

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FORUM: *Internet censorship is increasing around the world—from Russia to Asia and the Middle East. Do you view this phenomenon as emerging in isolated contexts, or is this a global trend? Should efforts to counter censorship be local or global in scope?*

VOLKOV: Internet censorship is very important. Internet censorship and Internet surveillance is now a major battlefield. If you consider the role of democracy in this, it's now a very important issue for every country—the majority of countries in the world, many Asian, African, Latin American, and some European countries. If you consider Hungary, it's still a very important part of the agenda because the Internet enables politicians, activists, and civil leaders to communicate very directly with their supporters. In non-free regimes, this is considered a threat, an increasing threat. They are taking more and more measures for censorship and surveillance to track their opponents, to cut them off from communication, and this is a very worrisome and increasing trend. It is very important that there is a resistance from civil society both in these countries and outside them with both political and technical tools.

We have Internet protections I've tried to contribute to in Russia, and we also exchange our processes and are eager to share our experiences with civil society activists who are facing similar problems in their countries. Historically, the Russian Internet is very developed, very well-connected. Russia has the second highest number of Internet service providers in the world, after the United States, for instance—much more than China or Nigeria, which speaks to Russian manipulation, but the engine of infrastructure is much better developed in Russia. Since the Russian government took measures to restrict Internet freedom, they started doing some experiments back in 2007, and they launched a full-scale Internet censorship program in 2011. Now, we see how many countries, like Congo,

Zimbabwe, Cameroon, in many parts of the world, follow the Russian model of Internet censorship. They consider the Russian government a role model, and some consider the Chinese government a role model.

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But there are also a lot of things they could learn from our opposition and civil rights movement, from our digital rights advocates, on how to resist, because we already have the technical tools developed and have positive examples of resistance. For instance, the Russian government was not able to block Telegram, but they tried to because the resistance was very high on both a technical and political level. So there is a story to be told. Also, it's funny, developed, democratic countries have something to learn from us because we have a longer, darker history of fighting against Internet censorship. This helped us develop a lot of immunity. For instance, every digital rights activist, every opposition politician, every independent activist in Russia has faced so many phishing attacks that they would never consider opening a link. Any newcomer to anti-corruption legislation, any employee with three months of experience would never do what John Podesta did, clicking on the phishing link that led to the DNC hack in the United States and had enormous consequences. Because we have lived within this toxic environment for almost ten years now, everyone has a basic level of literacy, which helps to withstand all these challenges. This is surprisingly not the fact in all of Europe or the United States. There are some things we have to share. There has to be real worldwide cooperation in this digital resistance to all kinds of Internet censorship, which also has to include and involve major companies—Google, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, and others. These companies don't have to cave to illegitimate requests by the Russian or Chinese governments to take down certain kinds of information, to censor some types of information. They can instead be part of the resistance. Otherwise, they put their customers in a bind.

FORUM: *You are well known for your work as Alexei Navalny's Campaign Manager and Chief of Staff for the 2013 mayoral election in Moscow. Although Navalny did not win that election, it was a major moment for Russia's opposition. What were the most significant lessons you learned from that experience? What were the main takeaways for the Russian opposition?*

VOLKOV: Reflecting from today, it was really a very important moment, and it was a life-changing experience, both for us and the Kremlin. The Kremlin realized that they will never again consider any opposition leaders as valid because of the risk. What we all learned is that approval ratings mean nothing; the campaign is what matters. We started with 3 percent against 75 percent, and that's why Alexei was permitted to run, because the Kremlin didn't consider it a risk. Then things changed dramatically over the course of a few weeks, because people realized there finally was an alternative. That's the lesson that the Kremlin learned, that it should never allow a real alternative to emerge. Otherwise, people start to consolidate around the opposition. Actually, this was probably the last moment when the fate of Russia could have changed using electoral mechanisms. We don't see any chance for this anymore. There will be change in Russia, but it, of course, will not be electoral.

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FORUM: *Your party and outside election observers have long questioned the fairness of Russian elections. What are the most effective practices for political activists and opposition parties seeking reform in countries with serious corruption or tilted electoral systems?*

VOLKOV: Well, of course, I can't make any general advice. Every country is different. It is like in the beginning of *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." To some extent, every successful country is lucky in a similar way, but every authoritarian country is unfortunately unhappy in a very different way. For instance, last week, I went to Accra, Ghana, to conduct a workshop for West African civil society activists, exchange experiences, and share experiences in how to overcome Internet censorship and how to build political organizations. There were activists from ten West African countries. They were all very different, of course, and they all faced very different challenges. While in some countries the opposition is allowed to participate in elections, the issues focus on how to redistribute election observers to make it more transparent and to make sure there is no ballot stuffing. In other countries, the problem is that the police would just arrest everyone and seize all their computers and other electronic devices, leading to problems like needing to encrypt hard drives just to function normally. And no one is talking about elections in those places.

The spectrum is quite wide, quite diverse, and I am not sure that there is general advice that could be applicable in every case. But of course, almost every authoritarian regime still is quite rational, otherwise they wouldn't be able to stay in power. They are always trying to calculate and contrast costs and benefits. The concept of political pressure works almost always. If you want to achieve something the regime doesn't like, you put the political pressure on something to affect their cost-benefit ratio. There is something they don't desire to do, and you show them that not doing it is even less desirable. Usually this makes them do it. And this works even in Russia. If we want the government to do something, usually we are able to achieve it if we build a campaign that is long enough and strong enough.

FORUM: *Alexei Navalny has drawn international attention for his thwarted efforts to run against President Vladimir Putin in the 2018 presidential election. How has this experience influenced the Russian opposition's development? How do you see the opposition developing into the future?*

VOLKOV: The main asset we were able to retrieve from the 2018 campaign was a regional network. In the main cities, we were able to prove that there was a lot of demand for politics in other regions, and not only in Moscow. The largest rallies we held, in terms of percentage of city population, were not in Moscow or St. Petersburg, but in Smolensk and Murmansk—relatively small cities never noticed on the political map of Russia before. As people in these cities see few options at the moment apart from moving to Moscow, and not everyone wants to move to Moscow, people in these areas show a strong demand for change, for a new approach, for a new wave of politics. And so we were able to keep forty of our regional offices

..... up and running, and they did a great job consolidating local activists and running local campaigns based on issues important to local communities.

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Literally, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, we are present in any Russian city with a population over 500,000. We keep going and we keep showing that people in these regions are not apathetic, that they are very interested in politics, they want to get involved, and they want to participate. The issue is that the country is very centralized and, of course, real change will happen in Moscow, but we have enough people on the ground to support this and to take over in the

regions. Every one of our regional coordinators is a much better fit to be a governor than the incumbent governor of their respective regions. They are very cool people who proved themselves to be great political managers under very tough circumstances. That's our main asset, and we are now developing this asset, through which we are trying to reach out to more and more people in the regions.

FORUM: *You have emphasized that the Russian opposition must be prepared to contest power whenever, and however, President Putin leaves office. What challenges might the opposition face in this effort? What should a post-Putin Russian government seek to achieve in the short term and in the long term?*

VOLKOV: First of all, the problem is that we don't know why the transition will happen, what form it will take, and when it will happen, so we have to be prepared at every moment. Just as the Arab Spring was ignited by a random event, the same could happen easily in Russia. Some random event sparks protests and leads to a turnover of power. And then suddenly we will find ourselves in a position where there is a ruined economy, and every single judge has to be fired because every single judge was part of the system and was making unlawful decisions. For this reason, we might not know where to get enough law enforcement officers and mid-level government officials around the country just to run the country.

Of course, all kinds of political forces that were not really active because there was no free political space will then come into play. We will see a rise in leftists and communists and nationalists, and all kinds of movements will finally fill the political black hole. So

the new government will have a very complicated structure and will have a very complicated coalition facing a lot of internal conflicts. Still, we will have to save the country and the economy and rebuild the institutions as fast as possible to prevent a new dictatorship from happening. The objective will be to rebuild the free press, independent courts, free elections, and political competition as quickly as possible. Otherwise, we will end up having a new Putin in a couple of years. This is going to be a very important challenge.

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FORUM: *Are there any lessons from efforts to rebuild the Russian government after the fall of the Soviet Union that could apply to post-Putin Russia?*

VOLKOV: The most important lesson is that the opposition then was too optimistic, too naïve, and did not explain anything. They did not realize how important it is to explain what you are doing and not to broadcast naïve expectations that could not be met. They undermined their own credibility incredibly quickly, and of course, that has been a very bad story. A good lesson for today is how far we have come from the early days of transition. After the Soviet Union collapsed, we had an enormous country and a huge population that was not ready to do very basic things, with no idea of what money is in reality because Soviet money was not real money. Its value was not set by the market. They were just pieces of paper with pictures—and no one realized that. People did not understand anything about elections. The Soviet Union technically had elections; you had polling places, ballot boxes, ballots—except that every ballot had only one name. People did

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not realize what the institution of elections was about. The elections in the Soviet Union were fake elections, and the money was fake money. But people thought they knew how to deal with this. People did not know what a bank or a stock market was. The rise of large Ponzi schemes in the early 1990s was due to the fact that the people just didn't know anything about entrepreneurship—what a business is or what a profit margin is.

Now the situation is very different. Putin's regime is ugly. It is state capitalism in its ugliest form, but it is still capitalism. People are at least aware of basic concepts. This makes me quite optimistic about future transitions because, economically, it will be not that complicated.

FORUM: *Which past and present opposition movements have you most closely examined and followed? Which movements offer the most important lessons for Russia's opposition? What can the Russian opposition teach other movements?*

VOLKOV: We have not had much time to study this, unfortunately, because with our very limited resources, we have to run very fast to keep pace with the Kremlin. Of course, the Polish Solidarity movement was a very important source of inspiration because it was a grassroots movement that sought to combat social injustice—a labor union- and grassroots-driven movement. Most of the movement did not originate from the intellectual elite,

but from the poor workers. They also initially aimed to establish a dialogue. Their ideal was not just to come to power, but to get rid of the communists and to establish a national dialogue to define how the country is to be run. That was a very important approach, I think. That's one example.

I don't know where there is another relevant example. Russia is quite unique, and our experiences are not easily transferable. Many people ask us to share our experience—which we are always eager to do—in running a public operation based on involvement of volunteers, organizing, crowd-funding, and protecting Internet freedom. We share our experience happily. But we always provide a disclaimer that our situation is probably different from your situation and you cannot just blindly copy what we are doing in your country.

FORUM: *Do you think the tensions between the United States and Russia have played a role in helping Putin retain power, by exploiting these tensions publicly?*

VOLKOV: Of course. He uses this a lot. Unfortunately, he found this string to pull, this post-Cold War trauma. He managed to re-initiate this anti-Americanism that was an important part of the political agenda in the final decades of the Soviet Union. He found enough people who were raised with this anti-Americanism in their blood and managed to make it an important issue once again—not without the help of the United States, of course. Playing the role of the world's policeman is not what you do to make everyone love you. Now, the sanctions, the anti-Russian rhetoric, this witch-hunt story of the Russian meddling in American elections—these all contribute to and help Putin's propaganda. Every time there is a new round of sanctions, they open a lot of champagne bottles in the Kremlin. What do these sanctions mean? The regime can blame everything on the sanctions, they can steal money without any problems because the population will not blame another year of economic decline on them but will blame it on sanctions. So why is life getting worse? Not because we managed to launder another \$50 billion of this country, but because the whole world is against us with more and more sanctions. They want to ruin our economy. What could we do? All we can do is consolidate around our national leader, Vladimir Putin, who is the only man who can protect us from the evil

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Americans who they feel want to conquer them. This becomes a talking point in the propaganda and is exploited masterfully. Most of the steps by the U.S. government only help this propaganda grow.

FORUM: *Where do you see the relationship between Russia and the United States going? How do you think this relationship could develop under a post-Putin Russia?*

VOLKOV: Any post-Putin government, whatever it be, will have the hard job of healing these wounds. It will be a long process. They are now huge. It will take a generation or two to repair relations. *f*