

The recent increase in fines for violating laws on demonstrations and labeling all non-profit organizations that receive foreign financial support as “foreign agents” are designed to serve these goals. However, it is hard to say whether the regime will further successfully use political parties and the parliament to coopt the systemic opposition and successfully isolate the non-systemic opposition.

Likewise, serious challenges stand before the opposition. It will be extremely difficult to maintain the “negative consensus” against the existing regime for a long period, to say nothing of efforts to secure organizational consolidation, particularly since the regime does not shy away from using “divide and conquer” tactics against the opposition. Nevertheless, the protest mobi-

lization experience of 2011–2 will not be wasted for the opposition or for the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of its supporters. The seeds planted last winter in the protest rallies in Moscow and other cities, will ultimately bear fruits, although not necessarily in the near future. In favor of the opposition works the fact that the mood of the more advanced voters over time will transfer to part of the peripheral electorate, expanding the potential base of its supporters. In other words, citizens’ demand for an alternative to the status quo will increase and the key question is: Will the current Russian opposition or other political actors satisfy it in the coming years?

About the Author

Vladimir Gel'man is a professor at the European University in St. Petersburg and at the University of Helsinki.

ANALYSIS

Russian Riot: Senseless and Ruthless or Legal Protest?

By Dmitry Oreshkin, Moscow

Abstract

The Putin regime, which draws its power from control of Russia’s natural resources, is likely to launch a crackdown on society in order to preserve its power. At the same time the protest movement is slowly moving from the capitals into the provinces. The only question is how long it will take for it to gain the strength necessary to make change. Upcoming local elections will provide greater clarity.

From Ally to Enemy?

The Western view on Russia today resembles the incomprehension that prevailed during the first years after World War II. It is almost as if Kennan has sent his Long Telegram, Churchill gave his speech in Fulton, Missouri, and the Iron Curtain has appeared, but no one can believe that yesterday’s ally has become an enemy.

The same thing (although in a lite version) is happening now: only yesterday we were talking about a “reset” in U.S.–Russian relations, pragmatic projects such as North Stream and South Stream, negotiations about canceling visa requirements, and rational actions regarding Russia’s entry to the World Trade Organization. Everything was predictable and was taking place within a reasonable framework. If Russia was not an ally, it was a solid and reliable partner. Does it make sense to change the picture because of the events of the last six–eight months?

The Nature of the Regime

There is a Checkpoint Charlie which sharply divides Western rationalism from Soviet or post-Soviet Putin-style rationalism: it is the question of power. If the problem of who will hold power is resolved and does not raise any concerns, the Putin strategy is reasonably stable, at least for the short-term: trading resources, corruptly purchasing the loyalty of the elites, regularly increasing living standards, and supporting stability. Everything is rational and competent.

But as soon as the question of power appears, which in a resource economy is the basis for the economic well-being of the elites, European rationality disappears like spring snow and rationality of a different type replaces it. It also follows its own kind of pragmatism, but addresses a different problem. It is irrational, from the point of view of a European observer, to preserve control at any price! Doing this means stopping development, freezing social activism, and threatening state institutions. But

such moves are logical in a petro-state, where power is unconditional and the all-encompassing priority.

Such is the inherited trait of the Putin elite from the times of the USSR and the KGB. From outside, it is hard to tell when the goal changed. Externally, almost nothing has changed, but internally, the system works differently.

The problem is that the old Soviet habits have run up against the new post-Soviet society. Moreover, the authorities themselves are not as free in choosing the instruments of exerting pressure. There are many reasons for this, of which the most important are: greater information transparency (the Internet); the arrival of a new generation of Russians who have benefitted from unprecedented freedom; and a higher level of income and quality of life for citizens. Overall, this led to a change in the Soviet collective psychology from a “humble cog in the great state machine” to the psychology of an individual taxpayer, who considers himself a partner and sometimes even an owner of his great country.

Coming Crackdown

Protest in Russia is taking on new content and form. But the authorities continue to see it with the eyes of the 1970s, viewing the protesters as dissidents-derelects. If there are changes, they are merely rhetorical: instead of calling members of the opposition “hirelings of the world bourgeoisie,” they speak about “agents of the State Department.”

The gap between the new socio-cultural requirements and the old political inventory of the Putin elite will only expand. With Marxist dogmatism, the authorities believe that the unmet material needs of the masses will continue to provoke social protest. The fact that the protests started in Moscow, the most advanced and well-supplied region, causes irritation and incomprehension at the top. Doubt about the diagnosis gives rise to a lack of confidence in the adequateness of the measures adopted in response. If a rise in the standard of living leads to opposition, maybe it makes sense to reduce the standard of living in order to strengthen Russia’s statehood?

In fact, that is basically what happened under Lenin and Stalin. That is why the Soviet Union needed such a powerful apparatus of total coercion. From its bosom sprung the key figures of Putin-style management. They, naturally, tried to restore the great (from their point of view) corporate culture, which created the USSR. They do not want to think that under normal conditions of development, when the economy is growing and doing a better job meeting natural human needs, a hypertrophied surveillance, suppression, and coercion apparatus (what Putin calls “manual management”) becomes an unneeded encumbrance.

It is hard to consider yourself unnecessary. The result is a fundamental contradiction: if the modernizing economy does not need the services of their corporation, then tough luck for the modernizing economy! When you see things from this point of view, then the convulsive actions of the regime become understandable and predictable: the Putin corporation does not exist to preserve, develop, and improve Russia, but instead, Russia exists to feed and humor the Putin corporation.

This conflict will deepen in the future. The collective Putin will become ballast for Russian business, Russian taxpayers, and Russian regions. It remains unclear how long it will take for people to understand what is going on and for a real force to appear that is capable of restructuring Russian politics in the interests of normal (in the European sense) development.

Here there is and can be no clarity. The economists are already tired of speaking about Russia’s destructive dependence on oil prices. Theoretically, they understand this at the highest levels and this is what explains Dmitry Medvedev’s abundant rhetoric about modernization. But, so what? The Soviet elite also hit bottom accompanied by speeches about introducing the achievements of the Scientific-Technical Revolution into the practice of socialist construction. The result is well known: the modernizing labor of Mikhail Gorbachev led to the collapse of the state machine, which had been built on an unnatural system of priorities.

The Putin elite learned the negative lesson of the Gorbachev era in that it decided that liberalization would destroy their version of the state. Again that means bad luck for liberalization. From this it is clear what the authorities will do in the coming months and years. The time is coming for a total crackdown, from an uncompromising position on Syria to the defamation of non-governmental organizations as enemy agents.

The Evolution of the Protests

What does this mean for the growing anti-system protests in the capital cities? First, it is necessary to understand that this is only the beginning of the process. The fevered hopes of revolutionaries like Eduard Limonov, who seriously discusses a street battle for the Kremlin and Central Electoral Commission, are clearly not going to be realized. What is happening on the streets of Moscow is principally different from what is happening in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. In Russia, there is another demographic, socio-cultural and economic situation. This is also different to the Orange Revolution that took place in Ukraine in 2004. That more closely resembled the Moscow events of 1991 when the elites were clearly divided on the strategy of further development. The street protests were only an argument in the battle of one elite group

against another. In today's Russia, there is still no split in the elite and therefore the citizens' protest of Muscovites and Petersburgers remains independent, separate, and a force with little influence on the political chess board.

Second, it will take time for the innovative mood to spread from the capital centers to other big cities, and then across the entire territory.

Third, in the process of spreading into the farthest reaches of the country, the protest will seek and take on new qualities, slogans, and leaders. Moscow demonstrated the dissatisfaction of the advanced and relatively well-off layers of the population. The demands of the demonstrations had nothing to do with salaries, pensions, and social provisions. They were focused on flagrant violations of the elections, the rampant corruption, and the inability of the authorities to obey their own laws and basic civil rights. It was a protest of citizens who were ready to take responsibility for their own personal welfare—if the authorities did not infringe on their legal interests and rights.

In the provinces, more simple demands are front and center: there the authorities are perceived as the source of funds for existence and other benefits. Demanding an increase in salaries is both tempting and understandable. But questions about rights sound too indefinite.

The Moscow example is interesting to the provinces because it shows that it is possible to go out onto the streets and nothing will happen to you, or almost nothing. Few are interested in the substantive side of the demonstrations; rural Russia received a different signal: public protest is possible. Within the Soviet mentality, this is a real revolution in thought.

Who Are the Protesters?

The Levada Center, Russia's leading public opinion polling agency, recently published a large study on the nature of the social protest. They painted a contradictory picture, but one that makes sense for a society in transition.

Overall, 62 percent of those polled recognize that the massive searches of protesters' homes are connected to the elites' fears about growing protest activity. Moreover, many agree that the repressions provide evidence of the weakness of the authorities rather than their strength (45% to 38%). The authorities mostly provoke irritation. With the label "Party of Crooks and Swindlers" for United Russia, there is 42% agreement against 40% disagreement. People recognize Putin's connection with the unsympathetic bureaucrats. But when the topic shifts to concrete personalities, 56% are not ready to replace Putin! No matter how bad it gets. Moreover, people do not see an alternative to him.

In the mass consciousness, the protest leaders lose out to Putin, particularly because state propaganda has

successfully discredited them. They are seen as agents of influence for external foes such as the U.S., NATO, and the West in general. The Soviet system of propaganda values has been successfully reincarnated over the last 10–12 years and it remains extremely effective. Moreover, the opposition leaders are associated with the crises of the 1990s.

People have little faith in the effectiveness of the protests and do not intend to participate in them. Only 10 percent say that they will join the rallies. At the same time, we should note the quiet erosion of the Soviet system of "pseudo-collectivism": in the set of fundamental values, things like "interests of the country" (6%) are barely visible, while values connected to family, relatives, and friends are at 69 percent. We are looking at a new "atomization" of the structure of social consciousness, in which the concepts of solidarity are absent. Against this background, it is clear why people have lost interest in the idea of strong government, which guarantees collective security, a collective increase in benefits, and collective labor for the benefit of the overall collective. Most likely therefore the protests are seen as consumerist, as a kind of show, which requires popcorn. 49 percent believe that the protesting intelligentsia are "obliged to protect the people" from the demands of the authorities, but they themselves are too busy with their own affairs to support the protesters. They don't have any time to waste in the squares.

Also working against the protest movement is the stable, since Soviet times, disregard for Moscow among the rest of Russia, which sees the capital as privileged and therefore alien to the majority. Muscovites are seen in the provinces as the representative of a golden class or caste—almost like the word "bourgeois" to the ear of a "true proletarian."

At the same time, in the eyes of public opinion, Putin is quickly transforming from the "president of hope" (who imposes order, restores legality, and establishes justice) to the "despair president," who, of course, does not arouse enthusiasm, but is better than the rest. Who are these others? They are also from Moscow...

In the Provinces

On the road to the provinces, the protests have to be transformed and must find a new language with concrete demands that are understandable to the wider masses. This is a long road with many crossroads. Moscow is generating a "right" protest, but the regions want the "left." Here is one of the contrasts between the old political mass culture and the new one. In previous times, the provinces accepted change in Moscow as something far away and inevitable. Gorbachev replaced the old Nomenklatura? Fine, maybe he will make our lives easier. Yeltsin?

We also agree, the country needs changes. Putin? Excellent, it is long been time for someone to impose order.

Today the situation is different. Moscow is a distant political theater. We live here and are more interested in what is happening in our territory. It does not make sense to expect something positive from Moscow. They have their own life there, where Navalny and Nemtsov for some reason fight with Putin, while we have our own life here. We have our own corruption and lawlessness. If they came here and imprisoned all swindlers and thieves, we'd be grateful. But they are not coming! We still are not thinking about how to fix our own problems... We don't know how and don't have the resources. It would be great if people gathered to demand from the owner of the local factory increased pay or sought better roads from local bureaucrats. But we are not Moscow. It is currently impossible for us.

When will the time come? Not before the rest of Russia recognizes that it consists of small territories, on which there are (or should be) authorities who are responsible to their population. Until now, this is not visible. Instead, we are observing the slow evolution of unitary and authoritarian mass thinking and its replacement with more concrete and pragmatic concepts of reality. This means that the under the foundation of Putin's power vertical, invisible to outsiders, there are murmuring small brooks which are slowly destroying the monolithic supreme power. The process is moving at a wide variety of speeds, depending on the local socio-cultural substrata.

In the municipal elections in Yaroslavl, which was always distinguished by its stable urban tradition of

freethinking, the extra-systemic mayoral candidate Yevgeny Urlashov won. In the elections that took place in the more conservative Astrakhan, with crude violation of the law, victory went to the United Russia candidate Mikhail Stolyarov (60%). His popular opponent from Just Russia Oleg Shein (30%) gathered a large number of witnesses to testify about the falsifications in organizing the elections and counting votes, but they were not enough to convince the local authorities or courts. Shein's subsequent month-long hunger strike, along with his supporters, turned Astrakhan into one of the regional centers of political activity, but they did not win any legal victories.

Mayoral elections in the large cities of Siberia, Krasnoyarsk and Omsk, took place with record low voter turnout, 21 and 17 percent respectively. United Russia representatives won in both cases, but the number of people voting with their legs shows disappointment latently is flowing into the urbanized centers of the country. The protest is still passive, but it is in the early stage of development. Its irreversibility is obvious. How soon things will happen is the only question.

Most likely, "Putin's stability" under such conditions will continue for several years. Against this background, the authorities are doing what they can: they are trying to restore the Soviet system of total fear. The problem is that this only speeds up the process of its delegitimation. In October, when there will be elections for four governors, a series of regional legislatures and city administrations, the articulation of protest at the local level will be more clear.

About the Author

Dmitry Oreshkin is a political analyst and the founder of the Mercator Analytical Group.