

Analysis

Growing Social Protest in Russia

By Tomila Lankina and Alexey Savrasov, Leicester, UK¹

Abstract

The number of social protests in Russia is growing, though the absolute number of participants remains relatively small. Overall, the authorities are suppressing a smaller number of protests now than they were two years ago. Political protests are more numerous than economic ones and protesters are increasingly targeting national leaders, though protests against regional leaders have increased slightly. The overall impact of the protests remains unclear.

Are Russian Citizens Finally Stirring?

In recent months, there has been a rise in social protest activism in Russia. The most prominent instance of Putin-era social mobilization occurred in 2005 against the monetization of benefits reform, that is, when the government announced that it would scrap many benefits hitherto available to vulnerable social categories. The anti-monetization protest wave ultimately subsided following government concessions and remained a largely isolated blip in the context of oil-boom era prosperity. Then followed the 2006-2007 *Marsh nesoglasnykh* (March of Those who Disagree) protests organized by the Other Russia political opposition coalition and limited to specific regions. These protests were hailed as highly significant and as the first Putin-era instance of political mobilization and generated substantial publicity in the Russian blogosphere and the West. However, limited as they were to a handful of regions and explicitly political in nature, the *Marsh* told us little about the Russians' general willingness to defend their democratic rights through protest when it comes to issues that immediately affect their day-to-day existence.

The scope and nature of recent protest activity is therefore unprecedented. It has been triggered by the socio-economic downturn, dramatic rise in unemployment (particularly in mono-industrial towns), government incompetence in dealing with the crisis, and its populist and misguided policies.

The most prominent expression of public discontent was in Primorskiy Kray in 2008 and in the first months of 2009. The trigger to a wave of protest activism there was the national government's decision to raise import tariffs for non-Russian cars. This decision had strong implications for the financial security of large segments of the population in the Far East who depend on trade in Japanese cars. Aside from this widely publicized in-

stance of popular discontent, there have been other instances of mobilization in localities particularly hard hit by the downturn.

While there has been some isolated coverage of these events, so far there has been a dearth of systematic analyses of regional trends in protest activity. Such an analysis is highly pertinent however given the implications of these developments for Russia's political and economic development and territorial cohesion.

The Data

We here present results of a systematic exploration of recent regional protest. The data are compiled from the opposition website associated with Garry Kasparov, namarsh.ru. Data on the website are compiled based on regular dispatches from a network of regional correspondents and from press reports. Because each data entry is accompanied by a web link to press coverage of a given event, the accuracy of each entry could be verified. Although the press secretary of the *Drugaya Rossiya* (Other Russia) coalition that runs the website has assured us of the comprehensive coverage of all regional protests, we do not claim that the data are indeed comprehensive of all regional protest activism. Indeed, some regions may be over-represented because of more active web correspondents, and some regions under-represented because of the absence of correspondents or less active reporting. We do, however, believe that the data provide a reasonably accurate portrait of the *general* temporal and spatial trends in protest activism because they dovetail with public opinion poll results about those willing to take part in protest activism and actually taking to the streets and because they generally agree with analyses of the quality of the democratic process in the regions.

The website contains information on protest activity ranging from isolated, one-person protests, to large-scale mobilization involving organized political groups. Data are routinely updated by correspondents of the

¹ We are grateful to De Montfort University for generous funding and support for this research. Any errors are solely our own.

web-site in the regions. Our analysis covers data from 16 March 2007, when the first protest entry on the site was recorded, until 21 March 2009. In this period, the site recorded 1,783 protest acts, including those that took place despite a ban by the authorities.

The data only include activities that could be construed as genuine protests. That is, events organized by the government United Russia party or pro-government youth movements are excluded from this analysis. The dataset also contains an entry labeled “suppression” which refers to the public authorities’, the police’s, or pro-government groups’ attempts to disrupt or sabotage a protest act.

Following are the key protest categories in the dataset:

- Political – anti-government and anti-regime protests
- Economic – protests against government economic policies, such as those affecting exchange rates, salaries, etc.
- Social – protests by, and specifically furthering the aims of, socially vulnerable groups of people such as pensioners, victims of Chernobyl’, students, disabled people, people on state benefits, etc.
- Legal – protests targeting unpopular legislation, its implementation (labor, criminal, and administrative codes, etc.); protests against laws aimed at limiting political freedoms; protest against illegal acts (forced eviction, construction in inappropriate areas, etc.)
- Ecological – environmental issues, hazardous work conditions, waste dumping, destruction of forest reserves, parks, and protected woodlands.
- Cultural – protests against the destruction of monuments and of historically valuable buildings and sites; against change in city (area) names, etc.

Many protests fall into more than one category and have been coded accordingly. Thus, a protest that includes both economic and political aims would be included in the analysis of both political and economic protest dynamics.

Protest activism has been categorized by its administrative-geographic scope. Thus, protests targeting or explicitly addressed to federal authorities or the national political regime are distinguished from those targeting regional bodies or having regional scope. Protests of a sub-regional nature or targeting municipal authorities are also assigned a separate code, as are those with a more micro focus on yards (*dvor*), premises, groups of households, or buildings. Protests are also categorized by social groups that are the main organizers or participants in a protest, such as vulnerable groups; professions/in-

dustry employees (teachers, motorists, etc.); shareholders; as well as those with a combination of the various groups pursuing broader objectives. We have yet to analyze this dimension of protest and it is therefore not discussed in this report.

Expanding Protests

Figure 1 on p. 9 maps the density of protest activism by region for the whole period analyzed. The most densely shaded regions, that is, those with the highest volume of protest activity, are Moscow, regions in the Northwest, Volga-Urals and Western Siberia, as well as the Primorskiy Kray in the Far East.

Figure 2 on p. 10, which records numbers of protests by month, illustrates the steady rise in protest activity between January 2007 and March 2009. In the Fall of 2007, the peak figure for number of participants was slightly over 40,000 people nation-wide. A year later, around the same time, over 80,000 people, or double the number, took to the streets. Figure 3 on p. 10 shows that suppression of protest activity by local, regional, or federal authorities has been declining. Thus, in June 2008, the authorities suppressed over 30 percent of protest activity, while around December–January 2008–2009, the peak figure was slightly over 25 percent. It is important to note that the peak in protest activism at both these time points is largely attributable to the same cause, namely protests against the unpopular tariffs on imported automobiles. This trend may indicate the perception by federal and regional authorities of the potentially explosive nature of suppression given that automobile tariffs affect large populations – both consumers and those involved in trade. Alternatively, it may be indicative of the much talked about liberalization under the new president Dmitry Medvedev. The contagion effect of these events may be also at work as political opportunity structures open up and more and more people are influenced by the mobilization demonstration effect in other regions. Permissiveness by authorities in some regions against the swelling ranks of protesters may provide similar signals to those in other regions.

Politics More Important than Economics

When we disaggregate data by goals of protesters, we see (Figure 4 on p. 11) that there were more political protests than those that were purely economic in nature. Both have been on the rise. The graph in Figure 5 on p. 11 shows that there has been a slight increase in protests that are regional in scope or targeting regional authorities. By contrast, the fitted line for protests targeting national authorities indicates a more pronounced

trend for growth, with a steeper rise in protests targeting national authorities. This trend may be indicative of the general dissatisfaction with government policies. It could also be a poignant illustration of the Achilles' Heel that President Putin created in the form of governor appointments. Because governors are presidential appointees, it is the national authorities, and not the regional bodies, that people hold accountable for regional social and economic problems. Likewise, the recentralization of decision making means that governors are unwilling or unable to reverse or challenge policies that are unpopular in their regions, and, in the case of imported automobiles, those adversely affecting some regions in particular. Contrast this latter situation with the potential scenario of the US federal government banning fishing and hunting or abolishing environmental-friendly policies, and the likely response of the governor of Alaska or California.

In terms of regional trends, Table 1, which lists the top regions in the categories of number of protests, number of protest participants, political protests, and those targeting regional and federal levels, shows that leaders in protest activism are Moscow and St. Petersburg. Other regions, which have in the past received high democracy ratings for the competitiveness of their political process, such as Samara, Sverdlovsk, Omsk and Novosibirsk are also among the top 15 regions. Conspicuously absent among regional protest leaders are the ethnically-defined republics: only Karelia, Dagestan, and Udmurtiya feature among the top 15 protesting regions. The absence of North Caucasus republics other than Dagestan among protest leaders is all the more glaring considering the known socio-economic problems in that area heavily dependent on federal handouts. These entities also have some of the lowest ratings for the competitiveness of the democratic process – both the more constraining political opportunity structures and social passivity may therefore explain this record.

Aggregate numbers of protest participants are quite modest considering that they cover data for two and a half years. Nevertheless, in such leaders as Moscow and Primorskiy Kray close to 100,000 people took to the streets in that time, with some 60 percent of all protests political in nature. The general authoritarian climate in which protests occur is also an important consideration. The government has been notorious for inventing tactics

to deal with street protests. In many regions, regional authorities have denied authorization to hold demonstrations. The opposition has in turn come up with an ingenuous way of avoiding the violation of a ban to hold a protest. Protesters often take turns standing with a poster at some prominent location. Thus, a protest may be reported as a one-man/one-woman show, while in reality it is part of an organized campaign involving anything from a handful to dozens of activists.

To summarize, protest activism has been on the rise between 2007 and 2009. Significantly, economic dissatisfaction fuelled by rising unemployment, cost of living, and quality of life issues appears to be filtering into greater political dissatisfaction with the current national political regime. While both regional and federal authorities have been blamed for the economic woes, there has been a growing tendency to target the national government in protest activism. While most regions recorded some protest activity, a handful is particularly active.

Significantly, among the most active protesting regions are Kaliningrad and Primorskiy Kray in the Far East. Kaliningrad is an exclave, geographically separated from mainland Russia with growing ties to the European Union. Recently, the Moscow Carnegie Center scholar Alexey Malashenko raised the alarming prospect of Russia's disintegration, suggesting that Kaliningrad would be the first region to go considering its geographic location and links to Europe. At the same time, the intensity of protest against automobile import tariffs in Primorskiy Kray has forcefully demonstrated just how deeply the region's economy is orientated to, and dependent on, the Far Eastern countries, most notably Japan. It is noteworthy that while the Spring 2007 *March* participants in St. Petersburg raised a banner of the European Union, those protesting in the Far East sported giant banners that read "Russia doesn't need us?" and "Give Vladik and Kurily [Vladivostok and Kuril Islands] to Japan!" As the economic crisis in Russia deepens, social and political protest is unlikely to subside. In the most optimistic scenario popular discontent would force national level political and economic reform. In the less optimistic scenario, these developments would threaten the country's territorial cohesion.

Information about the authors and suggested reading overleaf.

About the authors

Tomila Lankina is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Public Policy and Alexey Savrasov is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Human Resources Management at De Montfort University in Leicester, UK.

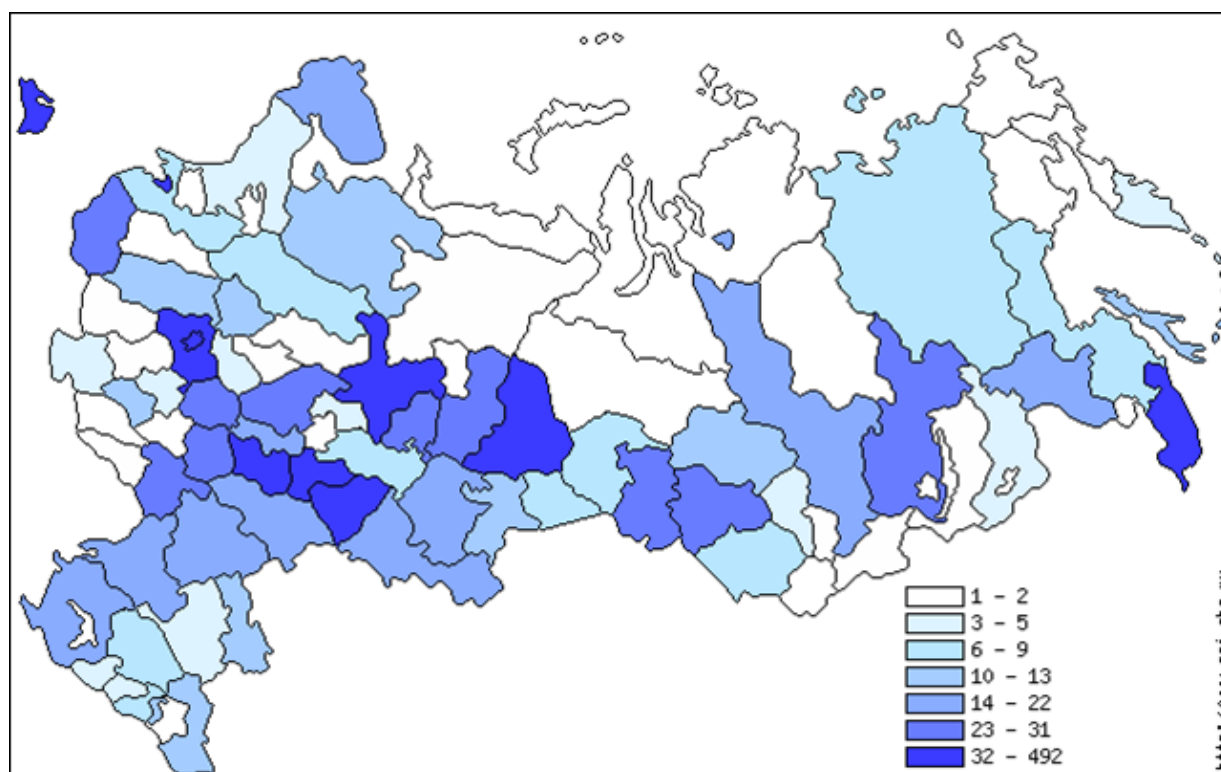
Suggested Reading

- Nikolai Petrov, "Regional Models of Democratic Development," in *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*, in M. McFaul, N. Petrov and A. Ryabov, eds., Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005.
- Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Natalya Zubarevich, "Sovremennoye prostranstvo Rossii: Chelovecheskoye izmereniye," *Demoscope weekly*, 2005.

Statistics

Social Protest in Russia 2007–2009 in Figures

Figure 1: Density (Number) of Protests by Region, March 2007–March 2009



Source: map generated on <http://www.sci.aha.ru/> using data compiled by Tomila Lankina and Alexey Savrasov