

Daring to Protest

WHEN, WHY, AND HOW RUSSIA'S CITIZENS ENGAGE IN STREET PROTEST

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The December 2011-March 2012 protests in Russia, unprecedented in scale, surprised even the most astute observers of Russian politics. Were these protests a mere blip on the “normally placid surface of Russian political life”?² Or are they part of a longer-term trajectory of political maturation for Russian society? Do they reveal a growing capacity of Russia's citizens to resort to non-institutionalized forms of political participation, as opportunities to influence governance through the ballot box progressively shrink? When and under what conditions should we expect protests to erupt again?

An original protest dataset I have assembled helps answer these questions.³ In 2007, the liberal-leaning opposition figure Garry Kasparov helped set up a website called “namarsh.ru,” which can be roughly translated as “Go and protest!” The website relies on a network of regional correspondents to post and repost news on protests occurring across Russia. While some overreporting of liberal-leaning activism is likely, given the political orientation of those who run the website, the reports do cover protests featuring diverse agendas and political groupings. These range from activism that could be construed as purely civic in nature, such as when neighborhood residents take to the streets to challenge waste dumping, to protests led by activists from the Communist Party (KPRF) and other opposition parties and groups. Altogether, some 5,100 protest events were reported between April 2007, when the first protest entry was posted, and December 2013.

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² Lilia Shevtsova, “Implosion, Atrophy, or Revolution?” *Journal of Democracy* 23, 3 (2012): 19-32.

³ For a detailed discussion of the data, see Tomila Lankina, “The Dynamics of Regional and National Contentious Politics in Russia: Evidence from a New Dataset,” forthcoming in *Problems of Post-Communism*.

The data reveal temporal variations in the kinds of causes that people rally around which correspond to broader socioeconomic, institutional, and political changes occurring over time in Russia. We see from **Figure 1** that protests with a pronounced economic component peaked in 2008-2009, corresponding to the shock wave of the global economic crisis. Following the post-crisis economic recovery, protests with socioeconomic demands and agendas declined. Protests coded as civic—that is, those dealing with environmental, cultural, or legal issues⁴—show a more consistent, flatter trajectory over time. Furthermore, in line with the findings of political scientist Graeme Robertson, who employed data from a left-leaning opposition website run by the Institute of Collective Action (*Institut kollektivnogo deystviya, IKD*), civic protests constitute a substantial chunk of protest activism.⁵ The data also reveal a steady rise in number of protests with an explicitly political agenda in the years and months leading up to the mass protests that erupted in December 2011, as well as a decline in political activism after the re-election of Vladimir Putin to his third presidential term in March 2012. Despite the subsequent restrictions imposed by the Russian government and the resulting decrease in protests, as **Figures 2 and 3** show, the number of protests and people taking to the streets again rose in the second half of 2013. This record might be explained by a temporary reopening of the political space in advance of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games, which were preceded by the release from prison of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and members of the Pussy Riot group. The most interesting trend that emerges from these data is the apparent metamorphosis of civic protest into political activism during the winter of 2011-12 (percentages of types of activism by year for the entire period are contained in **Figure 4**). This is followed by a swift reversal of the trend after March 2012: the shrinkage of politicized protest as a share of overall protest activism appears to correspond to the (re)expansion of activism that is framed not in political terms but in terms of a diverse range of civic agendas. In 2013, specifically, the ratio of political protests vis-à-vis other types of protests recalibrated to a much more balanced spectrum of protest activity, with civic protests lagging only slightly behind political ones.

These trends suggest the presence of a latent constituency for protest that is largely hidden from the public eye and mainstream media spotlight as it engages in “safe” forms of activism during periods of political repression and/or closure, only to re-emerge again when openings occur in what social movement theorists refer to as “political opportunity structures.” It is well known that the rise in politicized contention corresponded to the liberal opening under the interim presidency of Dmitry Medvedev in 2008-2012. The election of Putin to his third presidential term in March 2012 was

⁴ Protests concerned with legal issues target unpopular legislation and its implementation (labor, criminal and administrative codes); the category also includes protests against illegal acts by state bodies or private companies (forced eviction, construction in inappropriate areas). Environmental protests include those that target hazardous work conditions, waste dumping, and destruction of forests, parks, and protected woodlands. Cultural protests include street rallies against the destruction of monuments and historically valuable buildings and sites and against changes in city or area names.

⁵ Graeme Robertson, “Protesting Putinism,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 60, 2 (2013): 11-23.

followed by a crackdown unprecedented in scale against protesters and political opposition. This crackdown is epitomized by the trials of the “Bolotnaya” protesters, named after the square in Moscow around which anti-regime protests and disturbances occurred on May 6, 2012, which some experts have likened to Stalin’s show trials.⁶ The trials were initiated ostensibly due to protester violence against the police and have already resulted in nine jail sentences, arrests of a further twelve activists, and surveillance and travel restrictions on at least four other individuals. The repression and crackdown on street protests that followed Putin’s re-election is systematically recorded in my dataset. As shown in **Figure 3**, a substantially higher share of protest activity after March 2012, as compared to the earlier time periods, became subject to repression in the form of arrests of protesters, attempts to disrupt events by pro-Kremlin groups (by, for example, the youth group *Nashi*), police harassment, and other disruptive activities.

By highlighting how protest repression might encourage protesters to alter the key demands articulated in a protest, I do not imply that these demands are completely divorced from citizens’ particular grievances. Indeed, as noted above, in times of economic hardship more people are likely to rally around bread-and-butter issues like layoffs, wage arrears, or delays in payment of salaries. Most ordinary people—at all times—may well perceive problems in their locality or neighborhood as having the most pressing and tangible effects on their lives. What the data trends seem also to suggest, however, is that particularly when political repression increases, there may be a greater tendency to (re)frame or (re)articulate grievances in more particularistic-local-parochial terms and re-channel blame away from national leaders and onto their sub-national clients or other lesser officials in the periphery: the corrupt municipal officials who enrich themselves by generating kickbacks from illegal construction projects on beautiful nature reserves; the private companies that dupe citizens into paying for apartment blocks that never get completed, and then get away with it because of the complicity or inaction of municipal and regional officials; or reckless drivers of official luxury vehicles sporting ubiquitous blue flashing lights (*migalki*) and endangering pedestrians and other vehicles.⁷

Why should we pay attention to the observed fluidity in protest issues and the question of whom protesters blame for their grievances? In an earlier PONARS memo analyzing the sustainability of the momentum generated by the December 2011-March 2012 protests, Mark Kramer rightly highlighted the importance of the development of

⁶ As discussed by Nikolay Petrov at the Comparative Workshop on Mass Protests, June 13-14, 2014, LSE, London.

⁷ Putin’s soaring popularity after Crimea’s annexation notwithstanding, public opinion surveys reveal constant—and even growing—levels of disaffection with corruption, lawlessness, and lack of accountability at all levels of governance. For recent Levada Center surveys of citizen satisfaction with government performance, see “Kto ne odobryaet deyatel’nost’ prezidenta,” June 24, 2014, <http://www.levada.ru/24-06-2014/kto-ne-odobryaet-deyatelnost-prezidenta>.

“abeyance structures.”⁸ These structures unite protesters into something more or less whole and coherent, enabling and nurturing continuity in between phases of contention that could be separated by months or even years. Our data may not reveal the development of a coherent set of structures, ideologies, and leadership unifying protesters, but it does suggest the presence of constituencies for protest—however disparate—that continue accumulating what Robertson refers to as the human capital and skills toolkit of protest in between spikes in contention.⁹ The existence of such protesting constituencies may be regarded as an important constant, even if the causes and targets that the same individuals take on are fluid, shifting, and adaptable to the institutional and political environments in which they operate. Sociologist Georgi Derlugian has also highlighted the importance of paying attention to this phenomenon by tracing the life histories of quintessential Soviet and post-Soviet activists in the Caucasus: a Brezhnev-era activist in pursuit of relatively safe issues (like the environment or youth health) becomes a democrat in the *perestroika* era and a nationalist demonstrator in post-Soviet times.¹⁰ These patterns are illustrative of the adaptive capacity of citizens to change the way in which they articulate grievances in an authoritarian regime—and their potential to unite in large-scale protest as circumstances change.

Under what conditions, then, should we expect to see a rechanneling of non-political forms of protest into the kinds of mass anti-regime contentious politics observed on the streets of Russia between December 2011 and March 2012? Prior scholarship on protests in other settings and analyses of Russia’s “December Movement”¹¹ highlight the centrality of elite splits in generating political protest-enabling openings; rival elite factions not only can help rally protesters around political causes but also ensure their relative safety by association—as when, for instance, they are flanked by influential political figures such as former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin who joined the 2011 protests.

The sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea and allegations of support for separatist forces in eastern Ukraine may have already generated intra-elite grievances that are simmering behind the façade of a patriotic and nationalist consensus. Evidence of the Kremlin’s sensitivity to potential grievances of the bureaucratic elite—and hence perception of the fragility of its loyalty to Putin—is its decision to pursue its

⁸ “Political Protest and Regime-Opposition Dynamics in Russia,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 280, September 2013, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/political-protest-and-regime-opposition-dynamics-russia>.

⁹ Graeme Robertson, “Protesting Putinism.”

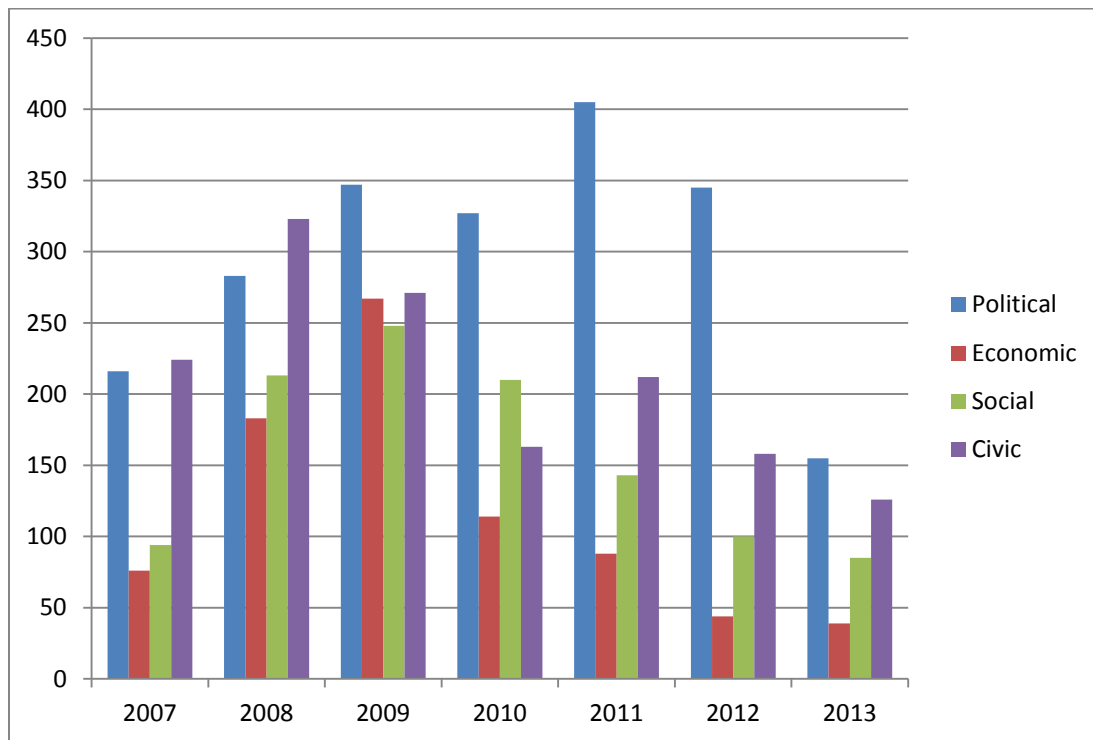
¹⁰ Georgi M. Derlugian, *Bourdieu’s Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹¹ Lilia Shevtsova, “Implosion, Atrophy, or Revolution?” *Journal of Democracy* 23 (3) 2012: 19-32.

campaign to limit property ownership abroad by government officials with a relatively light touch.¹²

As more stringent international sanctions are imposed on Russia, and a wider circle of officials is affected, the patriotic consensus may well crumble in the face of lost opportunities to vacation or access bank accounts abroad. Sanctions may also affect the economic well-being of ordinary citizens as foreign investment into the Russian economy shrinks. Socioeconomic grievances of ordinary citizens could intensify street activism of the bread-and-butter kind. A combination of political openings—if and when they occur—and mounting socioeconomic grievances are likely to encourage the metamorphosis of non-political forms of protest—already a routine occurrence in Russia’s neighborhoods and cities, as my data demonstrate—into more overt forms of political contention.

Figure 1. Number of Protests by Category, March 2007-December 2013



¹² For instance, rather than banning property ownership by state officials abroad, Putin allowed the ownership of real estate by state officials abroad as long as property was declared. Discussed by Elizabeth Teague at the Comparative Workshop on Mass Protests, June 13-14, 2014, LSE, London.

Figure 2. Number of People Participating in Protests, March 2007-December 2013

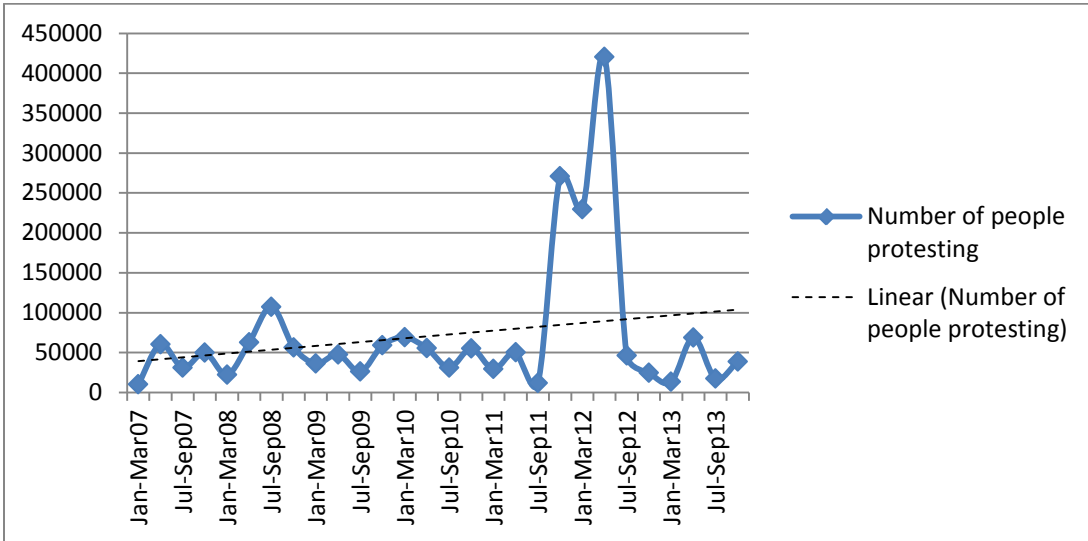


Figure 3. Number of Protests and Suppressions, March 2007-December 2013

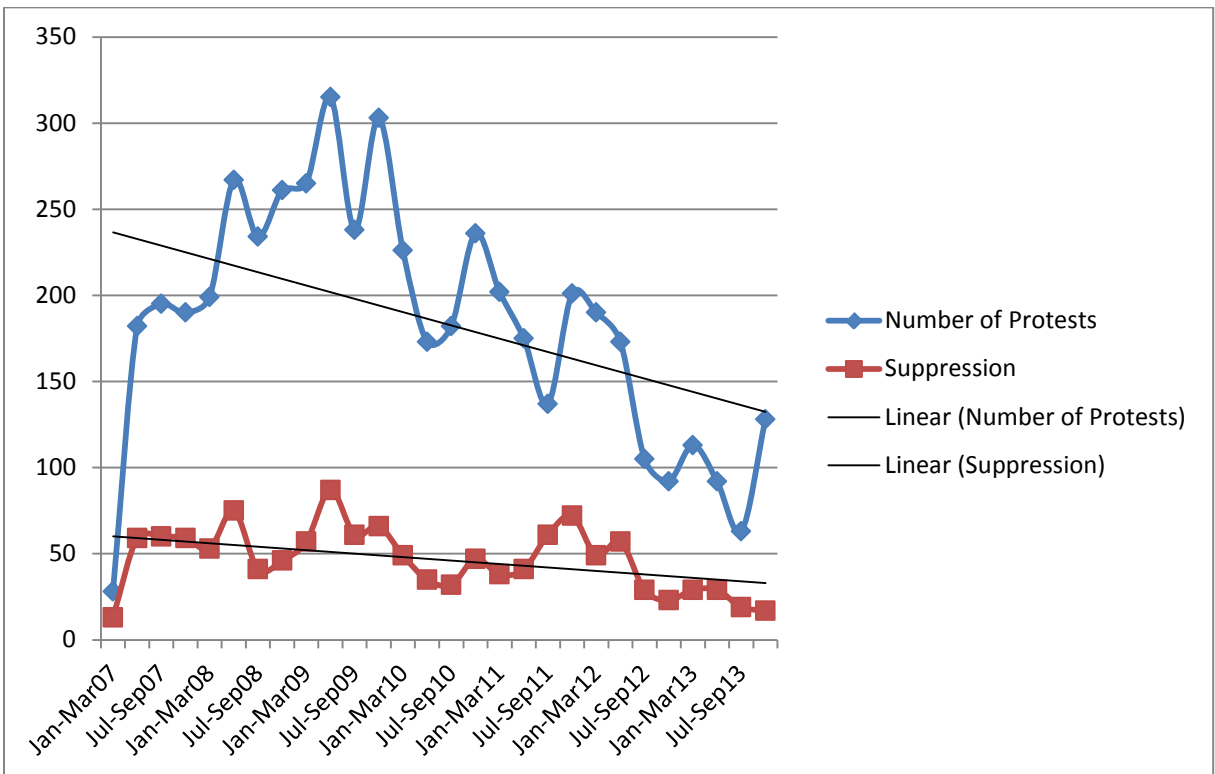


Figure 4. Type of Protest, March 2007-December 2013

