

## Russia's Truckers and the Path from Economic to Political Protest

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 551  
November 2018

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What can truck drivers teach us about protest in Russia's political system? Truck drivers throughout Russia suddenly joined together in dramatic mobilizations at the end of 2015. While those protests have largely dissipated, this case sheds light on two questions: how can widespread collective action over socio-economic issues spontaneously erupt, and how sharp is the divide in Russia between economic and political protests?

The truckers' example illustrates that economic and social reforms, however well intentioned or deemed necessary, can prompt otherwise isolated individuals to join in protest when they are impacted as a single category. Given the prospect of slower economic growth in the foreseeable future, raising taxes or cutting social expenditures will almost certainly be on the agenda, and doing so without impacting concrete groups will be difficult to avoid. The truckers' case also shows that once isolated individuals have united over socio-economic demands, the path to subsequent political engagement can be fairly short. To be sure, the truckers initially displayed a reflexive support for Putin, as well as an understanding that social and economic protests are in some sense legitimate, while political protests are not. Yet in little over a year, the truckers went from pleading "President, help us!" to demanding he resign, even attempting to run one of their own as an opposition presidential candidate.

### Categories and Protest Mobilization

How were truck drivers throughout Russia suddenly able to unite in protest? In a classic work of social movement theory, sociologist Charles Tilly [argued](#) that two ingredients—he termed these "netness" and "catness"—were central to successful mobilization. Netness refers to networks, such as labor unions, connecting individuals and groups to

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one another. The truck drivers' existing union did little to help unite them, and like many other civic organizations in Russia, soon proved to be coopted by the authorities. But the truckers' protest provides a perfect illustration of what Tilly called "catness": the potential for individuals to become mobilized collectively because they belong to a single category.

The conflict began over a simple tax issue. On November 2015, the Russian government announced a new road tax on load-bearing tractor-trailers, in order, it was argued, to help pay for the wear and tear heavy loads placed on Russia's highways. Through a system called *Platon*, trucks weighing over 12 tons would be charged four rubles per kilometer, with the charges incurred through a satellite-based tracking device. Before the imposition of the tax, the truckers were isolated and spread throughout Russia's far flung regions—"we were perfect strangers" as one trucker [put it](#)—with little ability or inclination to act collectively. That quickly changed, however, when the government imposed on them as a group.

Others have pointed out that Russian citizens can appear quiescent provided that the state [does not intrude](#) on their daily lives. Yet when the state imposes unwanted changes on otherwise isolated individuals as a single group, widespread collective protest can erupt. The 2005 protests over the monetization of benefits, where pensioners in dozens of Russian cities arose spontaneously in protest, was a clear example of that trend. In current conditions, with the end of the oil boom and the prospect of slower economic growth, calls for raising taxes or cutting social expenditures will no doubt increase. The recent protests over pension reform would appear to provide another example, with those affected including most working Russians. However, the raising of the pension age impacts different groups differentially, and unlike the truck tax and the monetization of benefits, for most the impact of pension reform will be felt years from now rather than experienced as an immediate shock to their daily lives. There have certainly been protests over the pension reform, but in less sustained fashion and (so far, at least) with less impact. Nevertheless, the reform has clearly [reduced](#) the level of public approval of state officials.

### **The Blurred Divide Between Economic and Political Demands**

That leads to the second lesson one can draw from the truckers' protest: the blurred line between socio-economic and political protests in Russia. That line appeared to be drawn sharply during the 2011-12 protests centered in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the demands were explicitly political over issues such as electoral fraud. Then the Kremlin sought to portray the allegedly middle-class and cosmopolitan protesters as out of touch with the everyday concerns of the working class in Russia's industrial heartland. Years earlier, during the 2008-09 economic crisis, Putin famously sided with working-class protesters in the "monotown" of Pikalyovo, when he arrived by helicopter to dress down oligarch Oleg Deripaska on national television.

Yet the truckers protest posed a different dilemma: an economic protest prompted by actions for which the government itself was responsible. This led to some excitable commentary at the start of the truckers' protest predicting that the truckers could [spark](#) a revolution. When that soon appeared unlikely, other commentary [chastised](#) Russia's opposition for believing that truckers and other working-class Russians would ever care for more than their own narrow economic interests.

However, the truckers' example reveals the limitations of imposing sharp analytical divides between socio-economic and political demands. In an illustration of just how rapidly the truckers' demands changed over time, one well-researched and in-depth study sought to [explain](#) the "failed politicization" of Russia's truckers' movement by arguing that the "rigid divide between economic and political protest" in Russia prevented the truckers from becoming radicalized. Yet in hindsight, just the opposite has proven true.

While there is often a discursive divide in Russia between socio-economic and political protest demands, the reasons behind that divide are more complex than is commonly supposed. One clear reason, which the truckers themselves acknowledge, is reflexive support for Putin, especially among the working class. This was exemplified in one of the most prominent slogans during the first phase of the trucker's protest, "President, help us!," which is only a slight variation of the much older Russian phrase, "If only the Tsar knew!"

Yet another explanation for the divide in demands is that the authorities have made clear, to the truckers and others, that social and economic protests are in some sense legitimate, while political protests are not, and that the latter will be dealt with harshly. Thus, when protesters themselves insist their demands are not political, it may reflect less the intensity of their concerns, and more a calculated effort to appear more legitimate, to obtain redress from the authorities, and to avoid repression. Yet while the truckers initially rejected explicit political demands, that distinction quickly became blurred.

In an illiberal regime where the state looms large over the economic as well as the political sphere, socio-economic protests are often politicized by their very nature. This is certainly the case in Russia, since social or economic demands almost always entail an appeal to authorities for redress. Moreover, Russia's political leadership—indeed, embodied in Putin himself—often claims to be the ultimate protector and savior of the population. Yet further politicization becomes a distinct possibility when workers come to believe that government officials are unable or unwilling to address their demands. The flip side of the belief in the "good tsar" is discovering that the top leader does indeed know, and is choosing to respond with silence or worse, repression.

Much theoretical and comparative work on social movements suggests that such realizations become more likely once individuals have mobilized and begin to act collectively. This is precisely what happened in the wake of the truckers' first protest actions, as they set up an encampment in Khimki on the outskirts of Moscow. Before long the truckers solved their lack of "netness" by forming a new independent union, the *Ob'edinenie Perevozchikov Rossii* (OPR). Having broken out of their isolation, these once perfect strangers began to discuss Russia's "accursed questions": Who is to blame, and what is to be done?

As they did so, the truckers' sense of grievance became compounded by the fact that the company operating the *Platon* tax collection system, which received 20 percent of all the funds collected, was half-owned by Igor' Rotenberg, the son of Arkadii Rotenberg, a former judo partner and friend of Vladimir Putin turned billionaire. Within a month of their first protest, drivers were [placing](#) placards on the back of their trucks announcing "Remember Rotenberg: the tire iron is under the seat," with other signs proclaiming "we want to feed our wives and children, not the oligarchs." Believing that the central media was ignoring their protests—a crucial element in their subsequent radicalization—other signs portrayed Russia's three main TV networks as the three "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" monkeys.

Yet even as the truckers became radicalized, they continued for some time to disavow politics. But they did not do so out of disinterest, or because they revered Putin and viewed Russia's political system as legitimate. On the contrary, a major reason they rejected any political alliances was their distrust of political parties and the political process in general (a view shared, they argued, with much of the public). Another reason was the cultural divide and mutual mistrust between Russia's intelligentsia and its working class. Yet as the truckers welcomed visitors to their encampment, such divisions softened. For instance, truckers [began joining](#) demonstrations commemorating the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, and backed Muscovites protesting the building of a church in Torfyanka park.

By March 2017, when the government failed to meet their demands and the road tariff increased, the truckers escalated their protest in an "all-Russian strike" with explicitly political demands. Just over a year after their initial protest, in addition to their economic demands, the truckers called for "the resignation of the government and no-confidence in the president." Further still, the truckers adopted language from Navalny's anti-corruption protests that coincidentally began at the same time, targeting (as did the Navalny protests) Prime Minister Medvedev by name. Thirty truckers were among the 825 individuals [arrested](#) in Moscow during the Navalny-inspired anti-corruption protests that June, and truckers participated in protests in at least 8 other cities that same day. As one OPR leader in Chelyabinsk put it, in an echo of Navalny's claims of the corruption of Medvedev and other leaders, it [wasn't trucks but yachts](#) that were destroying Russia's roads.

As the protests were met by repression as well as continued silence from government officials and state media, the truckers' politicization continued. Whereas the March 26 strike announcement sandwiched the demand for the resignation of the government and no-confidence in the president between economic demands (it was number 4 out of 6 demands), by July that demand was moved to number 1, and printed in bold. In another dramatic step away from their plea for help from Putin, by June 2017 Andrei Bazhutin, the elected leader of the OPR, announced his intention to run for president in 2018. While his candidacy was quixotic—he was prevented from registering—and was clearly intended to draw attention to the truckers' cause, this was a fundamental transformation for someone whom one observer had recently [described](#) as an “apolitical” leader who sought to keep the truckers “on the ‘correct’ side of the economic/political discursive divide.”

Nor was Bazhutin alone in his political transformation. Aleksei Borisov, a leader of the OPR branch in Ryazan, [explained](#):

“When the tax was announced, many of us went to Moscow in search of the truth. We didn't think about politics, we simply wanted to explain to Putin that we would not be able to work, that we would go bankrupt. We sincerely believed that he didn't know about it, and somehow we would tell him and somehow he would understand.... . It seems funny now, but that's what I believed. Journalists and volunteers, friends and family, sympathizers and people who had yet to make up their minds came to visit us. But no one from the government would talk with us. The majority of the information from the mass media was either nonexistent or unreliable. We spent four and a half months in that camp... . Much became clear. I turned off the television and saw the light.”

## **Two Lessons**

In the end, the truckers' protests subsided, and never approached a direct political threat to the authorities, let alone a revolution. Yet the example of the truckers highlights two closely connected dilemmas for those in power. The first is that economic and social reforms, however well intentioned or deemed necessary by economic conditions, can prompt otherwise isolated individuals to join in protest when they are impacted as a single category. This can occur despite (or perhaps because of) the lack of “netness”—a vibrant civil society. Given the likely prospect of slower economic growth in the foreseeable future, raising taxes or cutting social expenditures will almost certainly be on the agenda, and doing so without impacting concrete groups will be difficult.

The second lesson from the truckers is that once isolated individuals have united over socio-economic demands, the path to subsequent political radicalization can be fairly short. Government repression dispersed many truckers, but emboldened those that

remained. In little over a year, the truckers went from pleading “President, help us!” to demanding he resign. Beyond repression, the other alternative for ending such protests is for the authorities to make concessions, yet doing so may undercut the goals of the reform, prompting the need to seek other potentially fraught avenues for raising taxes or cutting expenditures in challenging economic conditions.

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