

Political Protest and Regime-Opposition Dynamics in Russia

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Mark Kramer

Harvard University

Focus groups and opinion polls in Russia over the past three years have revealed substantial discontent with Russia's political system—discontent that was instrumental in the outbreak of mass protests in December 2011 after Russia's parliamentary elections were marred by widespread fraud. The scale of the protests caught most observers by surprise. Even though electoral fraud has been a catalyst of anti-regime unrest in several other post-Soviet states in the recent past, neither the Russian authorities nor even many of the protesters themselves expected that the same phenomenon would occur in Russia. The size of the demonstrations and the hostility that was openly voiced toward Vladimir Putin once would have been inconceivable in Russia, but Putin's announcement in September 2011 that he would be returning as Russian president (and his claim that he had decided several years earlier to return in 2012 and had, by implication, merely been stringing people along) sparked dismay not only among the remnants of Russia's political opposition but also among many other Russians who sensed that the political system was becoming stale and needed to be replaced by a less opaque and more accountable structure.

Even though only a year-and-a-half has passed, those protests now seem a distant memory. This policy memo will explain what went wrong and what might happen in the future.

The Protests and Backlash

The demonstrations in Russia in late 2011 and early 2012 came on the heels of destabilizing unrest that had been engulfing North Africa and the Middle East since early 2011. The unexpected outbreak of anti-regime protests in many parts of the Arab world, the downfall of long-time dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and the onset of a bloody civil war in Syria contributed to the deep uncertainty that prevailed in Russia in late 2011. The protest organizers in Russia were ambiguous about whether they would emulate the demonstrators in the Arab world in pressing for regime change. The protesters' avowed aim in Russia was to have the parliamentary elections re-run, and most of the demonstrators explicitly said they did not want to foment revolutionary

change. However, a few of the protest leaders did hint, or even openly declared, that they were seeking more radical change. Certainly the authorities feared that many of the demonstrators were furtively hoping to precipitate the end of Putin's regime.

Putin was caught off-guard by the scale and intensity of the initial protests. As he tried to regain his footing he was mindful of (and apprehensive about) what had been going on in the Arab world. For a brief while, he and his associates were exceedingly nervous about the outcome in Russia, and they began reviewing the concessions they might need to make to prevent outright rebellion.¹ Some of Putin's advisers even began to consider whether he might have to agree to not stand for the presidency in 2012, paving the way for Dmitry Medvedev to present himself as a more palatable alternative who could reach a political accommodation with the opposition.

In the end, no such concessions proved necessary. After withstanding the initial protests and gradually regaining the initiative, Putin easily won reelection in the first round in the March 2012 presidential elections and set about implementing major changes in Russia's political-legal system to ensure that he would never again be confronted by a challenge of similar scope. An array of repressive measures, including severe restrictions on pro-democracy and human rights NGOs and election monitors, a huge increase in fines imposed against those who take part in "illegal" gatherings, the banning of public assemblies in certain areas that were sites of protests in late 2011, the exclusion of foreign broadcast media, restrictions on Internet access, and a sweeping expansion of the definition of "treason" were all adopted with the support or at least acquiescence of a substantial majority of the population in 2012. Additional measures were adopted in 2013, including a blasphemy law, a law banning "propaganda" in support of gay rights, highly intrusive inspections of NGO offices, and the implementation of laws requiring NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as "foreign agents" and to identify themselves as such in all their literature. Even though a few NGOs in outlying areas have been able to challenge the applicability of the new laws to their own work, the "foreign agent" requirements overall have had a chilling effect on democracy promotion.

The new web of restrictions has been combined with selective prosecutions and imprisonment of opposition activists, intended to keep everyone off balance. The threat of prosecution or of facing onerous tax charges has been designed to intimidate leading opposition figures and to cause them to worry about leaving themselves or their families exposed. Even individuals with ties to the establishment have felt pressure to display their loyalty to the regime. In June 2013, a wealthy business executive who in late 2011 was sympathetic to the protesters' demands emphasized the precariousness of the situation she faced: "Everything can be taken away from me at any minute."

Putin's Steps and the Opposition's Missteps

By skillfully using structural features of the Russian political system to his advantage,

¹ These statements are based on conversations I had with two prominent advisers to President Putin in late October 2012 in Moscow.

Putin was able to reassert control after the brief period of uncertainty in December 2011. He, far more than the opposition, recognized that as long as oil revenues continue to flow into Russia and keep economic growth rates at a relatively brisk level, the majority of Russians are much less inclined to worry about things like democracy and freedom. The last time that massive protests really took broad hold in Russia (the RSFSR, as it was then) was in the first few months of 1991. Huge demonstrations on the streets of Moscow in early 1991, numbering several hundred thousand people, came at a time when the policies adopted by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev had thoroughly destabilized the Soviet economy and caused rampant shortages of goods and soaring inflation. The miserable economic conditions in 1991 (a “suddenly imposed grievance” in the phrasing of social movement theory) spawned acute public disaffection that protest organizers could easily exploit to rally large crowds. If protests against Putin had broken out in December 2008 or January-June 2009 (when the Russian economy was declining precipitously amid the global economic crisis and no one was quite sure how far it would sink), demonstrators might have been able to marshal anxiety about the economy to mobilize people all around Russia.

By December 2011, however, Russia was no longer in an economic crisis. Putin and his aides thus had a much easier time convincing a sizable majority of Russians that it was the protesters who were trying to destabilize the country and plunge it into economic chaos. If a genuine sense of crisis had still existed in December 2011, as it did in late 2008 and early 2009, this would have been a much harder case to make. But the circumstances gave Putin fertile ground for arguing that protests of any sort would rock the boat and possibly jeopardize the improvements in living standards that most Russians had been experiencing since 1999. This explains why polls taken by the Levada Center showed that a solid majority of Russians were opposed to the demonstrations and were fearful that the country might be plunged into instability. This is not to say that they embraced most aspects of Putin’s agenda. However, they did accept his basic contention that mass demonstrations would threaten Russia’s stability and should therefore be eschewed.

For much the same reason, only a small percentage of Russians have opposed the crackdown that Putin has implemented in 2012-2013. Although Putin’s popularity rating gradually declined in the latter half of 2012 and early 2013 before stabilizing at around 64-65 percent, that trend was not a signal of wide public backing for protests. On the contrary, the percentage of those who say they are willing to take part in protests in 2012 and 2013 has declined to 5-10 percent, whereas the percentage of those who are unwilling to take part has ranged from 75 to 80 percent. Not only do many Russians worry that political unrest might cause wider upheaval, instability, and economic dislocation; they also doubt the efficacy of such protests. By eight to one, those who believe that protests “are of no real influence” have consistently outnumbered those who see protests as a means of “achieving genuine concessions.”

In addition to the circumstances that have militated against mass mobilization in Russia, the protest organizers compounded their plight by making crucial mistakes. From the start of the unrest in Moscow, they had to be skillful in mobilizing people; they

could not expect that grievances alone would be enough. Grievances exist in every country. What protest leaders need more than grievances to mobilize people is a suitable catalyst, particularly a “suddenly imposed grievance” that is widely resented. Once a catalyst actually emerges, the protest organizers have to exploit it as much as possible. An important catalyst was present in December 2011 (the glaring electoral fraud), but the revived economic growth in Russia in 2010-2011 meant that the threshold for mobilizing people was a lot higher than it would have been three years earlier when the economy was declining precipitously.

As noted earlier, one of the reasons that a majority of Russians were uneasy about the protests in late 2011 and early 2012 is that they feared the “destabilization” of the country and the prospect of a return to the economic dislocation of the 1990s. Faced with circumstances that demanded considerable dexterity, the organizers repeatedly blundered, especially when they took a prolonged break from late December 2011 through early February 2012. Experience from the mid-1980s on has shown that the best way to mobilize people to take part in large peaceful protests is to keep doing it, week after week, to sustain momentum. Most would-be movements will peter out anyway, but they stand a much better chance of success if they engage in frequent mobilization than if they take a month-and-a-half off while the movement is just beginning. Partly as a result of the long hiatus, the protests in Moscow dwindled in 2012, reaching the point of just being a nuisance rather than a threat to the regime. Outside Moscow, where protests were never close to the size of those in the capital, they never revived. The initial round of political contention in Russia thus ended in a clear victory for Putin.

The Outlook

Nonetheless, even though the December 2011 protests in Russia were supported by only around two-fifths of the population, and even though a large majority of Russians rejected the protesters’ central demand for a re-staging of the parliamentary elections, the mere fact that mass protests erupted is itself significant. The continued signs of restiveness suggest that, under suitable circumstances, mass demonstrations could recur. Putin’s popularity ratings (62-65 percent) remain extraordinarily high compared to those of most Western leaders, but he is no longer in the 80-85 percent range that was the norm during his second term as president. The ridicule that was directed against him during the December 2011 protests may have been disconcerting to a lot of Russians (opinion polls showed that many did not welcome protests that were “disrespectful to the authorities,” meaning Putin), but the criticism put at least a few dents in the Teflon that had long surrounded Putin. In that sense, as well as in demonstrating the potential for meaningful collective action, the mass unrest in late 2011 changed some of the political dynamic in Russia. Even if Putin remains in the presidency until 2018 (or 2024), he no longer has quite the same leeway to do whatever he wants without fear of reprisal. The repressive legislation adopted in 2012-2013 may enable him to prevent further protests, but he does now have to be more mindful of going too far.

Whether the opposition will be able to pose a real threat to Putin is, however, uncertain at best. In a semi-authoritarian country like Russia, especially in the wake of

the legislation adopted in 2012 and 2013, opportunities for mass mobilization are not likely to come along very often. When such opportunities do emerge, they almost always are of limited duration. Most protest movements do not achieve their objectives during the first phase of contention, and the key to success is fashioning what Verta Taylor has called a “movement abeyance structure,” which enables a “social movement [to] sustain itself in non-receptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another.”² Taylor uses this concept to explore the organizational and ideological bridges that linked the women’s movement in the United States at various stages in the twentieth century, and the concept also features in Doug McAdam’s analysis of the groups, individuals, and ideas that sustained the civil rights movement in the United States during lengthy periods of frustration and ultimately enabled the movement to achieve its goals. One can also think of underground Solidarity in Poland in the 1980s (from December 1981 through early 1989) as a movement abeyance structure.

In a non-democratic country such as Russia, phases of political contention may be separated by many months or years. During a prolonged gap in the cycle of contention, when political opportunity structures (POS) are inimical to mass mobilization, the only way a fledgling protest movement can survive is by developing an effective abeyance structure. Such a structure will enable individual activists and groups in Russia (whose ideologies and goals vary a great deal except on the basic goal of shifting to a more open and accountable political system) to maintain a basic degree of continuity. If they achieve this, they will be in a much better position to take advantage of future changes in the POS that facilitate a return to mass mobilization. But if, instead, the activists and groups are increasingly divided and fail to maintain even a minimum structure of a movement—as appears to be happening now in Russia—the opposition movement will almost certainly die out. In that case, contention might resume in the future, but it will be through a different movement.

What does this imply for the future? The legal restrictions introduced by Putin in 2012 and 2013 to curtail opposition activities, coupled with the harassment and prosecution of opposition figures, means that the POS are much less propitious for the opposition now than in December 2011. The threshold for mobilizing people will be higher in the future than it was in late 2011. A major deterioration of economic conditions in Russia might provide a sufficient catalyst, but with national elections not scheduled to take place until 2016 (parliamentary) and 2018 (presidential), it is hard to see what else might serve as a catalyst in the near term. The leaders of opposition groups in Russia will therefore have to fashion movement abeyance structures during what could be several years (or more) of an unpropitious phase in the POS. Their chances of success in developing durable structures will be enhanced if they seek to maintain as broad a coalition as possible. Rather than getting bogged down in programmatic details, they should be focusing the energy and attention of fellow activists exclusively on the

² Verta Taylor, “Social Movement Continuity: The Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” *American Sociological Review* 54, 5 (October 1989), 762.

goal of a transparent and accountable government. In fashioning a protest discourse, they must be mindful of the need to provide a convincing rationale to people from across the political spectrum. If they do these things, they will stand a much better chance of keeping the movement alive, ready to act when the POS change in their favor. If instead they get bogged down in squabbles and infighting, the opposition movement will cease to exist.

During a period in which a movement abeyance structure will be crucial, opposition leaders need to be mindful of public sentiment. In particular, they need to focus on grievances that are shared by large numbers of Russians—such things as the resentment many people feel toward abusive public officials and egregious corruption both petty and grand. Although the Russian public may be more willing than Western societies to tolerate high-level corruption and conflicts of interest, questions of public integrity could, under certain circumstances, be a potent catalyst of the next round of political contention.

**Elliott School of
International Affairs**
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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