



Alexei Navalny and Public Dissent in Russia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The massive protests staged in Russia by supporters of opposition leader Alexei Navalny pose a serious threat to the country's political elite. The Kremlin has a problem on its hands no matter what it does. Whether Navalny is kept in prison or released, his movement will be strengthened, and it has the potential to fuse to broader public dissent over Russia's long-term economic performance and government ineffectiveness.

Huge protests recently held in Russia over the jailing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny could become a nationwide movement against the ruling political elite. The immediate reasons for the large public demonstrations are the poisoning of Navalny and a series of videos of corruption schemes that incriminate President Vladimir Putin himself.

Other factors, however, are the real driving force behind the protests. They include anger over falling living standards, pandemic-related troubles, diminished political freedom, and Putin's decision to effectively remain in power beyond 2024. Though the latest protests could have been partly motivated by earlier local movements, such as the Moscow protests of summer 2019 or the regional ones that occurred in 2019–2020 in Khabarovsk, Yekaterinburg, and Shiyes, they are different in that they represent a new stage in Russian public dissent.

The first indicator that these rallies are different is their sheer size. Totalling nearly 100,000 people, they were the largest nationwide displays of dissent in recent years. The detention of 3,700 people greatly exceeds the detentions that occurred during the wave of anti-Kremlin protests that rocked Russia in 2011 and 2012.

Another indicator is the way the protests have spread. Citizens in nearly 100 cities across the country took to the streets. Historically, Putin enjoyed the advantage of Russia's geography, which precluded the spread of public dissent. Much has changed, however, as modern technologies have enabled the coordination of simultaneous protests across Russia's vast territory.

For nearly a decade, the Russian authorities treated Alexei Navalny like a minor political headache. High-level officials even shied away from referring to him by name—an apparently imperious form of behavior that in fact reflected an inherent problem within the Russian governing elite.

The way the Navalny problem was handled revealed that there are at least three different strains of thought on how to deal with him within the Russian government. Had the leadership been monolithic in its vision, Navalny might not have been poisoned in the first place. The decision to attempt to assassinate him catapulted him to the status of a national figure, though many Russian citizens disagree with his political views.

Not long ago, many of them had no idea who Alexei Navalny was, but he is now famous enough to pose a direct threat to the leadership. In the aftermath of his poisoning in Siberia and recovery in Germany, Navalny is Russia's second most prominent voice abroad after Putin. He has become a politician with a global reach.

The momentum for the protests was partly fueled by a growing anti-regime, anti-elite, and anti-corruption sentiment among the population. This was long in coming and is not directly related to Navalny's anti-corruption investigation videos. Russia is experiencing what many former Soviet states experienced in the 1990s and the early 2000s—a struggle for a more effective government, more accountability, transparency over public spending, and most of all, the ability to change the government through elections.

Western observers who are hoping the dissent will generate a liberal movement may be disappointed. Though some degree of a liberal mood might be present, the protests are not necessarily either pro-Western or pro-democracy. Very young people have not been a dominating force. The crowds have included middle-aged, middle-class Russians—members of the urban, post-industrial working class who work in the service sector or at office jobs. These people are frustrated with the government's economic performance, the ruble's performance, and inflation. It is little wonder that over 40% of the crowds were protesting for the first time.

Another novelty is that the crowds openly targeted the Russian president. Considering that the dissent has gone national, this is a serious challenge to

Putin and to the entire regime. According to independent pollster Levada, many Russians still view Putin as irreplaceable, and his approval rating stood at nearly 65% as recently as November 2020—but this support is primarily motivated by fear of the chaos that could erupt after his departure rather than by love of the man himself.

The memory of the troubled 1990s is still fresh, but it will be increasingly difficult for the Russian government to play that card. A growing number of people who grew up under Putin do not remember the post-Soviet era. Many of them want a higher standard of living and a more effective government.

The severity of the crackdown on the protesters suggests nervousness within the regime. On July 27, 2019, 1,373 people were rounded up in what was at the time the largest single detention of protesters in years—but at the Navalny protests, almost 3,700 people were taken into custody. The scale of the challenge was also indicated in a surprising statement given by Putin denying his ownership of the palace when directly asked about it during a video conference.

The protests might result in a worsening of the government's policy on freedom of speech. New regulations and laws will likely be introduced as the crackdown on the Navalny movement intensifies. Yet a new tradition of protest is being established, possibly influenced by foreign examples.

Russia's neighbors have already experienced popular revolutions. Russia is much larger, of course, and the influence of the smaller states should not be overstated—but it would be an error to ignore them entirely. In Belarus, the opposition has been trying for months to remove President Alexander Lukashenko, who won an election many believe was rigged. Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan have all experienced revolutions during Putin's tenure.

Public dissent in Russia has become matter of international relations. Russian leaders have to contend with Western demands that Navalny be released. Their dilemma is that releasing him would further embolden the protesters, but imprisoning him indefinitely could further radicalize them. While no significant challenge to the ruling power is likely to be made in the near future, the protests collectively represent a general worsening of the public's attitude toward the government, and they are likely to continue across the country.

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