

In the face of protests, the Russian government makes superficial concessions

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On 26 August, by decree of President Medvedev, work stopped on clearing the forest along the projected Moscow-St Petersburg motorway, which a social movement gathering in strength has been protesting against for several years. Next, on 30 August, the governor of Kaliningrad was replaced on an initiative from the Kremlin; Georgy Boos, a native of Moscow who was appointed by the Kremlin in 2005 and is unpopular in the region, is departing, and his place will be taken by the Kaliningrad politician Nikolai Tsukanov. These are extraordinary decisions, as in both cases the government has changed its approach under the influence of long-term social protests. This change seems to have been caused by both the new quality of the protests in the cases mentioned above, and also the difficult economic situation in Russia, which may prove to be a serious social challenge for the government. At the same time, the concessions they have made are merely superficial in nature, as they will not lead to any qualitative revision of the state's regional or ecological policies. The main goal of the change in the government's tactics is an attempt to neutralise the dissatisfaction of active groups in Russian society.

The new nature of the social protests

Despite the economic crisis, for the most part Russian society remains passive. Protests are usually short-term and limited in nature. Against this backdrop, however, two protest movements have come to stand out in Russia: one against the regional authorities in Kaliningrad, and another against the felling of the forest in the Khimki region near Moscow. These protests have lasted for long periods, and their cores are made up of better-off social groups who have contacts in the elites and the media. Their actions have had significant resonance elsewhere: thanks to internet and the involvement of public persons in these activities, their initiatives have received nationwide publicity.

In Kaliningrad, the basis for the protests was the deterioration of the economic situation and the policy of the Kremlin-appointed governor, which was perceived as being harmful to the region (the dissatisfaction's roots included rises in taxes and tariffs, as well as the changes in the functioning of the special economic zone, which were unfavourable for local businesses). The protests brought together local residents, some of the area's business and political elites, and well-known opposition figures from Moscow (Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Milov, Ilya Yashin). The protests in the region have lasted since autumn 2009 (in January 2010, a meeting in Kaliningrad attracted 10,000 participants, which on the Russian scale

was an extraordinary turnout), and reports on them regularly appear on the internet, and are vigorously commented on.

Another long-term social protest which has been gathering in strength is the movement to defend the forest in the Khimki region near Moscow, through which the planned Moscow-St Petersburg motorway is to run. The opposition was caused by the decision to opt for the extended route, which requires the clearance of a large part of the forest; this move is intended to serve the interests of the government and business structures, which have purchased land along the highway's planned route. The social movement in defence of the forest was founded in 2007 by a group of Khimki residents under the leadership of a local journalist, Mikhail Beketov. Despite the repression targeted against them (including a savage beating of Beketov in 2008, as a result of which he has been paralysed until today), the movement organises regular actions, and has been winning more and more publicity. In the last year, the protesters were joined by ecologists, human rights defenders, well-known artists (including Yuri Shevchuk, the leader of the famous Russian rock group DDT; additional publicity came from the public support of Bono, the leader of U2). Thus, the defence of the forest from a local civic initiative turned into one of the best-known protest actions in Russia. This has reflected on the image of the government, and may also be the reason for the notable financial complications which the road-building project is now undergoing: environmental questions are of great importance when foreign creditors, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, make decisions on granting funds for road building. The protesters have highlighted the plan's ecological negligence in their appeal to these banks.

Superficial concessions as a way to neutralise tension

The government's strategy so far in the face of diverse kinds of social protests has led to them being ignored, locally repressed, to attempts to discredit the organisers, or to ostentatious, well-publicised top-down solutions to the problems.

Also, in the face of the protests in Kaliningrad and Khimki, the tactic of limited repression (intimidating the organisers of the protests, the use of force against participants) was used in earlier stages. However, such actions did not slow down the development of these initiatives, which from limited actions of local concern grew into better-promoted, more formalised initiatives, which now pose a considerable challenge of image for the government.

In this situation, the government has changed its tactics; it has undertaken activities aimed at simulating dialogue and concessions to the protesters. The Kremlin withdrew its support for Georgy Boos, the governor of the Kaliningrad region, against whom a large part of the local elites and general public had protested. The successor to the Moscow-born Boos was the Kaliningrad politician Nikolai Tsukanov. The government also made a gesture towards the defenders of the forest in Khimki; by decree of President Dmitri Medvedev, the clearance was halted and additional consultations with experts and the public were arranged.

Nevertheless, much indicates that these concessions will not bring about any change in the government's policy. The new Kaliningrad governor, although he comes from region, will most probably be well-disposed towards Moscow; he is a loyal politician (he belongs to the ruling party, United Russia), and at the same time he is not well known in the region, and

does not have own power base. In turn, the decision to bring a temporary halt to the construction of the motorway in Khimki will most probably not bring about any change in its development, and only postpone the moment of the project's implementation.

The main reason why the government has shown a readiness to make concessions is, above all, a desire to immediately defuse the social tension which has accompanied the problems mentioned above. Above all, this concerns the neutralisation of the dissatisfaction shown by the active, well-off social groups which engaged in both protests, and have shown determination and resistance to the repressions and harassment used against them previously. Tactics based on superficially engaging them in the decision-making process may prove much more effective (for example, the government's decision to halt the construction of the motorway in Khimki and the subsequent public consultations have already caused splits in the protesters' camp; some of them have supported the government's activities).

Also, the Russian ruling elite prefers to avoid the use of repression on a wider scale, which would cause significant damage to its image; and would rather base its legitimacy on broad public support, which despite the crisis, remains very high.