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Protest by truck drivers in Russia

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In Russia over the last few weeks, there have been protests by truck drivers against the introduction on 15 November of high new road taxes for vehicles weighing over 12 tonnes for using the main federal highways. The fee applies to Russian carriers, which mostly operate as one-man companies, and to foreign shipping companies transporting freight on the territory of Russia. The fee for each kilometre travelled is paid via a special electronic program called 'Platon', which is operated by a company controlled by Putin's friends, the Rotenberg brothers.

The protesters are calling on the President to abolish the tax , which will absorb a significant portion of their earnings, and to punish those responsible for their introduction. At first, the protests were initiated in several regions of the country, but now they cover almost the whole of Russia. On 4 December a blockade of Moscow's busy ring road is planned, which threatens to paralyse the city. Participants say the authorities are trying to prevent the carriers from reaching the capital (the protest's coordinators have been detained; mass checks on trucks using access roads are being carried out; clashes with the police have taken pace). This topic is being ignored in the government media. The president's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin is being informed about the situation, but the protesters' demands have not reached him. The Speaker of the Duma Sergei Naryshkin has supported the appeal to the President to abolish the 'Platon' system.

Commentary

- The drivers' protest is one of the largest and most extensive protests by workers on economic grounds in Russia in recent years. This type of self-organisation in Russia is difficult due to the lack of independent trade unions. In addition, citizens who participate in protests are discouraged by the potentially high personal costs (most often, the authorities respond to such demonstrations by layoffs, lawsuits, and even arrests and beatings). The scale of the protest has been determined by the number of the drivers as a professional group, their networking ability, and their determination in the face of the potential loss of their livelihood.
- The intended recipient of their demands is President Putin, suggesting that the protesters are aware that in the Russian political system, direct intervention by the head of state is the most effective, and often the only way of solving problems. The protesters are offering the president the opportunity to play the role of the 'good tsar' and consolidate his image as 'father of the nation'. It is therefore likely that in the coming days the protest

will be quietened down thanks to some kind of intervention by Putin. The drivers are in fact one of the professional groups upon whose support the Putin regime is based (the patriotically-minded manual workers are being contrasted with the pro-Western intellectuals). It would not be in the Kremlin's interests to antagonise them any further.

- However, the lack of response from the authorities and the attempts to prevent the protesters from assembling may lead to the radicalisation of the drivers, which increases the risk of clashes with police. On the other hand, significant concessions from the Kremlin may encourage demonstrations by representatives of other professions. The authorities are able to effectively pacify 'spot' protests, although a build-up of demonstrations based on economic factors in times of a deepening financial crisis may pose a serious challenge for them.