

New political protests in Moscow and the government's harsh response

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On 27 July, people took to the streets in the centre of Moscow in protest against preventing opposition candidates from taking part in the election to the Moscow City Duma (a local legislative authority) scheduled for 8 September. The demonstration had not been authorised by the government. According to estimates provided by independent organisations, the total number of demonstrators reached around 15,000 (3,500 according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs). Even though the streets were blocked by massive police and National Guard forces, the protesters dispersed in large groups across Moscow and continued the protests until evening. Some of them marched past the FSB headquarters, the Lubyanka Building, chanting the slogan 'away with the Chekist government'. 1,373 people were detained and at least 25 were injured as a consequence of the heavy-handed intervention by law enforcement officials. Several of the would-be candidates to Moscow Duma had been detained before the demonstrations began (Ilya Yashin, Lyubov Sobol and Dmitry Gudkov, amongst others). Alexei Navalny, the co-organiser of the demonstration on 20 July, who had been detained a few days earlier, was taken to hospital with severe allergy symptoms on 28 July. Opposition sources claim that the politician might have been poisoned.

Commentary

- The government's harsh response to the demonstration (using violence to disperse the protesters) fits in with its standard practices of responding to unauthorised assemblies, aimed at discouraging people from participating in them. The belief that the public should remain convinced that there is no alternative to the present governance model predominates among Russian decision-makers. According to this logic, opposition candidates should not be permitted to participate in elections (when Alexei Navalny was allowed to run for the position of Moscow's mayor in 2013, he stood a real chance of defeating the government's candidate). The Russian government is more afraid of showing weakness than undermining its public legitimacy. This tactic has failed to produce the desired results, proof of which is the growing number of protests and the ever stronger determination of protestors. The record-high number of protesters detained on 27 July suggests that the Kremlin is concerned about this trend.

- The significant number of protesters, by Russian standards, and their reaction to the measures taken by law enforcement agencies is a manifestation of the mounting public frustration resulting from the Kremlin's domestic policy. It is above all a consequence of the inept management of the public sphere by the state administration at various levels. So far, mainly social and ecological issues have dominated the protest agenda. However, as the Moscow protests in July indicate, political issues can also provoke public discontent, among them the government's indifference to even maintaining the pretence of a real election process in the capital city. In Moscow the degree of support for the 'party of power', United Russia, is the lowest in the country (22%, according to the governmental public opinion research centre WCIOM).
- Given this context, it is very likely that the protest voting scenario seen during the regional elections last year will be repeated in Moscow. In 2018, mainly due to public dissatisfaction with pension system reform, the Kremlin-backed candidates lost the gubernatorial elections in four Russian regions. Considering Moscow's significance in Russian domestic policy, a similar scenario implies a much graver political risk for the Kremlin, given the context of the national parliamentary election scheduled for 2021. Thus, further escalation of violence from law enforcement agencies, preventive detentions and intimidation of dissatisfied citizens, especially in the period surrounding the regional elections in September this year, should be expected.