

Russia: mass protests in defence of Navalny

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On 23 January, unsanctioned rallies in solidarity with the arrested opposition activist Alexei Navalny took place in over 120 Russian cities. In total, they brought together between 110,000 and 160,000 participants, which was the largest unsanctioned protest in the country's post-Soviet history. For many participants this was their first ever involvement in a protest rally. The immediate causes of the demonstration were the opposition leader's arrest upon his return to the country and the YouTube video made by Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, tarnishing Vladimir Putin himself and exposing the scale of his ostentatious wealth and corruption within his inner circle.

The authorities seemed surprised by the scope of the demonstrations, the more so as they had previously taken a number of preventive measures to discourage citizens from participation. Waves of repression are expected in the coming weeks to prevent the protests from continuing. The Kremlin fears that the protests may escalate, as in the case of Belarus, and that growing social discontent could affect the course of the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2021.

Background to the protests

The direct reasons why Russians took to the streets were Navalny's arrest (along with the prospect of a long prison sentence) and the YouTube video released on 19 January by his Anti-Corruption Foundation, about the impressive palace erected for Putin in Gelendzhik on the Black Sea coast. It is the first of the foundation's numerous reports to take such a hard swing directly at the president.

The video, entitled 'A palace for Putin. The story of the biggest bribe' meticulously analyses the cogwheels of corruption centred around Putin. Most of the video is devoted to the Black Sea residence – actually belonging to the president, but formally registered in the name of fake owners. The report contains already known information, but presents it in a splashy and witty way and adds a number of new details, including a visualisation of the interior, staggering with its gigantomania and grotesque splendour (the cost of the complex is estimated to be 100 billion roubles, which is almost \$1.4 billion). One item among the luxurious furnishings, a toilet brush which cost €700 (about 63,000 roubles, which exceeds the value of the average monthly salary in most Russian regions) has become a meme. The video offers a compelling psychological portrait of Putin: a man obsessed with getting rich at the expense of society and amassing an absurd amount of wealth in order to lavish it on his kin. Some parts of the video even ridicule the president openly, thus undermining the traditional quasi-sacral image of the Russian ruler.

The material went viral and caused a wave of not only indignation but also mockery. Navalny's arrest and the repression of his associates sparked interest in the video, allowing it to reach over 90 million views (as of 26 January) and breaking records for popularity of internet posts. It also reverberated around the social network TikTok, which is especially popular among school students. Materials with the #Navalny hashtag have had over 200 million views there, and numerous recordings have been made showing students demonstrating against the authorities, including taking Putin's portraits down from school walls and, in some cases, replacing them with images of the opposition leader.

The authorities' preventive measures

In the days leading up to the protests, the Kremlin counteracted on two levels. Firstly, a series of preventive detentions and arrests were carried out in Moscow and other Russian regions, primarily among Navalny's associates. These were formally justified as being a response to their calls for unsanctioned demonstrations. Some of the detainees were sentenced to several days in arrest. Law enforcement officers also made preventive visits to other opposition figures, social activists and journalists, and warned them against taking part in such gatherings. Secondly, propaganda measures were taken to discredit the protests in the eyes of the public and to intimidate potential participants (for example, some universities warned students that they could be expelled for taking part in 'illegal' demonstrations). The prosecutor's office and *Roskomnadzor* (the government media control agency) also demanded, under threat of punishment, that content "calling minors to participate in illegal protests" be removed from social networks. On the day of the demonstration, law enforcement officers throughout Russia were put on alert, and police and Rosgvardia units were deployed in advance in city centres.

The course of the demonstration

As in previous years, the government did not adopt a unified, coherent response strategy. The showcase suppression of demonstrations on a massive, nationwide scale was abandoned, and the responses were adjusted to the developments in local protest actions, leaving decisions in this area to regional authorities, primarily local structures of the Interior Ministry or Rosgvardia. The internet was conspicuously jammed at the protest sites, both to prevent the demonstrators from coordinating their actions and independent media from reporting the interventions by government forces. While many cases of violent detentions and beatings of demonstrators were reported in Moscow and Saint Petersburg (there were also occasional clashes between participants and officers, which is rare in opposition protests in Russia), the actions in some other cities (Irkutsk, Tambov, Perm) were relatively peaceful. During the protests, a record number of people were detained – over 3400, including 300 minors. In many cases, violations of the epidemic regulations were given as formal grounds for detention, while in others the justifications included violations of legislation on public gatherings, on public order, or resisting law enforcement services. According to reports to date, a significant number of detainees were released from police stations quite quickly. By 25 January, at least a dozen criminal cases had been initiated. The charges include using force against officers, destruction of property (both crimes are punishable by up to five years in prison), and hooliganism (the maximum sentence is seven years).

Protests on an unprecedented scale: the reasons why

These were the largest unsanctioned protests in post-Soviet Russia. Hitherto, the only actions with a similar size of participants were those organised with the prior consent of the authorities, where law enforcement services refrained from violence. What is noteworthy is the unprecedented gathering of citizens outside the traditional centres of protest, Moscow and Saint Petersburg (the most frequently quoted estimates of numbers in the two cities' protests are 15,000–40,000 and up to 35,000 respectively). The authorities seemed surprised by the scale of the demonstrations. Even those commentators inclined towards the opposition did not expect significant public gatherings, given the pandemic, the low temperatures within most of the country's territory (during the demonstration in Yakutsk the temperature dropped to around -50°C), as well as the citizens' clearly passive attitude during 2020 and the risks involved in participating in such events.

The protests unified people with different views; some of them do not consider themselves political supporters of Navalny. It seems that they were united mostly by the idea of justice, understood as harsh criticism of both gross income inequality and the lawlessness symbolised by the persecution of Navalny himself. Contrary to the propaganda spread by the authorities, the largest group among the protesters were not minors, even though Navalny's case has gained enormous recognition on social networks popular among young people. According to the results of surveys conducted during the Moscow action, schoolchildren accounted for no more than 10% of the protesters, while adults prevailed, including older people. Many participants admitted that they were attending an opposition event for the first time; in Moscow the share of such people was estimated at over 40%. This may indicate that the social base of opponents to the regime is broadening.

The relatively high turnout should be explained by the indignation at the ostentatious arrest of the opposition leader and the abuse of power clearly presented in his video, especially against the backdrop of the government's inept fight against the pandemic and the systematic decline in standards of living over recent years. Most likely, the trends in public sentiment, which had so far been revealed on a limited scale at the local level, have been aggravated: growing discontent with the dysfunctional system of state governance, disillusionment with the lack of prospects for economic development, a demand for change, and a growing awareness of civil rights. These sentiments have so far not been reflected in public opinion polls (declared support for Putin remains at over 60%, although these results should be treated with caution, as many people are afraid to reveal their real views), but they can be perceived in more in-depth sociological studies. A key factor was Navalny's return to Russia on 17 January, despite facing a prison sentence and even a potential threat to his life. In the eyes of many demonstrators, including those who are not Navalny's unquestioned supporters, his fearless attitude towards the government raises hopes of a new quality in Russian politics and the empowerment of society, especially when juxtaposed to the attitude of President Putin, who has remained protected and isolated by the security services during the pandemic.

Forecast

It is unlikely that the demonstrations will force the Kremlin to mitigate their actions against Navalny; he will most likely be sentenced to prison on 2 February (see [Navalny arrested upon his return to Russia](#)). This in turn may fuel further protests; at the same time, the scale of the public reaction is likely to improve Navalny's personal safety as the most important political

prisoner in Russia today.

For the time being, there are no signs that the authorities are preparing for brutal, mass-scale persecution along Belarusian lines, but large-scale repressions may begin in the coming weeks. The government has a number of tools at its disposal to identify demonstrators after the protests ended, such as facial recognition systems and analysis of data from communications operators. Dispersing the repression may weaken its media impact and thus put a lid on the negative public reaction. At the same time, the repression will serve to reduce the turnout at the next demonstrations, which are already being scheduled.

The demonstrations on 23 January were an explosion of social disappointment and discontent which had remained latent for a long time, and are probably only the first stage in the confrontation between the authorities and the disappointed citizens. At this stage it is not possible to predict the intensity of further protests. They may influence the course of the September parliamentary elections in a way which is unfavourable for the Kremlin; however, they may also be effectively contained, especially if the authorities are ready to react more violently to the upcoming demonstrations. Protests, along with the mobilisation of the anti-Kremlin electorate, are the key elements of the political strategy being pursued by Navalny and his team. It is aimed at breaking the traditional pattern of passivity in Russian society through convincing citizens that the management of the state is deeply dysfunctional and the ruling elite is outrageously corrupt. At the same time Navalny points out that an alternative to the current system has emerged. While the opposition's main challenge will be to keep the opponents of the regime together despite the repression and the natural exhaustion of the demonstrators' determination, the challenge for the Kremlin will be to counter the protest movement stirred by the government's inept dealing with the pandemic and the deteriorating standards of living, coupled with the growing demand for change.

However, we should not expect the wave of indignation sparked by the allegations of corruption against Putin to lead to an immediate and massive-scale mobilisation of those opposing the government which could threaten the stability of the regime. At this stage the discontent of Russian society and its disillusionment with the ruling elite, which have emerged in many attitudes and statements, including on the Internet, are rarely combined with any expressions of readiness for open confrontation with the government. The public frustration at Russia's economic, social and political decline is often latent, yet the various scandalous and outrageous decisions taken by those in power have exposed it, as was the case with Navalny's arrest and his disclosure of information that thoroughly discredits the president. However, the majority of citizens are afraid of repression, and this may lower their involvement in active protest, which the authorities will exploit.

The popularity of the Putin video also demonstrates the progressive erosion of his once attractive image as a leader. While he was previously perceived as a strong, tough and just politician, he is now increasingly portrayed as an ageing ruler, out of touch with reality. One source of the discontent is his rigorous isolation under pandemic conditions, earning him the nickname of 'the junker in the bunker'. In the long run, the discrediting of the president by Navalny's video may serve as an important catalyst in delegitimising the regime in the eyes of the public.