

Mass protests in Russia in the shadow of repression

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On 31 January, further protests called by Alexei Navalny's associates were sparked off in dozens of Russian cities. According to available estimates, tens of thousands of people took part in the demonstrations, despite a campaign of harassment by the authorities and the unprecedented actions taken by law enforcement bodies, including the blockade of large city centres. Over 5400 participants were detained during the action, more than during the demonstrations on 23 January. In the days preceding the latest protests, the authorities preventively detained most of Navalny's associates, some of whom remain in custody. During the action, the security forces' behaviour was notably more brutal. The opposition is planning the next demonstrations for 2 February, when the court is to decide whether Navalny's suspended sentence (handed down in 2014) will be converted into a real prison term.

Although the number of protesters was smaller than a week ago, the wide geographical scope of the actions and their scale in the face of unprecedented repression are signs of persisting discontent among the public. The latter is caused not only by the situation concerning Navalny, but also by the population's declining living standards and a growing sense of injustice. In the short term, the authorities have a whole array of repressive measures to stifle the protests at their disposal. However, they do not have the capacity or political will to solve the problems causing the public's discontent, which will thus continue to re-emerge in the future.

A protest without leaders

The protests on 31 January took place in dozens of Russian cities. The headcount was often difficult to estimate, primarily due to their dispersed nature. This was the result of an unprecedented mobilisation of police and Rosgvardia forces, the blockade of city centres (in Moscow, a total of 10 metro stations were closed, and overground traffic in the regions adjacent to the Kremlin was blocked), and the restrictions placed on pedestrians. According to observers' assessments, the number of demonstrators was smaller than on 23 January. Moscow (6000-8000), St Petersburg (7000-14,000), Novosibirsk (5000) and Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, Ufa and Samara (a few thousand each) saw the largest numbers of protesters. Gatherings of more than 500 people were recorded in Irkutsk, Tyumen, Krasnoyarsk, Omsk and Vladivostok.

In Moscow, the organisers chose a symbolic place for the action – the Lubyanka Square, in front of the Federal Security Service headquarters. However, due to the blockade of the city centre, including the closure of the surrounding metro stations, the participants had to change their route several times, and scattered around the city centre. At the end of the

protest, some demonstrators marched in a column to the Matrosskaya Tishina detention facility where Navalny is being held. Due to the detention and isolation of many of his associates, the action in the capital had no leaders (similar to the earlier environmental protests and the political protest in Khabarovsk). However, thanks to coordination through the Telegram messenger, a significant number of participants were able to react flexibly to the situation, which proves the demonstrators' potential for self-organisation.

Throughout Russia more than 5400 people were detained (1800 in Moscow, 1200 in St Petersburg), which is a record in relation to last week's events. The detainees include a large number of journalists (82 in total throughout Russia, more than were arrested on 23 January), observers and even a member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, Nikolai Svanidze. Just like a week ago, the law enforcement officers often reacted violently, and many detainees were beaten. In numerous cases the police used tear gas and tasers. After the intervention, the Investigative Committee initiated new criminal proceedings under the article on the violation of sanitary and epidemiological regulations (Article 236 of the Criminal Code); further cases against specific individuals will probably be opened in the coming days.

The government takes preventive and propaganda actions

In the week preceding the 31 January demonstrations, the authorities took a number of preventive measures. Routine warnings of penalties for participating in 'illegal' protests, for 'involving minors' and posing a sanitary risk during the pandemic (all punishable by up to several years in prison) were accompanied by a wave of detentions, arrests and searches. These mainly affected Navalny's associates (some were arrested immediately after the end of their previous detention periods), but also other activists and oppositionists in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia. Among other acts, Navalny's flats were searched, as were the Navalny Live studio and the headquarters of his Anti-Corruption Foundation in Moscow. Each time, a whole series of regulations were violated: the police often broke into premises and blocked lawyers' access to the sites. Large-scale 'preventative talks' were also conducted with activists, journalists and students in an attempt to discourage them from participating in the protests. More than 20 criminal cases have been launched in connection with the events of 23 January. The entire state media machine has been involved in the campaign to discredit the demonstrators, and MPs and other officials openly demonstrated their solidarity with the law enforcement institutions. Some of the protesters detained on 23 January were forced to make public self-criticisms, which were filmed and published online; such methods to humiliate opponents have previously been used by the authorities in Chechnya. The first cases of students being expelled from universities for taking part in the demonstrations on 23 January have also been reported.

The authorities have also been trying to counteract the impact of Navalny's video about Putin's palace in Gelendzhik, which was the catalyst for the protests (it now has over 100,000,000 views on YouTube; according to statistics provided by the BBC, at least 20,000,000 people in Russia have watched it). However, the routine denials by the authorities, mainly Kremlin spokesman, have been rather clumsy, perfunctory and unconvincing. Arkady Rotenberg, a long-time friend of the president and a businessman who has made huge profits from public procurement, finally 'confessed' to owning the palace, which was met with further scepticism online.

Erosion of public support and a creeping political crisis

The scale of the mobilisation and the methods used by the law enforcement bodies show that the authorities have learnt some lessons from last week's protests. The repressive apparatus was employed on a larger scale than before, and the intensified brutality was intended to intimidate the protesters. However, the recent actions, the accompanying online discussions and a number of other signs prove that – for the time being – this strategy has not deterred the majority of demonstrators. What is more, despite the risks and personal costs, a large percentage of the protesters are 'newcomers' to opposition actions, which may suggest a broadening of the protests' social base. It can be assumed that there is even a higher number of dissatisfied but passive citizens who have not taken to the streets, but who got disillusioned in the authorities over the last year – due both to the negligible state aid during the pandemic, and to the recent events surrounding Navalny. In this sense, what Navalny has done – his return to Russia, which ended with his arrest, and the publication of his video about Putin's palace – have served as a catalyst exposing the public's long-standing and latent discontent, including disapproval of the Kremlin's social policy, the impoverishment of the population, the lack of any prospects for development, and the growing repression.

The government may escalate its repressive activities over the coming weeks, with the intention of demonstrating its strength to both the public and the broader elite. A surge of violence can be expected against opponents of the regime, as well as harsh sentences for the accused, especially the activists around Navalny. It is very likely that the universities will be pressured to expel students participating in the protests. The risk of an ostentatious crackdown on Navalny himself is growing. In addition to his suspended sentence in the Yves Rocher case, which could be converted to up to three and a half years of imprisonment, he is facing a sentence for allegedly embezzling the funds raised for his Anti-Corruption Foundation, among others (up to 10 years in prison; the case was initiated at the end of December 2020).

However, while the authorities may temporarily suppress the street protests, or the demonstrators' fatigue may even extinguish them in the upcoming weeks, the deeper roots of discontent will remain unresolved, and may manifest themselves on different scales on future occasions. Other social irritants are likely to accumulate: the violence against peaceful demonstrators may be condemned, or those detained and imprisoned may be publicly defended.

There are numerous indications that this is the most serious political crisis of Putin's time in office, although in the immediate future it will probably remain at a low level of intensity. For the time being, social discontent has not yet reached a critical level which could ignite a turning point, and as yet no signs of disloyalty to President Putin have been expressed within the ruling elite or the law enforcement bodies.