Russia's spring of discontent – a threat to Putin?

The recent protests in Russia are the largest since the 2011-2012 demonstrations over alleged electoral fraud. They reflect widespread discontent with longstanding problems such as endemic corruption exacerbated by an economic downturn, but are unlikely to topple Putin’s regime.

Anti-corruption and other protests are spreading across Russia

President Vladimir Putin’s grip on power has seemed stronger than ever lately. Since Crimea was annexed in 2014 his approval ratings have remained at over 80%, and in September 2016 the ruling United Russia party scored a record high majority in an election whose outcome was never in doubt. All this contrasts sharply with the controversy surrounding the preceding parliamentary elections in 2011, when the party was accused of massive electoral fraud, precipitating widespread protests. However, recent unrest is threatening to stir the usually placid surface of Russian domestic politics once again.

Thousands are taking to the streets across Russia in anti-corruption protests

On 2 March 2017, opposition politician Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation released a video alleging that Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev had amassed huge wealth by corrupt means. Building on the success of the video, which as of May 2017 had been watched over 20 million times on YouTube, the foundation held rallies in nearly 100 cities on 26 March, and again on 12 June, on the Russia Day public holiday. Organisers claim that the March protests were attended by a total of at least 150,000, including 25 to 30,000 in Moscow (police estimates put the numbers at 7,000 to 8,000), making them the largest protests since the 2011-2012 post-election demonstrations. On 12 June, there were 5,000 protestors in Moscow and 3,500 in St Petersburg. Not only the size of protests but also their geographical spread was significant; as well as in the two main cities, major rallies took place in provincial cities where political activism is much rarer.

Other grievances include new taxes, urban redevelopment and employment conditions

Since 2015, truckers have participated in a series of protests against a new road tax which they claim will put them out of business; in March 2017 thousands came out on strike. Meanwhile, on 14 May as many as 60,000 Moscow residents protested against the city’s plan to relocate them from dilapidated Soviet-era apartment blocks, which the authorities claimed would be too expensive to renovate.

Labour protests have become more frequent: after a gradual increase from 205 per year in 2010 to 293 in 2011, in 2014 they jumped to 400 in 2015 and 2016. Over half of these were caused by employers’ failures to pay wages on time.

Russian authorities’ response: repression, but also some concessions

Moscow city authorities refused to authorise the March anti-corruption rallies; in March and again in June, over 1,000 demonstrators were arrested. Navalny was jailed for two weeks in March, and for 30 days in June. State media initially ignored the protests. Despite calls by the opposition Communist Party and others to investigate the allegations against Medvedev, presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed those accusations as a fabrication by a convicted criminal (referring to Navalny’s suspended sentence for embezzlement); he also claimed that organisers had bribed young people to take part.

At the same time, some concessions have been made. Following the truckers’ protests, the government delayed the introduction of its new road tax, and a subsequent proposed increase in the tax was scaled back...
from 100% to 25%. The Moscow City Council is offering those affected by relocation additional guarantees of compensation. Protests on both issues are continuing, though on a smaller scale than before; a second rally against Moscow's demolition programme on 28 May 2017 attracted only a fraction of the numbers at the first protests two weeks earlier.

**A deep economic crisis is exacerbating discontent with long-standing problems**

*Russia is experiencing its worst economic downturn for decades*

Endemic corruption, unpopular taxes, controversial urban development schemes and labour disputes are nothing new in Russia, and yet the current protests have attracted more support than usual. Probably the main factor is the country's worst economic downturn since the 1990s. A modest recovery that began in late 2016 has yet to substantially benefit household incomes, which have fallen to a level last seen in 2009. Although relatively few Russians have lost their jobs (unemployment has remained below 6% since 2011), public sector salaries and pensions have been frozen for much of this period. Education and health spending has meanwhile been slashed as the government struggles to contain its budget deficit while pursuing an ambitious rearmament programme. Since 2013, 5 million Russians have fallen below the poverty line.

**Political consequences of the protests**

*Despite little evidence of a major shift in public opinion, Putin may have to consider a leadership reshuffle*

**Putin**: respondents to an April 2017 poll identified rampant corruption and falling living standards as the greatest failures of Putin's presidency – frustrations reflected in calls by anti-corruption demonstrators for him as well as Medvedev to step down, even though Navalny's video does not accuse the president of corruption. However, in the same poll those failures were outweighed by perceived achievements such as 'boosting military capability' and 'strengthening Russia's international position'. The minimal decline in Putin's approval rating (down by just 1%) in April 2017 and the fact that anti-Putin rallies organised in the same month attracted just a few hundred participants suggest that opposition to his rule remains marginal.

If Putin decides to stand for the presidency in 2018 (which seems likely, given that no efforts have yet been made to prepare a successor), recent opinion polls indicate that he is unlikely to face a serious challenge from other contenders. However, low voter turnout could undermine his victory, as was the case in 2016, when over half of eligible voters stayed at home on election day. Recent protests show an apparent correlation between voter turnout and discontent: in March, the cities with the largest anti-corruption rallies were also those where fewest voted in the 2016 parliamentary elections.

**Navalny**: with up to 38% of Russians approving of anti-corruption protests, the rallies were a success for the democratic opposition, just a few months after the crushing defeat of the PARNAS and Yabloko parties in the September 2016 parliamentary elections. Young people in their teens and twenties were particularly well represented; their participation probably reflects Navalny's slick use of social media and the tendency of this age group to seek news online, where pro-opposition views can still be expressed with relative freedom, rather than from pro-Kremlin TV channels, the traditional source of news for older Russians.

However, such success does not automatically translate into political support. Voting intentions for Navalny in the 2018 presidential elections (in the unlikely event of him being allowed to stand as a convicted criminal) have quadrupled since before the rallies, but in May 2017 were still very low at just 2%. As for the younger generation, surveys suggest that despite their willingness to protest, most are apolitical, and insofar as they hold political views at all, are no less conservative than the general population.

**Medvedev**: in line with the historical Russian perception that 'the Tsar is good, the boyars (nobles) are bad', Medvedev has taken the blame for the current grievances. His approval rating has been in decline since the beginning of the economic crisis in early 2014, sinking by a further 10% after Navalny's video to an all-time low of 42%. Putin has stood by Medvedev so far, but may eventually have to look for a new prime minister. United Russia, the ruling party, is hardly any more popular; this did not stop it winning a huge majority in September 2016, with similarly low ratings. Even so, Putin could try to revive flagging support through a new electoral vehicle, such as the All-Russia People’s Front movement set up in 2011.

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**European Parliament position**: an April 2017 resolution on the anti-corruption protests adopted in April 2017 called on the Russian authorities to release Alexei Navalny and other detainees, praised Navalny's efforts to combat corruption, welcomed the protests as a sign of increased political engagement, and deplored restrictions on freedom of assembly and other human rights.