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Russia

Putin's Majority?

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On 2 February, Alexey Navalny was sent to prison for two years and eight months. Legally, the verdict makes no sense: the court replaced his suspended sentence with a real one for failing to check in with the authorities in Russia – while he was recovering from the novichok poisoning in Germany. Politically, Navalny's imprisonment looks even worse: since it came right after the failed assassination attempt, how else to interpret it other than the 'second best option' for the regime? This disregard for optics suggests that the Kremlin is simply unwilling to tolerate Navalny's activities any longer. He must either be imprisoned or assassinated, regardless of the backlash.

The authorities adopted the same stance of open confrontation towards the protests that followed Navalny's arrest. Russian cities were instantly flooded with riot police, the National Guard, plainclothes 'anti-extremist' officers and countless other forces. Central Moscow and St Petersburg were completely shut down: armored vehicles blockaded the streets; metro stations were closed for 'technical reasons'. The 23 January protests set a record, as at least 4,000 people were detained across the country. On 31 January that figure climbed to 5,700. With normal holding facilities chock-full of protesters, new detainees were brought to a migrant detention centre on the outskirts of Moscow. The lack of holding cells is so severe that hundreds of people spent days in police vehicles, prevented from eating or sleeping.

The latest wave of resistance is in many ways unprecedented. Navalny's direct, populist style, his focus on elite corruption and his embrace of social demands (such as raising the minimum wage) have increasingly brought inhabitants of the Russian 'heartland' into the opposition orbit. In that respect, the protests of late January were something of a breakthrough. According to the sociologist Alexandra Arkhipova, who organized a quick survey of the protesters, 39% of 252 people surveyed in Moscow and 47% of 454 people surveyed in St Petersburg on 23 January responded that it was their first protest. In the regions, the number of new participants was likely even higher. Vladimir Zvonovskiy, another researcher who conducted 20 interviews with protesters in Samara, claimed that only a few of his respondents had ever attended such a gathering. Turnout at demonstrations reached its highest ever levels in many smaller cities.

While it was Navalny's investigation and arrest that provoked the protests, only a minority of the protesters could be considered fully fledged 'Navalnists'. According to Arkhipova, 33% in Moscow and 22% in St Petersburg 'fully trusted' Navalny, while the majority (57% in Moscow, 64% in St Petersburg) 'somewhat trusted' him. Zvonovskiy reported that some respondents did not want to replace Putin with Navalny, though they nonetheless craved social change. These findings confirm an obvious fact: despite Navalny's charismatic media persona, the protests have never been solely about him. This cannot be considered 'his' movement. In its current form, the Russian opposition is comprised of disaffected youth, students, workers and white-collar professionals increasingly from outside Moscow.

The political credo that assembled these diverse layers can broadly be defined as 'populist'. From the beginning of his career, when he joined the liberal Yabloko party in 2000, Navalny's attitude toward policies and programmes has been instrumental. Whatever unites and expands the movement is good; whatever sows disagreement and alienates potential allies is bad. This was a stark contrast with Grigory Yavlinsky, the founder and eternal leader of Yabloko, who has always been dogmatic and intolerant, refusing any coalitions with the left (viewed as the heirs of Stalinism) and with other liberals (seen as responsible for the disastrous market reforms of the 1990s, which Yabloko opposed, favouring a more cautious, gradual approach). Navalny's disenchantment with Yabloko – from which he was expelled in 2007 – did not evince a rejection of liberal ideas, but an antipathy toward old-style Russian liberals, who are famously disinclined to form a broad coalition.

It was in pursuit of such a coalition that Navalny began to align himself with the extreme right in the late 2000s, presenting a 'civilized' image of Russian nationalism open to alliances with the liberal opposition. But at the end of 2011, when a wave of mass demonstrations against parliamentary election fraud swept the country, Navalny came to recognize that nationalism – rejected by most of the protest movement – could not be a unifying platform. From that moment on he began to create his own 'political machine', a strongly personalized platform based on the rhetorical confrontation between 'the people' – lacking proper political representation – and the corrupt elite that had consolidated their power within Russia. Throughout the 2010s, this populist attitude informed Navalny's anti-corruption investigations, whose targets were not only state officials, but oligarchs such as Oleg Deripaska. Navalny railed against their acquisition of enormous wealth through the criminal privatization of former Soviet enterprises. Gradually, as Russia's economic crisis deepened and poverty levels rose, Navalny's focus on social inequality and the degradation of the public sector increased. One of his recent flagship projects was the Alliance of Doctors, an independent trade union that called for higher salaries in state health care and denounced the underfunding of hospitals during the pandemic.

None of this means that Navalny has turned left: his social-populist rhetoric, like his former nationalist line, reflects his pragmatic approach. Navalny's personal views seem to be unchanged: he advocates 'normal' capitalism with functioning democracy, a large middle class, and a welfare state capable of smoothing out income inequality. He does not seem to dwell on the difficulty of attaining these goals in a poor, semi-peripheral country without implementing wider structural change. Yet his economic advisors are attuned to this contradiction – and propose to solve it through neoliberal, free-market policies that leave less room for the social protection and inequality reduction than Navalny envisions.

Navalny's populism has always been linked to activist politics: in every one of his videos he urges his audience not to remain passive spectators in anti-corruption investigations, but to take to the streets and struggle for change. Navalny himself has always been at the forefront of this struggle, which bears great personal risks in Russia's authoritarian conditions. Navalny has been arrested and imprisoned for short periods after virtually every street protest (in total he has already spent around one year behind bars), and his younger brother Oleg has been sentenced to three years on trumped-up charges. Navalny's decision to return to Russia and accept an indeterminate jail sentence is the latest example of his willingness to pay a personal price for his politics.

It is difficult to predict how the current street protests will develop. On the one hand, the January demonstrations saw the emergence of a new generation of activists ready to embark on a lengthy war of attrition. On the other hand, the furore surrounding Navalny's arrest is bound to peter out, and many protesters will be mindful of losing their jobs or going to jail. Yet the authorities' attempt to suppress the movement – through Navalny's harsh sentence, the house arrest of his key associates and the systematic intimidation of his supporters – takes aim at a symptom, not a cause. These measures are based on the Kremlin's theory that protest is merely a 'technology' imported from the West, which can itself be defeated by technical rather than political solutions. In reality, state repression will only defer a looming political crisis, which is likely to hit during the 2021–2024 election cycle.

This September's Duma elections will be decisive for Putin's re-election in 2024. The Kremlin strategy for both ballots is rooted in the concept of 'Putin's majority': a silent mass of supporters who will ensure the absolute parliamentary dominance of United Russia, along with another triumphant victory for Putin himself. However, the January protests have cast doubt on this supposedly unbeatable voting bloc, which is threatened not only by those who took to the streets, but by all those who watched the Navalny investigation and expressed cautious sympathy for the protesters. The lack of social prospects, the pandemic-fuelled decline in living standards, and the frustration with an irremovable and unaccountable political regime will continue to dilute Putin's support over the coming years. This will create a new political configuration in which the current system of 'managed democracy' may become untenable.

Besides street protests, Navalny and his team have developed their own electoral weapon – a highly advanced tactical voting scheme called 'smart voting'. Though elections in Russia are tightly controlled through electoral fraud

and the removal of independent candidates, the scale of malpractice varies across the regions. In many cases, it is possible to drive United Russia out of local parliaments by voting for the second most popular candidate in single-member districts. This is precisely the idea behind 'smart voting': votes mobilized by Navalny would be added to the second most popular candidate's organic support, producing a narrow victory over the United Russia candidate. Of course, the problem is that the other Russian political parties are usually no less subservient to the Kremlin, so the benefits of electing them are slight. Nevertheless, Navalny's support sows the seed of ambition among the existing parties' mid-level operatives. Ironically, this most applies to the Communist Party of Russia (KPRF), as it is still the second most popular party nationwide and the chief beneficiary of 'smart voting'. Gennady Zyuganov, the KPRF leader, demonstrated his cowardly subservience to the regime by denouncing Navalny and the protest movement in January; yet Valery Rashkin, the head of the Moscow KPRF, broke ranks and defended Navalny against the crackdown. Communist deputies of the Moscow city parliament even travelled to the airport to meet Navalny upon his return to Russia. The reason is simple: 'smart voting' has increased KPRF representation in the Duma from five to ten seats out of 45. Navalny and his team have already promised to unleash this scheme in the upcoming federal parliamentary elections, in a move which could exacerbate the current instability.

The Russian left – primarily its radical extra-parliamentary wing – is approaching the crisis in a state of organizational weakness and internal division. The protests that began in January once again revealed two opposing views on left strategy. According to the first, Navalny and Putin are simply the representatives of different ruling class factions, and the tens of thousands who came out to protest are therefore pawns in someone else's game. They should either be radicalized (by urging them to abandon the protests for smaller Marxist grouplets), or simply ignored as irrelevant to a genuine (but currently absent) class struggle. The second position, which most left-wing activists have taken, stresses the need to participate in the democratic protest movement, bearing in mind that it transcends the figure of Navalny. The composition of the recent protests – which have drawn in a large number of new participants whose main demand is social justice – opens up a space for socialist ideas. This youth-driven movement, centred on a rejection of social inequality and elite privilege, is far more amenable to the left than, for example, the 'fair elections' rallies a decade ago. No one can guarantee its success; yet among the broad spectrum of protesters there is more demand than ever for democracy and socialism.

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