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Dollbaum, Jan Matti

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dollbaum, J. M. (2022). Protest and Opposition: Short-Term Depression, Long-Term Uncertainty. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 281, 14-15. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000539633>

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ANALYSIS

Protest and Opposition: Short-Term Depression, Long-Term Uncertainty

By Jan Matti Dollbaum (University of Bremen)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000539633

Abstract

Protest and opposition in Russia have had a complex and at times conflictual relationship. But as elections have gradually lost their competitiveness, protest has become increasingly important. This article presents educated guesses about the future of the relationship between protest and opposition in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. In the short term, the regime's clearly signaled readiness to quell any form of resistance suggests that protest is unlikely. In the long term, however, changing socio-economic conditions have the potential to reshuffle the protest landscape and generate incentives among elites to address social grievances, perhaps even giving new life to the loyal opposition. Protest, therefore, might not only re-emerge, but also usher in a new phase of political opposition.

Introduction

Protest and opposition in Russia have had a complex and at times conflictual relationship. In the past, not all protesters saw themselves as opposition. Those who protected parks and squares or addressed social ills often abstained from asking questions on the distribution of power. Even participants in the "For Fair Elections" protests in 2011–13 often saw themselves as outside of politics because, after all, they merely wanted the authorities to respect the rules of the game. For their part, those who consider themselves part of the political opposition only gradually came to embrace protest as a serious tool in the repertoire of political action.

Professionalizing Protest

But as elections gradually lost their competitiveness, protest became increasingly important, with Aleksei Navalny famously professionalizing the strategic use of rallies to gain name recognition, motivate activists, and build his political organization. This process, in turn, put protest in authorities' spotlight: in proportion as it grew in importance for oppositional actors, it came to be treated as a threat in and of itself. Marking the pre-war climax of this spiral of escalation, the year 2021 saw

authorities crack down not only on demonstrators, but also on independent media and all other entities involved in organizing, facilitating or simply covering protest.

We do not know what impact Russia's war against Ukraine will have on the relationship between protest and opposition. But given the developments sketched above, we can make a few educated guesses, which can be roughly divided into short-term and longer-term outcomes.

Short-Term Scenario

In the coming weeks and months, the trend outlined above is likely to accelerate. Putin's recent talk of "cleaning society" of "national traitors" further frees authorities on all administrative levels to use repression against any form of public dissent (be it narrowly political or not), as long as its protagonists are successfully cast as treacherous elements. This will make the use of protest—a form of political engagement that is public by definition—yet more dangerous and therefore less likely. Moreover, the clampdown on all forms of organized non-systemic opposition means that hardly any actors are left to protest strategically. The systemic Communist Party (KPRF), which in the past has used protest to draw attention to its

demands and has sometimes supported aggrieved citizens, has fallen completely in line and is currently too busy demonstrating its loyalty to be a force for protest. For a while, therefore, the regime's treatment of protest and opposition as similarly threatening will suppress both, thereby continuing developments that began years ago.

Long-Term Scenario

In the medium to long term, however, the coming economic crisis may well shake these established patterns. Mounting grievances—resulting from rising food prices, unpaid wages, and unemployment—may push new groups of people onto the streets, people who have never protested before and have thus never experienced repression. Moreover, as stability erodes, and with it an important part of Putin's claims to legitimacy, the war's consequences might turn larger swathes of people against him personally. And although systemic opposition forces themselves will likely not call for protest, strong independent mobilization could make the parties' elites (most notably the KPRF) rethink the bargain with the Kremlin that has secured them a place in the system in exchange for loyalty. Protest, it therefore seems,

could not only re-emerge, but also usher in a new phase of political opposition. This scenario is unlikely but cannot be ruled out. If it becomes reality, the Kremlin will need to decide to what extent it is willing to escalate repression against the unemployed and hungry—people who are quite difficult to paint as “national traitors.”

Conclusion

Given the regime's clearly signaled readiness to quell any form of resistance, the coming weeks and months are unlikely to see much protest. Changing socio-economic conditions, however, have the potential to reshuffle the protest landscape and generate incentives among elites to address social grievances, perhaps even giving new life to the loyal opposition. That said, even if the systemic parties try to exploit potential social protest politically, it is far from guaranteed that this will bring an end to the war. If the regime's response to social mobilization includes costly concessions like higher social payments, however, this might put further strain on the state's finances, which will increase the pressure on the regime more broadly. In this scenario, volatile times lie ahead.

About the Author

Dr Jan Matti Dollbaum is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Bremen. His research interests include protest and social movements in democratic and authoritarian regimes. Together with Morvan Lallouet and Ben Noble, he recently published the first book-length study on Aleksei Navalny.

ANALYSIS

Netoscope: A New Black Box Through Which the Russian Government Controls Content Dissemination?

By Liudmila Sivetc (Turku University) and Mariëlle Wijermars (Maastricht University)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000539633

Abstract

Russia has increasingly adopted policies that leverage the power of private infrastructure owners, including algorithmic gatekeepers, to achieve more effective, but less easily perceptible, control over online content dissemination. This article analyzes the Netoscope project, which has compiled a database of Russian domain names suspected of malware, botnet or phishing activities. Within the framework of this project, federal censor Roskomnadzor cooperates with Yandex (which downgrades listed domains in its search results), Kaspersky, and foreign partners. The article concludes that non-transparency creates possibilities for misuse of the project.

History and Functionality of the Netoscope Project

Over the last decade, Russia has increasingly adopted policies to leverage the power of private infrastructure

owners, including algorithmic gatekeepers, to achieve more effective, but less easily perceptible, control over online content dissemination (Sivetc 2020, 2021; Wijermars, 2021). One example of this kind of coopera-