



RUSSIA UNDER PUTIN: 20 YEARS OF PROTESTS

Report by the Institute of Modern Russia

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

- Executive Summary 4**
- Introduction 5**
- PROTEST: A TIMELINE 7**
 - The Yeltsin years: Labor disputes and elite competition
 - 2000-2004: The state re-emerges
 - 2004-2008: Laying claim to the streets
 - 2008-2012: Mass protests emerge
 - 2012-2019: Corruption is the new protest agenda
- REGIME RESPONSES TO PROTEST 15**
 - Laws prohibiting unsanctioned protest
 - Administrative barriers to lawful protest
 - Discouraging protest through propaganda
 - Pre-emptive arrest
 - Internet restrictions
- PROTEST AND ART 20**
- FORWARD-LOOKING 24**
 - Policy recommendations
- TAKEAWAYS 26**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the protest dynamics in Russia over the last twenty years. By clearly describing the frequency, volume, and nature of protest, as well as regime responses to it, the report helps to correct misleading narratives about the nature of state society relations in one of the world's most high-profile authoritarian regimes.

Over the last twenty years, protest in Russia has transformed from being driven by economic grievances to being motivated by political demands, while local issues have remained important to protest participants. In the 1990s, Russia's regions saw the most protest activity as labor strikes and road blockades were regularly used by workers of various sectors in response to wage arrears. Economic recovery and the centralization of political power in the Kremlin reduced both the demand for and the supply of protest during Vladimir Putin's first term in office as president. In his second term, learning from the experience of nearby post-Soviet states going through Color Revolutions, and from the domestic "cash for benefits" protests, the Kremlin began to organize pro-government social movements like *Nashi* ("Ours") and *Molodaya Gvardia* ("Young Guard") to offset the visibility of anti-regime rallies. This had some success, but groups which were marginalized from the formal political process increasingly chose street actions to express themselves during the end of the first decade of the millennium. Although many were surprised by the emergence of massive anti-regime protests in the winter of 2011-2012, protests had become politicized in the years running up to that winter. Since then, large protests attracting between 20,000 and 60,000 people across dozens of cities

in Russia have taken place on issues such as pensions, urban renovation, ecological mismanagement, corruption, elections, and political prisoners. Russians have begun increasingly to connect local concerns over health, infrastructure, and the environment to the broader political situation in the country.

As the protests have evolved, so too has the regime's response. Since 2012, the Kremlin has introduced new or amended existing laws several times to clamp down more severely on unsanctioned rallies, while simultaneously making it difficult for independent organizers to meet administrative regulations in order to hold ones that are, on paper at least, permitted. As a result, detention and prosecution of protest participants has increased. Authorities have also tightened control over the information sphere, using anti-extremism and other laws to block online information about protest events and even disrupt access to mobile internet during them.

Despite these efforts, there is evidence that the public appetite for protest is increasing. More sectors of society, including students, middle-class professionals as well as artists and celebrities, are taking part in protests. For now, the most mobilizing issues remain individual and social: protection of local parks and green spaces, policies that infringe on existing social benefits, and the use of repressive measures against vulnerable people. However, the connection between local grievances and the quality of the political regime is becoming more evident, suggesting that mass protests will continue to be an important feature of Russian politics.

INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Putin has now marked twenty years in power in Russia, occupying the post of president for four terms and of prime minister for one. In those twenty years, Russia left behind the turbulent 1990s, stabilized, and turned outward with an aggressive foreign policy. Within Russia, Putin has built a powerful but highly personalized political system by gradually co-opting political and economic elites and reshaping the relationship between state and society.

In the two decades that Putin has presided over Russia, various narratives—supplied by the Kremlin, policy analysts, and Western media—have emerged to explain the longevity of his regime. One of the most popular relates to the social contract between Putin and Russian citizens, whereby people accept uncompetitive and fraudulent elections, hollow political institutions, limits to their rights, and weak rule of law in exchange for economic prosperity and political stability. More recently, some have argued that the social contract has been amended to offer Russians international prestige—in the form of world-class sporting events and reunification (read annexation) of its neighbors—in exchange for curtailed rights.¹ Another common narrative is that Russians are apolitical and passive.² Despite eco-

nomie hardships and repression, Russians choose to abstain from politics rather than organize and challenge the government. Yet another narrative suggests that Putin is genuinely popular with those who prefer, for historical and cultural reasons, strongman rule. This narrative tends to rely heavily on conceptions about the nature of the “Russian soul,” which makes Russians value order above liberty.³ Lastly, and somewhat contrary to the narrative about Putin’s popularity, the idea that Russia is a “totalitarian” state⁴—a political system that has stamped out opposition and mobilized society in support of the regime—has gained traction among some Western observers, and is used to explain both Putin’s survival and society’s quiescence. These narratives, so ingrained in conversations about Russia that they are often employed without evidence, are of minimal use in developing an authentic understanding of the country.

This report takes the opportunity offered by the twentieth anniversary of Putin’s regime to reflect on one important aspect of Russian politics: protest. Massive protests in Russia made headlines in the Western press in 2011, 2012, 2015, and 2019. Yet these reports have not disrupted misleading narratives about the country. Below, we provide a

¹ Alexander Baunov. (June 15, 2015) “Ever So Great: The Dangers of Russia’s New Social Contract” Carnegie Moscow Center. Available online: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/60401>

² Andrei Kolesnikov. (November 4, 2015) “Putin Thrives on Russian Passivity” *Newsweek*. Available online: <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-thrives-russian-passivity-321066>

³ Ralph Peters. (December 8, 2016) “Vladimir Putin and The Russian Soul” *Strategika*. The Hoover Institution. Available online: <https://www.hoover.org/research/vladimir-putin-and-russian-soul>

⁴ Susan B. Glasser. (October 5, 2017) “Putin’s Russia, guided by its totalitarian past, has no future” *The Washington Post*. Available online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/putins-russia-guided-by-its-totalitarian-past-has-no-future/2017/10/04/0c6a43f8-9fb0-11e7-9c8d-cf053ff30921_story.html

comprehensive timeline of protest in Russia, highlighting important trends over the last twenty years as well as the evolution of regime responses to rallies. Our aim is to lay out a comprehensive and nuanced description of protest politics in Russia.

Protest is an important topic to examine because its patterns reflect the political system in which they take place. Russia's authoritarian system, which combines elements of democratic institu-

tions with authoritarian practices, provides unique opportunities for and constraints on political participation. While election results may be fraudulent and public opinion polls inaccurate, protests are a visible and undeniable statement about political values. We can therefore better understand Russia's political system if we examine when and how people choose to come out onto the streets, as well as what motivates them to do so.

PROTEST: A TIMELINE

The Yeltsin years: Labor disputes and elite competition

Photographs taken in Moscow of crowds gathered in support of democracy and against the conservative putsch in August of 1991 remain powerful and iconic images. Yet the 1990s in Russia were a decade dominated not by demands for civic and political rights, but by labor conflict. Contentious actions were frequent, taking the form of road and rail blockades, hunger strikes, and demonstrations, which peaked toward the end of the millennium when the economy contracted and wage arrears reached an all-time high of 50 trillion rubles.⁵ Miners, factory workers, teachers, and healthcare workers were among the most active protest participants. Their efforts were loosely organized and focused on local issues and material demands. Though widespread, the protests did not evolve into mass movements capable of exerting independent political influence but were instead largely co-opted by competing regional political elites—especially governors—in their negotiations with the federal center.⁶

2000-2004: The state re-emerges

Putin's first term as president saw a sharp decline in protest. Economic recovery coupled with Kremlin policies focused on centralizing and strengthening the state gradually diminished both the demand for and supply of protest. During the redrafting of Russia's Labor Code, the country's largest labor union was brought into closer association with the state, reducing incentives and opportunities for strikes.⁷ The Kremlin also reasserted control over governors and other regional elites, reversing Yeltsin's policy of vesting sov-

eignty in the regions. This made protest less attractive as a tool of negotiation between these elites and the federal center.⁸

2004-2008: Laying claim to the streets

Putin's second term as president witnessed the mobilization of society in support of the state. The idea that civil society should work in cooperation with the state was articulated early on by Putin. In his first address to the Federal Assembly in 2000, Putin described as "false" the notion of a conflict between personal freedoms and state interests, and urged civil society to become a "full partner to the state."⁹ In January 2005, Putin faced the first mass protests of his tenure in response to reforms that replaced Soviet-era in-kind benefits (such as free transportation, medicine, and energy subsidies) with lump-sum cash payouts to pensioners, veterans, and the disabled. By the end of the month, over 100,000 people from 89 regions had come out onto the streets. The government eventually compromised with the protesters and rolled back the scale of the reforms.¹⁰

The "cash for benefits" protests coincided with the end of Ukraine's Orange Revolution, during which mass protests succeeded in overturning the results of a rigged presidential election. Similar protests had already brought down regimes in other so-called Color Revolutions in Serbia and Georgia. After witnessing the potential threatening power of mass mobilization at home and abroad, the Kremlin began a program to co-opt it. The focus was on courting the youth, a group that had played a leading role during the Color Revolutions. The Kremlin organized and financed pro-Kremlin youth movements: *Nashi* and *Molo-*

daya Gvardia.¹¹ These youth movements were meant to pre-empt the emergence of a “Ukraine scenario” by “forcibly preserving” the current political system and filling the streets with a visible pro-regime crowd on demand.¹²

Despite efforts to demobilize the population and channel contentious actions through state-sponsored groups, protests began to re-appear across Russia in the run-up to the 2008 worldwide recession. In 2006, people in 360 towns and cities protested increases in utility prices. That year, car owners also rallied against officials’ often fatal disregard of traffic rules.¹³ A series of so-called “Dissenters’ Marches” took place in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod in late 2006 and early 2007. These marches, though effectively dispersed by the police, represented a turning point when protest became a tool of those excluded from the political process rather than a tool for elite negotiation.

2008-2012: Mass protests emerge

The December 2011 outbreak of the largest protests since the collapse of the USSR took many observers and scholars by surprise. However, protest activity in Russia had been on the rise for

years beforehand, laying the foundation for the “For Fair Elections” (FFE) movement.

From 2008 onward, the number of political protests rose¹⁴ as the nature of protest demands transformed from economic and social grievances to a focus on abstract rights. For example, a group called “Strategy 31” began holding protests in 2009 on the last day of each 31-day month in support of freedom of assembly enshrined in Article 31 of the Russian Constitution.¹⁵ Direct actions associated with labor disputes, such as strikes and blockades, were gradually replaced by more symbolic political demonstrations.¹⁶

Increasingly, protesters also connected local issues to a shared sense of injustice. This was the case with the defense of the Khimki forest movement, which became politicized after attempts by citizens to preserve a protected nature zone outside of Moscow were repeatedly ignored by the local and federal government.¹⁷ The activists went from being concerned about a local green space to challenging the lack of responsiveness offered to them by the regime. In a similar vein, the “blue bucket” movement of car owners staged several motorcades in 2010 throughout Moscow to protest the widespread

⁵ John S. Earle and Klara Z. Sabirianova. (2002) “How Late to Pay? Understanding Wage Arrears in Russia” *Journal of Labor Economic*, Vol. 20 (3): p. 662.

⁶ Graeme Robertson. *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing dissent in post-Communist Russia*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Chapter 2: Protest and Regime in Russia, pp. 40-67.

⁷ Stephen Crowley. (2002) “Comprehending the weakness of Russia’s unions.” *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 10 (2): 230 – 255.

⁸ The Kremlin re-asserted control over regional security and budgetary resources. After the Beslan school siege, direct elections of governors were abolished in favor of a system of presidential appointments which solidified the patron-client relationship between the Kremlin and governors.

⁹ Vladimir Putin. (July 8, 2000) “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly” Available online: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480>

¹⁰ Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman, and Henry Hale. (2014) “The dilemma of hybrid regime governance: Russia from Putin to Putin.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30 (1): p. 10.

¹¹ Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce. (2013) Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers. *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11 (3): 753 – 768.

¹² Tatiana Stanovaya. (26 March 2013) “The Fate of the Nashi Movement: Where Will the Kremlin Youth Go?” Institute of Modern Russia. Available online: <https://imrussia.org/en/politics/420-the-fate-of-the-nashi-movement-where-will-the-kremlins-youth-go>



One of the largest protests against Vladimir Putin's rule took place on February 4, 2012—a few weeks before the presidential election in Russia. Despite cold temperatures, tens of thousands of peaceful protesters took to the streets of Moscow, casting a challenge to his presidential bid. Photo: Ivan Sekretaryov / AP.

and arbitrary use of emergency lights, or *migalki*, by public servants.¹⁸

In December of 2011, the protests against election fraud began almost immediately after the results of the Duma election—in which United Russia apparently won a majority of seats despite its widespread unpopularity—were announced.

Attendance at protests grew rapidly. The first meeting at Moscow's Chistye Prudy metro station on December 5 attracted between 4,000 and 6,000 people.¹⁹ This was followed by several much smaller pro-Kremlin protests and *Nashi* rallies organized in support of the government. However, attempts at monopolizing the streets in support of the regime were unsuccessful. On December 10, approximately 50,000 people demonstrated on Bolotnaya Square in central Moscow.²⁰ Smaller thousands-strong rallies followed on December 17 and 18. On December 24, between 60,000 and 80,000 people gathered on Sakharov Avenue, chanting anti-regime slogans and cheering speeches by opposition leaders. By this time, the protests had spread to many other cities in Russia. A demonstration held on February 4, 2012, in Moscow attracted a crowd of 120,000. More protests with thousands of participants were organized in Moscow and elsewhere throughout February.

On May 6, the so-called "March of Millions," organized to protest Putin's presidential inauguration was violently repressed by police.²¹ Four hundred and forty-nine people were detained²² and dozens would eventually be convicted of

¹³ Ivan Buranov. (13 February 2006) "Drivers protest against Oleg Shcherbisky's verdict: A Ride Action" (*Voditeli protestuyut protiv prigovora Olegu Shcherbinskomu: Aktsiya proyezda*). *Kommersant*. Available online: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/649042>

¹⁴ Tomila Lankina. (2015) "The Dynamics of Regional and National Contentious Politics in Russia: Evidence from a New Dataset." *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 62 (1): 25-44.

¹⁵ Maryana Torocheshnikova. (July 30, 2010) "What is Strategy 31?" *openDemocracy*. Available online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/what-is-strategy-31/>

¹⁶ Graeme Robertson. (2013) "Protesting Putinism: The Election Protests of 2011-2012 in *Broader Perspective: Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 60 (2): 11-23.

¹⁷ Alfred B. Evans Jr. (2012) "Protests and Civil Society in Russia: The Struggle for Khimki Forest." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 45: 233-242.

¹⁸ Miriam Elder. (May 28, 2010) "Moscow's limos halted by blue buckets." *The Guardian*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/28/russia-moscow-blue-buckets-cars>

¹⁹ "Russian election: Hundreds rally against Putin in Moscow" (December 5, 2011), *BBC*. Available online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16042797>

²⁰ Ellen Barry. (December 10, 2011) "Rally Defying Putin's Party Draws Tens of Thousands." *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/world/europe/thousands-protest-in-moscow-russia-in-defiance-of-putin.html>

“DESPITE EFFORTS TO DEMOBILIZE THE POPULATION AND CHANNEL CONTENTIOUS ACTIONS THROUGH STATE-SPONSORED GROUPS, PROTESTS BEGAN TO RE-APPEAR ACROSS RUSSIA IN THE RUN-UP TO THE 2008 WORLDWIDE RECESSION.”

“mass rioting” in one of the largest political trials—known as the “Bolotnaya case”—in modern Russian history. In June 2012, 50,000 protesters marked Russia’s independence day by participating in the “March of Millions,” which went ahead despite raids against protest leaders carried out just days earlier and new punitive fines introduced to discourage protest.²³ Contentious actions declined in the following few years due to repressive measures undertaken by the government and the rise in popularity of the regime that followed the Olympic Games in Sochi, the annexation of Crimea, and the FIFA World Cup.

Some observers were disappointed by the fading of the FFE movement in 2012 and 2013. Nevertheless, the wave of protests had several polit-

ically significant consequences.

First, they helped to launch the national profile of Alexei Navalny, transforming him from a political blogger into a political leader. In subsequent years, he would go on to not only stage dozens of well-attended multicity anticorruption protests but also run for mayor of Moscow and for president.

Second, the protests served as a political awakening for many middle-class Russians and provided opportunities for further participation in organized electoral politics.²⁴ Among the people attending the December 2011 protests were sociologists and political technologists who helped to recruit and train other protest participants to run for local political office in a series of “Schools for Deputies” that continue today.²⁵ This training helped launch the careers of dozens of local politicians in Moscow and would eventually pave the way for mass protests in support of independent candidates in the capital during the summer of 2019.²⁶

Lastly, the detention, abuse, and prosecution of participants at the FFE protests sparked the creation of new organizations that aimed to help protesters. Chief among these organizations is

²¹ Ellen Barry and Michael Schwartz. (May 6, 2012) “Arrests and Violence at Overflowing Moscow Rally.” *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/07/world/europe/at-moscow-rally-arrests-and-violence.html>

²² OVD-Info Report. “Monitoring 2012.” Available online: <http://reports.ovdinfo.org/2012/data/en>

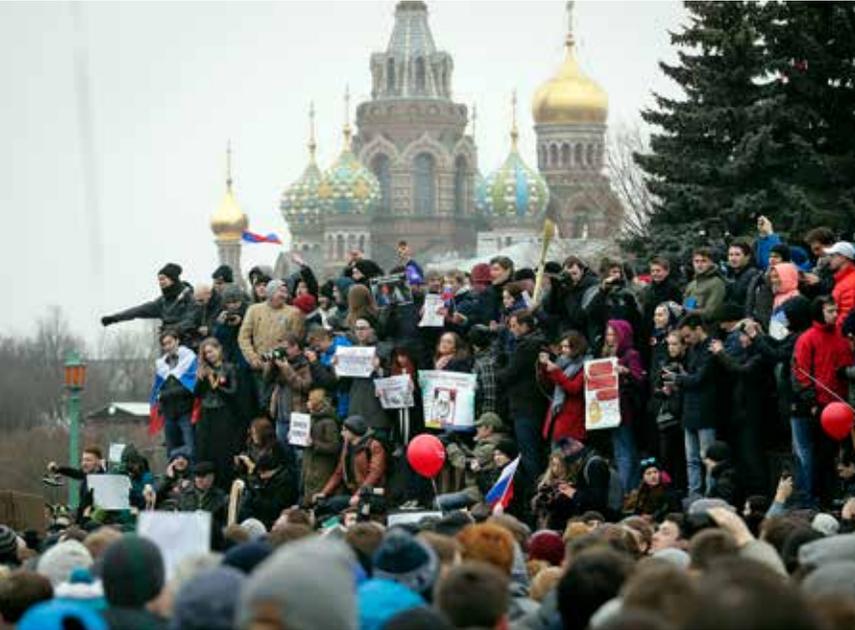
²³ “Russia: The March of Millions” (June 13, 2012). Human Rights Watch. Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/06/13/russia-march-millions>

²⁴ Yana Gorokhovskaia. (January 2018) “Grassroots Capacity Building: Why Municipal Politics in Moscow are Important Signposts of Russia’s Democratic Development.” *Ponars Policy Memo*, No. 502. Available online: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/grassroots-capacity-building-why-municipal-politics-moscow-are-important-signposts-russia>

²⁵ Yana Gorokhovskaia. (2019) “What it takes to win when the game is rigged: The evolution of opposition electoral strategies in Moscow, 2012-2017.” *Democratization*, Vol. 26 (6): 975-992.

²⁶ Yana Gorokhovskaia. (June 17, 2019) “Moscow’s Local Elections: Ghosts, disqualification, and real political competition.” *Perspectives. Eurasianet*. Available online: <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-moscows-local-election-ghosts-disqualification-and-real-political-competition>

²⁷ Adam Taylor. (July 18, 2013) “Protests Hit Moscow After Anti-Putin Activist Alexei Navalny Sentenced to Five Years in Jail.” *Business Insider*. Available online: <https://www.businessinsider.com/protests-in-moscow-after-navalny-conviction-2013-7>



Thousands of Russian young people across the country rallied on March 26, 2017 at the anticorruption protests organized by Alexey Navalny. Photo: Dmitri Lovetsky / AP.

OVD-Info, founded by Grigory Okhotin and Daniil Beilinson in 2011 after they had witnessed protesters being arrested at the first anti-electoral fraud protests in central Moscow. The organization is an independent human rights media project that provides people with the means—through

advice or legal representation—to defend their rights when detained for participating in protests.

2012 – 2019: Corruption is the new protest agenda

Although mass protests on the scale seen in 2011-2012 declined, contentious actions continued throughout Russia during Putin's third and fourth presidential terms. Mobilizations post-2012 were both spontaneous reactions to injustices and coordinated efforts to build political momentum. For example, several thousand people came out in support of Alexei Navalny, immediately after he was convicted of misappropriation in the Kirovles case in July of 2013.²⁷ He was quickly released and his five-year prison sentence commuted to a suspended sentence. After Boris Nemtsov—a prominent oppositionist and politician—was assassinated in central Moscow on February 27, 2015, an anti-war march he had planned was quickly transformed into a memorial march. Between 20,000 and 50,000 people gathered in his memory on March 1, 2015 in central Moscow.²⁸ Nemtsov's memorial march on the fifth anniversary of his death (on February 29, 2020) was attended by 22,200 people pro-

²⁸ "Police counted 21,000 people at the Nemtsov memorial march in Moscow" (*"Politsiya naschitala 21 tys. chelovek na shestvii v pamyat' o Nemtsove v Moskve"*), March 1, 2015. *Interfax*. Available online: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/427196>

²⁹ "Thousands Rally in Moscow, Other Russian Cities to Mark Anniversary of Nemtsov Killing." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-marks-anniversary-killing-of-nemtsov-moscow-petersburg-nizhny-novgorod/30460967.html>

³⁰ Link to video and press release: <https://fbk.info/english/english/post/304/>

³¹ "Detentions at public actions" (*Zaderzhaniya na publichnykh aktsiyakh*). *OVD-Info*. Available online: <https://data.ovdinfo.org/detentions/>

³² Natalya Vasilyeva and Jim Heintz. (June 12, 2017) "Thousands rally across Russia in new challenge to Kremlin" *Associated Press*. Available online: <https://apnews.com/35b2b23545fb4abb8f7e4f86b45b2896/Thousands-rally-across-Russia-in-new-challenge-to-Kremlin>

³³ Yana Gorokhovskaia. (June 12, 2017) "Protesters as Patriots: A New Narrative for Russia." *Eurasianet*. Available online: <https://eurasianet.org/protesters-as-patriots-a-new-narrative-for-russia>

³⁴ "Zaderzhaniya na publichnykh aktsiyakh." *OVD-Info*. Available online: <https://data.ovdinfo.org/detentions/>

³⁵ Irina Meyer-Olimpieva. (May 17, 2017) "Russian Truck Drivers Against the Platon Tax, Round 2." *Wilson Center*. Available online: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/russian-truck-drivers-against-the-platon-tax-round-2>

³⁶ "2017-2018 Protests: the increase in the public's protest activity" (*Protesty 2017-2018: rost protestnoy aktivnosti naseleniya*) (November 8, 2018). *Center for Economic and Political Reform*. Available online: <http://cepr.su/2018/11/08/protests-2017-2018/>

“ANTI-PENSION REFORM PROTESTS—THE BIGGEST SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROTEST ACTION OF RECENT YEARS—WERE BOTH POLITICIZED AND AIMED AT RAISING THE ISSUE OF CORRUPTION. ONE THOUSAND ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FOUR PENSION PROTESTS WERE RECORDED BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 2017 AND OCTOBER 2018.”

moting a variety of issues—from opposition to proposed constitutional reforms to support for political prisoners.²⁹

While the post-2012 protests focused on both national and local issues, corruption emerged as an overarching theme. On March 27, 2017, approximately 90,000 people gathered in 80 towns and cities across Russia to call for the resignation of Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. The protesters were responding to the release of a documentary by the Anti-Corruption Fund (FBK) in early March 2017 titled “*On vam ne Dimon*” (“He is not Dimon to you”), which accused Medvedev of embezzling \$1.2 billion during his time in office.³⁰ Protesters carried rubber ducks in reference to a duck house constructed at one of Medvedev’s luxury properties. Most of the protest actions (77

of 99) were denied permits, and the rest were heavily policed. Over a thousand people were detained, including Navalny.³¹ This action was followed in the summer by another wave of anti-corruption protests held on June 12 in over a hundred Russian towns and cities.³² The rallies held in June on Russia’s independence day re-framed the demands of the protesters as “patriotic.” Using the Russian flag and other national symbols, protesters signaled that they were genuinely concerned about Russia’s future, and that those who opposed them were the ones depriving Russia of achieving its socio-political goals.³³ This was in direct response to the regime’s many attempts to portray anti-regime protesters since 2011 as foreign-funded outsiders trying to foment instability inside the country. Once again, there was a considerable police presence and over 1600 protest participants were detained in Moscow and St. Petersburg alone.³⁴

Another nationwide movement that organized protest actions in 2016 and 2017 was the Association of Haulers of Russia (OPR), which used strikes and road blockades to oppose the introduction of Platon, a new road tax. The truckers argued that the system constituted a third tax on cargo trucks and were also critical of it being collected by a company owned by the son of a Kremlin-aligned oligarch. Although the organizers maintained an arm’s-length distance from oppo-

³⁷ Sabra Ayres. (September 9, 2018) “Protesters across Russia rally against Kremlin plan to raise retirement age.” *Los Angeles Times*. Available online: <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-russia-pension-protest-20180909-story.html>

³⁸ Ivan Golunov. (August 15, 2017) “Who invented renovation” (*Kto pridumal renovatsiyu*). *Meduza*. Available online: <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/08/15/kto-pridumal-renovatsiyu>

³⁹ Elena Vinogradova, Rinat Sagdyev, Irina Gruzina. (May 28, 2017) “Moscow demolishes not the worst” (*Moskva snosit ne khudsheye*). *Vedomosti*. Available online: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/realty/articles/2017/05/29/691843-moskva-snosit>

⁴⁰ Tom Balmforth. (May 14, 2017) “Thousands Protest in Moscow Against Plan to Raze Soviet-Era Housing.” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-moscow-protests-demolition-krushchev-era-housing/28487244.html>

⁴¹ Alla Baranovsky-Dewey. (August 19, 2019) “Why Russia’s garbage protests turned violent.” *The Washington Post*. Available online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/08/19/russias-garbage-protests-turned-violent-what-happened-lebanon-helps-explain-these-demonstrations/>



A protest wave swept over Russia during the summer of 2018, as thousands of people rallied against the unpopular pension reform. Photo: Mikhail Voskresenskiy / AP.

sition political parties, the truckers' demands quickly became politicized. Within a year, the truckers transitioned from making personal appeals to Putin for help, to calling for the resignation of the entire government.³⁵

Anti-pension reform protests—the biggest socio-economic protest action of recent years—were both politicized and aimed at raising the issue of corruption. One thousand one hundred and seventy-four pension protests were recorded

between September 2017 and October 2018.³⁶ Unlike other socio-economic protests that year, the pension reform protests were organized by both systemic and non-systemic political parties—the majority by the Communist Party. Despite their social focus these protests had a distinctly political character. Participants targeted not only Medvedev but Putin too, and accused the government of corruption and mismanagement.³⁷

At the local level, socio-economic protests also started to become politicized quickly as Russians increasingly found government initiatives suspect, even ones promising to improve living conditions. For example, in February 2017, the federal government, along with the government of Moscow, announced a plan to demolish 1950s and 60s-era five-story prefabricated apartment blocks, commonly known as *khrushchevki*. Occupants were promised apartments in new buildings. However, protesters mobilized quickly against the initiative in response to media reports highlighting the government's political³⁸ and economic³⁹ motives behind the renovation plan. Thousands of people protested against the renovations in the spring and summer of 2017, accusing the government of corruption and disregard for constitutionally-guaranteed property rights.⁴⁰

Local issues turned political again in 2018 and 2019 during anti-landfill protests held across dif-

⁴² Irina Kosterina. (January 2020) "Civil Society in the North Caucasus: Latest Trends and Challenges in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan" CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

⁴³ "List of detainees at the protests against the ban of candidates to the [Moscow] elections on July 27, 2019" (*Spisok zaderzhannykh na aktsii protiv nedopuska kandidatov na vybory 27 iyulya 2019 goda*), OVD-Info. Available online: <https://ovdinfo.org/news/2019/07/27/spisok-zaderzhannykh-na-aktsii-protiv-nedopuska-kandidatov-na-vybory-27-iyulya-2019>

⁴⁴ "Dozens of people beaten up at peaceful demonstrations" (*V Moskve na mirnykh aktsiyakh byli izbity desyatki chelovek*) (July 28, 2019). *Radio Svoboda*. Available online: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30078890.html>

⁴⁵ Maria Tsvetkova and Gleb Stolyarov. (August 10, 2019) "Thousands defy crackdown in Moscow's biggest protest for years." *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-protests/thousands-defy-crackdown-in-moscows-biggest-protest-for-years-idUSKCN1V00CV>

ferent regions in Russia. Participants opposed plans to construct landfills in Russia's north that would store waste from Moscow.⁴¹ Originally focused on health and ecology, these protests became politicized when participants connected their concerns with the larger problem of unresponsive policy-making by the government.

The anti-landfill protests were notable because they took place mostly outside of the capital, where the bulk of protest activity had been concentrated since 2011. Other traditionally "quiet" regions have also experienced anti-government protests in recent years. For example, approximately 60,000 people protested in Ingushetia—one of the North Caucasus republics in Russia's south—in October of 2018 in response to a land trade deal negotiated in secret by the governments of Ingushetia and Chechnya. Participants accused the regional government of ceding land to neighboring Chechnya without consulting residents of the republic.⁴²

Overreach by authorities was also a mobilizing

factor in the summer of 2019 in Moscow during the protests connected to the city's Duma election. The protests began in July when electoral commissions around the city disqualified independent opposition candidates from running in the Duma election by claiming that the nomination signatures they had collected were invalid. By the end of the month, several opposition candidates had been arrested and sentenced to administrative detention; a record number of protest participants—1373⁴³—were detained in one day, and there were numerous instances of police violence against protesters.⁴⁴ What began initially as a protest demanding access to a local election, expanded into mass protests against repression. The slogans of the two movements merged and became "*Dopuskai! Otpuskai!*" ("Let them run [in the election]! Let them go!"). On August 10, 2019, 60,000 people participated in a protest in Moscow, with smaller sister protests in other cities.⁴⁵ This was the largest political rally in the capital since the winter of 2011-2012.

REGIME RESPONSES TO PROTEST



Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny is regularly detained at the protests—sometimes pre-emptively. Photo: Artemiy Mindrin / AP

As protests in Russia have evolved, so has the regime's toolkit of responses. Today, there exists a web of criminal and administrative laws that punish participation in unsanctioned protests while also making it incredibly difficult for organizers to receive a permit for protests. In addition, state-controlled media disseminates propaganda that frames protests as foreign-funded, violent, and destabilizing events. Organizers of protests are routinely and pre-emptively arrested to discourage protest participants, and online information about protest events is increasingly restricted.

Laws prohibiting unsanctioned protest

Freedom of assembly is guaranteed by Article 31 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which states that citizens have the right to assemble peacefully, hold rallies, meetings, demon-

strations, marches, and pickets. In 2004, Federal Law No. 54-FZ "On Meetings, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches, and Pickets" was enacted. The law required gatherings of more than one person to obtain prior permission (sanction) from local authorities. Receiving sanction for a protest involved informing authorities, rather than securing their consent. In principle, authorities were not allowed to withhold permission unless public safety was at risk. In the decade before the outbreak of the mass protests, authorities did regularly refuse permission for some protest events such as the Dissenters' Marches and commemorations of the Beslan school hostage-taking. However, the legal framework for protest in Russia remained unchanged.

In 2012, following the biggest mass protests seen in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, laws regulating the right to assembly began to be altered to punish organizers and participants in unsanctioned protests more severely. Fines for individual participants and organizers were increased, and new administrative offences related to "inciting" people to participate in unsanctioned protest were established. In addition, protest organizers faced new liabilities if they failed to control the number of attendees at a protest, or if traffic or public order was disrupted by the protest.⁴⁶

In 2014, the fines were increased again, and detention for up to 20 days was added as a possible punishment for participants in an unsanctioned protest. A second violation of the law would result in 30 days' detention. A third violation within a 180-day period can incur a criminal charge carrying up to five years in prison.⁴⁷ In 2018, more

“PARTICIPATION IN UNSANCTIONED PROTEST IN RUSSIA EXPOSES PEOPLE TO SERIOUS ADMINISTRATIVE AND EVEN CRIMINAL LIABILITY. HOWEVER, OBTAINING PERMISSION FOR PROTEST ACTIONS HAS BEEN PURPOSELY HAMPERED BY THE AUTHORITIES, AS THE PROCESS IS COMPLICATED AND OPAQUE.”

amendments were made to laws having to do with the dissemination of information about unsanctioned rallies. The first change levied a fine against organizers who did not inform citizens of authorities’ refusal to allow a protest. Later that same year, another amendment prescribed a fine, compulsory community service, and 15 days’ detention for “involving a minor” in an unsanctioned protest, though the meaning of “involving” was not clarified.⁴⁶ Laws prohibiting the dissemination of “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” and events that may “offend the religious feelings of believers” all but eliminated the possibility of organizing certain types of protests such as Gay Pride marches. Lastly, unsanctioned

protests may also be categorized as “mass riots” by authorities even if there is no violence or destruction of property.⁴⁹ Participants detained during these events can be charged with a criminal offense, as was the case for those arrested at an unsanctioned protest in support of disqualified candidates in Moscow on July 27, 2019,⁵⁰ that carries a sentence of up to eight years in prison.

These laws are applied selectively and often against ordinary people who could be first-time protesters, rather than established activists. During the Bolotnaya Square protest in 2012, 500 people were detained while over 30 were prosecuted and sentenced to serious prison terms.⁵¹ Similarly, in 2019 over a thousand people were detained but only a handful were charged with and convicted of serious crimes. The effect of selective prosecution is to create an atmosphere of fear.

Administrative barriers to lawful protest

In order to avoid being fined and detained, protest organizers and participants must obtain permission to hold an event—a complicated and difficult process pervaded by arbitrariness.⁵²

Application for permission must be submitted on a strict timeline neither too long, nor too soon

⁴⁶ “Freedom under threat: Clampdown on freedoms of assembly, expression and association in Russia.” Amnesty International (2013). Available online: <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/eur460112013en.pdf>

⁴⁷ “Violation of the established order” (*Narusheniye ustanovlennogo poriyadka*). *OVD-Info*. Available online: http://reports.ovdinfo.org/2015/20_2-report/

⁴⁸ “Limitations on and restrictions to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in the digital age: Legislative norms and enforcement practices in Russia.” *OVD-Info*. Available online: <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/freedom-of-assembly-in-the-digital-age>

⁴⁹ “After summer: The Moscow experiment continues” (*Posle leta. Moskovskiy eksperiment prodolzhayetsya*), *OVD-Info*. Available online: <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/mgd2-2019#2>

⁵⁰ “The July 27 case: What is important to know” (*Delo 27 iyulya. Chto vazhno znat'*), February 18, 2019, *RBC*. Available online: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/18/02/2020/5d42d0b49a794782c3eab414>

⁵¹ “Delegitimization and Division in Russia” (May 18, 2017) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available online: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/18/delegitimization-and-division-in-russia-pub-69958>

⁵² For detailed account see, “The Art of the Ban: How Russian authorities refuse permission for rallies and other protests,” *OVD-Info*. (December 18, 2019). Available online: <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/art-ban>

before the scheduled event. The stated aim of the event must not be too broad and cannot contradict the principles of the Constitution or any part of the Criminal or Administrative Codes. Assessing whether applications meet these requirements is left to local authorities, who are not required to provide a specific rationale for denying permission. Protest actions may only be held in certain parts of cities. The specific areas are regulated by an extremely complicated web of local and regional laws. The federal law does not set out criteria, but allows local authorities to exercise discretion to ban protest actions in a certain space if such may lead to the disruption of vital infrastructure, transpiration, pedestrian, or vehicle traffic, or deny access to premises.⁵³ The text of regional and local laws specifying these areas may not be available or accessible to organizers.⁵⁴ Moreover, whole cities can be made “unavailable” for protest actions if authorities decide that repair work, urban improvement, or snow removal is necessary.

One of the most common reasons cited to deny permission for protests is a conflicting event scheduled for the same time and place as that requested by protest organizers. These “doppelganger” actions appear often from nowhere just as organizers are filing the relevant paperwork. As a result, organizers can never be sure that their

requested time and location will be available and lose valuable filing time correcting applications when informed of the conflicting event. Moreover, doppelganger events are usually organized by the authorities themselves or by pro-government organizations, while notices to protest organizers usually lack detailed information about the rival event.

In sum, participation in unsanctioned protest in Russia exposes people to serious administrative and even criminal liability. However, obtaining permission for protest actions has been purposely hampered by the authorities, as the process is complicated and opaque. The combination of these two factors—risk of punishment and arbitrariness—effectively reduces the constitutionally-guaranteed right to freedom of assembly in Russia to nil.

Discouraging protest through propaganda

Russian authorities limit information about protests and discourage participation in protest through the use of negative framing. Before the outbreak of mass protests inside Russia in 2011, the Kremlin portrayed mass protests abroad, especially the Color Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, as being staged by outside forces interested

⁵³ Article 8 of the Federal Law No. 54-FZ. Available online: <https://www.legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/4367>

⁵⁴ “Regional bans on protests against the authorities” (*Regional'nyye zaprety na mitingi vokrug organov vlasti*) *OVD-Info*. Available online: <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/regionalnye-zaprety#4>

⁵⁵ Karoun Demirjian. (July 22, 2014) “Meanwhile in Russia, Putin passes a law against protest,” *The Washington Post*. Available online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/07/22/meanwhile-in-russia-putin-passes-law-against-protests/>

⁵⁶ Darya Korsunskaya. (November 20, 2014) “Putin says Russian must prevent ‘color revolution’” *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-security-idUSKCN0J41J620141120>

⁵⁷ “Newline: September 6, 2005” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1143474.html>

⁵⁸ Claire Bigg. (December 9, 2013) “Ukraine’s ‘Euro-Maidan’ Through the Lens of Russian Television” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-euromaidan-russian-media/25194912.html>

⁵⁹ Oleg Shynkarenko. (February 4, 2014) “Kremlin Analysts Push for Ukraine Annexation.” *The Daily Beast*. Available online: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/kremlin-analysts-push-for-ukraine-annexation>

“IN RESPONSE TO MORE RECENT ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS, THE KREMLIN ENGAGED IN WHA-TABOUTISM. PUTIN SUGGESTED THAT POLICE IN EUROPE TREATS PROTESTERS MORE HARSHLY THAN IN RUSSIA, WHILE THE KREMLIN’S SPOKESPERSON SAID THAT PROTESTERS IN THE UNITED STATES RISK BEING SHOT.”

in destabilizing those countries. Putin described the Color Revolutions as “takeovers instigated and financed from outside.”⁵⁵ The Kremlin suggested that mass mobilizations had been promoted by the United States⁵⁶ and resulted in political and economic chaos.⁵⁷ Ukraine’s Euro-Maidan revolution, which started as a reaction to the government’s refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union and led to the ousting of President Victor Yanukovich, was characterized in Russia as a coup by far-right nationalists.⁵⁸ The Kremlin’s narrative of a fascist takeover of Ukraine would eventually underpin Russia’s official reasoning for the annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁵⁹ “Maidan” remains a watch word used by the Kremlin to highlight the dangers of

protest.⁶⁰

With regard to domestic protest, the regime’s strategy is twofold. First, state-controlled television downplays anti-government protests,⁶¹ often understating the size and number of participants in rallies.⁶² This is supplemented by propaganda and comments by government officials challenging the authenticity of the protesters. For example, in 2012 the pro-Kremlin network NTV released two pseudo-documentary films, titled “Anatomy of Protest” and “Anatomy of Protest 2,” that suggested the mass anti-government protests in 2011 and 2012 were financed by the West and that protest organizers were planning to stage an armed coup against the government.⁶³ Referring to these protests, Putin expressed the belief that participants had been paid, and remarked that the white ribbons adopted as their symbol of resistance resembled condoms.⁶⁴

In response to more recent anti-government protests, the Kremlin and Putin engaged in wha-taboutism. Putin suggested that police in Europe treats protesters more harshly⁶⁵ than in Russia, while the Kremlin’s spokesperson said that protesters in the United States risk being shot.⁶⁶

Certain vulnerable groups are specially targeted to discourage their participation in protest. In 2017, it was reported⁶⁷ that schoolchildren and university students across Russia were intimidat-

⁶⁰ “Pro-Kremlin Activists Storm NGO Protest Forum, Saying ‘We don’t want Maidan in Russia’” (August 22, 2019) *The Moscow Times*. Available online: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/22/pro-kremlin-activists-storm-ngo-protest-forum-saying-we-dont-want-maidan-in-russia-a66978>

⁶¹ Alissa de Carbonnel. (December 7, 2011) “Insight: Social media makes anti-Putin protests ‘snowball.’” *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-protests-socialmedia-idUSTRE7B60R720111207>

⁶² See, for example: <https://twitter.com/sarahrainsford/status/1233784493842063360>

⁶³ Roman Vorobyov. (October 12, 2012) “‘Anatomy of Protest’ stirs trouble.” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*. Available online: https://www.rbth.com/articles/2012/10/12/documentary_stirs_trouble_for_opposition_19039.html

⁶⁴ “Transcript of the TV program ‘Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continuation.’” (*Stenogramma programmy ‘Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinyem. Prodolzheniye’*), December 15, 2011. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. Available online: <https://rg.ru/2011/12/15/stenogramma.html>

⁶⁵ “Putin plays down Moscow protests, blames opposition for ‘falsification’” (August 22, 2019). *The Moscow Times*. Available online: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/22/putin-plays-down-moscow-protests-blames-opposition-for-falsification-a66974>



As the authorities ramp up administrative barriers to lawful protests, the unsanctioned demonstrations continue to take place. But the risks of being detained and taken away in a police van have increased. At one of such demonstrations, on August 3, 2019, about 1000 people were detained. Photo: Pavel Golovkin / AP.

ed by school officials in an effort to deter them from attending protests.⁶⁸ Young people were arrested in large numbers in March 2017 after taking part in anti-corruption protests. Subsequently, parents were warned that they risked losing their parental rights if their children attend protests or if they brought children into the vicinity of protests.⁶⁹

Pre-emptive arrest

Authorities have consistently used pre-emptive

arrests of protest organizers as a tactic to discourage protest participants. This was the case at the very beginning of mass unrest in December 2011, when the government detained⁷⁰ some protest organizers before a sanctioned protest, and is still routine. Despite the fact that he was not organizing the protests in Moscow in support of disqualified City Duma candidates, Alexei Navalny was nonetheless arrested for calls to participate in an unsanctioned protest and sentenced to 30 days' administrative detention in July 2019.⁷¹ In fact, most of the disqualified candidates in the Moscow election in 2019 were detained and served administrative sentences as the protests were held in their support.

Internet restrictions

Information about protest lives online. Since protest organizers use social media to post news about protest events and coordinate participants, Russian authorities have been working to limit and disrupt access to information online.

In 2014, amendments to a federal law on information expanded the authority of Roskomnadzor—the federal agency responsible for communication, mass media and technology—and the Prosecutor General's Office to extra-judicially block access to websites that post what they dub "extremist" material or calls to participate in un-

⁶⁶ "Russian protesters don't 'get shot' like they would in the US, Putin's spokesman says" (September 24, 2019) *The Moscow Times*. Available online: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/09/24/russian-protesters-dont-get-shot-like-they-would-in-the-us-putins-spokesman-says-a67410>

⁶⁷ "This is How a Russian Schoolteacher Talked to Her Students About Patriotism" (March 21, 2017). *Global Voices*. Available online: <https://globalvoices.org/2017/03/21/this-is-how-a-russian-school-principal-talked-to-her-students-about-patriotism/>

⁶⁸ "Russia: Children, Students Targeted after Protests" (June 11, 2017). Human Rights Watch. Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/11/russia-children-students-targeted-after-protests>

⁶⁹ "Russian Parents Investigated for Bringing Toddler to Moscow Protest" (August 6, 2019). *The Moscow Times*. Available online: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/06/russian-parents-investigated-for-bringing-toddler-to-moscow-protest-a66729>

⁷⁰ Fred Weir. (December 20, 2011) "Kremlin turns to more covert tactics to undermine Russia's protest movement" *The Christian Science Monitor*. Available online: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2011/1220/Kremlin-turns-to-more-covert-tactics-to-undermine-Russia-s-protest-movement>

sanctioned protest.⁷² Subsequently, both activist blogs—including Navalny’s— and major news outlets, such as *Ekho Moskvy* (*Echo of Moscow*), were threatened with being, or actually were, blocked.⁷³

In 2016, new amendments known as the “Yarovaya Package” were introduced to address online extremism. However, in reality, they exposed social network users to potential prosecution by obliging providers to give the state agencies access to users’ data.⁷⁴ Companies that refuse to give up encrypted communications of their users (such as Telegram) risk being banned. The government tried, unsuccessfully, to block the Telegram app in Russia in 2018, but failed because the company masked users’ IP addresses.⁷⁵ However, other apps, such as LinkedIn and Zello, have been blocked. The Russian government has also

pressured Google to remove search engine results and YouTube content about protest or opposition figures.⁷⁶

Most recently, the Kremlin deployed a new tactic to disrupt protest activities: disabling mobile internet. The first incident took place during protests in Ingushetia, where 3G and 4G networks were turned off for the period October 3–17, 2018.⁷⁷ In Moscow, during mass protests on July 27 and August 3, 2019, access to mobile data was also disrupted for 7 to 11 hours. Mobile operators initially claimed that access failure was due to too many users in one area, but documents uncovered by reporters suggested that the internet was intentionally jammed in response to a government request.⁷⁸ Both protest actions still attracted numerous participants, but coordination via Twitter and VKontakte was effectively impeded.

⁷¹ Shaun Walker. (July 27, 2019) “Moscow police arrest more than 1,000 protesters ahead of election.” *The Moscow Times*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/27/moscow-police-arrest-up-to-200-ahead-of-election-protest>

⁷² “Freedom on the Net: Russia” (2019). Freedom House. Available online: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2014/russia>

⁷³ “Limitations on and restrictions to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in the digital age: Legislative norms and enforcement practices in Russia.” *OVD-Info*. Available online: <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/freedom-of-assembly-in-the-digital-age>

⁷⁴ “Freedom on the Net: Russia” (2016). Freedom House. Available online: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/russia>

⁷⁵ Matt Burgess. (April 28, 2018) “This is why Russia’s attempts to block Telegram have failed.” *Wired*. Available online: <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/telegram-in-russia-blocked-web-app-ban-facebook-twitter-google>

⁷⁶ “Russia tells Google not to advertise ‘illegal’ events after election protest” (August 11, 2019). *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-protests-google/russia-tells-google-not-to-advertise-illegal-events-after-election-protests-idUSKCN1V10BY>

⁷⁷ Maria Kolomychenko. (November 16, 2018) “Russia stifled mobile network during protest: report.” *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-protests-internet/russia-stifled-mobile-network-during-protests-document-idUSKCN1NL116>

⁷⁸ Zak Doffman. (8 August 2019) “Russian Authorities ‘Secretly’ Shut Down Moscow’s Mobile Internet: Report.” *Forbes*. Available online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2019/08/08/russian-security-agencies-secretly-shut-moscows-mobile-internet-to-control-protesters-report/#1577c22375bf>

ART AND PROTEST



Russian rapper Ivan Dremin (known as "Face") performs at the August 10, 2019 protest in Moscow. Tens of thousands took to the streets to protest exclusion of opposition candidates from the Moscow city election. Photo: Alexander Zemlianichenko / AP.

Art and politics have been intimately connected in Russia since the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks encouraged artists to produce work that would carry a political message and help to transform every aspect of Russian society.⁷⁹ Throughout the Soviet period, art and culture were heavily censored to promote official political propaganda. The distance between art and politics increased briefly during the 1990s and early 2000s as new galleries and art collectives—many of

them subversive but not politically engaged—mushroomed in the wake of economic recovery.⁸⁰ In the lead-up to, and following, Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the state increasingly intervened in art and culture to assert officially prescribed conservative values and punish what it deemed to be immorality, vulgarity, and non-orthodoxy.⁸¹ In response, art not only became more dissenting but also more engaging. Over the last ten years, art and protest have converged more often, with artists finding inspiration in political protest, staging political performances, and participating in protest.

The most famous and most recognizably "political" art protest of recent years is the so-called "Punk Prayer" by Pussy Riot. The song, laden with direct criticism of Putin,⁸² was performed inside the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow on February 21, 2012, resulting in arrests and convictions for the three band members on the charge of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred. The band—an all-female ensemble—was formed in 2011 in response to the wave of protests gripping Russia, but Pussy Riot has roots in other political art collectives. Some of its members were also part of the *Voyna* (War) group, well-known for drawing a giant phallus on a St. Petersburg bridge in 2010 that, once the bridge was raised, faced

⁷⁹ Susan Delson. (27 October 2017) "When Art Joined the Russian Revolution" *The Wall Street Journal*. Available online: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-art-joined-the-russian-revolution-1509119232>

⁸⁰ See: Lena Jonson. *Art and Protest in Putin's Russia*. London: Routledge: 2015.

⁸¹ Lena Jonson. (2016) "Post-Pussy Riot: art and protest in Russia today," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 44 (5): 657-672.

⁸² Jeffrey Tayler. (November 8, 2012) "What Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer' Really Said." *The Atlantic*. Available online: (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/what-pussy-riots-punk-prayer-really-said/264562/>)

⁸³ Nadia Beard. (July 10, 2014) "Exhibition of Russian resistance art open in Sweden." *The Calvert Journal*. Available online: <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/2823/large-scale-exhibition-of-russian-resistance-art-open-in-sweden>

“IN THE LEAD-UP TO, AND FOLLOWING, PUTIN’S RETURN TO THE PRESIDENCY IN 2012, THE STATE INCREASINGLY INTERVENED IN ART AND CULTURE TO ASSERT OFFICIALLY PRESCRIBED CONSERVATIVE VALUES AND PUNISH WHAT IT DEEMED TO BE IMMORALITY, VULGARITY, AND NON-ORTHODOXY.”

the office of the security services—the FSB.⁸³ Since serving their prison sentences, some members of Pussy Riot have continued to perform explicitly political music, but also more systematically participate in socio-political dialogue by establishing *MediaZona*, a media outlet focused on the courts, law enforcement, and the prison system.

The performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky, inspired by Pussy Riot, has also staged numerous one-man acts protesting political persecution, anti-LGBT laws, and other repressive government policies.⁸⁴ These acts include wrapping himself in barbed wire, sewing his mouth shut, and nailing

his scrotum to the cobblestones in the Red Square. His performances highlight what he sees as the “apathy, political indifference, and fatalism” of Russian society.⁸⁵ These works also stress the physical suffering that can be produced when individuals come into contact with the political system. Pavlovsky sought asylum in France in 2017.

Celebrities and performers have also been involved in or spoken out in favor of protests. For example, Ksenia Sobchak, a television star, socialite, and presidential hopeful in the 2018 election (who is also the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, the late St. Petersburg mayor and Putin’s mentor), took part in the 2011 protests. As a result, she was allegedly banned from state-controlled television channels for a decade. In 2010, Yury Shevchuk, frontman of the famous Russian rock band DDT, criticized—both at his performances and in a meeting with Putin directly—the way the government had handled protesters participating in the Dissenters’ March.⁸⁶

Recently, intersections between the world of celebrity and the world of protest have grown. In August of 2019, rappers and other celebrities joined the protests in Moscow in support of political prisoners and independent political candi-

⁸⁴ Fernanda Eberstadt. (July 11, 2019) “The Dangerous Art of Pyotr Pavlensky.” *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/11/magazine/pyotr-pavlensky-art.html>

⁸⁵ Andrew Higgins. (28 February 2020) “An Artist Who Aspires to Be ‘a Bone in Everyone’s Throat,’” *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/world/europe/pyotr-pavlensky-interview.html>

⁸⁶ “What would you ask Putin? Rock veteran Shevchuk makes most of rare opportunity” (May 31, 2010). *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Available online: https://www.rferl.org/a/What_Would_You_Ask_Putin_Rock_Veteran_Shevchuk_Makes_Most_Of_Rare_Opportunity/2057898.html

⁸⁷ Yana Gorokhovskaia. (August 20, 2019) “The ‘Celebritization’ of Protest in Russia.” *The Moscow Times*. Available online: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/20/the-celebritization-of-protest-in-russia-a66927>

⁸⁸ Maria Starikova, “Weekend Agenda. The Moscow opposition says it might not recognize the election results” (*Povestka vykhodnogo dnya. Moskovskaya oppositsia ob’yavila, chto mozhet ne priznat’ resul’taty vyborov*), August 12, 2019, *Kommersant*. Available online: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4059292>

⁸⁹ Paulina Glukhova and Anastasia Medvedeva. “In 2018, the authorities disrupted more than 40 concerts. Look at the table” (*V 2018 godu vlasti sorvali bol’she 40 kontsertov. Posmotrite tablitsu*), December 28, 2018, *Meduza*. Available online: <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/12/28/v-2018-godu-vlasti-sorvali-bolshe-40-kontsertov-posmotrite-tablitsu>



Russian musician Nastya Kreslina of the electronic duo IC3PEAK performs at a concert in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The band is known for the harsh criticisms of the Russian politics. In the fall of 2018, numerous Russian artists were pressured by the authorities, with a string of concert cancellations and arrests. Photo: Anton Basanayev / AP.

dates. Popular rappers, including Face and IC3PEAK, performed at the rally while other musicians like Oxxxymiron and Loquimean, actors like Vladislav Katlyarsky, and popular YouTuber Yuri Dud were in the crowd. They also used their social media accounts, with millions of followers, to encourage fans to attend the protest.⁸⁷ The presence of celebrities led some observers to

speculate that protest in Russia had become “fashionable,”⁸⁸ but the phenomenon is more significant than that.

Authorities in Russia, both local and federal, routinely shut down concerts and other cultural events claiming to be upholding laws protecting children from the promotion of suicide, narcotics use, extremism, or exposure to “gay propaganda.”⁸⁹ When musicians defy the bans with public performances, they face administrative fines and the threat of criminal prosecution.⁹⁰ In response to government pressure and limits on their freedom of speech, artists have produced more politically charged music, openly addressing social inequality and state repression.⁹¹ These actions expose them to the risk of censorship and prosecution, but they also help to politicize the entertainment that Russia’s young people consume. Simultaneously, researchers are finding that the proportion of young people attending protest has grown, and solidarity campaigns with young people detained at protests have become more visible.⁹² As the state enforces a conservative social and cultural agenda while excluding many opposition voices from the formal political sphere, art and protest will continue to find connections.

⁸⁰ “Russian rapper Husky sentenced to 12 days in jail over gig on car roof” (November 2, 2018), *The Guardian*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/22/russian-rapper-husky-faces-jail-over-gig-on-car-roof>

⁹¹ Tanya Simakova. (September 2, 2018) “Rap is the authority here. Why Face made a political album” (*Rap zdes’ vlast’: Zachem Feysu politicheskii al'bom*), *The Village*. Available online: <https://www.the-village.ru/village/weekend/music/324057-face>

⁹² Olga Zeveleva. (August 14, 2019) “Putin’s pesky millennials.” *Meduza*. Available online: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/08/14/putin-s-pesky-millennials>

FORWARD-LOOKING

Protests in Russia are relatively frequent events, a phenomenon that challenges the assumption of Putin's full control of society. Notably, both people's anticipation of political protest and their willingness to personally participate in political protest have gradually increased over the last decade according to independent surveys.⁹³ Anticipation of political protest peaked in February 2012 and July 2018, with 33% and 34% of surveyed respondents saying that political protests were "quite possible." Willingness to protest, which has been traditionally low and contributed to misconceptions about the passivity of Russian citizens, peaked in November of 2019 at 25%. This was the highest level recorded since this type of question began to be asked in surveys in 2009.⁹⁴

Moreover, despite government propaganda against protesters and efforts to stifle information about protests, a growing number of Russians are not only aware of protests but have a positive view of them. For example, 39% of surveyed respondents in Moscow reported a "positive" opinion of the protests that took place in the city during the summer of 2019, despite the mass detention of participants by police.⁹⁵

Sympathy for protest participants who have been severely punished has also noticeably increased among Russians, with one-man pickets, petitions, and open letters used to marshal support for political prisoners. Detention and prosecutions of protesters have resulted in an intensification of group solidarity among certain sectors of Russian society. For example, the prosecution of a young actor for allegedly assaulting a police officer during a protest attracted condemnation of Russia's creative class.⁹⁶ The prosecution of a

university student for extremism and participating in a mass riot prompted students and teachers across the country to sign a letter in his support.⁹⁷

Increased knowledge of protests, willingness to participate, and feelings of solidarity with unjustly persecuted protesters are important trends for the future of state-society relations in Russia. They suggest that, despite the ever expanding array of restrictive laws that limit freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, the government has found its ability to maneuver when dealing with protests to be narrowing. Repression of protest risks a negative public response, yet sanctioning it carries the danger of spreading political messages critical of the government more widely.

Protests have also shown to have consequences for the formal political system. After the 2018 protests against the pension reform, for the first time ever, three incumbent United Russia governors lost their reelection bids, as voters decided to channel their frustration from the streets to the ballot box.⁹⁸ Similarly, despite keeping most opposition politicians off the ballot, United Russia lost a third of its seats in Moscow's City Duma following the protests in support of disqualified candidates there during the summer of 2019.⁹⁹

Policy recommendations

For interested observers, the chronology of protest outlined in this report, as well as recent changes in attitudes toward and participation in protests, have several implications for how to better interpret the dynamics of Russian politics.

1. Despite the genuinely authoritarian nature of Russia's political system, protests are not unusual. Tracking of protest events by scholars over

the last two decades demonstrates that hundreds of protests take place across the country every year. Participation in protest—among all sectors of society—does seem to be on the rise more recently, and has coincided with the declining popularity of both Vladimir Putin personally and the government in general.

2. Both regional and national protests are not “surprising” events, as international media tends to characterize them. Instead, mass demonstrations often have roots in local disputes and develop over time before emerging on the national stage.

3. Most importantly, protests in Russia—even mass ones—should not be immediately read as spelling revolution or regime change. There is a strong desire among analysts and observers to

make comparisons between mass anti-regime protests in Russia and the Arab Spring, the Color Revolutions, or EuroMaidan. But such analogies tend to be misleading because they gloss over the real differences both in state-society relations and the nature of Russia’s political system. Without fissures emerging within Russia’s political elite, street protests are unlikely to lead to radical political change.

However, just because protests are not revolutionary does not mean that they are inconsequential. An overview of the last twenty years of protest in Russia shows that waves of protest build on one another, spawning new civil society organizations, political initiatives, and even opposition politicians. In short, protests matter, but their impact may be felt only in the long term.

⁹³ See: “The state of affairs in the country” (*Polozhenie del v strane*), Levada Center. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/>

⁹⁴ See: “Protest potential” (*Protestny potentsial*), Levada Center. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2019/12/02/protestnyj-potentsial-10/>

⁹⁵ Natalia Galimova. (August 6, 2019) “A third of Muscovites have a positive opinion of the protests” (*Tret’ moskvichey polozhitel’no otneslis’ k aktsiyam protesta*), RBC. Available online: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/08/2019/5d498e439a794731012612aa>

⁹⁶ Tom Balmforth. (September 17, 2019) “Russian celebrities demand release of actor jailed over protest.” *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-ustinov/russian-celebrities-demand-release-of-actor-jailed-over-protest-idUSKBN1W21H0>

⁹⁷ Maria Tsvetkova. (August 10, 2019) “Arrest of student at opposition protest roils top Russian university.” *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-protests-students/arrest-of-student-at-opposition-protest-roils-top-russian-university-idUSKCN1V007J>

⁹⁸ Jake Rudnitsky, Irina Reznik, and Stepan Kravchenko. (September 24, 2018) “Putin’s Party Suffers Rare Losses as Russian Protest Votes Grow.” *Bloomberg*. Available online: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-24/putin-s-party-suffers-rare-losses-as-russian-protest-votes-grow>

⁹⁹ Andrew Osborn and Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber. (September 9, 2019) “Russia’s ruling party loses a third of seats in Moscow election after protests.” *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-election-moscow/russias-ruling-party-loses-a-third-of-seats-in-moscow-election-after-protests-ria-idUSKCN1VU0DF>

TAKEAWAYS

- Protests that begin as a display of economic, social, or environmental grievances tend to become politicized when the government fails to address protesters' concerns. Local issues (landfills, renovation, urban development) are then linked to the government's tendency to be unresponsive and corrupt.
- The regime's approach to protest has become noticeably harsher over the last five years as the set of administrative and criminal laws punishing participation in protests has grown. Simultaneously, efforts to control information have shifted from propaganda about protests disseminated by state-controlled television networks to expanding control over internet communication and online sources of information.
- The extreme but arbitrary prosecution of some protest participants has fueled intergroup solidarity among certain social strata (artists, students, professionals) within Russia. Petitions, open letters, and one-man pickets have all been used to demonstrate this solidarity. Notably, in some cases, a widespread show of support has resulted in a lessening or complete dismissal of criminal charges by the authorities.
- Compared to the early 2000s, personal appeals to Vladimir Putin during protests to solve local problems have decreased, while the blame attributed to him and the government for such problems has grown.
- The political consequences of protests are rarely evident in the short term because street actions tend to fail at achieving narrowly stated political goals, such as the resignation of politicians or the cancelation of election results. However, each episode of protest builds momentum and spurs the development of a variety of social and political organizations and networks. These new elements of civil society, in turn, help to protect participants and support opposition activists during ensuing episodes of street protests.



About 100,000 people rallied against election fraud in Moscow on December 24, 2011. It was one of the largest protests in Russian modern history. Photo: Alexander Zemlianichenko / AP.

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Front Cover: Russian riot police officer at the Bolotnaya Square protest in Moscow on May 6, 2012 that went down in history as one of the harshest crackdowns on a sanctioned rally under Vladimir Putin's rule. Photo: Sergey Ponomarev / AP.