

Russians are protesting! Part 7: This may discredit Putin in the next election

By Regina Smyth March 31

Symposium introduction: On Sunday, March 26, the unexpected happened in Russia. Across the country, coordinated anti-corruption protests drew tens of thousands of people. Ostensibly these were not directed at President Putin, although as you'll see below, opinions differ. Rather, opposition leader Alexei Navalny called for the protests in a video released online accusing Prime Minister (and ex-president) Dmitri Medvedev of a spectacular and corrupt accumulation of wealth, demanding an investigation. Protests struck dozens of cities, widely dispersed, led not just by pensioners but also young people.

To understand these surprising protests, I asked a series of experts on Russian politics from PONARS Eurasia to join an online symposium, answering:

Do the protests that took place across 99 cities in Russia last Sunday signify a meaningful change in Russian politics is likely? Why or why not?

For this post, the seventh in the symposium, we hear from Regina Smyth, professor of political science at Indiana University.

— Joshua Tucker

Too often, analysts see the effects of protest events as revolutionary or insignificant. Since revolutions are rare, protests that do not spark regime change are usually relegated to the insignificant category.

This type of thinking was evident in much of the press analysis that I read of the Russian anti-corruption protest on March 26, 2017. I would argue that it impeded clear thinking regarding the true influence of the event.

This protest — framed as a call for government investigation of corruption by Prime Minister Medvedev — will not lead to revolution and it was probably not designed to do so. Rather, it was a part of a broader vision for political evolution that starts with civic engagement as a mechanism to disrupt of the regime's strategy for managing the next election. In this regard,

protest leaders will be heartened by the young people who joined them on Sunday. They should also be encouraged by the effectiveness of regional efforts to mobilize through social media.

A year before President Putin faces a re-election contest in March 2018, the Kremlin's proxies have already begun announcing the outcome of that contest. They have framed the election as a referendum on popular trust in President Putin, which will be communicated by an overwhelming victory in a high turnout contest.

The focus on voter participation reflects the Kremlin's concern with low turnout in urban centers in the 2017 parliamentary elections, which has been construed as latent opposition. They are right to be concerned.

Analysis of public opinion data shows that the same voters who failed to turn out for the 2017 parliamentary elections are most likely to join protests. The March 26 events in cities across Russia demonstrate the lack of support for the president and creates the potential for escalation and the transfer of protest from the streets to the ballot box, as it did in 2011. The Kremlin may be forced to abandon electoral modernization — defined as institutional manipulation of elections — and flatly falsify results to achieve its goals.

Popular discontent is also likely to spark elite debate. The reform and institutionalization of new coercive forces since 2011 strengthened the constituency for repressive response within the government. While the current sentences of those arrested on Sunday appear quite light, it is likely that the regime is buying time while it debates the final response. With rumors of injured police officers and even a police death, there will be a pressure on President Putin to respond with new charges and stiff sentences.

Increased repression further closes off a path of regime reform and increases the uncertainty in the “stable” political system. Just as the “failed” protests of 2011 profoundly changed the regime's trajectory, these events will have far reaching effects on the mechanisms that link state and society.

To understand the nature of change, we will need to watch how the legal cases play out, the variation in response across different regions of Russia, and the Kremlin's rhetoric and organization around the March 2018 election.

This post is the seventh in the symposium. Here you can find the [first](#), [second](#), [third](#), [fourth](#), [fifth](#), [sixth](#), [seventh](#), and [eighth](#).