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Why Protests Keep Putin Up at Night

The Fears of a Strongman

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By all appearances, Russian President Vladimir Putin is at the height of his power [1]. He currently enjoys domestic approval ratings of over 80 percent. He has sidelined, if not repressed, any serious political opposition. And by all accounts, he has full control over the Russian state apparatus [2], not least the so-called power ministries, such as the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior.

Despite his solid grip on power, Putin appeared alarmed when, at the end of March, Russian citizens in dozens of cities suddenly appeared in the streets to peacefully protest official corruption. The government responded by having as many as 1,000 of the protestors [3], including the leader of the opposition, Alexey Navalny, arrested. Why such concern by a political leader who appears to be so fully in control?

Putin's uneasiness can be attributed to three causes: the limits to authoritarianism; the particular threat posed to him by corruption allegations; and the challenge of maintaining his regime's legitimacy under a stagnating economy.

The first of these causes relates to a paradox at the heart of authoritarian power: in such a system, perceptions of a leader's invincibility can change rather quickly. To date, there has never been a revolution in a liberal democracy [4]. The most likely explanation is also the simplest one: in a liberal democracy, there is always hope that even a despised leader can be removed from office through constitutional means. But in authoritarian systems there is no procedure for the people to remove a leader except by revolution.

Russia is not technically an authoritarian state, since it has at least the semblance of elections and a political opposition. Most political scientists characterize it instead as a hybrid regime [5], containing a mix of authoritarian and democratic elements. Although elections in Russia are hardly free, they do exist, and the political system relies on them to provide some legitimacy for those in power. The hybrid nature of Russia's politics is significant because claims of electoral fraud spurred most of the so-called color revolutions [6], such as the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, as well as the 2011–12 Russian protests [7] centered in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russia is facing a presidential election next year, and Navalny, who inspired the recent protests, plans to run as a candidate. There is little doubt that Putin will win, but the election process itself creates a slight vulnerability, as it could become a focal point for popular discontent.

Indeed Russia, like other hybrid regimes, has created certain dilemmas [8] for itself. For instance, although Russia has not eliminated independent media entirely, it has pushed critical views to the periphery. And when sycophantic state media dominates, political leaders receive little feedback

about how they are truly perceived by their citizens. It becomes difficult for them to judge where society's breaking point is and how close they are to reaching it. That is why the scale of the anti-corruption protests came as a surprise to Russia's leaders.

The second reason for Putin's anxiety is that allegations of corruption—particularly credible allegations of vast corruption at the very top of the government—present a challenge to both the regime's political legitimacy and the rulers' pocketbooks. The March protests were prompted by a 50-minute video released by Navalny in February, which provided extensive documentation that Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev <sup>[9]</sup> had accumulated over \$1 billion in assets, including country estates, a Tuscan vineyard, and two yachts, despite his modest government salary. In addition to provoking public anger, the exposure of officials' illicit wealth is deeply troubling to the Russian leadership since they operate in a system in which political power is the only real guarantor of property rights. After the Maidan Revolution in 2014, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was chased from office, the absurdly lavish mansion <sup>[10]</sup> he had built for himself (including a zoo and a restaurant on a faux pirate ship) was turned into a museum, where citizens could gape at what their erstwhile leader had stolen. As Yanukovich's fate makes clear, whatever vast holdings Russian leaders currently enjoy, a fall from political heights can mean losing wealth as well as power.

The third challenge to the Putin regime is Russia's stagnating economy. Putin's rise to power in 1999 coincided with an economic boom, with Russia's GDP growing between 5 and 10 percent every year, the recession year of 2009 excluded. That boom ended in 2014 with the drop in global oil prices. Since then the economy has been limping along, and popular grievances are accumulating. When so many Russians are struggling to meet their basic needs, charges of ill-gotten wealth take on greater weight. During the 2011–12 protests, Putin survived by characterizing the protesters as professional-class liberals from the big cities who were out of touch with real Russians <sup>[11]</sup> and their traditional values. But Russia at the time was still enjoying oil-fueled economic growth. That growth has now ended.

Since 2014, protests by workers <sup>[12]</sup> over pocketbook issues have been increasing. At almost the same time as the most recent protests, Russian truckers began a nationwide strike against what they see as an illegitimate road tax, made worse by the fact that the levies are collected by a private company owned by the son of Arkady Rotenberg, one of Putin's longtime cronies. When the truckers first protested the tax in November 2015, their most prominent demand was "President, help us!" Now over a year later, they are calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Medvedev's government <sup>[13]</sup> and declaring that they have "no confidence in the president."

If more evidence were needed that economic discontent can lead to protest, Russian leaders can look next door to Belarus. There, Alexander Lukashenko—often referred to as Europe's last dictator—has remained in power since 1994 through a mixture of authoritarianism and what came to be known as "socialism with Russian subsidies <sup>[14]</sup>," in which Moscow exported oil and gas at below-market prices to keep the Belarussian economy afloat. With those subsidies now gone, Belarussians in a number of cities have taken to the streets <sup>[15]</sup> and have called for Lukashenko to resign. And in both Belarus and Russia, recent protests, in contrast to those in the past, took place in cities and towns well beyond the major metropolitan areas.

There is, to be sure, still no sign of a looming color revolution in Russia. Putin's popularity ratings remain high. Many of those who participated in the March protests were rounded up by police, and the leaders of the truckers' strike were detained even before their protest could begin. But for Putin and those around him, fear no doubt lurks alongside vast power. Having based his regime's legitimacy on providing stability in contrast to the chaos of the 1990s, Putin could struggle as signs of past discord reappear. Indeed, his anxiety was evident in the government's decision to downplay the centennial of the 1917 Russian Revolution <sup>[16]</sup>, one of the most dramatic social insurrections of

all time. Given the lack of transparent institutions to regulate state–society relations, the fear of losing wealth as well as power, and the growing grumbling over a stagnating economy, he must be aware that, should he lose his grip, the fall may be pretty steep indeed.

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