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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka • Anna Maria Dyer • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
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Anti-Corruption Protests Pressure Putin Ahead of 2018 Presidential Election

Łukasz Jasina, Agnieszka Legucka

In March, the most significant anti-government protests since 2012 took place in Russia, ostensibly against corruption. The biggest political winner was opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who wants to run in next year's presidential election. The protests have forced Russian President Vladimir Putin to find a new electoral strategy. In addition to social and economic issues, he and his authorities aim to mobilise Russian voters on other important issues, such as the threat of terrorism. This means that the Russian election campaign in 2018 will be dominated by both anti-corruption and state security themes.

Course of the Protests. On 26 March in 82 Russian cities—including the largest cities of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tyumen, Makhachkala, Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg, Saratov, Samara, Voronezh, Khabarovsk, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Ukhta and Vladivostok—demonstrations were held against corruption among high-ranking authorities. Opposition activist Alexei Navalny claimed that 150,000 people across Russia took to the streets. Radio “Echo Moskvy” estimated the number of demonstrators at 60,000. The manifestations were spontaneous and not registered in advance. The marchers were young people who had not been politically engaged yet. Police in Moscow arrested more than 1,000 people, including Navalny, who was tried and sentenced on 27 March to 15 days’ detention and a fine of 20,000 roubles (about €300). The scale of the demonstration surprised the Russian authorities. Russian President Vladimir Putin postponed his annual press conference and citizen question-and-answer session, originally scheduled for mid-April.

Support for Navalny. In December 2016, Navalny announced he wanted to run for president of Russia. By mobilising Russians ready to manifest against corruption in government, he emerged as the leader of the opposition to the current authorities. A protest leader, lawyer and opposition activist, he was one of the leading demonstrators in 2011 and 2012. Since then, Russian courts have handled two criminal trials against him, culminating in convictions. The first one, issued by a court in Kirov in 2013, charged him with misappropriation of state funds and after his conviction, sentenced him to five years in prison but suspended it for five years. The second, issued by a court in Moscow on allegations of corruption and misappropriation of private funds, resulted in a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence, suspended for five years. In the Russian legal system, the second conviction does not withdraw the previous suspension. On 23 February 2016, however, the European Court of Human Rights determined that Navalny’s first trial was incompatible with proper procedure. In November, Russia’s Supreme Court mulled the judgment and referred the matter to a lower court for reconsideration. On 8 February of this year, Navalny was again sentenced to five years in prison, suspended for five years.

Because of these convictions, Navalny formally cannot stand for the presidential election in March 2018. According to the election law of the Russian Federation, no one found guilty of severe or very serious crimes, which in the Russian penal code means sentences of 3 to 10 years or longer, can run for president, nor an imprisoned person. The suspension of the prison terms and penalties against Navalny automatically

deprive him of the possibility of taking part in the presidential election. These formal barriers, though, will not eliminate him from political life in Russia.

The fight against corruption is Navalny's message. For many years, he and his Anti-Corruption Fund have publicised materials about central and local government officials. At the beginning of March this year, a video was released to YouTube containing highly charged information about Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. It has been viewed by almost 16 million people and shows that the prime minister may effectively control property worth about 70 billion roubles (more than a billion euros). The film contrasts the glamorous holdings with the economic situation of ordinary citizens, whose average monthly salary is about 35,000 roubles (€543). Medvedev is depicted as the embodiment of the ruling elite. By extension, the inference against him includes the entire administration, including Putin. Navalny in the video did not directly attack the president, who still enjoys a great amount of support (86.1% as of February 2017). It is possible, however, that he is preparing similar materials for the presidential campaign.

Putin's Strategy. President Putin is likely to announce in mid-December that he will seek re-election. However, the scale of the March protests and their background may have forced him to adopt a new election strategy now. According to research by the Levada-Center, 89% of Russians oppose corruption in government. Putin probably will build his future campaign on memories of stabilising the state, although he may find it difficult to connect with young Russians who do not remember the difficult 1990s. He also likely will bring up a programme of social reforms, including fighting corruption in the administration. His proposals will be his response to the country's deteriorating economic conditions, including real wages, which have fallen by 40% between 2014 and 2017. Due to inflation—in 2015, it was 17.1%, but is now 4.3%—prices of food and educational materials for children have grown, creating big financial problems for many families. In 2016, and for the first time since Putin's accession, there has been a significant increase in the number of the poorest (to 22 million, or 6 million more than in 2014). This contrasts with his earlier success in reducing the number of the poorest in Russia from 42 million in 2000 to 16 million in 2014. It is possible that the economic hardship will mean Putin will put the blame on a number of people, including governors, whom he may deprive of power, and even Prime Minister Medvedev (according to Levada-Center research from mid-April, 45% of Russians want him to resign). The president would likely only take these decisions if the public anti-corruption pressure builds up.

Putin also will likely emphasise security. The terrorist attack in St. Petersburg on 3 April increased public support of the authorities. On 8 April, local leaders, supported by Putin's One Russia party, organised demonstrations throughout Russia, including in cities where the anti-corruption demonstrations had earlier taken place (for example, 50,000 people gathered in Samara). According to the Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, 150,000 Russians across the country marched. Putin, in his campaign, will want to show that he is an experienced leader who will ensure the safety of Russian citizens.

Evaluation and Prospects. The terrorist attack in St. Petersburg temporarily tamped down the debate on corruption in Russia and allowed the authorities to issue a message favourable to them on the need to focus their efforts on ensuring the security of the country. The March demonstrations, though, showed the level of growing discontent in Russia and more are expected. The anti-corruption marches also confirmed Navalny's position as the leader of the opposition to the current political elites. The protests have helped build his electorate for the 2018 battle. Putin's state stabilisation message is not persuasive to the younger generation and they expect equality of opportunity and the prospect of social advancement. It is likely then that Putin will turn to using internal threats (terrorist attacks) and external ones (such as his claims about NATO military installations close to the borders of Russia, the war in Syria, and the conflict with Ukraine) to convince citizens he is the right person for the job. All indications are that the current authorities will hinder Navalny's political activity. They will run a campaign to discredit him and play up his convictions and sentences on supposed corruption charges. They also will interpret election law in ways that are unfavourable to him. Navalny undoubtedly will appeal to the country's Constitutional Court in these matters, however his main strength will be further anti-government protests. The next ones are scheduled for 12 June and could verify the public's support for him and his message.