

Prospects of the Russian Protest Movement

Ksenia Kirillova and Olga Khvostunova



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Cover: People attend a rally to demand authorities allow opposition candidates to run in the upcoming local election in Moscow, Russia August 10, 2019. REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov

Atlantic Council
1030 15th Street, NW
12th Floor
Washington, DC 20005

Website: www.atlanticcouncil.org

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PROSPECTS OF THE MOSCOW PROTEST MOVEMENT

Ksenia Kirillova

The eruption of protests on the streets of Moscow in early August was the culmination of demonstrations the previous month after election officials barred opposition candidates from running for City Council, citing irregularities in the signatures collected to put them on the ballot.¹ Hundreds were arrested as the protests repeated for several weekends in a row amid police crackdowns against demonstrators and opposition figures.²

The results of the 2019 Russian municipal and regional polls were foreseeable, but did contain a few surprises. In the regional elections, all sixteen pro-Kremlin governors were re-elected, including Alexander Beglov in Saint Petersburg, whose victory was preceded by numerous violations.³ Although United Russia dominated in the regional elections, the ruling party suffered significant losses in Moscow: they were able to get only twenty-five out of forty-five seats while the opposition parties received twenty seats, thirteen of which were taken by the Communist party—quite an unusual outcome for the city, where the Communists have been rarely supported by voters. Many explain this victory as a result of a “smart voting” strategy, launched by Alexei Navalny and designed to rally support for the registered candidates in Moscow’s election with the best chance of defeating a pro-Kremlin candidate. But whether the “smart voting” strategy played a crucial role in the results or not, the outcome of Moscow’s election has confirmed both the growth of protest moods among the population and the opposition’s ability to mobilize joint actions.⁴

As these kinds of protests in Russia become increasingly common, polls tell us that Russians have been losing confidence in President Vladimir Putin. But those two trends do not add up to a popular movement for change. They may be frustrated, but Russians are also too divided and anxious to coalesce around a revolutionary vision or action.

PUTIN’S DECLINING POPULARITY AND ITS CAUSES IN RUSSIA

The last year has seen a shift in the mood of the Russian public that, in combination several other trends, could spell trouble for Putin, were it not for the opposition’s inability to unify Russians and counter the government’s shopworn narrative.

Most significantly, public confidence in Putin is waning. In a January 2019 poll by the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (VCIOM), the level of confidence in Vladimir Putin had reached its lowest point in thirteen years. At that time, only 33 percent of respondents expressed confidence in the president.⁵ By late May 2019, the number had fallen to 31.7 percent,⁶ which, according to Radio Liberty,⁷ is the lowest rating since the center began asking the question. This indicator started to slide in the summer of 2018,⁸ as Putin signed into law hikes in the retirement age and the country’s value-added tax rate, even as people’s real incomes continued to decline.

1 “Moscow protests: Opposition rally ‘largest since 2011,’” BBC, August 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49305129>.

2 “Moscow: Thousands protest local election,” Deutsche Welle, August 10, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/moscow-thousands-protest-local-election/a-49979411>.

3 “Единый день голосования в России. Главное,” Meduza, September 8, 2019, <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/09/09/proval-edinoy-rossii-v-habarovske-beglov-v-peterburge-sistemnaya-oppozitsiya-v-moskve>.

4 “Поражение в Москве, победа в регионах: итоги выборов 8 сентября,” The Bell, September 9, 2019, <https://thebell.io/porazhenie-v-moskve-pobeda-v-regionah-itogi-vyborov-8-sentyabrya/>.

5 “Опрос: доверие россиян к Путину сократилось до 13-летнего минимума,” BBC, January 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-47008309>.

6 “Рейтинги доверия политикам, одобрения работы государственных институтов, рейтинги партий,” VCIOM, May 24, 2019, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9707>.

7 “Рейтинг доверия россиян Владимиру Путину обновил исторический минимум,” Radio Svoboda, May 25, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29962455.html>.

8 “Рейтинги доверия политикам, оценки работы президента и правительства, поддержка политических партий,” VCIOM, May 31, 2019, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9728>.



Anton Sergienko (RFE/RL)

Following the barring of opposition candidates in Moscow city elections, protests on the streets of Moscow continued throughout August 2019, with over 2,000 protestors detained. Photo credit: Anton Sergienko (RFE/RL)

Ironically, VCIOM also reported in late May 2019 an increase from January 2019 in Putin's job approval,⁹ from 61.7 percent to 64.5 percent. The agency explained the discrepancy between the confidence and job approval numbers by saying it had adopted a new, more accurate method of conducting surveys soon after releasing the bruising results of the public-confidence question.

That explanation, though, raises a few questions. First, in March 2019, VCIOM had put Putin's job approval at its highest level since the beginning of 2019,¹⁰ 65 percent, even as his confidence rating hit 33 percent. What can account for that discrepancy? Second, May's 64.5 percent cannot be called "growth" from the March figure of 65 percent, by anyone's reckoning. For all of VCIOM's claims about new methodology, Putin's ratings continue to decline.

Also, notably, the number of Russians who support Putin's foreign policy, usually a solid indicator for the president, decreased in 2018.¹¹

Another ominous trend for Putin and his government is the recent growth of protest activity in Russia. Anastasia Nikolskaya, a researcher at Kosygin Russian State University who has for years studied the attitudes of the Russian public, told this year's meeting of the Free Russia Forum in Vilnius:

A year ago, Russia's domestic policy was condemned by many, but the majority approved of the country's foreign policy and emphasized the importance of the idea that other countries fear Russia. However, in October the request for a peaceful foreign policy was clearly made. There

9 Рейтинги доверия политикам, оценки работы президента и правительства, поддержка политических партий, VCIOM, May 31, 2019, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9728>.

10 Алексей Дегтярев, "Рейтинг одобрения деятельности Путина достиг максимума за полгода," Взгляд, March 22, 2019, <https://vz.ru/news/2019/3/22/969654.html>.

11 "Опрос социологов: уровень поддержки внешней политики Путина снижается," Radio Svoboda, August 9, 2018, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29421583.html>.



The Kremlin utilizes bureaucracy to restrict assembly. To protest the arrest of journalist Ivan Golunov, Russians organized shifts of single-person pickets to circumvent a law requiring permits for gatherings of more than one person.
Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

is also a growing tendency of [Russians] fighting for their rights by constitutional means. Respect is among the most important Russian values, so the arrogant statements of low-level local officials make people feel even more offended. It's fair to say that people have changed.¹²

In a May interview with Russian independent news agency Znak.com, Nikolskaya said there is a “revolution in the mass consciousness of Russians” and that “people want autonomy for their regions.”¹³

These demands for respect and self-government, along with rising skepticism of Putin, are being made as the economy and living standards continue to decline. “Stagnation in the Russian economy has become quite familiar, and it cannot be overcome

within the framework of the economic logic that has dominated since 2012 among the Russian elites,” Vladislav Inozemtsev, economist and director of the Center for Post-Industrial Society Studies, wrote in June. This stagnation, Inozemtsev wrote, is wearing people out:

The situation is aggravated by the fact that the authorities consciously create in people’s minds a sense of life in a ‘besieged fortress’ and thus send a signal that we should not expect our lives to improve in the near future. Under the circumstances, the authorities should not be surprised by the decline in their own popularity. ... Such a course in four to five years can create a fully revolutionary situation, which no fabricated ratings and made-up growth rates would be able to prevent.¹⁴

12 “Первый день 7-го Форума свободной России. Прямая трансляция,” Free Russia Forum, June 3, 2019, <https://www.forumfreerussia.org/multimedia/video-ffr/forum-vii-video/2019-06-03/pervyj-den-7-go-foruma-svobodnoj-rossii-pryamaya-translyatsiya/ffr/>.

13 “Полная неадекватность власти, как будто мы с ней живем в разных мирах,” Znak, May 20, 2019, https://www.znak.com/2019-05-20/proishodit_revoluciya_v_massovom_soznanii_rossijan_intervyu_s_sociologom.

14 Vladislav Inozemtsev, “На пороге революции. Владислав Иноземцев о том, как элиты потеряли чувство самосохранения,” The Insider, June 10, 2019, <https://theins.ru/opinions/160359>.

At least two large-scale protest movements in recent months—both regional and federal—illustrate these trends.

First, citizens in Yekaterinburg, an industrial city in the Urals and the fourth largest city in Russia, protested the construction of a cathedral on one of the city's most popular squares in the heart of the city. The huge mass of demonstrators carried the day, and even Putin had to acknowledge the conflict.¹⁵ The protest, perhaps the biggest since 2012, did not end with one or two rallies, but grew into a tent city that did not break up until demonstrators' demands were heard. The Uralians' determination spooked both officials and "patriotic activists"—members of pro-Kremlin youth organizations used to spread government propaganda and discredit political opposition—who dubbed the speeches in Yekaterinburg "the Ural Maidan."¹⁶

The second action, which spread across Russia, was the movement for the release of investigative journalist Ivan Golunov, on whom police had planted drugs in order to fabricate a criminal case. Outrage over Golunov's plight was so widespread that the case against him was dropped and authorities launched an investigation into who fabricated evidence against him.¹⁷

CHALLENGES FACING RUSSIA'S PROTEST MOVEMENT

For all its growing strength, however, the Russian protest movement's vulnerabilities keep it from blossoming into a genuine threat to Putin's regime.

First, most protests have been about local issues, which obviously cannot galvanize Russians from coast to coast. In addition to Yekaterinburg, there was a string of local, wintertime protests across Russia against landfills.¹⁸ Then in the spring, a series of environmental protests took place in various regions,¹⁹ as well as protests against domestic violence.²⁰

Second, a formidable protest movement requires that different parts of society come together to either seek a common goal or voice a common objection. For example, Ukraine's Euromaidan united patriotic and nationalist forces, the liberal intelligentsia, and most of the clergy. Maidan was supported by the priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, some priests of the Moscow Patriarchate, Catholic and Protestant churches, and some Muslim and Jewish religious leaders—along with the military, some representatives of the security forces, middle class businesspeople, human rights activists, statesmen, and anarchists. That is why Maidan was not just a "liberal protest," but a real, popular revolution.

The outcome of Moscow's election has confirmed both the growth of protest moods among the population and the opposition's ability to mobilize joint actions.

In contrast, during the Yekaterinburg protest there were splits not only among citizens but also within the protest movement itself. On the one hand, it coalesced many ecologists, supporters of democratic transformations, and previously indifferent citizens. On the other hand, some people broke away from the dissident movement due to discrepancies in the "church matter," and some dissidents were grateful to Putin when he eventually intervened.

Third, a protest movement becomes a threat to those in power when people realize that the current government cannot meet their key demands. If people see no possibility of agreement among themselves and do not see appealing to higher authorities as the only way to solve their problems, their protest activity will never go beyond the local level.

15 "Путин предложил провести опрос о строительстве храма в Екатеринбурге," Radio Svoboda, May 16, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29944551.html>.

16 Zergulio, "Пять минут до Майдана на Урале. Скандал вышел на федеральный уровень, чиновники в растерянности," Live Journal, May 14, 2019, <https://zergulio.livejournal.com/6341960.html>.

17 " 'Дело Голунова' передадут в Следственный комитет," Radio Svoboda, June 21, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30012590.html>.

18 Evan Gershkovich, "Thousands Protest Against Moscow's Plan to Dump Its Trash in Russian Regions," Moscow Times, February 3, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/03/thousands-come-out-in-protest-against-moscows-plan-to-dump-its-trash-on-russian-regions-a64376>.

19 Мария Кольцова, "Протесты выходных: против вырубки лесов и призыва в армию," MBK, April 20, 2019, <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/region/protesty-vykhodnyh-protiv-6/>.

20 "Даже небо плачет": жители Новосибирска потребовали защитить жертв домашнего насилия," Tayga.info, August 18, 2019, <https://tayga.info/148272>.

In Russia, discontent and anger have repeatedly given Putin the opportunity to play the benevolent tsar, arbiter and solver of problems. For example, during the Yekaterinburg protests, the Russian president proposed a survey on the construction of the cathedral. If a majority favored it, the park would be moved elsewhere.²¹ He did not reflexively side with the Church and even showed some understanding of the protesters' argument. Some activists welcomed his intervention. It probably helped that the protests were not formally against the government, even though the overwhelming majority of Russians rightly see the Russian Orthodox Church as an extension of the Kremlin.

In these three key ways, the Yekaterinburg protests lacked the elements necessary to become a national movement, but they still mattered: As sociologists point

Activists will need to show that the Kremlin has been the aggressor in its confrontations with the West and point out that friendly relations with neighbors are a better guarantee of security for Russia

out, such actions help citizens develop their potential to protest and show them that mass protests are an effective way to protect their rights.

Aside from mass repression, some uniquely Russian circumstances have so far prevented the kind of social cohesion necessary to create a large and consequential protest movement: fear of an external threat from which Russians need to be protected, the lack of a consolidating idea, and the lack of consensus about what the future should look like.

Domestic Kremlin propaganda is not aimed at denying the facts of air pollution, corruption, or other social problems, the frequent targets of local protests. Coverage of those topics is frowned upon, but it is not absent. Official corruption and incompetence were even the subjects of at least two popular TV comedies in 2018, *Year of Culture* and *House Arrest*.

None of those issues can generate a serious, nationwide protest movement that could lead to systemic changes and threaten Putin, because Russians are more afraid of the specters dreamed up by the Kremlin than they are outraged by lawlessness and falling living standards. What are those specters? The menacing West and the return to chaos, devastation, and even war that they have been told to expect if Putin and his system are overthrown. These are particularly rattling possibilities to a Russian populace that, despite post-Soviet liberalization, still feels heavily reliant on the state. If the state were to disappear or be crippled, most Russians do not have sturdy, independent support systems to fall back on. In comparison to that kind of existential threat, people's everyday problems pale in insignificance. As long as Russians see in Putin a defender and savior from these threats, they would not dare to participate in a revolutionary protest.

Russia's distinct lack of social support systems make it nearly impossible for citizens to develop separation from the state. Even in the 1990s, which was a period marked by freedom, the inviolability of private property did not develop, nor did an independent judiciary or the very culture of respect for the individual. Today, almost every person comes face to face with Russia's lawlessness and then makes vain attempts to find the truth and break through the wall of corruption. As a result, all Russians understand deep down that in their country, anything at all can happen to anyone at all. The only guarantee, though not an absolute one, of escaping this rule is being loyal to the state and having some type of relationship with it, so that the state knows who you are. The Russian sees no other way of protecting him or herself. That's why the Russian people perceive chaos and the destruction of the state as the loss of the last possibility of protection.

As a result, even Russians who protest develop a certain self-censorship that prevents them from going beyond a certain point. For example, Golunov himself refused to attend an unsanctioned protest action that was organized to support him,²² and Ivan Kolpakov, the editor-in-chief of Meduza, the news organization where Golunov works, said, "We rescued our guy ... but we do not engage in activism and do not want to be heroes of resistance."²³

This fear of chaos and attack from a foreign power also helps explain why the Russian opposition's most animating idea, the fight against corruption, has not

21 "Путин предложил провести опрос."

22 "Голунов не пойдет на акцию в его поддержку 12 июня," Interfax, June 11, 2019, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/664892>.

23 Ivan Kolpakov, Facebook, June 11, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/ivan.kolpakov/posts/10220196857938244>.



The arrest of journalist Ivan Golumov on what appeared to be fabricated drug charges led to a sudden burst of spontaneous protest. Additionally, three leading Russian newspapers ran front pages that read “I’m/We are Ivan Golunov.” Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

ignited a large movement—indeed, Russian authorities often strengthen their grip on institutions and officials under the guise of fighting corruption. Meanwhile, most Russians put up with graft in order to avoid a greater evil; they are convinced that theft is inevitable under any type of government and that a liberal government, in addition to looting Russia, would try to destroy the country on the order of overseas bosses.

This, in turn, helps explain why Russia’s most zealous anti-corruption crusader, Alexei Navalny, does not command much of a following. “[S]upport for Alexei Navalny is not so high, firstly, because many consider him an agent of the State Department or an agent of the Kremlin,” noted Anastasia Nikolskaya in her speech at the Free Russia Forum in June 2019. “[S]econdly, people believe that he does not offer any concrete methods to improve the situation, and proposes to fight not with

corruption, but with corrupt officials,” Nikolskaya said.²⁴ She added that the absence of leaders recognized by the people is one of the main problems of the modern protest movement.

Most Russians are not impressed with current government officials, but they do tend to adhere to the old Soviet mindset and are distrustful of liberal leaders. To the average Russian, no person in the modern Russian political field truly aligns with their ideals of what a leader should be.²⁵

Despite this, Navalny remains the de facto leader of the Russian protests. As founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation, Navalny has authored high-profile anti-corruption revelations of senior officials. After trying to challenge Putin for the presidency in the past, the Kremlin created new eligibility requirements that bar

²⁴ “Первый день 7-го Форума свободной России. Прямая трансляция.”

²⁵ “Полная неадекватность власти, как будто мы с ней живем в разных мирах,” *Znak*, May 20, 2019, https://www.znak.com/2019-05-20/proishodit_revolyuciya_v_massovom_soznanii_rossiyan_intervyu_s_sociologom.

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individuals from running for president if they've been arrested—something of a frequent occurrence for anti-corruption protestors. Today, he has a rather strong team supporting him in organizing these protests, including economist and former government official Vladimir Milov and Anti-Corruption Foundation lawyer Lyubov Sobol.

Part of the protest movement also recognizes the paradoxical benefit of government corruption: the fiercest critics of Russia's foreign policy are mindful that illicit personal enrichment funnels away resources that might otherwise go toward wars and subversive operations in Western countries.

Finally, Russians cannot agree on what type of future they should be advocating for, which contributes to the absence of unifying leaders and protest strategies. For example, since 2001, the independent Levada sociological agency has periodically asked Russians what they think of Joseph Stalin.²⁶ This year, the Soviet dictator got his highest-ever marks, with 51 percent of respondents professing admiration, respect, or sympathy for him. Combined with those who claimed indifference, 77 percent of respondents had a favorable or neutral view of Stalin. The share of those who said they respect him was up by 12 percent over last year.

Many commentators with liberal views said the poll was evidence that Stockholm Syndrome had gripped the population, and some even accused the Levada Center of distorting the results—but they are the logical result of decades of Russian propaganda, which has depicted Stalin not as a specific historical figure but rather as a set of qualities and actions that Russians expect from contemporary authorities.

The paradox is that Stalin's new propaganda cult, originally intended as a pillar of Putin's rule and to maintain his image as the new Stalin, is turning increasingly against the Russian president. And the less people tend to trust Putin, the more they seem to like Stalin. Introduced into the media space to bolster the



Russian opposition leader Ilya Yashin is one of the candidates prevented by authorities from registering for city elections in Moscow in 2019. Yashin served multiple consecutive ten-day jail terms in August and September, 2019, for organizing unsanctioned protests. Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

image of a strong leader and strong state in the mass consciousness, Stalin is no longer so much legitimizing Putin's dictatorial tricks as discrediting him.

Corruption and the looming threat from the West are issues where the former Soviet dictator particularly shows up his successor. While Putin sits atop a corrupt system, Stalin's admirers say he would have locked up the highly placed crooks and thieves long ago. And while many acknowledge that Putin is doing a good job of defending Russia from external enemies,²⁷ they question why he has not dispatched them after all these years. Russian television warns that the threat comes not only from the mighty Washington, but also from Ukraine, which could attack any day.

26 "Уровень одобрения Сталина россиянами побил исторический рекорд," Levada Center, April 16, 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/2019/04/16/uroven-odobreniya-stalina-rossiyanami-pobil-istoricheskij-rekord/>.

27 "Путин отлично выполняет свою работу - защищает Россию от внешних врагов?" Mail.ru, <https://otvet.mail.ru/question/166343070>.

Another factor at play is that under Putin, especially against the background of falling living standards and pension reform, there is certainly no social justice. For anyone that buys into the revisionist pro-Stalin propaganda, this is a far cry from the supposed social justice of the general secretary.

Seen in this light, growing support for Stalin is a sign less of growing support for Putin and his policies than of opposition to them. Even the *Military Review*,²⁸ known for its loyalty to the Kremlin, gets the point. Viktor Kuzovkov, one of the authors on its site, writes:

Stalin's sharp rise in popularity is nothing but a veiled, so far drawn-inward, protest of society against the actions of our government and those who now represent it. ... This is, if you will, the 'internal opposition' that philosophers sometimes talk about and comedians sometimes joke about. Now it has become a reality for 51 percent of Russians. And no matter who really relates to Stalin's personality, such a percentage of potential oppositionists must somehow convince the Kremlin that it is losing control of the situation and is on the verge of significant changes.²⁹

Of course, Russia's liberal opposition rejects the notion of Stalin as the embodiment of the country's restive mood, while Stalin's admirers aggressively refuse to see liberal dissidents as the custodians of their aspirations. The image of the "Glorious Future Russia" for these groups is radically different. Many are unhappy with the state of things, but they seek opposing outcomes. Some celebrities, including popular video bloggers and rappers, attended the Moscow protests, but none took the lead and offered a clear vision of the desired future.³⁰

For all these reasons, an effective protest movement seems a long way off in Russia, but any efforts to build one will need a few specific elements.

First, it will likely consolidate around a social problem that is a direct consequence of Putin's policies, as

opposed to the actions of local oligarchs, officials, or church hierarchies. Issues that affect people in most of Russia's regions—environmental problems, private-sector job losses, substandard health care, medicine shortages—present the best opportunities for widespread mobilization.

For example, the country lacks the funds to provide adequate medical care, productivity is dropping, basic government services are being cut, and people will have to work longer to ease the load on the government's pension fund. Meanwhile, Moscow spends freely on the wars in Donbas and Syria, on the militarization of Crimea and Kaliningrad, on bribes for Western politicians,³¹ and on an army of security officials and Internet trolls. And since Putin's rhetoric toward the West grows only more bellicose, these misguided priorities probably will not change any time soon.

Russians cannot agree on what type of future they should be advocating for, which contributes to the absence of unifying leaders and protest strategies.

Medicine shortages are an especially stark example because they are often a result of the government's ban on drug imports from certain countries in response to Western sanctions.

A chief organizational hurdle is that members of the Russian opposition are not good at negotiating with each other and have little mutual trust. Overcoming interpersonal disagreements in the opposition may be the main condition for the selection of a leader recognized by different groups of protesters, able to organize activists and bring consistency to opposition.

28 "Гнёт 'стабильности' делает нас сталинистами?" Военное обозрение, April 22, 2019, <https://topwar.ru/157040-gnet-stabilnosti-delaet-nas-stalinistami.html>.

29 "Гнёт 'стабильности' делает нас сталинистами?"

30 "На протест в Москве пришли российские знаменитости," Факты, August 10, 2019, <https://fakty.com.ua/ru/svit/20190810-na-protest-u-moskvi-priyshly-rosijski-znamenytosti/>.

31 "Commuting to Moscow: Lega Nord's Pilgrimage To Russia," Bellingcat, August 8, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/08/08/commuting-to-moscow-lega-nords-pilgrimage-to-russia/>.



Despite being the most well-known non-systemic opposition leader and the subject of Kremlin harassment, Alexei Navalny has not yet enough political support to lead this opposition into the mainstream. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Second, Russia's modern-day dissidents will have to discredit the propaganda that is the cornerstone of Putin's regime, specifically that the West awaits the chance to pounce on a vulnerable Russia and that regime change would unleash chaos on society.

Activists will need to show that the Kremlin has been the aggressor in its confrontations with the West and point out that friendly relations with neighbors are a better guarantee of security for Russia and its borders than a constant state of hostilities. And they will need to somehow disprove the West's theoretical plans to attack Russia.

Further, Russians need to be shown that the plundering of the country and the redirection of funds to Russia

directly threaten their lives and well-being. This threat could come from environmental problems that remain unaddressed, such as the 2017 release of ruthenium in the Chelyabinsk region and similar incidents that were covered up by the authorities, or from the general catastrophic oncological situation in Russia, or from the collapse of medical care and sporadic drug shortages that reduce the survival rate of cancer patients.³²

To take regime change and democracy out of the realm of the unthinkable, activists should offer Russians examples of other countries where the transition was successful and the government still working, such as the Baltic states, Czechia, and even Ukraine. People need to see how civil society in other countries seeks to solve problems, including through protest actions,

³² "Russia's Bad Health Care System Is Getting Worse," Newsweek, November 21, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/12/02/dire-russia-health-care-523380.html>.

without sparking chaos and revolution. Activists could even point to neighboring Ukraine, where people live in peace in regions where Russian troops and mercenaries are not present.

In debunking the Kremlin's carefully nurtured fear of a return to the wild '90s in the event of regime change, activists should remind Russians that it was the restructured Committee for State Security (KGB) and mafia, not the democrats, who plundered the country and took money abroad.³³ What's more, as the economist Inozemtsev notes, the status quo is in some ways worse than in the 1990s:

In addition, the sharp decline of the economy lasted only four years, and the new reality was sharply different from the disgraced socialism. Today in Russia there is a situation when the decline in income continues for the sixth year in a row, the retirement age is rising, the devaluation is taking place at the same rate as, for example, in 1993-1997, but at the same time the economy does not allow for successful private entrepreneurship. Law enforcement officers are robbing the population worse than any racketeers, and the social elevators have stopped.³⁴

Activists also need to imbue their actions and rhetoric with patriotism, and always stress that the change they

seek aims to ensure that Russians can enjoy dignified, peaceful, and safe lives. The Kremlin will not have a monopoly on the language of security and defense if activists can convince Russians that Putin's militarism and adventurism threatens Russia's security.

Domestic Kremlin propaganda is not aimed at denying the facts of air pollution, corruption, or other social problems.

Finally, democrats need to make the point that this regime is arbitrary and that its displeasure can be directed at people of all political persuasions—that loyalty to the regime does not protect against repression. For example, it's not only Ivan Golunov and liberal activists who have found mystery drugs in their pockets: Addiction researcher Nikolay Kaklyugin, a vocal opponent of Russia's liberals, sits in a Novochoerkassk pre-trial detention center awaiting trial on drug charges in what is widely believed to be a frame-up.³⁵ This is not the benevolent regime its conservative defenders claim, and the fight against it should unite people of disparate views.

33 Kseniya Kirillova, "Propaganda stereotypes paralyze Russia's potential for change," Euromaidan Press, January 12, 2016, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/01/12/propaganda-stereotypes-paralyze-russias-potential-for-change/>.

34 Inozemtsev, "На пороге революции. Владислав Иноземцев о том, как элиты потеряли чувство самосохранения."

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RUSSIAN YOUTH IN THE MOSCOW PROTESTS

Olga Khvostunova

July and August 2019 saw some of the largest protests in Moscow in recent years. Tens of thousands took to the street to protest the government's refusal to register independent candidates in the Moscow City Duma elections. Young Russians made up a noticeable group among the protesters—a trend that sociologists³⁶ and political experts³⁷ have increasingly registered. This is a sign that civic awareness in Russia is growing, and young people who first showed up in large numbers to country-wide demonstrations in 2017 are increasingly demanding that the government hear their voices and enter a dialogue. While the specific role of the youth in the Russian protest movement remains unclear, it remains a factor to be watched closely.

It has been a turbulent summer for members of the unapproved Kremlin opposition in Moscow; despite their best efforts, all were banned from running in the September 8 Moscow City Duma elections. Moscow's

electoral authorities denied registration³⁸ to as many as sixty-two candidates on often absurd grounds. By mid-July, public outrage reached a tipping point and erupted in the form of mass protests—with sanctioned demonstrations on July 20³⁹ and August 10⁴⁰ and unsanctioned rallies on July 27⁴¹ and August 3.⁴² Each protest attracted tens of thousands of people, and the turnout only grew as law enforcement brutally cracked down on demonstrators with excessive force and arrests. By some estimates, authorities detained almost 3,000 people, and arrested⁴³ opposition leaders such as Alexei Navalny,⁴⁴ Ilya Yashin,⁴⁵ Dmitry Gudkov,⁴⁶ and Lyubov Sobol.⁴⁷ The August 10 protest in Moscow was reportedly the largest since 2011,⁴⁸ with 60,000⁴⁹ people turning up on Moscow's historic Sakharov Avenue.

Turnout for the protests took many observers by surprise, but the abundance of young faces⁵⁰ remains a particular interest. According to a random sample poll⁵¹ conducted on August 10, 59 percent of protesters

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- 42 Deutsche Welle. "Russia Protests: Police Arrest Hundreds at Moscow Rally: DW: 03.08.2019." DW.COM. Accessed October 10, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-protests-police-arrest-hundreds-at-moscow-rally/a-49878715>.
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Mumin Shakirov (RFE/RL)

Photos of 17-year-old Olga Misik went viral after she sat in front of riot police reading them the Russian constitution to them. Photo Credit: Mumin Shakirov (RFE/RL)

were thirty-five years old or younger, and 23 percent were twenty-five or younger. These statistics echo the numbers of the March 2017 anticorruption protests⁵² organized by Navalny, when Russian youth took to the streets en masse and surprised both the Kremlin and the general public.

This summer's unrest confirmed⁵³ that young Russians are breaking away from the Kremlin's clasp and moving toward creating their own political identity.⁵⁴ Until a few years ago, the eighteen to thirty-year-old demographic was viewed⁵⁵ as the Kremlin's most loyal and reliable group of supporters—youth support of the president was estimated⁵⁶ at 65 percent—but these attitudes have changed dramatically over the last two years. In fact, according to a January 2019 poll by the Public Opinion Foundation, which has since been removed, young people now have the least favorable view of the Russian president—32 percent as opposed to the average of 42 percent among the general population.

At least three major factors are causing this drastic shift. First, the generational gap between the youth and the ruling elite has grown so wide that it is no longer possible to bridge—these groups have diverging interests, priorities, worldviews, and value systems. Second, the Russian youth inhabits the online world—similar to their foreign counterparts and in contrast to older generations. As digital natives they consume information differently and are largely immune to the Kremlin's propaganda that flows from national TV networks.

The third factor is the Kremlin's failed youth outreach policy. Despite early success with its youth movements *Idushchie Vmeste*, "Walking Together," and *Nashi*, "Ours," the Kremlin still fails to offer a positive agenda or strategic vision for the future. In the long run, the Kremlin's carrot and stick tactics have failed to rein in young people who are increasingly less driven by so-called "traditional values" imposed by the state,

52 Tom Balmforth, "New Kids On The Block: A Younger Generation Invigorates Anti-Kremlin Protests." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, May 28, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-navalny-protests-new-generation/28394359.html>.

53 Olga Khvostunova and Vladimir Milov, "Opinion | How Putin and the Kremlin Lost Russian Youths," *The Washington Post*. WP Company, June 17, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/06/17/how-putin-kremlin-lost-russian-youths/>.

54 Vladimir Milov and Olga Khvostunova, Russian Youth: A Look Inside the 'Black Box', Free Russia Foundation, <https://www.4freerussia.org/russian-youth-a-look-inside-the-black-box/>.

55 Михаил Соколов, "Первое Путинское Поколение," Радио Свобода, November 3, 2015, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27331008.html>.

56 Евгения Кузнецова, Вера Холмогорова, and Владимир Дергачев. "Прокремлевский Фонд Заявил о Рекордной Поддержке Путина Среди Молодежи." РБК, May 3, 2017. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/05/2017/590a1c9c9a794751dd7bc6d5>.

and more by personal goals of self-actualization, growth, and creativity. Career opportunities within the government or state corporations were the only real perks that the Kremlin had been able to offer young people, but these opportunities are now inaccessible since 2014 the Russian economy has been shrinking and kleptocracy and nepotism have flourished.

Still, on average, Russian youth show little interest in politics⁵⁷, which begs the question: what made young Muscovites, arguably the most privileged group among the Russian youth, protest this summer? Indignation over irregularities in the Moscow City Duma elections

Still, on average, Russian youth show little interest in politics, which begs the question: what made young Muscovites, arguably the most privileged group among the Russian youth, protest this summer?

does not seem to explain their action, especially after it was reported⁵⁸ that the turnout at the September 8 election was at a low point of 22 percent.

There are several possible reasons for these outbursts of unrests among the youth. One reason for the protests may lie in the context of the larger social processes unraveling in Russia today. According⁵⁹ to economist Mikhail Dmitriev—notable for predicting⁶⁰ the 2011-2012 mass Bolotnaya Square protests—Russia is currently undergoing a breakdown of the post-Crimea consensus, which is reflected in social discontent, a decline of public

trust in the government, and a demand for change. Dmitriev recently explained, “Negative emotions don’t go anywhere, they build up, which creates grounds for a potential outburst as a result of some triggering event.”

Other experts have argued⁶¹ that the Moscow protests were the result of growing civic awareness. Russian people, including the youth, increasingly find themselves in conflict with the government and feel the need to assert their dignity and demand a peaceful dialogue with the authorities. In the case of the Moscow elections, the government refused to enter this kind of de-escalatory dialogue.

The latest Levada national poll regarding the protests shows that the youngest group of the polled population held the most critical attitudes toward police behavior: 58 percent of respondents age eighteen to twenty-four said that the police acted harshly and used unjustified force as opposed to 48 percent of the group aged twenty-five to thirty-nine, 43 percent of the group aged forty to fifty-five, and 31 percent of the fifty-five and older group.

When asked about whether or not Western countries played a role in causing the latest protests, 43 percent of the youngest group rejected the idea as an attempt to discredit the protests, as did 33 percent of the groups age twenty-five to thirty-nine and forty to fifty-five, and only 29 percent of the older groups. It was also the youngest group that held more favorable views of the Moscow protests—28 percent (compared to 23 percent of the two middle groups and 21 percent of the oldest group).

In his Vedomosti op-ed, Levada analyst Denis Volkov also shared insights from Levada’s August interviews in focus groups.⁶² Referring to the Moscow protests, young interviewees said that the “authorities don’t want to let anyone in [the power structure],” and that “they only think about themselves and ignore average

57 Денис Волков, “Чем Российская Молодежь Отличается От Своих Родителей,” ВЕДОМОСТИ, December 4, 2018. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/12/05/788410-rossiiskaya-molodezh>.

58 Татьяна Кежаева, “Итоги Выборов в Мосгордуму 2019: Самовыдвиженцы в Лидерах, Явка На Уровне 2014 Года,” Акценты - репортажи и аналитика - РИАМО, September 9, 2019, <https://riamo.ru/article/380099/itogi-vyborov-v-mosgordumu-2019-samovydvizhentsy-v-liderah-yavka-na-urovne-2014-goda.xl>.

59 Арнольд Хачатуров, “От Крымского Единства к Брожению Умов,” Новая газета, August 8, 2019, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/08/09/81545-ot-krymskogo-edinstva-k-brozheniyu-umov>.

60 Сергей Белановский et al., “Движущие Силы И Перспективы Политической Трансформации России,” Фонд «Центр стратегических разработок» в сотрудничестве с Российской академией народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте Российской Федерации, November 11, 2011, http://www.svor.ru/public/docs_2011_11_7_1344238631.pdf

61 Любов Борусяк and Алексей Левинсон, “Пробуждение Гражданского Общества: Почему Разрастается Протест в Москве: Общество,” Forbes.ru, August 12, 2019, <https://www.forbes.ru/obshchestvo/381659-probuzhdenie-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-pochemu-razrastaetsya-protest-v-moskve>.

62 Денис Волков, “Российское Эхо Московских Протестов,” ВЕДОМОСТИ, September 8, 2019, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2019/09/09/810759-eho-moskovskih-protestov>.



As popular Russian music acts including IC3PEAK, Oxxxymiron, and Monetochka (left to right) increasingly address problems of daily life and resentment towards the Kremlin in their music, they have found themselves on the receiving end of government repression, with sudden venue cancellations, withdrawal of concert permits, and pushback on lyrics found to be distasteful by the authorities. Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

people;” that there are “no fair elections” and that the “Constitution doesn’t work.” The police brutality during the protest crackdowns disturbed many Russians—especially the case of Daria Sosnovskyaya, a young woman who was punched in the stomach by a riot police officer.⁶³

Political context is another useful lens to understand this new generational divide. Alexander Kynev, an expert in regional politics, echoed⁶⁴ the view that Russia’s post-Crimea social consensus is under growing strain. Moscow authorities’ refusal to register independent

candidates in the Moscow elections—an obvious injustice—was a trigger for the rallies, but the protest’s sentiment was already there.⁶⁵ The government’s reaction to unsanctioned protests—police brutality and mass detentions—only added insult to injury, pushing more people to take to the streets.

According to political commentator Kirill Rogov,⁶⁶ the political nature of the protest prevailed not just in Moscow, but also in other parts of the country; there have been recent protests in the northern town of Shies⁶⁷ and in Yekaterinburg.⁶⁸ The Moscow protests, in

63 “Riot police in Russia punch a woman in the stomach during a protest for free elections,” YouTube video, 0:44, “Guardian News,” August, 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcGcEAD3eqE>.

64 “‘Протест Будет Только Расширяться’. Эксперты о Ситуации с Митингами в Москве - BBC News Русская Служба,” BBC News, August 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-49320760>.

65 Александра Козлова, “Среди Россиян в Теории Растут Протестные Настроения.” Коммерсант, June 4, 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3991419>.

66 “‘Протест Будет Только Расширяться’. Эксперты о Ситуации с Митингами в Москве - BBC News Русская Служба.”

67 Charles Digges, “Russia’s Garbage Protests Raise Central Questions about the Right to a Clean Environment,” Bellona.org, June 12, 2019, <https://bellona.org/news/russian-human-rights-issues/2019-06-russias-garbage-protests-raise-central-questions-about-the-right-to-a-clean-environment>.

68 “Why Are Russians Clashing Over a New Cathedral in Yekaterinburg?” The Moscow Times, May 16, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/16/why-are-russians-protesting-a-churchs-construction-in-yekaterinburg-a65611>.

his view, revealed that the new generation of Russian youth is highly political and less timid than the older generations. Rogov said, “This youth has a different view of protest, they lack the complex of ‘learned helplessness’ inherent to older generations.”⁶⁹ Human rights activist Tatiana Lokshina articulated a similar view of the situation, attributing the large number of young people at the Moscow protests to their not having grown up in the Soviet Union when Russians feared government repression.⁷⁰

Yet another way to look at the situation is from the psychological perspective of individual and group experiences. Sociologist Olga Zeveleva explained⁷¹ that three hundred of the people detained during the Moscow protests were students, many “facing administrative prosecution, as well as threats from the police and university officials.” One of them, Yegor Zhukov,⁷² a Higher School of Economics student, remains under house arrest and could be sentenced to up to five years in prison for alleged calls for extremism on the Internet. In response to the mass detentions, Moscow students mobilized to help

each other by building digital resources, such as the Here We Stand project,⁷³ launched by independent student magazine DOXA.⁷⁴ Clearly, for many young Russians, these early experiences with police brutality against their peers will shape their perceptions of the government for years to come, thereby exacerbating social conflict.

Finally, the government’s outright repression of youth culture further delegitimizes the regime in the eyes of young people. Bands and musicians that don’t toe the party line find themselves targeted by government bans—acts like IC3PEAK,⁷⁵ Husky,⁷⁶ and Monetochka⁷⁷ are clear examples. As one Vedomosti columnist noted⁷⁸ last December, the Russian authorities try to ban⁷⁹ “the most honest music,” the music of the street, which is often dark, tough, brutally honest, and anti-government. Police brutality and lawlessness are recurring themes in what is becoming⁸⁰ the “music of protest.” It comes as no surprise that support from popular bands like FACE,⁸¹ Oxxxymiron,⁸² Krovostok,⁸³ and IC3PEAK,⁸⁴ who showed up at the August 10 protest, was a significant factor in the high turnout of the youth.

69 “‘Протест Будет Только Расширяться’. Эксперты о Ситуации с Митингами в Москве - BBC News Русская Служба.”

70 Ibid

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74 “Журнал Доха,” https://doxajournal.ru/?utm_referrer=

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77 “Монеточка – разбитый ковчег,” Youtube video, 3:31, Lunar Fox, August 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONoFUnIuwD0&list=PLf0PwPtXZiCRGzCwUXt5ZADbAlxdC4h4c>

78 Анастасия Иванова, “Почему Власть Запрещает Петь ‘Самую Честную Музыку,’” ВЕДОМОСТИ, November 27, 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/11/28/787696-zapreschaet-samuyu-chestnuyu-muziku>.

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81 Luxmoore, Matthew, “Dis-Chord: Pro-Kremlin Rapper Removes Music Video With Record Number Of Dislikes,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, September 10, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pro-kremlin-rapper-removes-music-video-with-record-number-of-dislikes/30157341.html>.

82 “Markul feat Oxxxymiron – FATA MORGANA (2017),” Youtube video, 3:46, oxxxymironofficial, September 21, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8e9sw6_oec&list=PL0rZj9lxt-ePxuUYtS-eD6Oh7gum-mE2p&has_verified=1

83 “Кровосток -ЧБ,” Youtube video, 37:41, Makcum, March 29, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TpruH-_l7Q

84 “Nearly 50,000 Protest for Fair Elections in Moscow,” The Moscow Times, April 10, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/10/nearly-50000-protest-for-fair-elections-in-moscow-a66798>.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

While the high turnout at the Moscow protests makes the case for a public political awakening, the Levada national poll⁸⁵ offers sobering statistics. On average, only 20 percent of the Russian people are ready to participate in political protests, and support is highest among the youth age eighteen to twenty-four, at 25 percent, and the lowest among Russians older than fifty-five, at 15 percent. Support for protests against declining living standards, or in support of rights, is slightly higher; 27 percent of Russians said they would join.

The reasons for the brewing social discontent are not going anywhere, and there are signs that Russia's political system is too rigid to adequately address mounting socio-political problems. As Dmitriev observed, the fomenting of public discontent will result in a change of social attitudes, although it is not yet clear what they will be. But opinion polls show a

growing demand for political freedoms, respect, and honesty amidst the general crisis of public trust in the government. Under these conditions, the Russian youth with its still-forming attitudes, open-mindedness, and audacity, can play a crucial role in political change in the country.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Ksenia Kirillova

Investigative journalist

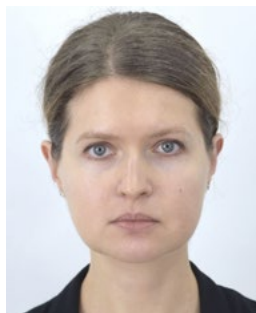
Ksenia Kirillova is an investigative journalist and analyst focused on Russian society, mentality, the mechanism of action of Russian propaganda (including in the US), “soft power,” “active measures,” and foreign policy. Ms. Kirillova is the author of several hundred articles, including research on Russian propaganda and soft power for the Integrity Initiative project at the British Institute for Statecraft, Homeland Security Today, EU Today, the British-Canadian security project Defense Report, Ukrainian English-language media Kyiv Post, Euromaidan Press, Stop Fake project, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and more.

While living in Russia, she worked as a journalist at the largest Ural media organization, Ural Worker, between 2008 and 2010. She also worked at the Ural branch of Novaya Gazeta from 2011 to 2013. Ms. Kirillova covered social problems in the region and exposed corruption, including at the FSB.

In the United States, she worked with the Associated Press, Newsweek, The Daily Beast, ABC7, Newsy, and other media outlets.

Since 2012, she is a corresponding member of the International Youth Human Rights Movement, and since May 2015, she is an expert at the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies in Kyiv.

She holds a degree in jurisprudence with honors from the Faculty of Law of The Liberal Arts University and was awarded twice the governor’s scholarship of the Sverdlovsk region.



Olga Khvostunova

Director, Institute of Modern Russia; Editor-in-Chief, imrussia.org

Olga Khvostunova is the Director of the Institute of Modern Russia and Editor-in-Chief of imrussia.org. She is a well-published journalist and researcher who has worked as a contributing editor at Kommersant, one of Russia’s leading newspapers, and as an Adjunct Professor at Moscow State University, where she received her Ph.D. in political communications. She was also a Fulbright Scholar at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute. Over the last 15 years, Dr. Khvostunova has authored hundreds of articles, covering various issues in Russian politics including energy markets, opposition movements, and Russian foreign policy. Her research focuses primarily on political discourse and the interplay of politics, media, and expert communities. Olga Khvostunova’s work has appeared in The Washington Post, The Atlantic, Index on Censorship, The New Times, and other media outlets. Her most recent paper studies the phenomenon of the Russian youth’s role in the country’s recent protest movement.

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Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org