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Anti-corruption protests in Russia: The Kremlin is up against some difficult decisions

The anticipated aftermath of the recent anti-corruption protests in Russia is that the Kremlin will most likely continue the country's long tradition of developing new methods of political and ideological co-optation. Yet the hitherto means of co-optation are now at a crossroads and the question of increasing the use of fear has become more acute.

A spontaneous gathering of mourners took place in St. Petersburg immediately after the terrorist attack on the city's metro line in early April. This was soon followed by a planned reaction by the authorities. During the days that followed the attack, several demonstrations against terrorism were organized all around Russia. According to many observers, these gatherings appeared to be strikingly superficial and pro-regime oriented, and bore all the hallmarks of the regime´s attempt to manipulate the shock of the terrorist attack for its own political ends.

The most obvious reason for state-backed rallies was the nationwide anti-corruption protests organized by opposition leader Alexei Navalny in late March, and the largest since spring 2012. Although it is too early to estimate whether waves of anti-regime protests similar to those seen in 2011–12 are about to emerge, the March protests demonstrated that the Kremlin's existing means of guaranteeing its authoritarian status quo have crucially weakened.

According to political scientist Adam Przeworski's classic formulation, the authoritarian equilibrium rests on lies, fear and economic prosperity.

When there is economic prosperity, fewer lies and less fear are called for. Consequently, when there is less prosperity, more lies are needed, and when lies no longer work, more fear is required.

It is debatable just how long the Russian economy will survive under the current policies, or what the actual effects of the Western sanctions will be. The undeniable fact is that the regime cannot restore the authoritarian equilibrium by purely economic means. Approximately 15% of the population live below the poverty line and only ten of Russia's 85 official regions have a stable budget.

Following Przeworski, the current situation requires more lies. Indeed, numerous negative socio-economic facts have been concealed and manipulated with the help of state television. However, the latest anti-corruption protests were visible proof of television's generational limitations. Television is followed by millions of Russians, yet those who truly believe in its message largely belong to generations from whom the regime's loyal backers of the future will not be drawn.

Hence the regime either needs more effective lies or more fear. The March protests might pose a challenge in both respects. Regardless of official claims concerning the opposition's capacity to threaten societal stability by manipulating youngsters, it is difficult for the regime to deny the moral strength of opposing corruption. Now the regime is trying to do the same with terrorism; yet terrorism is opposed by everyone in the same way that corruption is, and hence the result was unconvincing. The majority of the pro-regime anti-terrorism gatherings were more like staged entertainment, which does not sit well with commemorating victims of terror.

Increasing the use of fear to any great extent will also pose a challenge. Since the 2011–12 protests, the regime has put various administrative deterrents for unauthorized demonstrations into practice, in addition to repressive measures against Internet users. Nonetheless, they did not prevent tens of thousands of youngsters from flooding the streets, nor millions of Russians from viewing the opposition's corruption revelations on the web. It is highly likely that new measures against Internet usage will be implemented soon, although they will hardly eliminate the potential for protests and inspire the Internet generation to be loyal to the regime. It is also worth noting that among the adult population, the regime's recent attempts to diminish local and sectoral protests by co-opting them have not proved very successful either. The repeated protests against road taxes by truck drivers, which have been going on for almost two years, are a case in point.

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A more effective use of fear would simply require tougher and more widespread repression. But the regime can hardly regard this option as appealing. The rapid collapse of Victor Yanukovych's regime in Ukraine in 2014 has been seen as an example of the fate that awaits "soft" authoritarian regimes when they rely on a massive use of fear accompanied by violence.

One option could be a large-scale pro-regime mobilization with a manipulated security threat. But the economic situation places certain constraints on implementing this scenario. Moreover, the nationalist mobilization in 2014–15 reminded the Kremlin that semi-independent actors authorized by this mobilization might become too independent, and be prepared to stray from the official goals. What is more threatening for the regime, in light of Eastern Ukraine, is that they are able to gain popular support too.

The Kremlin's policies are based on wishful thinking with regard to national and international trends that would strengthen its interests. Since these trends have appeared less favourable, if not detrimental, exiting from the situation has become difficult. Historically, the West has represented something worth catching up with, while concurrently posing a threat to Russia's rulers by pressuring them into irrevocable and difficult reforms. Recent events have now shown that a significant number of young people are more engaged with the free Internet than with governmental indoctrination.

Putin's rule has continued Russia's long tradition of developing new methods of political and ideological co-optation, and shows no signs of abating. This is seen as a safer option than an ideologically framed foray into the systematic and large-scale use of fear. However, the hitherto means of co-optation are no longer working to the extent that they once did, much to the chagrin of the regime. Hence, the Kremlin is at a crossroads and the question of increasing the use of fear has duly become more acute.