

What the Protests in Russia Mean for President Putin

Over last weekend, the decision by Russian electoral authorities to bar independent and opposition candidates from running in Moscow City Council elections prompted protests that turned violent as Moscow police cracked down hard on those that turned out, leading to the arrests of nearly 1,400.

Meanwhile, the opposition figure and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny—who had urged people to turn up at the protests and had been jailed for 30 days in the run-up to them as a result—mysteriously developed an “allergic” reaction while in police custody. He has since been treated at a hospital and returned to his jail cell.

Why It Matters:

Protests are not new to Moscow. But the intensity with which these protests were met by Moscow police caught many political observers off guard. Why? A couple of reasons. The first is that the stakes were low, as Moscow City Council elections have little impact on national, let alone international, politics. And yet the police responded as if these protests directly threatened the Russian state—this was the most arrests at a Russian protest in more than a decade. Secondly, the Kremlin had seemed more responsive in recent months to public outcry—see the decisions to release an investigative journalist who was arrested on suspicious charges, or to pause plans to build a church on park grounds in Yekaterinburg. The Kremlin under Putin is not known for backing down, so the recent moves seemed to be an acknowledgment that a struggling economy, falling salaries, an unpopular pension reform plan, higher taxes, continued corruption and declining living standards hit Russians hard; some have gone so far as to hope a degree of political liberalization was forthcoming. The response to the protests this weekend—as well as that mysterious “allergy” that opposition-leader Navalny developed while in custody—put an end to any such optimism.

What Happens Next:

The intensity with which the protesters were put down is a troubling sign that rather than allowing some space for liberalizations, the Kremlin has decided to go

full-bore on repression, signaling its approach ahead of the 2021 national elections. In the more immediate term, Moscow is looking at a City Council packed with Kremlin loyalists—they're in too deep to do anything else at this point.

More interesting is what happens between now and those Duma elections in 2021, especially as a Russian economy propped up by energy exports faces serious headwinds. Putin and his United Russia party will win those elections—it's possible that the Kremlin will introduce electoral changes to make sure its preferred candidates win. But it's getting harder for them to use the same tools to stay in power that they used to. Moscow understands the daily lives of citizens are becoming harder, which makes increased social spending to satisfy the public more likely, but that just causes bigger economic problems down the line.

The Key Statistic That Explains It:

Putin's party, United Russia, is polling at 33 percent—still ahead of its political rivals, but far below the 54% it won in 2016 elections. Why is that so important? Because...

The One Major Misconception About It:

That the fall of Putin's popularity is driving the harsh crackdown. Putin's popularity, while having tumbled some from its summer 2015 high of 89 percent, is still relatively strong at 68 percent, according to the independent Levada Center. More concerning to the Kremlin are those plummeting United Russia numbers. Given the party's current standing, some party members opted to run as independents in City Council elections. The party's lackluster polling is a particular problem for the Kremlin as Putin needs a successful United Russia to control both the parliament and the regional governments.

The One Thing to Say About It at a Dinner Party:

In a world without a properly functioning geopolitical order, rogue states and non-state actors have the fewest constraints on their domestic behavior; Putin has been taking advantage of that for years. But he also loved being able to free outspoken critics like Mikhail Khodorkovsky and letting Navalny walk the streets; it was a sign of his power, the generosity, and goodness of spirit of the all-powerful Putin. But when his popularity starts sinking, the economy starts

stalling, and demonstrations start appearing, even Putin starts to feel the heat. And while still powerful, it turns out Putin has a thinner skin than he typically presents to the world. If it's proven that Navalny was poisoned—which, to be fair, is pretty much impossible to prove—it means there's more instability at home that people had presumed.

The One Thing to Avoid Saying About It:

The only thing worse than being in a democracy with just one party? Being in a one-party democracy when that one party starts collapsing.

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