

Psychology of Revolt In Russia Today and the Future

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Presentation by:

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Event Summary

The current political situation in Russia demonstrates that despite the emergence of the protest movements, Prime Minister Putin retains a high degree of public support. Both state-owned and independent polling agencies find his public approval ratings above fifty percent. The most important implication of this support is that Putin will almost certainly wake up on March 5 as president of Russia, with no need for a second round of voting.

In respect to the Kremlin's campaign message, he expressed remorse that Putin has failed to include any genuinely new ideas or proposals, instead choosing to rely only on tested political strategies. This approach involves three major aspects. First, Putin continues to contrast his tenure with the turbulence of the 1990s, serving to emphasize that he is a guarantor of stability. Second, Putin has argued that revolution is the only alternative to his continued rule, attempting to discredit the opposition through an appeal to his view of Russia's history of failed revolutions. Finally, Putin has fostered an "enemy at the gate mentality," appealing, for example, to the battle of Borodino or World War II as historical precedents. These efforts have attempted to isolate enemies both outside Russia, and within. Consequently, Putin has ramped up his anti-American rhetoric while also attempting to isolate internal enemies, such as internet users, middle-class Muscovites, and white-collar workers more generally.

The opposition, while lacking one unified message, has nevertheless, focused on three important ideas. First, the protesters denounce the lies of Putin's system, in particular with respect to the honesty of Russian elections. Second, the opposition stands for human dignity; the people who showed up to Bolotnaya Square were fed up with being humiliated by Putin's paternalistic system. Finally, the protesters have unified around the slogan, "Russia without Putin."

There are several implications of Russia's changing political environment. There may be a wide range of outcomes, but nevertheless two consequences are of the greatest significance. First, Putin's system, which had been in place since 2000, is now in a crisis of legitimacy. Putin's legitimacy had previously derived largely from his personal charisma. Putin was recognized as the legitimate leader not because he was elected, but rather because most Russians had a positive emotional reaction to their newfound leader. As Putin loses his charismatic appeal, his base of

legitimacy will continue to erode, regardless of the outcome of the Presidential elections. Two points served as evidence of Putin's waning legitimacy. First, leaders of United Russia, which had previously been associated with Putin at every turn, are now attempting to rebrand the party. Putin himself has kept distance from United Russia during his campaign, whereas he used to take every opportunity to associate himself with the ruling party. Second, respondents are asked to associate politicians with a particular animal. For years, Putin was consistently associated with a lion, but more recently, there have been an increasing number of responses that associate him instead with a rat.

The second major outcome coming from the emergence of the protest movement has been the polarization of Russian society. While the number of Putin opponents has risen, his supporters have grown more numerous as well. People's views have simply been pushed further, but in both directions; people who were once apathetic are now either joining the opposition or rallying behind the existing regime. Putin and his team have also made an effort to create and deepen polarizations throughout society where they otherwise would not exist. The most prominent divisions have pitted Moscow against the regions, "blue collars" against "white collars," and Russia against the West (particularly the United States). Putin's efforts have been questionably successful, as a wide range of citizens continue to support the opposition.

There are several psychological and emotional factors at work in the Russian protest movement. Politics cannot be understood without inclusion of the "human perspective." After all, even presidents still have human emotions. Putin feels insulted by the protests, both because he used to rely on his charisma and the people's love for him as the foundations of his political legitimacy, but also because his long time in office has made him sensitive to disapproval. The incident where Putin was booed by the audience after watching a martial arts fight in November 2011 came as a surprise. After said incident, Putin did not appear in public again until his speech at Luzhniki Stadium on February 23, 2012. His shock at being booed by a public that once loved him also prompted some misguided reactions; the attempts by his staff to explain away the booing only brought more public attention and made clear what had really happened. Even when Putin spoke at Luzhniki, his hesitance was made clear by the extreme precautions taken by the authorities (playing fake applause, paying the audience, and so on) to ensure that Putin would have a receptive audience.

Various state officials and government employees feel betrayed by Putin, and particularly by his reaction to the protests. Most prominently, his decision to re-instate direct gubernatorial elections, along with the firings of various regional governors, was viewed as a breach of trust by Putin's loyal appointees. Moreover, these officials are more broadly concerned by the weakening position of the Kremlin, as most of these figures owe their positions, and thus their power, to their ultimate benefactor: Vladimir Putin. It is in this light that we should understand the seemingly random state-sponsored pro-Putin rallies. These events have attracted a great deal of criticism, and may even have a negative electoral effect, but nevertheless serve as a message to the power vertical: "We will maintain Putin's strength. Don't jump ship."

The psychological motivations behind the protests are also important to consider. The protesters' motivations are neither economic nor political; people are tired of constant humiliation by a paternalistic regime and want the feeling of pride that would come from securing their own independence and political power. In this regard, the primary motivation of the opposition can be

seen as human dignity. These protesters believe human dignity and democracy are natural rights, refuting the oft-repeated claim that Russia does not need democracy because its people have an “authoritarian mindset.”

Dr. Gozman concluded his presentation by presenting two possible scenarios for Russia’s political future. In one scenario, the ruling regime would fail to implement substantive political reforms, choosing instead to buy off certain constituencies like pensioners with state funds, and potentially even starting another foreign war to rally the public behind the regime. In this scenario, there will be two reactions among the protesters. Some members of the opposition will become increasingly frustrated and depressed, essentially giving up hope for genuine reform. But a smaller segment of the protesters will instead become increasingly aggressive and violent. He noted that some violence is already occurring, and argued that a display of force by the authorities in response would trigger the end of the Putin regime.

In the second scenario, the authorities would make some genuine political reforms. However, these reforms would simply be seen as “capitulation” by the Putin regime. If, for example, Medvedev had succeeded in implementing reforms, society would have attributed such changes to Medvedev’s genuine desire to change Russia. If, on the other hand, Putin, after a decade of denying political pluralism, were to implement reforms, it would be taken as a sign that the government is caving to public pressure. This would encourage protesters to radicalize further and demand more from the government. This would only grant greater influence to regime hardliners who would push back against Putin, potentially requiring the use of force. Unfortunately, a peaceful transformation is the least probable outcome. He concluded by arguing that this is a challenge confronting Russian intellectuals, who must persuade the state to cede some power to the people while also persuading the people that they must not become too radical in their demands on the state.

Question & Answer

Responding to a question about the consequences of polarization, Dr. Gozman argued that the type of polarization occurring in Russia today was not of a kind that would inspire citizens to vote for different political parties, but rather to become aggressive with each other. Another question was raised about U.S.-Russia relations, and specifically about whether Putin’s recent article in *Moskovskie Novosti* demonstrated genuine anti-Americanism, or instead a legitimate response to confrontational U.S. policies, such as missile defense and NATO expansion. He admitted that the United States had made mistakes in its relationship with Russia (he pointed to the failure to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment as the most prominent one), but argued that the motivations behind Putin’s anti-American rhetoric were not important. To some extent, Putin’s rhetoric is part of an electoral appeal, and it may also be partially inspired by confrontational U.S. policies, but the existence of that rhetorical strategy commits Putin to a certain image and makes policy change towards a cooperative U.S.-Russian relationship much more difficult, regardless of Putin’s original motivations.

The next participant pressed on the claim that Putin had lost his legitimacy, pointing out that he himself had admitted that Putin had enough genuine political support to win a clean election in the first round. If that is the case, how would the opposition continue to craft their message if

Putin were to win the presidency without any evidence of falsification? Dr. Gozman responded by recounting a conversation with a member of Putin's team who believed Putin's best chance to maintain power was to hold free and honest elections, but the time had already passed for Putin to take this route. If he had reacted quickly to the December protests by firing Vladimir Churov and announcing a major campaign to improve electoral transparency, he might have been able to preserve his own legitimacy. After months of deriding the opposition and falling back on old campaign tactics, many Russians are sure to view the election as illegitimate, regardless of whether or not any evidence of fraud comes to light. The ruling regime would inevitably engage in some vote rigging, being unable to break from old patterns. Many of those who will vote for Putin hold unfavorable views of the Prime Minister, but will nevertheless support him given the lack of genuine alternatives. For this reason, the electoral results will not be considered legitimate regardless of whether or not fifty percent of voters cast ballots for Putin, as the exclusion of viable opposition candidates casts doubt on the election's legitimacy.

The discussion then shifted towards the recent proposal to re-instate direct gubernatorial elections; would such reforms actually be implemented, and would the general public really care? Reforms would certainly be perceived as important, but for moral, rather than political reasons. Most Russians feel humiliated by the existing regime, which tells them, for example, that they are not competent to select their own governors.

A participant pointed to the argument that the protesters are motivated by psychological, rather than economic or political, concerns. Assuming that this is correct, how then should the regime appropriately address those concerns? The implication of the argument is that Putin has no need to respond to real legal and political problems, but can instead use psychological tactics like propaganda to win back Russian society. Dr. Gozman argued that while Russian frustration with Putin has psychological roots, those frustrations are reactions to genuine material problems. The protesters feel humiliated by the government, but that humiliation derives from the paternalistic nature of the state. Thus, the opposition will not fade away until such concerns are addressed. He added that reform would also be impossible as long as the public does not trust the characters involved, of which Putin and Churov are the most prominent objects of public ire.

The next question centered on President Medvedev's view of the protests, and specifically on the motivation behind his comment that every Russian election has been illegitimate. In regards to the latter point, Dr. Gozman stated that the 1996 election, at least, was legitimate, and Medvedev would have been in no position at that point to witness any evidence of falsification. Medvedev may not be happy with the protests even though they have singled out Putin, rather than the standing president, as the object of criticism. Medvedev's frustration would stem from the fact that he exists as a "forgotten president," with the protests serving as just another means to downplay his authority.

Another participant asked if Putin would be able to pacify the population with economic reforms or personnel changes (like putting Prokhorov or Kudrin in positions of power), stopping short of genuine political change. Dr. Gozman replied that Putin is likely to do something along those lines, although the real question will be whether or not he grants genuine independence to these new characters. In his view, only substantive changes will address the concerns of the opposition, whereas continued symbolic reforms will only breed greater cynicism.

The next question focused on the possibility of the opposition organizing into a more cohesive structure similar to a “Venezuelan-style” scenario—in which multiple opposition groups collect together behind one candidate. The opposition emerged organically, rather than being organized by any one party or group. Dr. Gozman pointed to the potential emergence of a “new opposition” in the aftermath of the Snow Revolution that would form a single political party. While little coordination exists between the current opposition parties (both inside and outside the parliament) a new party could attract as much as thirty percent of the vote for the next Duma elections. He also pointed out that negotiations over the creation of such a party are already underway.

There are essentially three political groups in Russia: rural voters, urban voters, and pensioners. The urban voters have largely rallied together against Putin, but most of the regions still support Putin because of his charismatic leadership. The third group, the pensioners, may have different political motivations; they support Putin because he serves their economic interests. The Levada Center’s research on the “faces of Bolotnaya”—a survey that attempted to determine the demographic composition of the Russian protest movement found that the opposition did not consist of any one class, but rather was made up of people from a wide range of educational and socio-economic backgrounds, including pensioners.

The final question returned to the issue of unifying the opposition. There are strong divisions within the opposition—between nationalists, communists, democrats, and cynical non-voters—how would it be possible to combine these elements into one party? While multiple parties would certainly emerge, with communists and nationalists in particular continuing to exist as separate entities, the democratic forces would unify behind one party, which would prove to be the most powerful. Dr. Gozman also emphasized that the incentives for coordination among the opposition groups have now changed. Whereas victory used to be inconceivable, there is now a genuine incentive for groups to band together in order to secure larger electoral gains, and thus political influence.