

Putin vs. Civil Society: Outlawing the Opposition

By [Miriam Lansky](#)

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The Russian protest movement of 2011–12 posed the first real challenge to President Vladimir Putin and the political system that he has established in Russia. As hundreds of thousands of Muscovites flooded the streets in protest between December 2011 and May 2012 and smaller rallies took place in dozens of other cities, it became clear that Putin and his United Russia party were losing popularity, particularly among the more urban, affluent and influential segments of the population. In response, the government is trying to maintain its domination of political office at all levels by limiting freedom for society as a whole, yet it is not clear that this can be achieved without undermining the regime's popular appeal and its support within the elite.

The Kremlin is facing an existential dilemma as protesters

demand political participation.

According to recent polls, about 30 percent of the population has opposition views, while a majority of Russians agree that United Russia is the “party of crooks and thieves.”

The Kremlin, meanwhile, faces an existential dilemma. Russia’s semi-authoritarianism under Putin has provided sufficient personal freedom, material stability and access to the outside world to permit the emergence of new social movements. These movements are now demanding transparency, accountability and political participation.

Although ordinary Russians have enjoyed a great deal of personal freedom, a small circle of insiders has had a near-monopoly on politics. The October 2012 local elections, in which the opposition was again locked out of municipal and regional races, made it clear that the Kremlin was unwilling to share power with the opposition, even on a few remote and obscure town councils.

Shutting out opposition from political offices has required the government to take a hard turn toward authoritarianism. Since Putin’s return to office, the government has adopted a series of laws which constrict the public space and ban or marginalize all voices except for those which are in line with Putin’s conception of the Russian state.

Meanwhile, high-profile prosecutions, including Thursday’s five-year sentence handed down to opposition leader Alexei Navalny, shows the Kremlin’s willingness to use the country’s judicial system to intimidate Russians engaged in any kind of political opposition activity. Before Navalny’s conviction, police in Yaroslavl arrested that city’s mayor, Yevgeny Urlashov, in a late-night raid. Urlashov, the only mayor in Russia to be elected over a United Russia opponent, is accused of an implausible scheme to extort bribes from a local business. Perhaps most insidious is the “Bolotnaya” case against 28 protesters in Moscow, who are accused of inciting riots and assaulting police officers during an anti-Putin protest on May 6, 2012. Despite tenuous evidence, all are expected to receive lengthy sentences.

The regime has gradually begun to impose new restrictive norms. So far, the political opposition, protest participants and nongovernmental organization have suffered the most, but broad implementation of the new laws and restrictions could ultimately have far-reaching and unpredictable implications for the entire country.

Despite its seeming strength, however, the Russian political system is actually quite rigid and lacks the adaptability to respond to external pressures without risking serious damage to its own structural integrity. Following public demands for political change, a growing threat of economic instability and renewed tensions among the elite, Putin is working to quash all dissent within the government while simultaneously trying to build public support by exploiting nationalist sentiments. Within such a tense environment, what would previously have been minor scandals have resulted in firings and resignations at increasingly high levels of power.

To date, the defense minister, the vice-president of the Olympic committee, three State Duma deputies, one senator and a deputy prime minister have been forced out by corruption scandals. The firings and scandals may soon reveal cracks within the state machinery itself. As

activists who follow the whistleblower activity of Navalny uncover more corruption, formerly secure officials may conclude that Putin's system can no longer protect them and their assets.

Russian activists are increasingly seeing the Olympic Games as an opportunity to draw international attention to flaws within the system, in particular the corruption in construction contracting. Even the lowest estimates say more than \$500 million has been siphoned off by graft and inflated overhead costs. The preparations for the Olympics have drawn accusations of widespread workers' rights violations, unlawful seizures of property and unchecked environmental damage. Since the point of hosting the Olympics was to showcase a modern and dynamic Russia, these allegations will likely damage Russia's global reputation further.

A year into Putin's third term, it is clear that the regime has failed to return to business as usual. Before the protests, the Kremlin could rely on public apathy. But now there are growing popular demands for transparency and accountability.

Putin is attempting to navigate these turbulent times by enacting populist legislation and symbolically firing several corrupt officials, but these tactics are limited in their effectiveness. It is equally uncertain whether the opposition and civil society will be able to withstand the government's attempts to intimidate them and shut them down. If they manage to survive the current campaign against them, however, they will certainly find future opportunities to capitalize on the popular political awareness and discontent that have developed over the past three years.

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