

Putin Reminds Russians He Can Do Suppression

A record crackdown on protests in Moscow is a warning to voters tempted to protest their increasingly hopeless situation.

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Valery Sharifulin / TASS

July 27 saw a new post-Soviet era record set in Moscow: [1,373](#) people were taken into custody following a day of protests. Meanwhile, jailed opposition leader Alexey Navalny suffered a strange “allergic reaction” after calling for the demonstrations.

These developments were set in motion by something seemingly trivial: An election to Moscow’s city council. One of Russia’s weakest regional legislatures, it can’t even hold the capital’s mayor responsible for doing whatever he wants with the city budget.

The disproportionate violence unleashed on the protesters — dozens were severely beaten —

shows how deep the Kremlin's paranoia runs. With the patriotic fervor inspired by the annexation of Crimea and other foreign adventures exhausted, President Vladimir Putin and his entourage have little to offer voters and clearly fear the largely directionless anger prevalent in Russian society.

The city election is scheduled for September 8. Normally, it would be a tame affair. Five years ago, candidates backed by the pro-Putin United Russia party won 38 out of the 45 seats on a turnout of just 21 percent. This time, though, a number of candidates hostile to the Kremlin attempted to stand, among them some of Navalny's close associates. (The corruption-fighter can't run himself because of a previous conviction on what were, in my view, trumped-up charges of theft.)

Related article: [Police Detain Over 1,000 in Crackdown on Moscow Elections Protest](#)

To run, an independent candidate needs to collect thousands of supporters' signatures, which are then reviewed by the electoral commission. All the opposition candidates were denied a place on the ballot after their backers were deemed to be fake. This was despite the fact many hundreds of signatories were willing to testify that they had signed.

This illegal act by the authorities was insulting in its jeering openness. Still, not too many Muscovites got excited about another rigged election. In July, the city empties for the vacation season. Last week, the rejected candidates managed to rally more than 20,000 people, a small crowd for a metropolis the size of Moscow.

It was enough, though, to make the authorities lose their cool when Navalny took the floor at that rally and called on Muscovites to gather in front of the mayor's office on July 27. This earned the opposition leader 30 days in jail for inciting an unsanctioned protest.

Mayor Sergei Sobyanin cautioned residents against showing up, promising to put down any protests with force – a pledge kept by an unusually large contingent of riot police outside the mayor's control. (They were part of the National Guard, commanded by former Putin bodyguard Viktor Zolotov.)

Still, some 15,000 protesters roamed central Moscow for most of the day, shouting anti-Putin slogans and running intermittently into determined groups of riot police, who had clearly been ordered to take no pity on the mostly young crowd. Though the protest was peaceful, the record number of detentions filled every police station in town to overflowing, and rubber sticks were used without mercy.

The crisis could have been resolved by allowing a few opposition activists to run for the city council. Perhaps that would have been Sobyanin's instinct. In 2013, he went out of his way to make sure Navalny could run against him. The corruption fighter won 27 percent of the vote to the mayor's 51 percent, a result Navalny unsuccessfully contested.

This time, however, the decision to shut out the opposition at any cost appears to have been made in the Kremlin, which looks to have [taken over](#) the political management of the Moscow election.

The violence and arrests were also likely to have been ordered by the Kremlin. Moscow police, who were also out in force, were visibly less eager than the National Guard. After a few [attempts](#) to pacify angry citizens in recent weeks, Putin seems determined to show the opposition the limits of what he will allow.

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Navalny, in particular, appears to have received a chilling warning. The day after the protest, he was hospitalized after suffering an apparent allergic reaction. In a Facebook [post](#), his doctor, Anastasia Vasilyeva, herself an opposition activist, voiced her suspicion that he had been poisoned.

Obviously, the election of a few Kremlin opponents to the Moscow city council would have been no threat to Putin’s rule. Nor, for that matter, were the thousands of young people demanding their right to vote in fair elections. Moscow has seen bigger protests that have failed to displace Putin.

The president, however, appears worried that a random spark could ignite a bigger fire. The country’s economy is projected to grow by just 1.2 percent this year, according to the Bloomberg consensus forecast. In June, Russians’ disposable incomes were down 0.2 percent on a year ago.

There are clear indications that voters are angry. In June, Levada Center, the country’s last big independent pollster, [reported](#) that 27 percent would be willing to participate in protests against falling living standards — about twice the normal level — and 22 percent would join protests with political demands.

Since Putin has no rosy vision to offer and no means to speed up growth in an economy dominated by corrupt, inefficient state-run companies, he has focused on showing Russians that protest won’t work and that his regime commands overwhelming force.

With that goal in mind, provoking the relatively weak protests in Moscow may even benefit the Kremlin: Muscovites aren’t well-liked in the rest of the country, and the harsh police action got a lot of attention on the social networks. It’s a relatively low-cost way to show off the regime’s suppression potential.

The flip side of such action, of course, is that it can also fuel the vague irritation many Russians feel. Even if they don’t rise up at the sight of some young people being beaten up — as Ukrainians did in 2013 — the Kremlin’s message that protesting is pointless is a dangerous one in Russia, too. There won’t a revolution over a rigged city council election, but Putin is playing with fire. Suppression is never a long-term answer.

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