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Russia's Opposition Has a Long Way to Go

Despite Moscow's record protest, the Kremlin's position is still strong.

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Violetta Nadbitova / MT

Massive crowds marched through the streets of Moscow around me. The Kremlin had mobilized a virtual army of police and security troops, but still, Muscovites marched ignoring the bad weather and the even more chilling threats of state violence. But that wasn't last Saturday, it was 28 March 1991, when 100,000 came out to protest attempts to bar Boris Yeltsin from the Russian Federation presidential elections.

Three lessons were learned. From this display of people power, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev came to realize that unless he wanted to rule from a throne of bayonets, he needed to come to terms with Yeltsin. However, the massive and effective security operation also

persuaded Yeltsin that the Kremlin could not be challenged directly with impunity, and he was reconciled to reaching some kind of a deal with Gorbachev.

And from the fact that Gorbachev let the protests happen at all, a cabal of hard-liners decided that he was clearly too weak — pro-Kremlin newspaper Izvestiya even fulminated that it has been "disgraceful" that the Kremlin had demonstrated "powerlessness" — and that they needed to take matters into their own hands. The result would be the farcical August Coup that in fact destroyed the very Soviet system they thought they were defending.

The point is that even in the midst of economic freefall, nationwide strikes, rising secessionism, demoralization of the security apparatus, and the total discrediting of the official ideology, 100,000 marchers could not in themselves make a difference — rather, they influenced elite alliances and calculations, and confrontation had to lead to compromise.

This is worth remembering, now that the received wisdom is that 60.000 protesters in Moscow, with thousands more at solidarity events around the country, is too big for the Kremlin to ignore.

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The Kremlin absolutely is not ignoring the protest movement. The massive deployment of security forces (who are much more motivated, trained and equipped for public order operations than the disgruntled and nervous police I saw in 1991), the arrests of opposition leaders, the investigation into Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, even the rival music and food festivals intended to attract away Muscovites all attest to that.

But once the opposition has the Kremlin's attention, what then?

What, after all, are the protesters' goals? Is it simply to see opposition leaders Ilya Yashin, Lyubov Sobol and the rest restored to the electoral lists for next month's Moscow local elections and protesters freed?

This would not be enough to make the movement evaporate. The suspicion among Kremlin political technologists is surely that such a concession would be interpreted as a sign of weakness, and lead to further demands — revision of the municipal filter, dismissals of the officials responsible and the like.

This, in turn, is all part of a wider drive towards democratization, meaningful legal reform, a cleansing of the elite.

In a word, this is about revolution.

Yashin and the rest were not standing for the Moscow city council to argue about refuse collection and zoning, after all, but as a platform to articulate a message of systemic change.

So the hard-liners are — in their own self-interested terms — entirely right. It was foolish and short-sighted to have kicked the opposition candidates off the electoral lists, and doubly so to do so in such a clumsy manner. Having done so, though, the government has locked

itself into a position from which it cannot afford to retreat, or at least to be seen to retreat. This has become a struggle for power.

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If the opposition is to be able to use the momentum and opportunity it currently has, then it needs to articulate a set of political demands that manage to be plausible and meaningful, yet also acceptable to the Kremlin.

This is not 1991. At present, although there is discomfort within the elite about current policy, their greatest fear is precisely systemic collapse.

The security forces are disciplined and show no signs yet of being unwilling to play their role in the drama of repression. As for the economy, it is sluggish but not in crisis: amidst this political turmoil, global rating agency Fitch has restored Russia's investment-grade rating up to BBB, its pre-Crimea level. Fitch noted the country's macro-economic policies, low foreign debt and solid financials, adding that Russia was also now in a better position to weather any new U.S. sanctions.

The Kremlin's position is strong. However much neither man would like to acknowledge the parallel, though, Putin is in some ways like Gorbachev. He does not want to head a bloody-handed junta. He wants legitimacy both at home and abroad, and to fund his adventures, his cronies' embezzlement and his vanity projects, he needs a working economy, which in turn depends on many of those on the other side of the riot barriers.

But Putin is also a child of the 1980s, with a terror of the kind of rapid systemic collapse he experienced in both East Germany and the U.S.S.R. Even the horrendous violence we saw at previous protests is as nothing to what he could unleash if he wanted to — and likely would, if he felt it the only alternative to anarchy.

So the challenge facing the protesters is not just to retain their enthusiasm, courage and momentum in the face of arrests and threats, on the one hand, shashlik and music festivals on the other.

Arguably more difficult will be identifying a set of goals which slowly but genuinely advance their cause, but not leave the authorities feeling they cannot comply. The opposition has enthusiasm and right on their side. The authorities have ruthlessness and cosmonauts. Against this, the opposition has to play the long, clever game.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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