

Russia: Navalny's Return and Left Strategy

Thursday 18 February 2021, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#), [DJAGALOV Rossen](#), [KOMAROV Georgiy](#), [MATVEEV Ilya](#), [MEDVEDEV Kirill](#), [SMIRNOVA Liza](#), [SOLOVYOV Sergey](#) (Date first published: 18 February 2021).

What is the Russian left to think of Alexey Navalny and his campaign against corruption? We reprint a selection of contributions collected by LeftEast.

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Rossen Djagalov

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There is little new in the debate taking place within the Russian left and around it whether to participate in the protests called by Navalny and his team. One has been hearing a version of it since last August on Belarusian material. A few years earlier, the issue was hotly contested in Ukraine and or elsewhere in Eastern Europe, which was experiencing a liberal-dominated protest wave. Should we go in full historical mode, a similar debate would continually divide Third-Worldist Marxist parties and movements' uncertainty whether to ally themselves with the nationalist bourgeoisie against colonialist forces, or in European communists' dilemmas whether to work with social democrats or liberals or to go it alone. If there's anything this extensive historical record teaches us is that there are no a priori answers to this question. At times, the attempt to participate in the anti-authoritarian protest coalition results in abject failure (think of the attempts of a Red Maidan in Ukraine in 2014); in another episode, the sectarian line adopted at the Comintern's Fifth Congress made it impossible for German communists to collaborate with the social democrats against the greater enemy. What we can do is analyze the relation of forces, the nature of local society, its place within global capitalism, etc., etc., etc., and then decide. And even then there are no guarantees of anything.

Not living in Russia right now, and following the events from a great distance, I am hardly in a position to even begin this analysis. What is possible, however, is to identify and think through the three positions already taken by different sections of the Russian left vis-a-vis the protests: participation, critical/separate participation, and boycott. Of the three, I find the arguments in favor of boycott potentially the most harmful to the left. Though often evoked in good faith, they ultimately pave the road to red Putinism, the paradoxical passive support for the current regime in the name of left values:

1. In making the case against leftist participation in the protests, boycottists often begin their accounts of the protest movement with a negative psychological and political portrait of Navalny. And while any self-respecting leftist should be suspicious of Navalny, there is a sleight of hand in over-identifying the movement with his figure. In the first place, because there are so many different groups that stand to gain from this over-identification, starting with Navalny's own team, which seeks hegemony over the protests and ending with the Kremlin, which seeks to limit the appeal for the movement by reducing it to a divisive figure. For now at least, this over-identification doesn't correspond to reality: even the most cursory look at the footage from the protests on Jan. 23 and 31 reveals that Navalny's name was hardly the chant animating the masses. But the boycottists' call can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if the left absents itself from the protest movement and refuses to engage the tens or hundreds of people that came out on the street and the millions that support them without lending their bodies to the cause or the majority unhappy with the way Russia is run. Moreover, set against this negative portrait of Navalny's (authoritarian, nationalist, liberal), Putin doesn't seem so bad after all (though he is in reality, even more authoritarian, nationalist, and economically liberal). Better the devil you know. This way we won't have to inconvenience ourselves with action.
2. A related argument in favor of the boycott position is the evocation of Maidan. The Maidan of 2013-14 is strictly speaking a Ukrainian phenomenon and reflects the particular disposition of forces in Ukrainian society/politics. Thus, to analyze the Russian protests in terms of Maidan risks imputing to them Ukrainian characteristics (a geographically divided country, a weak and dependent state, and a site of virulent nationalisms and super-power competition) and erasing Russian specificity. As "Maidan" becomes our go-to comparison and ur-model, we sideline potentially more relevant anti-authoritarian movements with similar fundamental characteristics (Gezi in Turkey, the Arab Spring, etc.). The main user of "Maidan" discourse are authoritarian states (in our case, Russia), which need to showcase a scarecrow as the main alternative to their rule. We can't easily "own it" without amplifying the state's position (i.e., no matter how imperfect, the status quo is preferable to the changes that come). The fundamental political work that the Maidan comparison does for the left is to keep us passive owing to our Ukrainian trauma.
3. Other leftist opponents of the protests (especially abroad) tend to look at them through the prism of some geopolitical Great Game. In this logic, the US and the EU are the main imperialist powers to be resisted at all costs. As Putin (or Assad or Erdogan) are often in the business of this resistance, they become allies to be supported in this anti-imperialist struggle. Far be it for me to deny the reality of Western imperialism, but this kind of undiluted geopolitics renders Russian (Syrian, Turkish) societies, their class structure, divisions, and inequalities, completely irrelevant. And this is the primary appeal of geopolitics: one doesn't need to know anything about a society to know which is the right side. It suffices to identify whom the West opposes and side with that party. As applied to Russia (as opposed to Ukraine or many of the smaller states of the former Soviet bloc, all of which are characterized by a high degree of dependency), this makes even less sense.

This realistically leaves us with the other two positions that dominate the responses LeftEast received: 1) full-fledged participation in the civic protest, in solidarity with its democratic demands (freedom for political prisoners, expansion of liberties, a fair electoral system) but also seeking to introduce social demands; and 2) critical/ separate participation in the protests, with the aim of constructing a distinct leftist force, a third pole that refuses the choice between Putin and Navalny. I really wish these divisions could be dismissed as semantics or treated as a question of sequence or resolved with comradely discussion in the spirit of the elusive "the broad left." But good will is, alas, in short supply and there is now the very real danger of different sections of the Russian left finding themselves on opposite sides of the metaphorical barricades on the basis of the implicit alliances

each of these positions leads to: 1) with the extra-systemic liberals; and 2) with the loyal opposition of the Communist Party. These are the unenviable choices our Russian comrades are staring at right now, choices with whom to ally oneself and by whom to be betrayed.

Indeed, the Russian left has been dealt a bad hand and it will take a great deal of skill and wisdom to play it to advantage. But the moment is pregnant with possibility. And as the greatest Bulgarian soccer player of all times, Hristo Stoichkov, put it with pitiless clarity (in an advertisement for the national lottery), "If you want to win, you play. If you don't want to win, you don't play."

Georgiy Komarov

Georgiy Komarov, member of the executive committee of Marxist Union (Russia)

The Russian Left should definitely try to adapt to new reality and not to stay aside from the protest. However, the devil is in the details.

Alas, the rallies of January 23 were nowhere near a mass revolutionary movement. The rallies boast only tens of thousands in 144-million country. Moreover, no populist agenda, no "smart voting tactic" can efficiently appeal to the general audience while they're directly connected to Navalny, a Yale graduate who has pledged allegiance to Western liberal values numerous times that he can't be viewed as a viable leader by most Russians. In order to understand why, one should take a look at Russia's modern history.

The secret of Putin's political longevity is not only his authoritarian power but also his image of "the saviour from 1990's liberal chaos". That's ironic given Putin's purely neoliberal policy, but on a surface level, his populist rhetoric has paid off for many years. The 90's Russia was a borderline-failed state hung on IMF loans while still drowning in poverty and unemployment due to "shock therapy". On the contrary, thanks to rising oil prices in the 2000s Russia became a fairly independent developing country. The former was ruled by self-proclaimed "liberal democrats", and the latter by Putin. It's not hard to see why many people still consider their eternal president "the lesser evil" in comparison to his liberal opponents — even though the economic growth of the 2000s is long gone. Recent decline in Putin's approval is due to his policies (pension reform, insufficient anti-pandemic measures etc.) being too neoliberal and reminiscent of the 90's, not being "not liberal enough".

Thus being liberal in modern Russia is a disadvantage. Moreover, any political power strongly associated with liberals is doomed to be rather unpopular. Even Navalny seems to get it since he included some "social" demands in his 2018 program — yet fails to successfully distance himself from liberal brand. So, the Russian Left has a chance to become demarginalized only if it's able to present itself as a fully independent force.

Does it mean that leftists should abstain from any participation of "navalnyite" rallies? I don't think so.

First of all, the younger generation of Russians is clearly less susceptible to the "post-Soviet trauma" than their older peers. While those over 30 still remember "the miraculous escape" from 90s hell, 20-somethings experienced only decline of prosperity in their lifetime. This forces them to become more politically aware. Recent years have shown unprecedented growth of both liberal, libertarian, and leftist clubs and organizations. The younger Russians look for any viable answers to their questions, so many of them can become fertile soil for sowing leftist ideas.

Second, if you need to summarize the protests in two words, these words are “spontaneous and unorganized”. As editor-in-chief of my organization’s public media, I had the chance to read numerous in-field reports on January 23. These reports demonstrate that almost everywhere outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, from Far East to Central Russia, the vast majority of protesters didn’t really care about Navalny’s political stance. They didn’t really follow any organized liberal force. They just use that “call to arms” as an excuse to finally let loose of their discontent with powers that be. For many of the protesters it was the first time they ever participated in a political rally. This amorphousness of agenda gives the Left a chance to appeal to them, and moreover, to become a center of attraction for some of them.

The problem is how to use these chances and at the same time not be associated with liberals. After all, millions of Russians are still suspicious of anything connected to Navalny or other pro-Western politicians. The answer seems to be clear yet tricky: to become a “third party”. It requires a nuanced approach: the Left should neither fully embrace the protest without reservations, nor condemn it and abstain. The latter means to lose any chance to appeal to a younger audience. The former means to give into the illusion of “democratic revolution” when in fact it’s a minority movement. We should’ve learned the lessons of Belarusian leftists’ participation in anti-Lukashenko rallies of 2020: to overestimate the momentum is no better than to underestimate it. And joining a liberal-led coalition as “junior partners” equals making yourself virtually indistinguishable from liberals in public discourse. No matter how many “social demands” you have in mind, if you make a statement that you support something launched by liberals – you’ll be labelled liberal supporter and nothing else.

If we’re able to walk this thin line, – i.e. to campaign for leftist agenda during the rallies without positioning ourselves as a part of the pro-Navalny movement, – we’ll have a potential to become prominent players. It is a real possibility given that various polls show the overwhelming majority of Russians supporting economic equality, craving social welfare, and being generally sympathetic to Soviet legacy. But if we fail, then being “part of the democratic movement” won’t really pay off.

Liza Smirnova

Liza Smirnova is a journalist and left-wing activist

In the events of January we have seen a new type of street protest in Russia. Now it is not only the Muscovite middle class, as in the previous wave of mobilization from 2011-2013. This new wave of protests has covered the provinces as well. Actions proceeded even in those cities which were previously considered bulwarks of loyalty and stability. It is not only Navalny’s partisans who have gone out into the streets. Rather, it is representatives of various social groups unhappy most of all with the seven-year-long fall of incomes, the growth of inequality, the rising prices, the onerous conditions attached to bank loans, and so forth. Those who just yesterday were ready to vote for Putin today count themselves among the dissatisfied. Still, to this point, the protests have succeeded at mobilizing only a minority.

The overwhelming majority is still at home, most likely not trusting the monopoly the liberal opposition still has over protest discourse.

The participation of leftist forces in the coalition council of the opposition may broaden and radicalize the protesters’ demands. That could in turn lead the doubters to mobilize. Yet, for the time being, this possibility is only the phantom potential of this actual coalition. The January protests have not yet become a broadly democratic movement. Their public narrative has been more or less completely concentrated around the figure of a single person.

But today street protests are becoming a new form of political struggle in Russia. People who cannot get political representation by voting in their electoral districts are trying to speak out on their feet. But what are they speaking out for? To them, Navalny represents the same liberal model, just with different individuals in the administration and the presidential circle. In this situation, leftists must become an alternative kernel of a new protest campaign. But for that, it is imperative that they propose a new image of the future, one that breaks with the current system, one that will answer the questions of the majority of the discontent all over Russia. It is possible that then there will be, not just hundreds of thousands, but actually millions going out into the streets, dedicated to changing the situation in the country in their own interests.

Ilya Budraitskis

Ilya Budraitskis, Moscow-based historian, political writer, and co-author of the [Political Diary podcast](#)

Alexei Navalny's arrest at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport on January 17, minutes after his return to Russia, was not only the expected, but also the only possible reaction of the Russian authorities. At the beginning of this year, after the summer Constitutional amendments opened up the possibility of Putin's unlimited personal power, his regime had clearly entered a new phase: a virtually open dictatorship, based not on passive support from below but on repressive power. In this new configuration, there is no place either for the marginalized liberal opposition or for the systemic "managed democracy" parties, which have kept United Russia's absolute monopoly in check and have created limited opportunities for expressing electoral discontent. The attempted assassination of Navalny by the Russian security apparatus last August fits perfectly into this picture. From the perspective of the authorities, the main threat posed by Navalny is the tactic of "smart voting" – the accumulation of all the protest votes by the candidate who stands the best chance of defeating United Russia's nominees. In a situation where support for the ruling party is rapidly declining (currently it is no more than 30%), the "smart voting" threatens the approved scenario for the parliamentary elections scheduled for September of this year and, in the long run, the triumphant re-election of Putin himself to a new term.

Navalny's bold and precise populist strategy is in fact aimed at creating a protest coalition, with an important place reserved for the representatives of the system parties (above all, the Communists), who will refuse to play by the Kremlin's rules and are able to conduct lively and offensive electoral campaigns. A key element of this strategy is Navalny's rhetoric, in which the issues of poverty and social inequality have taken the place of liberal-democratic values. The high-profile anti-corruption investigations that have earned him popularity have an emotional impact on a huge audience (for example, his latest film about Putin's palace, costing 100 billion roubles, was viewed over 50 million times by Friday), since they directly indicate the extreme stratification of Russian society. In an environment of openly falsified elections and unprecedented police pressure, electoral protest can only have an effect if it is supported by a mass non-parliamentary street movement. And only such a movement can determine Navalny's personal fate today — if hundreds of thousands across the country do not stand up for his immediate release in the coming weeks, he will surely face a long prison term.

In my view, participating in such a movement — with our own program and demands — is today the only chance for the Russian left. Moreover, it is the left that can most coherently express the sentiments that are increasingly pushing people to active protest: social inequality, the degradation of the social sphere (especially health care, which became dramatically apparent during the pandemic), police violence, and the absence of basic democratic (especially labor) rights.

Ilya Matveev

Researcher and lecturer in political economy based in St. Petersburg and co-author of the [Political Diary podcast](#)

At first, Navalny's decision to return to Russia was bewildering. What did he expect to happen? The state had clearly decided to put him behind bars, disregarding international pressure (in any case, after the highly publicized assassination attempt, the reputation of the Russian authorities could hardly get any worse). In prison, Navalny could claim the moral high ground, but he could not be an effective communicator of anti-corruption investigations and political campaigns (his most important activity). Navalny's decision seemed almost irrational, a stubborn show of defiance. However, very soon it became clear that there was an element of political calculation to this. Once Navalny was arrested, his team released a new investigative video. It was one of a kind – Navalny's first big investigation targeting Putin directly. The video was destined to attract a huge audience. Navalny's calculation was to provoke an immediate and severe political crisis – both with his own arrest and with the new explosive investigation. This crisis would have a street dimension – on Saturday 23 January, Russian cities will witness unsanctioned rallies – and an electoral dimension.

2021 is in fact the year of parliamentary elections in Russia. Russia has a mixed electoral system – one half of the parliament is elected on proportional basis, another half in single-member districts. While elections are tightly controlled and falsifications have reached an unprecedented level during the vote on constitutional amendments in 2020, parliamentary elections could still pose a problem for the regime. Party list voting faces the problem of deep unpopularity of United Russia, a ruling party. And in single-member districts, the regime faces the so-called 'smart voting', Navalny's highly advanced tactical voting scheme. A political crisis triggered by Navalny's arrest and his new anti-Putin video hits both targets – lowers the vote for United Russia even further and promotes 'smart voting' in SMDs. It could be a heavy blow for the regime, especially combined with street protests. In short, Navalny's return to Russia was a calculated gamble. The ball is now in the court of the ordinary members of the opposition.

A few words on the new video itself. It does not present a lot of new facts – Putin's personal palace first appeared in the news in 2010. Nor is it significant simply because it is a direct challenge to Putin. What is striking about the video is that it creates a consistent narrative. In this story, Putin's defining characteristic is his absurd, comical lust for material wealth. According to Navalny, Putin has always been guided by this lust alone. He wanted things when he was a KGB agent in Germany, he wanted things in Anatoly Sobchak's administration in St Petersburg in the 1990s, he wanted things while moving to Moscow and eventually becoming president and he still wants things, even after building a \$1,5 billion palace with the seal of the Romanov dynasty at the entrance. In my opinion, this is not an accurate description of Putin's mindset or motivation. Nor can the Russian regime be reduced to this caricature. Nevertheless, Putin's decisions in recent years (starting with his return to the presidency in 2012 all the way to canceling term limits for himself in 2020) made such a depiction of his life and work inevitable. For this one-dimensional account of his life, Putin has no one to blame but himself.

Kirill Medvedev

Activist of the Russian Socialist Movement, musician from the Arkady Kots Band, editor of [Zanovo-media](#)

With his return, Navalny has taken an important step towards a new understanding of politics in

Russia and a new round of politicization. Previously, there had been a fairly clear “division of labor” in protest: activists take risks motivated by a certain idealistic civic impulse while politicians pursue their own, often purely selfish, interests. Navalny has drawn this line, showing that politics can and should be valiant and technological at the same time. Importantly, in the new videos, he continues to develop the image of Putin not as a politician, but as a corrupt functionary who, having gained enormous power through shady arrangements, continues to act in the same old manner of a rogue post-Soviet official with ties to the FSB.

But the more convincingly Navalny works with the theme of corruption and the ostentatious consumption of top officials, the more the limits of this rhetoric are exposed in a country like Russia, exhausted by inequality and permeated by class contradictions. Now the situation looks like this: Navalny is showing us the palaces of the rulers, playing with the fire of class resentment, while at the same time (together with his comrades-in-arms) promising businesses complete freedom in the Beautiful Russia of the Future. They say that the problem is not the palaces and gigantic fortunes per se, but where they come from. But of course, with the further development of this populist line, it will no longer be easy to separate the corrupt “friends of Putin” from those whom Navalny calls “honest businessmen,” but whose fortunes are just as huge, and similarly generated by illegal schemes from the 1990s and 2000s and, of course, by over-exploitation of workers. All of this opens up great opportunities for leftist politics, which, with an equally skillful combination of valor and rationality, could produce a far more powerful wave of discontent and a far more coherent program of change than Navalny’s eclectic populism.

Sergey Solovyov

Editor of the journal *Scepsis*.

The protests that took place in Russia were primarily the result of exhaustion of a certain part of society: from stagnation, social problems, and the bureaucracy-bourgeoisie reign. This exhaustion is enhanced due to the COVID-19 pandemic consequences.

The protests are pro-liberal and personalist (leadermaniac) by nature. After cancelling them on February 2, Navalny’s office announced a “format change” – i.e., taking to the streets with flashlights on February 14 – and this shows very well that what we have here is a manipulated personalist (leadermaniac) movement.

The very form of the protests proves that Russian society is still extremely atomized: no political structures, no social organizations, and no labor unions capable of collective action. We witness the movement of selves brought together by the symbolic leader and by the shared attitude (but not an agenda; the movement has no agenda other than “free Navalny” and, less frequently, “free political prisoners” slogans), coordinated by Navalny’s campaigners via social media. Collective participation during the last significant wave of protests was also not too intense, but much more intense than the one in 2021. The protests against the monetization of benefits in 2004-2005, that barely affected Moscow, being quite dramatic in provincial regions, still remain the largest-scale protests since Putin’s coming to power.

The current situation in Russia makes the personalist (leadermaniac) – as well as pro-liberal – movement the only possible one, given the fact that only the liberals have organizational and financial resources together with foreign support.

It must be taken into consideration that Navalny is a classical right-populist leader (of outrage-mongers kind). It was by no means an accident that he flirted heavily with the nationalist movement,

organized chauvinistic “Russian marches,” and used nationalistic rhetoric. Note also that a large part of “middle-class” in Russia is racially motivated (I mean, above all, its social racism, contempt for the poor and migrants), especially in Moscow, where criticism against mayor Sobyenin constantly goes hand in hand with references to his ethnicity and non-Moscow origin (using “reindeer-breeder” pejorative), and with accusations that he “has flooded the capital city with migrants.” These people make up a considerable part of Navalny’s audience. The threat of proliferation of chauvinism looms extremely large, and the left must absolutely not play along with it.

This is not just about the left, of course. The so-called pension reform (retirement age increase), elimination of the public healthcare, and other anti-social welfare measures have exacerbated popular discontent with the present regime. The key issue here is pension reform, which, without causing intense protest, has nevertheless undermined the loyalty of the longstanding government supporters. Furthermore, the population is drawn to protests as a result of a decline in the living standards, the consequence of the authorities’ incompetence in their fight against the pandemic.

Another significant factor is the absence of local (municipal and regional) self-governance. After the protests of 2011-2012, Russian authorities had agreed to gubernatorial elections, and then backed out at a very quick pace; now elections are sort of carried out, but persons undesirable for the regime are dropped out easily and can even fall under criminal persecution (cases of S. Furgal in Khabarovsk and A. Shestun in Serpukhov district of Moscow region). Those who would like to resolve specific challenges at a local not at a federal level, are forced into protests by this absence of genuine local self-governance. The success of struggle against the landfill site construction at Shiyes of Arkhangelsk region is an extraordinary, but far from the only, example of protests of this kind. And it is because of this self-governance problem, because of this pressure of central authorities on regional politics, that masses of people, a lot more than in 2011-2012, have taken to the streets in January 2021.

What should the left do in such a situation? The first option is just to take part in a “progressive movement” in the hopes that the collapse of the system would provide some left perspectives. But this is a pretty utopian option, to put it mildly. The fate of the Ukrainian left after the 2014 coup demonstrates very clearly the fault lines of this approach. The second option – the passive attitude of an observer – can only lead to an increasing marginalization of the left. That leaves only one option – active promotion of the socialist agenda among those protesters who may be receptive to such views, and who do not admire the new “leader of the people.”

Ilya Budraitskis
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