Why the Massive Protests Throughout Russia?

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WE ARE PUBLISHING Suzi Weissman's interview with Ilya Budraitskis, conducted on February 5th (Moscow time) for Jacobin Radio. If, after you read this interview, you would like to sign the petition calling for the release of all the political prisoners, please read and sign the statement..

Suzi Weissman: I'm very pleased to have Ilya Budraitskis speaking with us for the first time about the recent protest movement in Russia. He's a Moscow-based historian, political writer, cultural worker, and co-host of the podcast called Political Diary, which you can find online and listen to if you know Russian. Russia has been rocked by massive protests over the last few weeks. These are the first large protests since the ones that took place in 2011-12 that were put down by Putin. They are a mass response to the arrest of Alexei Navalny, who returned to the country on January 17th after narrowly surviving being poisoned from exposure to military grade Novichok on August 20th. Coincidentally he was arrested on the anniversary of Trotsky's assassination, ostensibly for violating his previous parole conditions. He "violated" the conditions because he couldn't show up to regularly scheduled appointments because he was in a medically induced coma in Berlin.

Returning was certainly gutsy. He was sure to be arrested, but it was also a political gamble. For the most part, the coverage of these protests has centered on the figure of Navalny himself. And some, especially on the left in Russia, have struggled to justify participating in the protests because of Navalny's politics have shifted. In the 2000s, when he was a member of Yabloko they were left liberal but a decade later he was making openly nationalist and anti-immigrant statements. His current emphasis is on opposing the corruption that defines Putin and his regime. This is a focus that strongly resonates with the public that is now exhausted by growing inequality and poverty.

Our guest, Ilya Budraitskis stands with the protesters. We're going to get his views of the movement itself, as well as how he sees Navalny, how he characterizes the Putin regime and his rule and what prospects are there for oppositional politics in Russia today. Many commentators refer to Navalny as a Russian nationalist. They cite his anti-immigrant statements from the mid-2000s to characterize and criticize the movement as a whole or to justify staying outside. But Navalny has added the issues of inequality and poverty to his consistent anti-corruption politics. And it resonates.

I think the real issue is not that Navalny flirts with various positions, but that he's galvanized the protest, which isn't about him, but about Putin and his rule. That's where I want to focus this interview. Can you describe the current protest movement, its significance, including the left's reaction, and then within that, maybe talk about how it's different from what we saw in 2011 and 2012? You've said that these massive rallies have spread across the length and breadth of Russia and suggest they represent a new quality of protest. We also know that thousands have been arrested; I think 5,000 on Sunday alone. Yet the protests continue. So how do you see these protests?

Ilya Budraitskis: Thank you very much for the invitation. You're absolutely right when you claim that there is not an identity between the figure of Navalny and the protest movement that we have for the moment. This movement is much broader than support for his political life.

What is significant and different from previous protests? Not only is it massive, but it's also widely distributed across the country. For the first time we're seeing rallies with thousands of participants in many provincial cities. On the 23rd of January, for example, there were more than 100 Russian cities, including all the industrial centers including Ekaterinburg and Irkutsk, where people came out into the streets. That is quite different from the protests of 2011 where their protests were mostly confined to Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Several sociologists reported that most of those who came to the streets, even in Moscow, came for the first time. It was their first political experience. It was also a huge politicization for young people. We're seeing people 16, 17, 20 years old involved in this protest.

SW: They've never known anything other than Putin as their leader, right?

IB: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's a generation that's grown up under Putin's rule.

SW: They're going to these protests and facing repression. But the numbers of arrests aren't stopping them. And there is a similarity with protests happening around the rest of the globe. It's almost as if they have no fear.

IB: Yes. It's important to note that the repression we've faced is unprecedented, even in comparison with the previous repressive actions from Putin's regime. We have thousands detained after these protests. And hundreds of criminal cases have already started across Russia, not just in Moscow and St. Petersburg. All the principal associates of Navalny are detained in terminal prisons or under domestic arrest. This means that they have no opportunity to use Internet communication.

The reaction of authorities was extremely tough. For the protest of the 31st of January, the whole of the center of Moscow was blocked by the police. More than 10 stations of its underground were closed down because of the protest. The atmosphere was like the anti-globalist protests in the early 2000s, whether Seattle or Genoa.

SW: What were the conditions that gave rise to the protest? Now that Navalny's been sentenced to almost three years in prison, is there a public reaction yet? Do you see this as a win for Putin in that he's been able to get Navalny out of the picture? Or is it, as many polls have shown, that people who are out protesting, are more about opposing Putin than for Navalny. So it may not change anything.

IB: Navalny became a central figure for this protest, especially after his return from Berlin. His was a brave personal act because he probably knew for sure that he was arrested after his return.

The documentary that he produced about Putin's palace got more than 100 million views. It seems that every adult person in Russia watched this movie. Interestingly, there was a radical change in the propaganda line of Russian TV. Before the strategy was not to mention the name of Navalny but to picture all the opposition as unpopular, marginal, unimportant. But in the last two weeks, Navalny was at the center of the TV program. Everyone discussed him. Putin personally commented on the movie and denied that this palace belongs to him or his relatives. For now, no one says they don't know Navalny or he is unimportant. It's clear that the choice is between Putin and Navalny even if we have no elections where Navalny could be represented.

Is this a victory for Putin? I think Putin's decision exposed his weakness and his fear. Maybe Putin's fear is a bit overestimated, but after Navalny's arrest, he became Russia's main political prisoner.

Almost all further events in Russia will be focused on his freedom.

SW: Could you characterize Putin and his rule? That's, of course, that's what provoked the protest movement. Some analysts are saying that Putin is a Pinochet-type authoritarian. Others portray him as leading a mafia state. He's managed to be in power for most of this century, which is extraordinary, except for a short term as prime minister when he switched with Medvedev. Then he came back as president and is now trying to increase the length of his rule. And, compared with other world leaders, he's been wildly popular. He's had the best popularity ratings, whether you believe them or not, than almost anywhere else. But that was in the earlier years.

I think it means that he was seen as the anti-Yeltsin, the one who stopped the devastating economic freefall of the immediate post-Soviet period. He stabilized the economy and so long as Russia could live on oil and gas revenues, living standards could improve, and he was popular. But now there's been six straight years of income stagnation. Since the pandemic started there's been a ten percent drop in income. Given the exposure of his opulent palace and lifestyle while the general population is losing ground how do these economic conditions fuel the protests? Do they count as much or more than Navalny's arrest and what they are watching on TV as the police bludgeon and arrest peaceful protesters?

IB: The popularity of Putin is declining slightly in Russia. According to the recent polls, about one half of the population still trust him as the President.

I think that the future of his regime will continue with the same dynamics, which in fact are destroying the so-called Putin's majority. The 80 percent of the population who believe in stability and who still are dominated with the fear of returning to criminal '90s are declining. Through the protest movement we see the myth of Putin's majority shrink. Of course, Putin tried to present himself internationally as an alternative to the American domination of the globe, even of global capitalism. For example, in Putin's last speech at the Davos forum he pointed out that there is great inequality in the world, and there is not a fair redistribution of wealth between countries. Even in Russia it's quite strange to hear such talk against inequality from Putin. After all, he built a regime of extreme inequality and extreme social differentiation in his own country. Yes, we have a kind of like Mafia state in that there is a certain group of people around Putin who took control of the country's political and economic power. But at the same time, it's important to stress that we also have a very hard-core variant of Russian neoliberalism.

This led to the degradation of the social sphere, and in turn lead to privatization in health care and in education. All this became clear during the pandemic. In fact, I think the government's reaction to the pandemic was important. It inspired the protest we have now because government aid was extremely limited. It was incomparable with the support given to ordinary citizens in most of the European states.

SW: You describe Putin's sentencing of Navalny as showing his weakness. I think I agree with you. You described Russia as a kind of Mafia state and that it is authoritarian. What makes it kind of weak is that there are still elections, so it's not a full-on dictatorship at this point. Even if the elections are rigged and we know that many of them are, still Putin must respond somewhat to popular opinion — and mostly that popular opinion has not expressed itself the way that it is now. And this comes, as you've said, and I said, in the context of stagnant wages and a dropping standard of living. If the standard of living could go up, people could, I guess, overlook a lack of democracy, but now that's not the case. How have these conditions slightly changed the character of Putin's rule? You wrote in LeftEast that his regime is entering a new phase, virtually an open dictatorship based not on passive support from below, but repression against any opposition. Is there more repression to come?

IB: You are quite right when you mentioned that there was managed democracy for most of the existence of the Putin regime. There were regular elections, and several parties were allowed to participate. But this rapidly changed after amendments to the Russian Constitution that allowed Putin to be leader of Russia until the end of his life. This vote was organized in a new way, prolonging it for three days, dismissing all the independent observers, having people vote in strange locations or in their workplaces. Basically, this vote was beyond any boundaries.

The elections that will be held in September of this year, parliamentary elections, are particularly important because they open the electoral cycle that will continue with the Presidential elections of 2024. Probably September's election will reproduce the same standard. And this standard, according to the Kremlin, doesn't have to lead to the total domination of United Russia, Putin's Party in the parliament.

For the moment, the level of popularity of United Russia is a bit less than 30 percent, but under this scenario it can gain some 70 percent or even more to win a constitutional majority in the new parliament. This presents a big challenge for even those who are part of the system's opposition. It is especially true for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, who are losing votes and have no instrument to defend them. In this situation, Navalny became an organic ally of the Communist Party, especially because of his call for so-called "smart vote."

[Russia has a mixed electoral system — one half of the parliament is elected on a proportional basis, the other half in single-member districts, the regime faces Navalny's highly advanced tactical voting scheme, the "smart vote." –ed.]

SW: Why is the "smart vote" important?

IB: It's very important. For the moment I think that's the main political threat facing Putin's regime. The "smart vote" means that the people who are in opposition vote for any candidate with the best chance to beat United Russia. This candidate could be independent, Communist or whatever. But all the people who are influenced by Navalny, all the people who participate in the protest movement, despite their political views, should vote for this candidate. That means most of these candidates are Communists. In 2019, there were elections in the Moscow City Parliament and the Communist Party gained seats. It was the best result ever for the Communist Party in Moscow, and that was only because of the smart vote system. That's led to some changes in the Communist Party itself. Even when the leader of the Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, condemned Navalny as a foreign agent, traitor of the country and so on, there were a lot of statements of support from Communist Party members, including members of the Moscow City Parliament and the city parliaments in different areas of Russia.

Just yesterday the representative of Navalny's campaign said that they will not organize protests over some coming months. He announced that now their main task is to prepare for the parliamentary elections. So the main focus of the protest movement will be on the electoral campaign and on the smart vote strategy.

SW: I should just let listeners know that in Russia you have single member districts and first past the post. As I understand it, there are not that many political parties who can contest the elections. What you're explaining, I guess, is that people are being told to vote for anybody other than Putin, that your vote doesn't represent support for but a vote against Putin and the United Russia Party. And if enough people do that, then his coalition will have a lot fewer seats. Is that right?

IB: Right.

SW: In the context of the failed assassination attempt on his life last August and now Navalny's subsequent arrest, how do you assess him as a personality? You said that Navalny was a brave man. I said he was gutsy to come back when he knew he would be arrested. What do you think was his political calculation? How do you see his role within the protest movement? We've seen that he's the titular leader, but how is he viewed by most of the mass of the protesters? Is he the catalyst? Aren't the protests really about Putin and his rule, and about the system, not Navalny? Does the movement have clear goals or is it inchoate?

IB: My main definition of Navalny is that he is a populist, but a populist who takes ideas in a very instrumental way. For him, if the ideas help to build and to broaden the coalition, they are good. If they are too confrontational, they are bad. I think that his original views are liberal. That is, he is a supporter of some liberal democracy — market capitalism. Those were his ideas in 2000. But to broaden the traditional base of liberals in Russia he turned to a kind of moderate Russian nationalism. By 2010 he started using a little bit of lefty political language, talking about inequality, poverty, the enormous luxury of the elite and so on. I don't think that he has any consistent principle, political views, or political ideas. For the movement, Navalny has become a symbol of the resistance. I think that most people don't know much about his political career over the last 20 years, including the moment when he tried to collaborate with Russian nationalists.

SW: Just yesterday it was announced that there's a new Russian vaccine for Covid-19. Sputnik V is being rolled out at a time when there are not enough vaccines around the world. Putin has said that this one will be cheaper than others and more plentiful. He said it will help the entire world, because none of us are safe until everyone is safe. Will the success of the vaccine give an impetus to Russian nationalism — Russia is great and can do this – affect the protest movement in any way?

IB: I think that Putin is trying to use Sputnik as his personal gain, but it's not working. Of course, most Russian people are happy with this vaccine if they could get a shot. In Moscow, you can do it without a problem. But in some provincial cities, there's are huge queues. But I think that for most Russian people, Putin's statement that the vaccine would bolster Russian national pride is fascinating – clearly that is his hope.

SW: Well, Ilya Budraitskis, this has been incredibly informative. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to be with us on Jacobin Radio.

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P.S.

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https://againstthecurrent.org/why-the-massive-protests-throughout-russia/