

Alexei Navalny's Movement Reflects the Weakness of Russian Democracy

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Faced with protests for opposition leader Alexei Navalny's release, the Russian left is torn over whether to join a movement which raises no general social demands. Navalny's personalized clash with Putin highlights the present hollowness of Russian democracy.

February 14 again saw large-scale protests sweep across Russia, after previous such demonstrations on January 23 and 31. The rallies were prompted by the arrest of poisoned dissident Alexei Navalny; he had been jailed upon returning to Russia, though his team was nonetheless able to release his exposé into Vladimir Putin's palace on the southern coast. Neither the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the fact that the rallies were unauthorized, was able to prevent tens of thousands of people from taking to the streets to protest against Putin's dictatorial regime.

These actions, in which disgust at the Putin elite's usurpation of the country's power and wealth mixed with anger at state violence, marked a new stage in protest mobilization in Russia. However, after numerous arrests of protesters, the organizers of the actions — the leaders of the Navalny movement — called for the suspension of demonstrations, insisting that we must "keep our powder dry," ahead of September's parliamentary elections.

The action on February 14 thus seems to have been the last, for now, with no further mass mobilizations in the immediate future. But with the politicization of Russian society intensifying, the Left has to provide a response of its own.

Leadership Vacuum?

The Russian Left has no shared strategy regarding the current protests, with the main divisions revolving around Navalny's role in the movement. Some leftists believe that he is only a symbol of opposition, and thus participation in actions does not amount to backing Navalny as a politician. Various leftist organizations and figures, including the [Russian Socialist Movement](#) and [Boris Kagarlitsky](#), call for participation in the mobilization in support of general democratic demands, while simultaneously agitating for their own agenda and seeking to make it hegemonic within an expanding and escalating movement.

Others argue that the Left should not participate in any way in protests that are supposedly completely controlled by Navalny; from this perspective, their involvement would turn the Left into mere extras as a right-wing leader stages his bid for power. The alternative is either to sit at home waiting for a new, more leftist protest or, as the leaders of the Left Front suggest, try to create a "third force" in the here and now in the form of a "left-patriotic platform," [as Sergei Udaltsov has suggested](#). All of these positions have both obvious and hidden flaws.

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and economic order the protesters opposed.”

Whether we like it or not, Navalny is undoubtedly the leader of the protest. First, he is the main organizer of the rallies and the most famous opposition figure — the number one political prisoner in Russia, if not in the world. Second, he is obsessed with the president’s office — and doesn’t hide it. Navalny’s goal is not just to achieve the release of political prisoners and make the transition to a parliamentary republic, but to become president of Russia. Third, and most importantly, his symbolic, not programmatic role in the protest is paradoxically key to his success in asserting a — likely authoritarian — political leadership.

Some argue that those who protest are not interested in Navalny per se, but freedom and justice, and thus we should support Navalny in the common struggle for the democratic change we all need, whether right or left. But the opposite is true: precisely because the protest is not programmatically defined and remains ideologically vague, it can easily be appropriated by an authoritarian leader. Protest with a specific — even if it is transitional — program and collective leadership is much less easy prey for those who seek to capture the leading role than a shapeless movement that stands against authoritarianism in general.

Many leftists today warn against comparing the Russian situation with the Ukrainian Euromaidan movement — indeed, this experience is also a bogeyman the Kremlin likes to use in order to scare off potential protesters. They say ethnic nationalism is not popular in today’s Russia, there is no Ukrainian-style regional polarization, and the state is not so weak in Ukraine. [In this line of argument](#), it would be mistaken to obsessively fear the fascistization of civil society, international neoliberal bondage, civil war, and authoritarianism. Those who make this case are right in many ways.

However, the Ukrainian experience does not only tell us about the grim results that a revolution like its own 2014 experience would produce. Rather, it should prompt us to consider why the oligarchic circles so easily “captured” the anti-oligarchic revolution. There is something sinister about the fact that in the wake of protests against the ex-president Viktor Yanukovich and his party, one of the founders of this very party, the oligarch Petro Poroshenko, came to power. This happened precisely because the protesters refused political self-determination in favor of maintaining the [moral unity of the Maidan](#), because they did not notice the “big” politics and even their own “official” opposition leaders, preferring to focus on what was going on in the streets.

Experience in other post-Soviet countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, as well as [Middle Eastern countries, like Egypt](#), shows that democratic uprisings can themselves bring to power undemocratic regimes or ones that reproduce the very social and economic order the protesters opposed. The same can be expected in Russia.

Populism to Polarization

Such an experience of “stolen revolutions” makes our post-Soviet countries fit in line with the main global trends in protest. Post-Soviet protests have three things in common with their counterparts around the world: populism, the fight against the dictator, and unintended consequences of polarization. Many revolts in recent years, from Occupy Wall Street to the Russian “movement for fair elections,” on which basis Navalny built his rise, were populist, with political conflict looking like a confrontation between the “people” and the “authorities,” with each side being imputed class and ideological coordinates. The main target of populist protest becomes the removal of a dictator, for example, Putin, Lukashenko or Mubarak. At the same time, polarization is growing within society, in which a conflict over values comes to the fore and displaces the articulation of class interests.

In the post-Soviet context, these three factors are present in an exaggerated form. If in Western countries, theorists and practitioners of populism, especially on the Left, emphasize the creative process that combines various groups and formulates general demands, in Russia, populism does not follow this process, but instead precedes it. Post-Soviet Russia is a country characterized by the declassing of social groups, the atrophying of class consciousness, the vilification of everything “Soviet” and “ideologies” in general, the undermining of parliament, and the degradation of the party system. In this context, the conflict between the “people” and the “authorities” provides an easily accessible, elementary language of protest politics.

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When the struggle between different social groups’ interests is represented at the level of political parties and social movements and surrounded with discussions about what changes are needed, populism becomes a way to intensify this struggle by uniting different unprivileged groups into the “people” and combining different demands into a single agenda. But if social conflict in society is suppressed and not represented in politics, if there is no tradition of sharp political discussion on the future of the country and specific reforms, then what instead happens is that the authorities and the opposition fight for the right to speak on behalf of the “people” — without having to propose any project for the future. This battle of attrition can last a long time, but if it does not lead to a clear understanding of what exactly it is in fact being fought over — for what program and for what future — it may end up just replacing some people in high office with others, while leaving the situation in the economy, culture, politics as the same as before.

In the post-Soviet context, populist conflict and the fight against the dictator have a pronounced personalized character. Recently we saw an example of how even in the context of the oligarchization of party systems, democratic leaders can embody political parties and ideas. Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn each returned democratic-socialist politics to the public sphere in the United States and Britain, respectively.

Yet, in the Russian case, Navalny does not offer a coherent political program, simultaneously combining opposite rhetoric from the left-populist to the neoliberal. Like Putin, he offers himself, not an idea or program. Navalny’s strategy is to force Putin to recognize him as an equal adversary and drag him into a strategic game where their respective moves and countermoves will look like a struggle between political giants. Political ideas are, in all this, used as mere decoration adorns the stage on which the battle of good and evil, embodied in specific charismatic heroes, unfolds.

Devoid of program, class, and ideological content, the populist conflict can nonetheless lead to social polarization, following the same rules: with an emphasis on the conflict between abstract moral values and leaders, not social interests. But the results are inevitable: the protest will be captured by elites, whose class and ideological interests, which have long remained in the shadows, will finally be revealed in the new political order.

Thus, the problem with Navalny is not only a matter of whether he really is a proponent of right-wing or neoliberal ideology. The problem is that the class and ideological “neutrality” of modern protests, paradoxically, it itself becomes part of their ideological appropriation and — more precisely — part of the mechanism by which these “neutral” uprisings are captured by far from neutral leaders and elites.

So, Should We Participate?

Thus, the position of unconditional support for the protests led by Alexei Navalny, as a supposedly general democratic protest, certainly has its weak sides. Yet even more problematic is the position that calls for nonparticipation, taking the same distance from the “regime” and “liberal protests.” Its arguments draw heavily on the traumatic experience of revolutions and coups over the last thirty years, ending with a neoliberal offensive and territorial disintegration — as in Russia in the early 1990s, as in the case of Maidan, or in various countries in the Middle East.

But we shouldn't forget that the very real problems in post-Maidan Ukraine, which so worry Russians, are presented by the official Russian media in a hyperbolic and distorted form. All these factors have ultimately pushed a huge part of the pro-Soviet or simply conservative audience into outright political paralysis.

Meanwhile, the active part of society is immersed in the reality of arrests and repression, including many against people who think rather like we do on the Left. Those who take to the streets today (not all of whom consider themselves to be supporters of Navalny) do so under the threat of detention, imprisonment, fines, expulsion from institutions, and dismissal from work.

As a result, these people find themselves not only victims of the regime, but also the hostages of various media strategies. Navalny's headquarters constantly work to personalize the protest, using his name for fear of losing symbolic control over it. Pro-government media do the same, in order to separate the “Navalists” from the rest of the dissatisfied. This is also the effect of that part of the Left which insists that whatever the differences among protestors, they are all under the media (and seemingly political) control of Navalny's team. On the one hand, this rhetoric fits perfectly the above-described consciousness, depoliticized by so many unsuccessful revolutions. Yet it also denies protesters' subjectivity — a dubious position for socialists and communists to take.

How Should We Participate?

Cautioning against participation in the protest movement, many on the Left say: Navalny's left-populist rhetoric conceals a neoliberal program, so why should we want to bring its implementation closer — and anyway, what we can put up against a leader with such resources? Indeed, in addition to his nationalist past and populist strategy, Navalny has a neoliberal agenda, which not so many people know about. Yes, the resources of the Russian left are now incomparable with Navalny's. However, in our opinion, by participating in the protest movement, the Left can become stronger — and partly thanks to the reality of Navalny's neoliberal program.

Despite the personalist and populist nature of the current struggle between power and opposition, one of the latest trends in Russian protest politics is public attention to political programs that no one would have read or discussed ten years ago. After the publication of Navalny's program, new “opposition” parties and candidates, including Kremlin spoilers Ksenia Sobchak and Zakhar Prilepin, began to acquire their own programs and even [debate each other over programmatic differences](#). However, Navalny's program is contradictory and not worked out, and, most importantly, it is made invisible by his other public activities: his exposure of corruption, journalistic investigations, and [“Smart Voting.”](#)

Smart Voting recently demonstrated the success of Navalny's populist strategy, but also exposed its limits. More people, getting involved in politics, followed Navalny's call to vote in a way that hurt the ruling party. And this succeeded — the ruling party was losing votes. But at the same time, an increasingly politicized society was posed with a question: Why is the most important thing in life to stand against United Russia and Putin? If in my area a candidate from the ruling party did something good, and his opponents do not represent my interests, my worldview, my lifestyle, should I vote for them just because I prefer opposition to authority? It is obvious that the “fight against corruption” —

the main point in Navalny's program — will not solve all of Russia's problems, from overcoming the economic crisis to building a real democracy.

While supporting the campaign for Navalny's release and an investigation into his poisoning, the Left must argue with Navalny supporters, including ones abroad, about his program and articulate in these disputes his own program. This is an opportunity to mobilize those who have appeared on the public stage in recent years: [leftist political scientists, sociologists, and economists of the new generation](#). This will make it possible to compensate for the temporary weakness of the Left in street mobilization, through competent analysis of the economy and society and the programmatic defense of the economic interests of the majority.

Thus, in debating Navalny's program with him, exposing the ways it contradicts his rhetoric, and proposing its own steps to reform the economy and politics, the Left can become stronger. By participating in Navalny's movement, we must light the fuse on the time bomb placed under him by his economic advisers. Navalny must be one of the opposition leaders, specializing in the fight against corruption, and not the Protest Leader of All the Russias. This strategy will not only allow the Left to become stronger. Our goal is not only to outplay Navalny, but also make politics a space for discussion about social interests, political programs, and the future of the country.

Then, "populism by default," over-fixation on the removal of the dictator, and artificial social polarization will cease to determine the political struggle in our country. For we need to be doing what Navalny is doing today. We must mobilize international support for left-wing activists, experts, and politicians, and, through an exchange of our experiences, help us write our own program and communicate its main measures to the general public. If Navalny is flirting with left-wing themes, we need to be sinking real roots in trade unions and activist groups. Navalny will soon face inevitable growing pains — but we should understand that we, too, have room to grow.

Growth Areas

Demanding freedom for political prisoners (Navalny among others), active solidarity with those taking to the streets, programmatic debates with Navalny's team — all this has not just a tactical, but a formative meaning for the Left. This gives it the opportunity to break from both its sectarian dogmatic tradition and from the left-nationalism rooted in the "red-brown" alternative to Boris Yeltsin of the 1990s.

Today, there are several potential growth areas for the Left. Particularly important are the youth, including those in depressed regions. They have been politicized over the past year or two, largely on the Navalnist wave, but are ultimately unlikely to be satisfied with his neoliberal recipes. There is also a movement of local activists and deputies capable of moving from the defense of local residents' interests to a [wider street politics](#).

These include some members of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). For this party includes radical popular representatives who are clearly closer to the modern democratic-left agenda than to official, nostalgic party Stalinists. They become dissidents in their own party when trying to win popular support by the real struggle for people's interests in local activism and in municipal and regional electoral campaigns. Paradoxically, this party's official status gives its militants more opportunities in the democratic struggle than the Navalnists have; and when the former suffer repression, it makes more of a shocking impact on the masses than when "clandestine" Navalnists are routinely persecuted. Thus, Navalny's militants have produced a radicalization among some KPRF cadres. As a result, they are beginning now to collaborate with each other — something already angering [pro-Kremlin KPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov](#).

This conjuncture provides a good chance for the KPRF as an official party with some radical cadres to struggle for hegemony in the protest movement. Even if it cannot fully achieve this, these radicals can avoid either subordination to Navalny or merely helping the Kremlin divide the opposition. In recent years, Russia has seen a large self-organized movement of Marxist circles and left-wing reading groups, and some have learned that there is no Marxism without the unity of theory and practice. Added to which are the leaders and activists of independent trade unions. So far, they can only indirectly support protests: they fear that they will put their rather vulnerable structures at risk of repression. Yet they also understand that for a militant workers' movement, democratization is as necessary as oxygen itself.

All these active groups in Russian society are directly or indirectly involved in protests — and need our unconditional support. That solidarity is much more important than the many discussions about the controversial and fluid political face of Navalny and his closest associates.

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