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# Prospects of political protest in contemporary Russia

## Roman Savenkov, Voronezh State University (Russia)

In 2011-2012, Russia was hit by a wave of rallies against falsification of State Duma election results. The protest actions were mainly participated by the middle class of large Russian cities. However, leaders of these actions were not able to offer a plan significant for all the country. Most of the Russians did not support the protests.

Conducting of significant foreign-policy moves by the Russian President V. Putin (the Olympic Games in Sochi, annexation of Crimea, participation in settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, a military effort in Syria) has considerably raised the rating of the central administration. Experts are recording a high level of consent with the policy pursued by V. Putin: 89.9% of the Russians approve his activities.

However, the citizens of Russia are starting to be adversely affected by implications of economic difficulties and Western sanctions: prices for essential commodities are rising, while real earnings of most Russians are remaining the same or decreasing. It forms an additional factor for discontent and increase of potential for protest actions.

At the same time, sociologists are recording a constant distrust of the election procedure. The Election Day is a bifurcation point of political development of Russia. The authorities are most vulnerable on this day and the opposition has a chance to mobilize the support of large segments of Russian society.

The regular elections of deputies of the State Duma will be held in September 2016. The incumbent has introduced changes in the procedure for formation of the State Duma (a mixed election system and a new method for formation of electoral districts). Moreover, the civil society is forming a number of loyal public organizations that will get the financial support. Social research data do not allow us to make any conclusions about Russian citizens' readiness for protest actions.

**Key words:** protest, Russia, NGO, public opinion.

From our point of view, "social protest" means any collective expression of discontent, while "political protest" means collective actions intended to change the power system or state policy. Such negative collective actions are generally focused on representatives of political elite.

First studies of social and political protests were conducted in the 1960s within the framework of political sociology. Since that time, we have seen shaping of the main theories in sociology of social movements that determine the conceptual design of modern studies in the area of social protests: collective behaviour, mobilization of resources, new movements, structure of political opportunities<sup>1</sup>. According to one of the main sociological schools, social protests and social movements emerge depending on the "structure of political opportunities" (Tarrow S.). The notion of "structure of political opportunities" includes open or closed nature of institutional political system, unity or split of ruling elites, possibility or impossibility to make an alliance with a part of elites, repressive opportunities of the state<sup>2</sup>.

In this article we will discuss two aspects in prospects of social and political processes in contemporary Russia. First, we will analyze readiness of the Russian society to social and political changes and collective actions. Second, we will formulate a ruling group's strategy being implemented in prevention of social and political protests and try to forecast development of this strategy and respective tactics in the future.

### **Readiness of Russian society to social and political changes**

First experience of social protests in contemporary Russia was gained in 2004-2005, when streets were hit by retirees and underprivileged citizenry exclaiming against "benefits monetization". During 2005, the Russian government together with regional authorities took a number of measures aimed at combating the social strain. In several regions, monetary compensations have been increased to the level acceptable for retirees and protests have gradually subsided. In December 2008, dozens of Russian cities saw protest actions of motorists exclaiming against the increase of customs duties for used foreign-made cars. In terms of income and social status, this population category belongs to the middle class – the most dynamic stratum of Russian society. In response to those organized collective protest actions, D. Medvedev (President of Russia in 2008-2012) and V. Putin (President of Russia in 2000-2008, from 2012) started to speak about the need for care of small and medium enterprises. In 2011-2012, Russia saw a wave of rallies against frauds at elections to the State Duma (lower chamber of federal parliament). The protest actions were widely participated by the middle class of large cities. However, the authorities managed to break the unity of protestants, while the leaders of protest actions turned out to be unable to offer an action program significant for all categories of Russian citizens. Most Russians did not support the protests.

Let us distinguish the main problems that can provoke social and political protests among Russian citizens in the future. Most Russians, irrespective of geography, are worried by the advance in process for essential commodities and municipal tariffs. Problems of political nature almost don't worry the respondents. The least important political rights for participants of social studies are: "freedom of peaceful assembly and association" (15%) and "right to participation in social and political life" (14%). At the same time, more than a half of all the Russians (55%) are worried by violation of various rights and freedoms in Russia and just over a half of them are worried by violation of social rights and the rest – by violation of social and political rights<sup>3</sup>.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Russians (69%) have never applied to authorities for restoration of their rights. Sociologists have analyzed possible instruments that could be used by citizens for protection of their rights. According to the respondents, *the most efficient* are non-institutional instruments: "address to relatives", "personal

relations”, “bribery” and *the least efficient* ones are: “voting for political parties at elections” (64%), “rally, picket, strike” (56%), “apply to authorities” (52%). According to D. Volkov (Levada Center), the main factor that blocks development of public activity is the fact that respondents are sure that they are powerless<sup>4</sup>.

Readiness for participation in social and political events is limited by voting at elections. It is stated by about 80% of Russians (residents of both large cities and other localities). This readiness is largely declarative, since the practice shows that this right is exercised only at federal elections, while voting turnout at local elections does not exceed 20-30%. The second most frequently mentioned acceptable type of social and political activity is election observation (stated by about 15% of respondents). At the peak of its development – in March 2012 – the movement of electoral observers numbered about 25,000-30,000 people all over the country. Readiness for other types of social and political activity does not exceed 4-5%. The least attractive options are: participation in political work and radical forms of protest.

The political inactivity is promoted by high rating of V. Putin. According to Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), activities of the Russian President have been evaluated at the level of more than 80% for more than a year and a half. Putin’s rating started to grow in spring 2014, at the time when Crime and Sevastopol reunited with Russia: in March 2014 it was 76.2 on the average, in April – 82.2, in May – 86.2. After anti-terrorist air strikes in Syria, the President’s rating reached its historical peak – his activities are approved by 89.9% of respondents<sup>5</sup>.

Russians’ emotions towards Putin have also changed. While two years ago respondents were mainly indifferent (about 50%; 20% spoke about positive feelings, 25% – about negative ones) and started to get tired of him, today the positive attitude towards him is expressed 2.5 times more often (10% speak about admiration, 37% – about sympathy), and neutral and negative feelings are mentioned more rarely (40% and 11%, respectively)<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time, D. Volkov, a sociologist from Levada Center, is convinced that public initiatives have a high potential for protest. Leaders of public initiatives are “pushed” into the political field, since they cannot settle their problems with the use of available legal institutes. The level of activity depends not on political sympathies, but on the level of interpersonal trust: the most active players are those who believe that they can trust people, those who plan their lives for several years into the future, respondents who regularly read the press and online news<sup>7</sup>.

In August 2015, Levada Center recorded the insignificant growth in respondents’ readiness for personal participation in protest actions based on economic and political claims. At the same time, expectations of protest actions based on social and economic problems have decreased and expectations of protest actions based on political issues have slightly increased<sup>8</sup>. Some growth in the number of protest actions in the first half of 2015 is also recorded by experts from the Committee of Civic Initiatives. During the first half of 2015, the recorded protest activities increased almost by 15% as compared to 2014. Evaluation of protest activities is based on media and news agency reports about public actions<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, opinion polls allow us to distinguish the following factors promoting preservation of social stability and low political activity of citizens: 1) high rating of V. Putin and acceptance of his general line in foreign policy; 2) sense of powerlessness, absence of experience in collective actions; 3) absence of established national opposition leaders. At the same time, experts record accumulation of discontent with deteriorating economic situation, which is not focused on the head of state.

### **Strategy of ruling group in prevention of social and political protests**

After massive protests in Moscow in 2011-2012, the Russian authorities have been consistently pursuing the policy of suppression of illegal and semi-legal political actions. In the middle of 2012, they amended the Federal Law “On meetings, rallies, demonstrations, processions and picketing” and the Code of Administrative Offences. Innovations and amendments itemize sanctions in relation to persons organizing unauthorized massive actions or breaking the public peace during such actions. In summer 2014, they introduced criminal responsibility for repeated violation of rules for organization and holding of public events. Now violators are facing five years’ imprisonment or a fine of up to one million rubles<sup>10</sup>.

In 2012, the Russian authorities passed the Federal Law No. 121 “On foreign agents”. This law regulates the activity of non-profit organizations (NPO) receiving money and other property from foreign sources and participating in political activities.

The law stipulates that political activity does not include any activities in the field of science, culture, art, health care, preventive health care and protection, maternity and child welfare, social support of disabled persons, promotion of healthy lifestyles, sport, plants and animals protection, charity and voluntary work.

According to the law, political non-profit organizations financed from abroad should register themselves in the Ministry of Justice as “foreign agents”. The law provides for maintenance of a register of non-profit organizations functioning as foreign agents. Applications about inclusion in this register should be filed by NPOs before starting of their activities as foreign agents. Annual accounting (financial) statements of such organizations, as well as departments of foreign non-profit non-governmental organizations are subject to mandatory audit. In 2014, the authorities issued the Federal Law that allows the Russian Ministry of Justice to include NPOs in the Register of foreign agents on its own account<sup>11</sup>.

In spring 2015, the authorities passed the Federal Law on so-called “undesirable” foreign organizations in Russia. It implies that any foreign or international, but only non-governmental organization “posing a threat to foundations of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation, its defense capacity and safety” may be acknowledged as undesirable. Such decisions shall be made by the Prosecutor General of the Russian federation or his/her Deputies as agreed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Such a decision may also be cancelled according to the same procedure<sup>12</sup>.

In summer 2015, the Council of Federation submitted to the Prosecutor's Office a so-called "patriotic stop list" including a number of foreign or international non-governmental organizations known for their anti-Russian bias, with a view to acknowledge their activities as undesirable on the basis of applicable statutory provisions. The senators' address included 12 foreign nongovernmental organizations<sup>13</sup>. It is officially known that the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has become the first NPO acknowledged as "undesirable" by the Prosecutor's Office of Russia<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, Russian domestic policy includes several arrangements aimed at the increase in control over NPOs participating in political activity at the expense of foreign grants and at prohibition of foreign NPOs suspected of anticonstitutional activities. Moreover, the authorities have toughened sanctions against violators of laws on public events. This constriction in the structure of political opportunities led to the decrease in the number of NPOs by 33% as compared to January 1, 2012.

At the same time, they are implementing some measures aimed at the support of loyal non-profit organizations. On October 15, 2015, at the invitation-only workshop for socially oriented NPOs, which had been prepared by the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation under the auspices of the Presidential Executive Office, it was decided to work out a concept for development of non-profit organizations. Moreover, the workshop participants discussed the efficiency of NPOs' work abroad and in small towns and villages of the Russian Federation, as well as criteria for assignment of NPOs to socially oriented ones. First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office V. Volodin explained that the government attention to the third sector would only grow, since it was one of the growing sectors of economy in the world<sup>15</sup>.

According to V. Putin, in 2015, the state support of non-profit organizations amounted to almost six billion rubles<sup>16</sup>. Prime Minister of Russia D. Medvedev has signed an order about distribution of 621 million rubles of subsidies among 55 selected constituent entities of the Russian Federation. These funds will be used for implementation of programs aimed at the support of socially oriented non-profit organizations in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation<sup>17</sup>.

Therefore, the structure of political opportunities in contemporary Russia is quite contradictory: on the one hand, the Russian authorities suppress civic initiatives in the political field and on the other – it stimulates the emergence of loyal civic initiatives not connected with claims for transformation of power. The experts expect that before the election of deputies to the State Duma the incumbent will increase the control over oppositional NPOs and support loyal ones.

Thus, the population of Russia is mainly worried by social and economic problems. In such a situation political slogans cannot mobilize citizens for collective action. Protest actions observed at present are characterized by small scale and addressed to businessmen, i.e. stacked against particular social and economic position of citizens and not connected with general political agenda.

Findings of social studies show that Russians have low protest potential and are unready to use institutional means of protection and representation of their interests. However, the political system of contemporary Russia is distinguished by the contradictory attitude of citizens to authorities. On the one hand, the citizens support the current regime and the head of state personally, but, on the other, they see that official rhetoric is inconsistent with reality. Accumulation of such discontent cannot be recorded with the use of quantitative methods. It is necessary to conduct qualitative research and depth interviews with Russians.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information please refer to: Kostyushkov V.V. Sotsialnyy protest v pole politiki: potentsial, repertuar, diskurs (opyt teoreticheskoy interpretatsii i empiricheskoy verifikatsii) // Politicheskie issledovaniya. – 2011. – No. 4. – P. 144-146.

<sup>2</sup> Kleman K. et al. Ot obyvatel'ey k aktivistam. Zarozhdayushchiesya sotsialnye dvizheniya v sovremennoy Rossii. – Moscow, 2010. – P. 296-299.

<sup>3</sup> Volkov D., Goncharov S. Potentsial grazhdanskogo uchastiya v reshenii sotsialnykh problem. Svodniy analiticheskiy otchet. Moscow: Levada Center, 2014. – P.6, 8, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 12, 14-15, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Press release No. 2958 of Russian Public Opinion Research Center, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115438>, October 25, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Volkov D. Reyting Putina: realnost' ili vymysel sotsiologov? Levada Center, <http://www.levada.ru/2015/07/08/rejting-putina-realnost-ili-vymysel-sotsiologov/>, July 10, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Volkov D., Goncharov S. Potentsial grazhdanskogo uchastiya v reshenii sotsialnykh problem. Svodniy analiticheskiy otchet. Moscow: Levada Center, 2014. – P. 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> Levada Center news <http://www.levada.ru/15-09-2015/protestnyi-potentsial-avgust-2015>, September 01, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> News portal RBC, <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/11/2015/563730859a7947cea084e2a0>, November 05, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Legal news of Rossiyskaya Gazeta, <http://www.rg.ru/2014/07/22/mitingi-anons.html>, September 29, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> News agency RIA Novosti <http://ria.ru/spravka/20140616/1011656413.html>, September 29, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Putin podpisal zakon o 'nezhelatelnykh' organizatsiyakh, Russian News Agency TASS <http://tass.ru/politika/1990676>, October 01, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Russian News Agency TASS, <http://tass.ru/politika/2099879>, October 01, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Official website of the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian federation, <http://genproc.gov.ru/smi/news/genproc/news-832994/>, October 01, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> NKO reshili poschitat' i umnozhit'. – Kommersant <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2832883>, October 17, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Forum of active citizens 'Soobshchestvo'. Official website of the President of Russia <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50631>, November 08, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Website of the Government of the Russian Federation <http://government.ru/docs/all/103759/>, October 15, 2015.