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From political apathy to mobilization – the sources, dynamics and structure of protests in contemporary Russia¹

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The anti-corruption protests of 2017 raise questions regarding the proactiveness of Russian society, its civic maturity and readiness for political change. In attempting to answer these questions it would be of value to remember how the demands of citizens vis-à-vis those in power have evolved since the end of the 1990s up to the present time. We shall also describe the nature of the protests in the past and now, investigate their scale, and on this basis determine the potential of the protest movement in Russia. In enquiring whether the protest situation in Russia is likely to develop we should refer to the view shared by many sociologists and political scientists² that Russian society is apathetic. It is worth looking at this closely, and then pointing to those factors that prompt a society which is considered to be apathetic to overcome its passivity and conformist tendencies.

¹ The article was written with financial support National Center of Science in Poland. Grant no 2015/19/B/HS5/02516, «Współczesna Rosja: między autorytaryzmem a totalitaryzmem».

² А. Макаркин, А. Кынев, Д. Волков, Т. Малева, *Почему российской власти выгодна апатия в обществе*, <http://www.dw.com/ru/почему-российской-власти-выгодна-апатия-в-обществе/a-19566316> (accessed: 10.07.2017).

The apathy of Russian society

On an axis with the binary opposites “apathy vs. political activity”, Russian society is definitely closer to political apathy, which expresses itself through passive acceptance of the policies of the ruling elite and a general unwillingness to involve itself in the country’s socio-political affairs. The apathy of Russian society is strengthened by Russia’s authoritarian political system and, on the other hand, an authoritarian political system increases the apathy of society. The strong position of the president and, at the same time, depriving parliament of the possibility of making key decisions play a direct role in making the society apathetic, a society that prefers passive approval of the will of the ruling elite.

When describing the regime Karin Kleman uses the term “imposed power”³, which refers to power based on coercion, intimidation and the co-optation of those who demonstrate their loyalty. This is a type of power “over”, rather than “with” citizens, a power which strengthens the strong political alienation of society. “Ordinary people do not believe that they can somehow influence those in power, but on the other hand they have the deep conviction that those in power should not interfere in their private lives”⁴. It became clear very quickly that the collapse of the USSR and the coming to power of “a new democratic elite” did not change very much as far as the role and significance of society and its influence on the authorities were concerned. According to Kleman, the society very quickly lost the power of social protest. Disillusioned by the ineffectiveness of their protests they returned to their private lives, to the problems of everyday survival⁵. In 1997, of those who “found their level of poverty unbearable” 46 percent were prepared to take part in protests. More than half of the most frustrated would not take part in a protest as a means of attempting to solve their everyday problems. The most important reason was neither health problems nor age, but a lack of trust in the effectiveness of this type of initiative⁶. When asked if they would wish to take

³ К. Клеман, *Подъем гражданских протестных движений в закрытой политической системе: потенциальный вызов господствующим властным отношениям?*, http://www.isras.ru/files/File/publ/Vyzov_vlast_otnosch_Kleman.pdf, p. 5, (accessed: 14.06.2017). See also A. Oleinik, *A Taxonomy of Power Relationships and its Applications to the Russian Case*, a paper from the meeting of the International Network of Experts on the Issues of Administrative Reform in Post-Soviet Countries, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 26–29 August 2006.

⁴ К. Клеман, *Подъем гражданских...*

⁵ See more: K. Clément, *L’action politique à la base au travers des manifestations à Moscou de 1987 à nos jours. Mémoire de DEA, sous la direction de M. Wiewiorka*, EHESS 1994, p. 150.

⁶ В.А. Ядов, С.Г. Климова, И.А. Халий, И.А. Климов, А.В. Кинсбургский, М.Н.Топалов, К.М. Клемент, *Социальная база поддержки реформ и потенциал массового протеста*, [в:] М.К. Горшков (ред.), *Россия в глобальных процессах: поиски перспек-*

action if their material status deteriorated, 49 percent of respondents answered that they would look for additional work, 21 percent responded that they would obtain a loan and 13 percent said that they would take part in a protest. The prevalence of the inclination to adapt rather than protest was characteristic of the 1990s, when the majority of Russians were focused on the question of survival in difficult economic circumstances⁷.

Sociologists who work on Russian society refer to so-called informal contacts, or ties that hold together a group of “one’s own people”, or a micro-group based on mutual trust. Interpersonal solidarity wins out against so-called “common issues”, ignoring the existence of good citizens’ attitudes, or general respect for state institutions and the dominant norms because the leader of the group frequently imposes their own unofficial laws and principles⁸. Micro-networks or micro-groups help to solve individual problems of members of the group, although these are very different from public issues or problems, and are often incompatible with the so-called common good. One should add that group-internal solidarity makes the development of associations difficult and minimizes the likelihood of members becoming involved with voluntary organizations. “So this type of solidarity, writes Karin Kleman, prevents people not only from taking collective action, but also from implementing their rights and responsibilities as Russian citizens acting, even to a small degree, as good Russian citizens”⁹.

This view is also shared by the director of the Levada Center, Lev Gudkov, who writes that “the apathy of citizens and their lack of involvement in politics stems from the fact that civil society is not developing quickly enough, from the acceptance of civil practices, laws and freedoms, from the creation of opportunities to join associations, and also from the emotional alienation of voters from those in power”¹⁰. The so-called *culture of non-participation* is reinforced by the Kremlin, which successfully blocks the appearance of a grassroots civil society through (i) repressive laws which target non-governmental organizations or those citizens who wish to demonstrate, (ii) depriving inhabitants who request to hold referenda of the opportunity to do so, (iii) increasing control over mass media, (iv) „concreting over” the political scene, thereby making it impossible to fill it with new actors, and also (v) by creating an “official civil society”, in which a key role will be played by the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. Despite the

тивы, Москва 2008, с. 98, http://www.isras.ru/files/File/publ/global/Socialnaya_baza.pdf (accessed: 17.08.2017).

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

⁸ К. Клеман, *Подъем гражданских...*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ В.А. Ядов, С.Г. Климова, И.А. Халий, И.А. Климов, А.В. Кинсбургский, М.Н. Топалов, К.М. Клемент, *Социальная база...*, pp. 85–101.

high level of dissatisfaction with the ruling elite in the Russian society, this dissatisfaction remains amorphous and diffuse. Furthermore, the repressive policies of the government aim to prevent certain groups or social ties from forming so as not to allow civil society to consolidate itself. In the case of Russia one can speak of a system with a high degree of centralization that keeps society in a state of fragmentation and atomization¹¹.

The path to protests

In their book *From Citizens to Activists: Emerging Social Movements in Contemporary Russia*¹², Karin Kleman, Olga Miryasova and Andryej Demidov consider the process of change in people's ways of thinking and acting to be one of the most important elements in a citizen's transformation from citizen to activist. This process appears when a person is confronted with problems or hurdles of a collective nature, which they feel so strongly that they start to doubt whether the current order can be described as "normal". This person's opinions, ideas and values change as they attempt to solve the problem, and at the same time new ways of interacting develop. The main factors that prompt the individual to action are contact with overt injustice, the formation of a team of like-minded people, a strong emotional resonance, a change in the way one sees oneself and others, and also the initial effects of the action undertaken¹³.

The first step in the formation of a social movement is a feeling of being threatened, linked to one's own life circumstances (people are rarely mobilized in the name of "the good of all mankind"). In a community as far removed from politics as Russian society, collective action must take people's everyday problems into account in order to have a chance of developing and becoming attractive to a Russian citizen¹⁴. The next stage is realizing that it is impossible to solve this problem on an individual level. This is followed by a confrontation with the state and disappointment resulting from a lack of will on the part of those in power to solve the problem peacefully. Then comes the time for collective protest.

One more important factor to which Kleman pays attention is the significance of the leader who organizes collective action. Without a person with initiative,

¹¹ Л. Гудков, *Надежды на то, что с молодым поколением все изменится, оказались нашими иллюзиями*, <http://www.forbes.ru/mneniya/324693-lev-gudkov-nadezhdy-na-cto-s-molodym-pokoleniem-vse-izmenitsya-okazalis-nashimi-illy?page=0%2C2> (accessed: 01.09.2016).

¹² К. Клеман, О. Мирясова, А. Демидов, *От обывателей к активистам Зарождающиеся социальные движения в современной России*, Москва 2010.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 632.

¹⁴ К. Клеман, *Подъем гражданских...*, p. 8.

a protest – even if it arises in accordance with the stages mentioned above – will remain passive. The leader plays a vital role in creating a network of contacts when the society, or specific groups of the, is first being mobilized. It is them who show that remaining within the circle of *one's own people* and submitting to the decisions of those in power is not the only course of action, and they suggest collective action as an alternative. The leader is viewed by the group as trustworthy, articulate, socially mobile, having organizational skills and a broad network of contacts, and they are fully conversant with the law. By the same token they have a considerable social capital at their disposal. This view concerning the significance of a leader who inspires people to action and is in a position to organize demonstrations with thousands of participants chimes with the words of sociologist Stephan Goncharov from the Levada Center, who writes that “a growth in the potential for protest usually occurs after the beginning of protests, when the reason for the protests has become known in the public sphere. Nobody is prepared to protest alone, but when the most pro-active people go out onto the streets the psychological barrier to taking part in the demonstrations is reduced and others join them”¹⁵.

The protest situation in Russia

An analysis of today's protests requires a retrospective consideration of the history of demonstrations in Russia up to the present time, taking account principally of the changes which have occurred in the protest movement since the fall of the USSR. It would be fruitful to consider the views of an American political scientist, Graeme Robertson, who works on protests in Russia and compares demonstrations in the 1990s to those that have taken place since 2000. He proves that the protests of 2011/2012 were a justified continuation and expected consequence of earlier demonstrations that occurred during Vladimir Putin's first two terms in office¹⁶.

Robertson finds several factors which distinguish the Russian protests of the 1990s from those that took place in Putin's Russia. He focuses on the nature of the demands, the programme and the location of the protests.

Above all, the nature of the demands of the protesters has changed. In the 1990s, during the prolonged economic crisis, the demands of the protests con-

¹⁵ Levada, *Россияне готовы протестовать только за компанию*, <https://www.levada.ru/2015/09/16/rossiyane-gotovy-prottestovat-tolko-za-kompaniyu> (accessed: 14.06.2017).

¹⁶ Greene and Lankina write that the 2011/2012 protests came as a surprise for the government and the citizens themselves; S.A. Greene, *Beyond Bolotnaya: Bridging old and new in Russia's election protest movement*, «Problems of Post-Communism» 2013, № 2, p. 40–52; T. Lankina, *Daring to protest: When, why, and how Russia's citizens engage in street protest*, «PONARS Eurasia» 2014, № 333.

cerned economic issues, for example the payment of outstanding wages. As many as 72 percent of all protesters' demands concerned such unpaid wages¹⁷. Over the course of the first two terms of Putin's presidency, the demands generated by the economic crisis gave way to a significant extent (although not completely) to issues that were a consequence of growing frustration surrounding the economy and society, which were transforming rapidly. Questions of judicial and ecological reform and demands for the ruling elite to take effective action against corruption, as well as other more abstract issues concerning citizens' and workers' rights started to play a greater role. Breaches of the law and violence towards journalists and artists who criticized the Kremlin's policies contributed to this to a large extent. Only 6 per cent of demands made by protesters concerned unpaid wages. However, sociological data show that the majority of protesters support authoritarian leadership more frequently than democracy. Busygina and Filippov claim that a broad opposition coalition which supports democracy in Russia is impossible because of the citizens' fear of the unequal and dishonest redistribution of goods, which is a consequence of all political reforms¹⁸. The tendency described above regarding the development of the protest movement in Russia shows transformations in the Russian society when Putin is in power. It is possible to distinguish the effects of a social contract that relies on Russians playing a part in the redistribution of profits from the sale of oil in exchange for supporting the actions of the Kremlin and not interfering in politics. During the first two terms of Putin's presidency Russians seemed to be satisfied with their financial situation. That part of society, which in addition to an improvement in their standard of living expected Russia to be modernized and expected her citizens to be treated subjectively, attempted to express their dissatisfaction with the ruling elite through protests. At the same time, the slogans of the protesters focused mostly on a call for the rule of law, and not democratization of the country.

A key element of the 2011/2012 protests was the fraud that characterized the 2011 elections to the Duma, although according to Robertson this should be interpreted in the broader context. This is necessary in order to answer the question as to why it was not until 2011 that people began to protest against dishonest elections, while they also took place in 2003 and 2007. In elections before 2011, even though irregularities were noticed, they were interpreted as follows: "Life has got

¹⁷ G. Robertson, *The Protesting Putinism. The Election Protests of 2011–2012 in Broader Perspective*, «Problems the Post-Communism» March-April 2013, p. 20.

¹⁸ S. Rosneberg, *The "Colorless" Protests in Russia: Mixed Messages and an Uncertain Future*, (in:) E. Arbatli, D. Rosenberg (eds.), *Non-Western Social Movements and Participatory Democracy*, Springer International Publishing 2017, p. 20. See: I. Busygina, M. Filippov, *The calculus of non-protest in Russia: Redistributive expectations from political reforms*, «Europe-Asia Studies» 2015, № 2, 209–223.

better, so who cares if they are dishonest?"¹⁹. Thinking in such categories reflects a consensus between society and state described by Mirosław Marody, according to which the state has ceased to be a value in and of itself, but is perceived above all through the prism of its capability and effectiveness at solving social problems and fulfilling the needs of society²⁰. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Russian society this consensus ceased to be valid in 2011. The increasing pride and impunity of those in power and the objective treatment of society resulted in the electoral fraud of 2011 being interpreted as a mere drop spilling out of the Kremlin's overflowing chalice of arrogance and has ignited protests²¹.

As far as the location of the protests is concerned, in the 1990s they erupted in various regions, depending on the level of citizens' dissatisfaction with the social policy of the local administration or employers. During Putin's presidency, the capital has become the main location for protests against the regime as well as the creation of human capital (primarily the developing middle class, who form the basis of civil society), essential for the December protests of 2011/2012. Although these resources were not sufficient for democracy, they nonetheless constitute an essential element for future democratic development²². This shift in location and the nature of the demands has been deemed to be proof that an engaged, thinking middle class is developing who wish to be treated subjectively and are aware of their civil rights²³.

The next change concerning the protests that Robertson notices is the largely symbolic nature of protests under Putin (the performance given by Pussy Riot or the protests of the Society of Blue Buckets), compared to the direct blockade-type protests and the hunger strikes etc. during Boris Yeltsin's time in office. Robertson emphasizes that this change is a consequence of the fact that, compared to the 1990s, those in power have at their disposal a greater range of means of counteracting hunger strikes, blockades and other direct protests²⁴. The symbolic form of protest has therefore become an attempt to counteract repression on the part of defense and law enforcement institutions. It seems that this type of protest, in a situation where control over society is being increased and authoritarian rule is developing, has become the only alternative means for specific groups to fight for their political subjectivity and to gain influence over the decisions of those in power.

¹⁹ G. Robertson, *The Protesting Putinism...*, p. 21.

²⁰ M. Marody, *Jednostka po nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2014.

²¹ D. Volkov, *Protest rallies in Russian in the end of the 2011 – beginning of 2012: demands for democratization of political institutes*, «Vestnik Obshchestvennogo mneniia» 2012, Vol. 2, pp. 73–86.

²² G. Robertson, *The Protesting Putinism...*, p. 21.

²³ A. Kolesnikov, *The Russian Middle Class in a Besieged Fortress*, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/04/06/russian-middle-class-in-besieged-fortress-pub-59655> (accessed: 13.07.2017).

²⁴ G. Robertson, *The Protesting Putinism...*, p. 18.

The period between 2012 and the anti-corruption protests of 2017 was the period that witnessed the annexation of Crimea and its consequences in the form of growing support for Putin's policies on the one hand and, on the other, sanctions imposed by the West in addition to the economic crisis. This crisis resulted from a fall in the cost of oil and countersanctions. It caused a dramatic decline in the standard of living of Russians. During that time, protests were limited to anti-war marches by the opposition, individual demonstrations in several Russian cities (in defense of a park in St. Petersburg, or independent television in Tomsk) and also a lorry drivers' strike. However, none of those protests affected the whole of Russia²⁵. Denis Volkov stresses that in order to become mass protests there must be widespread dissatisfaction with the situation in the country and the policies of its leader. In 2005 and 2011 the situation of protest manifested itself partly through a 33 per cent drop in support for the ruling elite. In just one year, Putin's support rating fell from 86 per cent to 65 per cent (from December 2003 to January 2005). Over the period between 2008 and December 2011 the number of people who accepted President Putin's policies fell from 88 per cent to 63 per cent. This was a result of the 2008 financial crisis. Polls indicated that at that time the majority of the residents of Russia had a feeling of uncertainty, disorientation and anxiety about the future²⁶. According to Volkov, if the Russian leader's support rating falls to a dangerous level of 60–65 per cent, this means that the many frustrated and disgruntled citizens have grown in strength and that critics of the Kremlin are being listened to willingly. When a large section of society is disgruntled, any incident may cause open opposition. On the other hand, of course, it is difficult to judge what can bring about dissatisfaction in a society. As a result of the fall in the standard of living of Russians in 2014, many journalists and commentators on Russian politics expected a fall in support for Putin's policies. However, this did not happen. Dissatisfaction with the policies of those in power can build up gradually and only when it has reached a certain level does it begin to contribute towards increasing protest sentiment.

Anti-corruption demonstrations – a new stage in the protest movement?

In 2017 a film made by the Foundation Against Corruption "*Don't call him Dimon*"²⁷ turned out to be inflammatory. It shows the prime minister of Russia, Dmitri Medvedev's hidden fortune as well as corruption at the top of the Kremlin

²⁵ D. Volkov, *Does Russia's Protest Movement Have a Future?*, <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/nation/2184-does-russias-protest-movement-have-a-future> (accessed: 12.06.2017).

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *On vam ne Dimon*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6679360> (accessed: 21.12.2017).

elite. When analyzing the anti-corruption protests of 26th March and 12th June 2017 it is necessary to indicate the extent to which they differed from the 2011/2012 protests and the extent to which they are a natural continuation.

Certainly one of the most frequently cited arguments intended to confirm the uniqueness of the recent protest movement concerns the participation of young people. It is worth noting that as early as 2012 political scientists and sociologists drew attention to the participation of many young people in the 2011/2012 protests, who used the Internet and expressed themselves on social media²⁸. “Hipsters—twenty-something, young, cosmopolitan urbanites”²⁹ replaced “crowds of impoverished elderly people”, who formed the core of previous Russian demonstrations³⁰. In 2017 the participation of young people was widely written about by political scientists, sociologists and journalists. The chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Institute of Demography, Migration and Regional Development, Yuri Krupnov, acknowledges that the participation of young people in a protest march is phenomenally important, an objective trend that has matured. “The voice of the smartphone generation is being heard, this generation is growing at a time of relative stability, experiencing boredom and because of this demanding new stimulation. The drabness of life and the thirst for such stimulation has turned them towards protesting against those in power. The government only offers young people “inflated images” and “lies from morning till night”. The rather too bureaucratic format of young people’s organizations of the type “Ours”, or the “Seliger” project, has not proved to be successful, but unlike their parents young people feel that they have nothing to lose³¹.

After the protest of 12th June 2017 the journalist Andrey Loshak described this situation as follows: “This is a physiological protest by the young against an infirm, cynical and morally outdated state”³². He continues: “Looking at the faces of these young people who are now themselves experiencing the limits of Russian freedom, I saw that a feeling of bewilderment is giving way to outrage, and outrage to anger. This anger will grow, this is an inevitable process. It is inevitable because the current government is not capable of dialogue, modernization and

²⁸ D. Volkov, *Протестное движение в России в конце 2011–2012 гг.*, <https://www.hse.ru/data/2012/11/03/1249193438/movementreport.pdf> (accessed: 16.08.2017), К. Бараковская, *На Чистых прудах митинговали с айпэдами в руках*, https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2011/12/06/policiya_presekla_pohod_oppozicii_na_cik, (accessed: 06.12.2011); S.A. Greene, *Beyond Bolotnaya*:..., p. 48.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 48–49.

³⁰ G. Robertson, *Protesting Putinism*..., p. 17.

³¹ DW, «Пора остановить этот сюр». Почему школьники РФ вышли на акции протеста, <http://www.dw.com/ru/пора-остановить-этот-сюр-почему-школьники-рф-вышли-на-акции-протеста/a-38157451> (accessed: 15.07.2017).

³² A. Loshak, <https://www.facebook.com/andrey.loshak/posts/10155437804032094> (accessed: 13.02.2017).

showing that it is developing in other ways; it is only capable of repression and reaction. Young people look to the future and what do they see? An aging dictator, total corruption, monstrous injustice, war with the West and the country's neighbours, "traditional values", "patriotic upbringing", lies on television, fat priests, and dim-witted teachers asking "now, children, do you want things here to be like in Ukraine?" This isn't the future. This is a caricature of the past which we are all living in"³³.

The role and significance of young people (aged 18 to 24) in the Russian protest movement is described in much more realistic terms by the sociologist Denis Volkov of the Levada Center³⁴. He notes that young people are turning away from the television towards the Internet, but stresses that this tendency does not mean that they are looking at reality in an alternative way, rather it suggests a low level of awareness of what is happening around them. Only eight per cent of young Russians are interested in politics, and compared to the average Russian young people are only half as interested in such topics as the situation in Ukraine, events in Syria and the migration crisis in Europe. Because of this, he believes that young people duplicate the views of the masses and passively accept the government's policies. Young people internalize these views; if they do not hear them from television, then their parents or older friends tell them. As far as political preferences are concerned, young Russians are mostly apolitical. As many as 65 per cent find it difficult to answer a question about their political views (this is 10 to 15 percentage points lower than the average for the population). Young people are unwilling to take part in elections; 30 per cent of respondents in the youngest age group voted in the 2016 Duma elections. For the population as a whole this figure was 50 per cent, while in the oldest age group it was 70 per cent. Of the young people who went to the polls the majority voted for "One Russia" or the LDPR. According to research conducted by the Levada Center, only 10 per cent of young people are prepared to take part in protests. Volkov's main fear is that the participation of young people in protests may only be short-term. The great enthusiasm of young people to take part in new protests does not mean that this enthusiasm will last for a long time. Nevertheless, even if this eagerness to protest is short-lived, both the prospects of young people becoming politicized and their anti-Putin stance worry those in power greatly, which can be seen from the action taken by the Kremlin that is intended to steer young people away from Aleksey Navalny and his plans³⁵.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Д. Волков, *Эффект от фильма «Он вам не Димон» почти прошел*, <http://www.levada.ru/2017/05/29/effekt-ot-filma-on-vam-ne-dimon-pochti-proshel> (accessed: 18.06.2017).

³⁵ Apart from intimidating young people in schools and universities and threats to expel them from education establishments for taking part in protests, the Kremlin decided to use young

Undoubtedly, however, the role and significance of young people in the protest movement will depend to a large extent on their interest in politics, their growing awareness of the need for change in Russia and their increasing will to take part in collective action, which aims to express their opposition to the government's policies.

Another element which distinguishes anti-corruption protests from those of 2011/2012 is the geographic shift of demonstrations from the capital to the provinces. This suggests that the protests are no longer an expression of the dissatisfaction of the middle classes who are fighting for their rights (for example "for honest elections", as was the case in 2011/2012), but also an expression of the opposition of people from all over Russia to the lack of justice, and the lack of governmental will to pursue it.³⁶ This situation not only forces the decision-making elite to counteract demonstrations in the capital, but also to find a way of dealing with protests that concern almost the whole country. It is worth noting that the dispersion of protests to a large extent makes it difficult to suppress them, and also raises the question as to whether it is possible to find a uniform response to the demonstrations which is agreed upon by representatives of the regional and federal authorities.

Apart from the geographic distribution, we should also consider radicalization of the protestors. Professor Valeri Solovey from MgiMO claims that 2017, as opposed to 2011 to 2012, saw "a serious psychological change in the participants in protests; they are not as peaceable as previously. Furthermore, the protests are taking place against the backdrop of an economic crisis. [...] The presence of local problems reinforces the political effect and means that the protests are part of a wider political crisis³⁷. Evidence of radicalization and determination of the participants in the protests is also provided by the fact that despite the protests not always being agreed to by the local administration, and despite mass arrests

people's heroes to mock and belittle Aleksey Navalny. Alisa Vox (a former singer in the group Leningrad) produced a short film "Kid" in which she criticizes schoolchildren who take part in protests. It soon turned out that the film was commissioned by the president's staff and that the singer received 2 million roubles for it. A short film that attacks Navalny's actions was also produced by the rapper Ptakha (Птраха). See *Алиса Вокс сняла антипротестный клип. Его заказал Кремль?*, <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/05/17/alisa-voks-snyala-antiprotestnyy-clip-ego-zakazal-kreml> (accessed: 21.12.2017). Vladimir Putin also decided to take part in a "hotline" with schoolchildren and answer their questions so as to get his message across to young people, see *Путин проведет прямую линию для школьников* <https://www.vedomosti.ru/newsline/top/politics/news/2017/07/17/724016-putin-dlya-shkolnikov> (accessed: 18.08.2017).

³⁶ Е. Винокурова, «Сегодняшние школьники умнее тогдашних взрослых», *Протесты-2017 vs Протесты-2011/12: четыре основных отличия*, https://www.znak.com/2017-03-29/protesty_2017_vs_protesty_2011_12_chetyre_osnovnyh_otlichiya (accessed: 18.09.2017).

³⁷ Ibidem.

following the protests of 26th March and 12th June, protesters were not afraid to go out on to the streets to express their dissatisfaction.

Another element which distinguishes the latest demonstrations from those of 2011/2012 is the issue of the leader. Six years ago there was no single leader of the protests; currently it is Aleksey Navalny. In 2017 no political party initially supported the protests. In other words, it is Navalny who through the social media mobilized participants in the protests to go out on to the streets. On the one hand, this charismatic leader strengthens the protest movement, gives it energy and motivates it to fight for citizens' rights. On the other hand, it raises the question both of the bottom-up organizational and mobilizing capabilities of participants in the protests and of the future of the movement in a situation in which Navalny has ceased to be the inspiration for the protests.

A further factor that distinguishes the recent protests from those of 2011/2012 is the issue of anti-corruption, which became the chief cause of the 2017 demonstrations. The question is no longer one of circumstantial accusations concerning specific reform (monetization of benefits), or one of demonstrations by specific professional groups (lorry drivers), rather it is a question of serious accusations regarding corruption at the top of the ruling elite. This means that public trust not only for corrupt low-rank officials but also for the whole of the vertical power structure right up to Vladimir Putin's closest colleagues, and therefore right up to Putin himself, is being undermined. The issue of financial abuses at the top of the power pyramid means that it is not possible to present them using propaganda as an import from the West, like pro-democracy slogans. Russian citizens have always accused those in power of corruption, so the elite also marginalize or mock the demands of demonstrators who are calling for Russian politics to be cleansed of financial abuses. Corruption means that the president's last, unwritten agreement with the Russian people is challenged. It presupposes that the citizens of Russia will patiently put up with sanctions and the inconveniences associated with it, in exchange for which Putin will defend Russia and the Russians against the supposed threat from outside. In the face of corruption the logic of this agreement becomes incomprehensible: why should the average Russian tighten their belt, while top state officials are becoming richer and richer. According to Navalny this corruption is "the most important reason for the murder of citizens"³⁸. Given the severity of the accusations it will be difficult for the government to calm the citizens' anger³⁹. Andrey Kolesnikov is right to

³⁸ P. Baev, M. Omelicheva, G. Robertson, T. Lankina, A. Makarychev, *New wave of protests in Russia (the old and the new)*, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/new-wave-protests-russia-old-and-new> (accessed: 20.06.2017).

³⁹ T.P. Gerber, *Russians are protesting! Part 2: Any government response will bring out more protesters*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/31/russians->

point out that above all the most recent protests concern injustice, and therefore fall within the field of ethics⁴⁰. Therefore, the ruling elite must eradicate the cause of injustice in order to win back the support of the protesters. The cause of the injustice, however, is to be found in the system itself, and so it requires reform on the level of the system.

Professor of Sociology and Russia expert Theodore P. Gerber from the University of Wisconsin believes that those in power are in an unusually difficult position, because there is no simple answer to the accusations of corruption made by society. Punishing Prime Minister Medvedev would not only mean admitting that the fact that Putin's closest colleague became richer and richer by dishonest means was accepted for a long time, but at the same time it would also confirm that protests are an effective means of putting pressure on the ruling elite and influencing internal politics. On the other hand, if those in power react aggressively they risk that the society would suddenly withdraw. Doing nothing, however, could cause the Kremlin to seem weak to the society. The authorities could arrest and intimidate the leaders of the protests, but the turn-out at anti-corruption protests shows that intimidation no longer works: dissatisfaction is sufficiently strong to prompt many to risk spending a few days under arrest in order to be able to express their dissatisfaction. This description confirms the tendency both to break with the conformism which is characteristic of Russians and, at the same time, to undermine the axionormative system on which the Russian political regime is founded. Participation in the protest movement suggests a lower level of susceptibility to pressure from the various pro-Kremlin forces (in particular the armed forces) and increased courage to express dissatisfaction with the actions of the decision-making elite and their (protesters') own expectations of the policies pursued by this elite.

Summary

Two things give hope that the enthusiasm of those disgruntled citizens who take to the Russian streets will not wane. These are a combination of the topic of corruption, which has repercussions for the financial situation of every Russian, and the involvement of young people and the determination of a charismatic leader who consistently follows financial abuses at the top of the Kremlin pyramid. An important point regarding the recent protests is the fact that the question of

are-protesting-why-part-2-any-government-response-will-bring-out-more-protesters/?utm_term=.2ac3ec138c76 (accessed: 13.06.2017).

⁴⁰ A. Kolesnikov, *New Protests Question Russia's Social Contract*, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/71283> (accessed: 18.07.2017).

corruption combines both economic and political demands perfectly. This allows us to suppose that the protesters' wish for the Russian political scene to recover will not die down soon. On the other hand, the situation of protest has not yet reached the critical stage; we cannot see any evidence of a coordinated bottom-up initiative which would channel civil frustration, dissatisfaction and would also (in the most extreme case) impose changes on the Russian system.

In evaluating the potential of the protest movement in Russia, it is easy to come up with extreme interpretations. There is a predominance of pessimistic prognoses, which classify protests as fruitless acts of critics of the Kremlin that do not help bring about change in the regime. Some, such as Andrey Kolesnikov, see potential in the protest movement, but point out that the recent wave of demonstrations is not in a position to change the regime and that the situation in Russia cannot be identified with either a colour or a velvet revolution.

However, as Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik rightly suggest in their book "Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries" successful attempts to use protests to overthrow authoritarian leaders take place in general only after a series of unsuccessful attempts⁴¹. It is also necessary to point out that one-off outbreaks of protest sentiment, which arise from circumstances peculiar to a given time, present a lesser threat for authoritarian leaders than a protest movement that forms slowly and systematically and whose members learn to come together and fight for their rights⁴². Referring to a claim made by Denis Volkov in 2012, we note that innumerable breaches of "the vital needs of specific people"⁴³ create an indispensable basis for building a broad coalition, capable of undermining the political domination of those in power⁴⁴. It may be worth viewing the recent protests as part of a long process which consistently aims to dismantle the Russian political system.

RÉSUMÉ

The aim of this article is to analyze the most important factors which have influenced the increased protest sentiment in Russian society since the annexation of Crimea. The author proceeds from an analysis of issues concerning the political alienation of the Russian

⁴¹ V.J. Bunce, S.L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*, Cambridge University Press 2011.

⁴² G. Robertson, *The Protesting Putinism...*, p. 13, cf. S.L. Wolchick, *Putinism under Siege: Can there be a Color revolution?*, «Journal of Democracy» 2012, no. 3, pp. 63–70.

⁴³ V. Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, Sharpe 1985.

⁴⁴ D. Volkov, *Putinism Under siege: the Protesters and the Public.*, «Journal of Democracy» 2012, no. 3, p. 61.

society, which distances Russians from those in power and minimizes their influence on public affairs, and outlines the circumstances in which Russians are mobilized to action. One of the more important questions discussed in the article concerns the motives that prompt certain social groups to break with conformity and publicly express their dissatisfaction with and opposition to the actions of the ruling elite. It is necessary to look closely not only at the structure of the protest movement, but also its dynamics and evolution, attempting to ascertain the scale of its potential.

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