



A New Generation of Protesters: Unrest in Moscow

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2019

Typical to any authoritarian regime, the civil unrest lurking under the everyday banality of modern life suddenly erupted in the streets of Moscow last Saturday. More than a thousand civilians¹ have been arrested as a result of clashes with the riot police. As it usually is the case, the trigger for the protest happened to be a very narrow and specific issue (The Russian government denied oppositional candidates the right to participate in elections for the city council)² which eventually transformed into broader demands, the latter being subsequently much similar to the popular demands during the protests of 2017/2018, namely corruption and overall dissatisfaction with the ruling tendencies of Vladimir Putin. The similarity is evident not only in the nature of demands of the protesters but also in the response undertaken by the Putin government.

The above mentioned 2017/2018 protests represent a good indicator of the overall dynamics of the political and not so rarely, deadly battle between the opposition and Putin. Even the murder of Nemtsov in 2015, which was arguably the most notorious among the political assassinations in modern Russia along with the tragic case of Politkovskaya, could not jump-start a political process in the streets culminating in any radical gains for the oppositional forces in Russia. Eventually the 2017/2018 protests amounted to little more than nothing. There is one vital difference between the protests of the recent past and the process taking place currently, more precisely the core of the protest movement is overwhelmingly young. This is a factor which has to be taken in consideration no matter how stable and resistant the authoritarian system happens to be.

One could ponder endlessly about the reasons and justifications for such utter and constant failure on behalf of Putin's opposition up to now, many solid reasons could be located and discussed, however attempting to explain the inability of the Russian political opposition to even slightly shake up Putin's grip on power as a whole, can only be fully understood by taking into account two pivotal factors, the global context and the generational factor. Considering the international political climate and the global weight of Russia, it is foolish to ignore what is happening outside of the borders of The Russian Federation, while trying to explain exactly what, why and how, happens within these

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/27/world/europe/moscow-protest-election-russia.html>

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very borders, the location and demarcation lines of which, at the very same time, are much disputed and represent one of the core hot spots for potential escalation on the international scene.

The phrase *“The Revolution will not be televised”* has its origins in a song by Gil Scott-Heron from the 70’s³, the author of this song would have probably never imagined that a lyric from his song would perfectly describe the stillborn revolution fathered by the CIA in Venezuela. Juan Guaidó, the self-acclaimed President of Venezuela (He has been officially recognized as the President of Venezuela by 54 countries as of now, among them the leading market economies)⁴, has still successfully failed to confront Maduro in the bid for power in Venezuela. If one looks at the world map indicating which country supports Maduro and which country supports Guaidó it is evident enough to point out two separate political camps, which happen to find common interests not only in the case of Venezuela and its disputed leadership. A continuous process which has spread from Venezuela to Hong Kong could easily be interpreted as a *“Democratic Assault”* on authoritarian regimes and it does not take a diploma in International Relations to see which state is in which camp.

In the beginning of July, Jeremy Hunt who has recently resigned from the position of The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *“threatened China with “serious consequences” over its treatment of protesters in Hong Kong”*⁵. One should decide on its own, to what extent it is justified from the moral point of view, for a state which has historically speaking recently *“possessed”* an economically vital city region of another state, to be threatening that very state on the basis of *“defending”* its former colony. From a legal point of view, the agreement between UK and PRC guarantees the *“One Country, Two Systems”* status quo until 2047, however legal proceedings do not play a decisive role in common opinion making as in ink on paper will never replace common sense, therefore the British diplomatic offensive can only be explained either within the framework of the *“Diplomatic Assault”* and not by any genuine concern for the democratic rights of the residents of Hong Kong which, one hand should be defended and upheld, while on the other hand remain strictly within the sovereign boundaries of domestic policy of the Peoples Republic of China. The global context gives Putin the ability to successfully perform one of the most old and practical tricks for any authoritarian, to use the foreign threat as leverage on its own nation by demanding unity in the face of a supposed foreign adversary while in the process effectively eliminating any opposition in the name of the national unity.

The long awaited political Tsunami in Russia will not be able to serve as a game changer for the many rightfully dissatisfied Russians who are wholeheartedly and honestly taking to the streets to demand more accountability on behalf of Putin and his *“sovereign democratic”* system without the active involvement of the youth. Many in Georgia who have been quick in the past to rush to their keyboards describing any protest wave in Russia as the promised apocalypse, which should supposedly take place anytime now due to the Western sanctions resulting in the complete collapse just as it happened with the USSR, have failed to take into account the differences between a protesting middle class and the protesting youth. The negative effect of the Western sanctions are

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Revolution_Will_Not_Be_Televised

⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/venezuela-diseases-health-system-measles-collapse-maduro-a8854586.html>

⁵ <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/uk-threatens-china-with-sanctions-over-hong-kong/>

clear, however they have failed to serve as a trigger for a political change in Russia since as long as the core of the protest prefers an evolutionary scenario rather than a revolutionary one and is not willing to confront unavoidable losses, both physical and economic.

There have been reports about one of the current oppositional leaders, Alexei Navalny being poisoned, the recent history of political assassinations related to Putin throughout the world, unfortunately leaves us no choice but to take reports of an oppositional leader being poisoned with deep concern, once again showcasing Putin's willingness to cross any red lines and crush widely agreed moral boundaries, however this does not change the fact that the mass participation and involvement of youth in this protest wave significantly alters the context of the political process, more precisely, it is a well-known fact that the youth involved in political turmoil is more daring and willing to take risks rather than the participating older generations. The social, legal or even stereotypical barriers for older generations partially set up by the government, which eventually hinder a possible revolutionary development are radically decreased or completely absent when the majority of protesting civilians happens to be young, it is also evident that Putin does not represent the breed of rulers who would even consider willingly giving up power, therefore one could only argue a further rise of political temperature considering the simultaneous generational change of politically active social groups in Russia and the unavoidable metamorphosis of Putin into Brezhnev.