

From Boom to Bust: Hardship, Mobilization & Russia's Social Contract

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Abstract: This essay revisits the debate about Russia's "social contract," arguing that the ability of the Russian system to maintain macro-political stability in the face of significant and prolonged micro-level economic hardship hinges on a peculiarly disengaged relationship between Russian citizens and their state. Russian citizens are seen clearly to understand the failings of the political system and leadership, reinforcing habits of "involution" learned over decades of institutional dysfunction. A review of recent protest movements, indeed, demonstrates that general quiescence coexists with a deep-seated antipathy toward the country's ruling elite, which lends particular animus to grassroots contention in a variety of settings. The question for Russia's sociopolitical future, however, remains an old one: can reactive civic mobilization lead to a proactive process of bottom-up agenda setting?

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How and why loyal Russian citizens – and loyal Russian citizens, by most counts, make up more than 80 percent of the adult population – come to find themselves on the barricades is something of a puzzle. Since surviving a major protest wave in 2011 – 2012, Putin has reconsolidated power and legitimacy, supported by a more adversarial approach to politics at home and abroad. His approval ratings have remained high, even as the economy has collapsed beneath his feet. To many observers, the question is not why there are pockets of opposition and protest, but why there aren't more. In truth, these questions share an answer: the same shifts in politics that consolidated a super-majority of voters behind Putin has laid the groundwork for a much more contentious – and much more pervasive – kind of politics.

The boom years of Vladimir Putin's first three terms in office provided a sense of a set of social contracts: one with the elite (centered around rents), one with the broad mass of the population (centered around paternalistic "noninterference"), and

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doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00439

one with the urban upper class (centered around the provision of space for “individual modernization”).¹ As living standards improved steadily over the course of nearly a decade and a half – providing, for the first time in post-Soviet history, a certain stability of expectations – a series of mobilizational interactions between the state and various challengers served as border skirmishes, outlining the contours of these settlements, illustrating how far each side could push (and be pushed) before something would break. Thus, a series of benefits protests and labor strikes in the mid-2000s seemed to set the terms of engagement between the state and most of its citizens, while more subtle standoffs with the economic elite and the most mobile urbanites led to similar understandings of the balance of power in society.²

The end of the boom provides an important opportunity to revisit received wisdom. Whereas the dislocation of the 1990s followed what had been many years of steady institutional decline, the current downturn – which is in its third year of economic contraction, bringing steep declines in GDP, income, and consumption – is the first in most Russians’ living memory to follow a prolonged period of hardening positive expectations. To economic hardship is added a range of other shocks, including ideology, elite hierarchy, political coercion, and international isolation.

In the post-boom and post-Crimea period, the primary public reaction to the apparent failure of the social contract is through a renewal of what in the 1990s was described as “involution”: a retreat from the public space and from universal institutions into relatively more robust networks of localized interpersonal relationships.³ But even as expectations of the state, which were already low, fell still further, the regime itself reengineered its own legitimacy through an appeal based largely on emotion. For most of the population

in most circumstances, this has been sufficient to produce consent. In other cases, however, recourse to the public sphere persists: citizens faced with severe or potentially irreversible threats to their welfare and quality of life engage, as they always have, in protest. Unlike prior mobilization cycles, however, post-boom and post-Crimea mobilization more quickly becomes ideological, driven first and foremost by the increasingly rigid and predictable tropes of the state’s own responses.

Looking to the future (a thankless but necessary task) is one of the goals here. The underlying trends – a state that increasingly seeks to engage its citizens emotionally and ideologically, and a population that feels increasingly alienated from the state materially – seem both unlikely to change and bound, over time, to produce ever more and ever sharper conflict. The ability of the current regime to withstand these challenges, while beyond the scope of this discussion, does not appear to be seriously in doubt. The intuition of this essay, however, is that real change in Russia will come not because power changes hands at the top, but because citizens at the bottom begin to regain their faith in the political community’s ability to deliver public goods.

Russia’s economy contracted by 3.1 percent in 2015 and, at the time this issue went to press, was estimated to have fallen by a further 0.6 percent in 2016.⁴ Hit by the combination of sanctions, falling oil prices, and a collapsing ruble, the economy has seen consumption decline by as much as 10 percent year-on-year – 2 to 3 percentage points faster than incomes have declined – as the government, too, has cut back on social spending.⁵

There has been a dramatic shift in the government’s approach to this crisis, compared with previous shocks. Whereas the Kremlin dug deep into its reserves – and put significant pressure on enterprise owners – to minimize the impact of the short-

lived 2008 – 2009 recession, much more of the burden of this deeper and more prolonged downturn has been placed squarely on the shoulders of citizens, in the form not only of falling incomes and rising prices, but also austerity, which has hit education, health care, pensions, and state salaries.⁶

Meanwhile, as noted above, consumption has fallen faster than income, as Russians themselves have tried to get ahead of the crisis.⁷ Spending has shifted from aspirational purchases – homes and cars, purchases that reflect plans and hopes for the future – to daily needs; mortgages and automobile loans have fallen by as much as half.⁸ All the same, many Russians have compensated through increased consumer borrowing, even as banks have made borrowing more expensive.⁹ The result has been an increasingly difficult – and often violent – relationship between borrowers and lenders, into which the government has been loath to insert itself.¹⁰ Similar friction has emerged between workers and employers, to a degree not seen since the rampant salary nonpayment problems of the 1990s.¹¹ One result is that more than half of working Russians are, in one way or another, not able to enjoy the rights and protections afforded to them by Russian labor, tax, and pension law.¹² Simultaneously, while 61 percent of Russians believe that now is a time to save rather than to spend, only 38 percent are prepared to trust their savings to banks.¹³ Not only does this leave savers without the protection of Russia’s deposit insurance system, it has also left the Russian Central Bank fretting that, as households withdraw from the formal financial sector, monetary policy itself risks becoming irrelevant.¹⁴

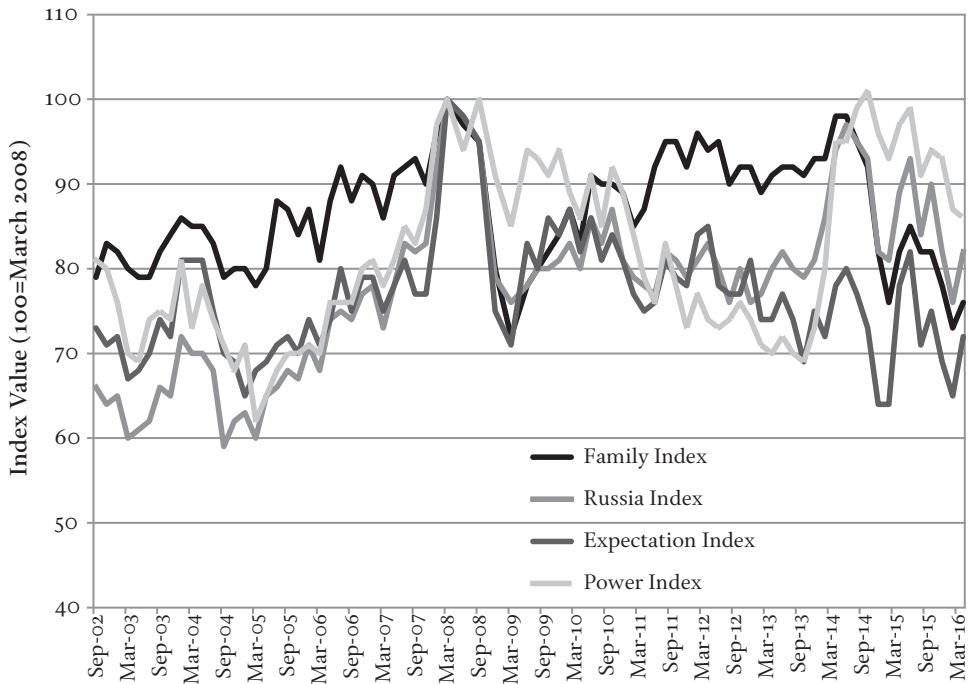
Russians, of course, are aware of all of this. The Levada Center, a Russian nongovernmental research organization that conducts regular opinion polls, recorded precipitous drops in several key indicators beginning in 2014, represented here as composite indices

calculated from a range of questions asked by Levada in recurring polls: the “family index,” which measures sentiment about household economic prospects; the “Russia index,” which measures sentiment about economic prospects for society at large; and the “expectation index,” which measures sentiment about the future. At the same time, the “power index,” which measures sentiment about the country’s political leadership, remained high (see Figure 1).

These data reflect a structure of public sentiment about power and the economy that cuts somewhat against the grain of conventional wisdom about authoritarian social contracts. When authoritarian leaders are popular – as Putin genuinely appears to be, or as Hugo Chavez was in Venezuela – it is often attributed to a broad public sense that the leader governs in the public interest, either through macrosocial redistribution or through more targeted but nonetheless pervasive clientelism. Russian citizens, however, see Putin as pursuing neither. Since the Levada Center began asking the question in 2006, the overwhelming majority of respondents have consistently believed that inequality in the country has gotten worse under Putin, not better (see Table 1). With similar consistency, fewer than one-quarter of Russians believe that Putin governs in the interests of the middle class, and many fewer still believe he governs on behalf of the citizenry as a whole; instead, Russians are much more likely to believe that Putin represents the interests of the *siloviki* in the coercive apparatus, the oligarchs, the bureaucrats, and big business (see Table 2).

And yet Russians are not particularly inclined to blame Putin for these or other failings. The number of respondents to a Levada poll in March 2015 – three months after the ruble lost more than half of its value – who had favorable opinions of Putin’s handling of the economy was only 2 percentage points lower than in October

From Boom Figure 1
to Bust: Levada Indices
Hardship,
Mobilization
& Russia's
Social Contract



Source: Data compiled by author from questions and recurrent polls published at Levada Center, <http://www.levada.ru/en/>.

Table 1
During Vladimir Putin's Rule, Has the Gap between Rich and Poor in Our Country Increased, Reduced, or Remained the Same as It was under Boris Yeltsin? (by % of Responses)

	March 2006	March 2007	March 2008	July 2009	July 2010	May 2011	May 2013	Sept. 2014	Sept. 2015
Increased	64	65	53	48	67	73	68	68	69
Reduced	11	9	13	15	11	10	9	11	9
Remained the Same	21	22	27	31	18	15	16	17	19
Hard to Say	4	4	7	6	4	3	7	4	3

Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshhestvennoe-mnenie/obshhestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

Table 2

In Your View, Whose Interests does Vladimir Putin Represent? (by % of Responses)

Samuel A.
Greene

	Oct. 2000	July 2001	July 2003	July 2005	Sept. 2006	Aug. 2007	Oct. 2010	July 2011	July 2012	July 2013	Aug. 2014	Aug. 2015
<i>Siloviki</i>	54	43	51	51	24	39	34	33	43	41	39	42
Oligarchs	24	15	27	25	23	18	26	29	39	35	30	31
Bureaucrats	12	15	21	26	21	19	24	22	32	30	24	28
Big Business	16	16	21	23	12	13	18	22	26	23	19	24
Middle Class	10	16	19	23	24	31	27	25	21	24	22	23
Everyone	5	7	7	6	10	12	8	12	11	12	14	16
Simple People	13	15	15	18	18	24	20	19	14	11	13	14
Cultural & Scientific Elite	4	8	9	11	7	10	10	9	10	9	10	13
Yeltsin "Family"	25	22	25	20	13	13	11	13	14	14	9	13
Intelligentsia	5	10	9	12	7	10	10	10	7	8	9	7
Hard to Say	13	18	11	12	12	13	14	12	7	10	15	10

Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshchestvennoe-mnenie/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

2009 (41 percent versus 43 percent); approval of Putin's economic management was higher in both periods than in November 2006, when the economy was actually doing better. Nor does Putin get much credit for his foreign-policy successes. Again in March 2015, a year after Putin engineered the highly popular annexation of Crimea, approval of his foreign policy stood at 69 percent, only barely above the 66 percent rating he received in October 2009 (see Table 3).

Indeed, a closer analysis of the Levada indices suggests that, evidence of pocketbook voting notwithstanding, the relationship between economic sentiment and political approval is anything but straightforward. As shown in Model 1 of Table 4, the "family index" (again, measuring pocketbook economic sentiment) does not correlate with the "power index" (measuring approval

of Putin and the government broadly). The "Russia index" (measuring sociotropic economic sentiment) correlates very strongly with political approval, as does the forward-looking "expectation index" (Models 2 and 3). And when the indices are combined, the family index becomes significantly correlated with the power index – but negatively (Models 4 and 5). In other words, sociotropic sentiment translates into regime approval most strongly when Russians are particularly unhappy about their personal situation, and vice versa: when Russians are feeling personally positive, they seem to have less need of their leadership.

This, in turn, comports with the observations of Russian sociologists, who have noted across a range of studies both an increasing reliance on interpersonal ties – often highly localized, but increasingly augmented

Table 3
In Your View, How Well is Vladimir Putin Handling . . . ? (by % of Responses)

	. . . the economy			. . . foreign policy		
	Nov. 2006	Oct. 2009	March 2015	Nov. 2006	Oct. 2009	March 2015
1 (worst)	5	4	7	4	2	2
2	12	12	15	5	5	6
3	40	36	34	21	22	18
4	29	31	30	39	41	37
5 (best)	8	12	11	25	25	32
Hard to Say	5	5	3	7	7	4

Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshchestvennoe-mnenie/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

Table 4
Levada Indices

Model	1	2	3	4	5
Family Index	.119 (.177)	-.252* (.193)		-.513+ (.103)	-.589+ (.106)
Expectation Index		.617+ (.179)			.204+ (.101)
Russia Index			.781+ (.074)	1.082+ (.068)	1.000+ (.071)
R-square	.014	.257	.610	.784	.806

* significant at 0.05 level

+ significant at 0.005 level

Dependent variable: power index. Standardized beta coefficients are reported, standard errors are in parentheses. Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshchestvennoe-mnenie/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

with the help of online social networking platforms – and an increased sense of welfare among those who report having the most interpersonal ties. Thus, as Russian political scientist Ekaterina Shul'man has written, "People who feel part of a social network believe that they can do without the state – they have an increased subjective sense of wellbeing not because they are well led, but because they become more self-confident."¹⁵ So, too, have individuals consolidated their own lives. According to Russian economic sociologists, what Lev Gudkov has called the "inertia of passive adaptation"¹⁶ seems to be giving way to a more proactive self-reliance:

Self-reliant Russians today are not a peripheral social group, not a marginal class, but a significant and growing group, reflecting the dominant trend towards independence and activism in society. The portion of Russians who claim responsibility for what happens in their lives and are confident in their ability to provide for themselves and their family without needing support from the state was 44% of the population in 2015, up from 24% in 2011.¹⁷

This is not, however, an entirely positive phenomenon, in the sense of increased autonomy, individualism, and self-reliance (traits that, in truth, were all central to Russians' robust coping mechanisms in the late Soviet period and throughout the 1990s). Disengagement from the formal state has a darker side: to wit, while some 75 percent of Russians report that their rights have been infringed in one way or another in recent years, only 39 percent reported that they appealed to state institutions, including law enforcement and elected officials, for help; fewer than 1 percent turned to the media or civic organizations; and 40 percent sought no help at all.¹⁸ Perhaps for that reason, as well, Russians by and large chose to ignore the September 2016 parliamentary elections, allowing the rul-

ing United Russia Party to achieve its largest ever majority on the back of the lowest turnout in Russia's post-Soviet history.¹⁹

By 2012, as Putin's personal appeal seemed to be waning (even as the economy was doing relatively well), support for Putin was boosted by his close association with bigger things – love of country and culture, for example – that most Russians hold dear.²⁰ In the wake of the 2011 – 2012 antiregime protest wave, and in the face of an economy that was failing to provide the kind of generalized growth in welfare that had accompanied Putin's first decade in office, the Kremlin opted for a new approach to public politics, one that was overtly confrontational, dividing society into more rigid categories of "us" and "them" with the help of values-oriented wedge issues, such as religion, sexuality, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity.²¹ To this was added fear, generated by an aggressive public sphere – to which the Kremlin's acolytes are eager contributors – and an increasing threat (and sometimes fact) of violence.²² Later, pride entered the mix, as the return of Crimea and Putin's steadfast position in the face of Western pressure (and sanctions) produced a "rally around the flag" effect that has lasted until the present.²³ The resulting concoction of identity politics, fear, and patriotic mobilization – what Russian analyst Kirill Rogov has called "the Crimea syndrome" – had, by the summer of 2016, become an inalienable part of Russia's politics.²⁴

The result looked to many Russian observers like a rewriting of the implicit social contracts of the 2000s. "By the spring of 2014," journalist Boris Grozovskii wrote, "in return for loyalty the state offered not growing welfare, but the feeling of inclusion in a power that was rising from its knees. This is a very powerful emotion, and in return the state now demands from the population not only loyalty, but also a preparedness to sacrifice."²⁵ Having given

up the right to a real political franchise – Maksim Trudolyubov, editor-at-large of the independent Russian daily *Vedomosti*, has argued – society acquired not permanent prosperity, but only a loan of well-being from the state: “Now, the state is calling in the debt.”²⁶

That this shifting bargain would be outwardly welcomed by many citizens, meanwhile, is in keeping with previous patterns of pro-state mobilization, wrote the sociologist Lev Gudkov:

The events of 2014 – 15 are not the first time we have seen mass demonstrations of solidarity with the authorities. . . . A state of collective enthusiasm and unfettered national self-aggrandizement is generally preceded by a phase of mass disorientation, frustration, irritation and, sometimes, intense fear. The waves we observe in public sentiment are society’s reactions to rapid change in the institutional structure of the state.²⁷

But the regime was not the only part of the Russian political landscape that was consolidating. For one thing, the challenge of the Bolotnaya Square protests was overcome, but not eliminated. Even as the Kremlin has provided a new, charismatic, and traditionalist basis for its legitimacy – successfully rallying the majority of Russian citizens to its cause – studies of online and offline activity suggest that the 2011 – 2012 “Bolotnaya movement” has continued to grow both in numerical and ideological terms, incorporating the antiwar movement that emerged in 2014, those aggrieved by the murder of Boris Nemtsov in 2015, and a growing number of others drawn in by the activism of their friends.²⁸

Indeed, Russia has seen rapid growth in labor unrest, with a record number of work disruptions in 2015, according to the Center for Social and Labor Rights (see Figure 2). There are “clear signs of workers reacting to worsening economic conditions,” particularly wage arrears, which make up the

plurality – if not majority – of strikes and other labor disruptions, according to labor sociologists Stephen Crowley and Irina Olimpieva.²⁹ Labor mobilization is concentrated in regional centers and major cities and is focused on industry and transportation.³⁰ Rising, too, is the proportion of labor mobilizations that involve strikes or other stop-actions, from 39 percent prior to 2014 to 42 percent in 2016.³¹ Stop-actions are predominantly provoked either by nonpayment of salaries or by other changes to remuneration; other grievances – such as generally low salaries, rising costs of living, and poor working conditions – did not typically provoke work stoppages in 2016.³²

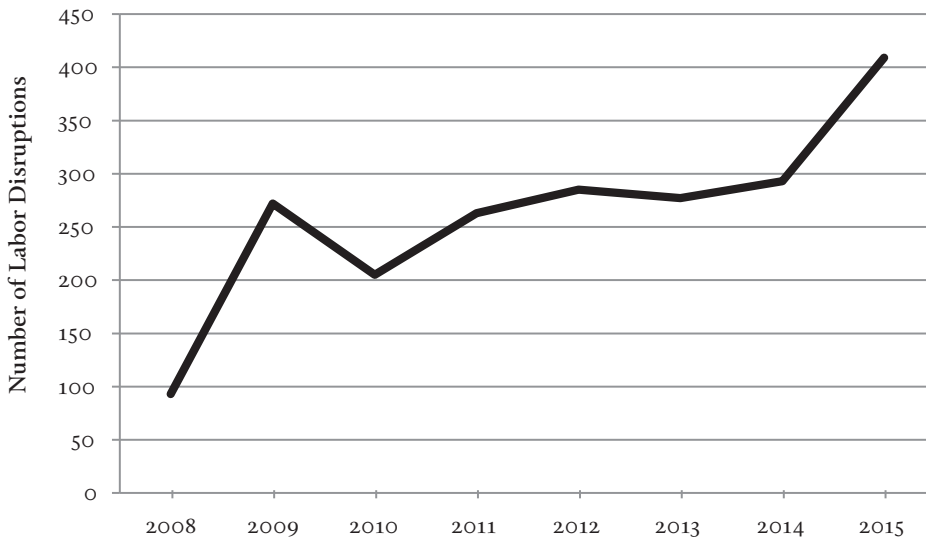
These trends mirror the findings of longer-term, more broad-based research into labor mobilization and economic protest in Russia.³³ Similar results are provided by an analysis of events cataloged by the activism website *Activatica.org*, demonstrating both an increase in overall levels of activity and an increase in the proportion of activity involving political and economic grievances (though environmental concerns predominate) (see Figure 3).

Insofar as our ability to observe is sufficient, the general mechanism by which grievance is transformed into mobilization in Russia has not changed: as they were throughout the first twelve years of Putin’s rule, Russian citizens remain capable of mounting meaningful resistance when the state presents a coherent challenge to their welfare. As before, Russians are more likely to mobilize collectively when the threats they face are immediate and potentially irreversible, and when the consequences of inaction are faced by an identifiable group of people at the same time and in the same way.³⁴ To see how things may have changed, however, let us briefly examine some indicative cases more closely.

Muscovites are protective of their green spaces. In a city clogged with traffic and

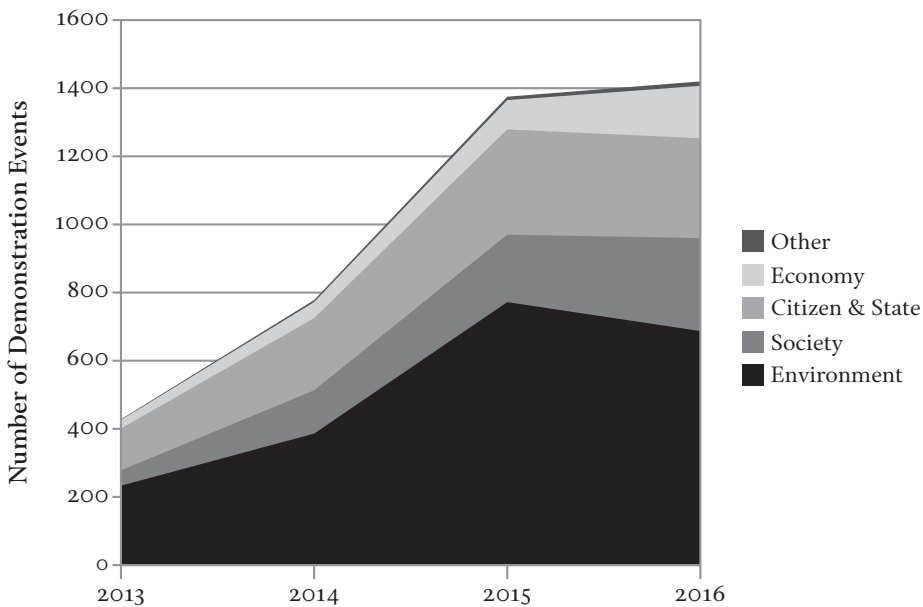
Figure 2
Labor Disruptions per Year

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Source : Center for Social and Labor Rights, *Trudovye protesty v Rossii v pervoi polovine 2016 goda* (Moscow : Center for Social and Labor Rights, 2016), <http://trudprava.ru/expert/analytics/protestanalyt/1712>.

Figure 3
Composition of Mobilization over Time



Source : Events counted by author at the Activatica database. See <http://activatica.org/>.

seemingly growing more crowded by the day, residents can usually be counted on to protest when developers set their sights on their courtyards, playgrounds, and parks. Most of these protests are local and small, and the majority don't last very long.³⁵ But some do.

On June 18, 2015, workers cordoned off a section of the Torfyanka Park in north-east Moscow; within a week, locals had begun protesting what turned out to be plans by the city administration and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to build a church in a corner of the park, part of a major effort by the ROC to build dozens of new churches across the capital. The pro-Kremlin camp wasted no time in reacting. On June 25 – the day of the first organized protest against the church – the website Ridus.ru, closely associated with the anti-Maidan movement and the pro-Kremlin National Liberation Movement, posted a long and detailed report, concluding as follows:

Against the construction of the church are arrayed a not disinterested group (village idiots and sincere neighbors attend, of course, for free) consisting of several social groups: leftists, [members of the Yabloko opposition party], Satanists-anarchists, people who hate the ROC on principle, and free citizens who have been brainwashed. . . . It's a courtyard Maidan in action, and none of the participants have anything in common with sincerity.³⁶

That, of course, set the terms of the debate to come. By July 9, rallies were drawing hundreds and then thousands of participants. Protest leader Natal'ya Kutlunina led off the proceedings, calling the park something of a second home for locals, a place where they could “go in their slippers and dressing gowns”; a city councilwoman from the ruling United Russia Party was booed off the stage.³⁷ As the summer wore on, protests grew in number and frequen-

cy, centered on a permanent camp blocking the entrance to the construction site, where the original locals were joined by left-wing groups and members of the liberal opposition, as well as residents from other neighborhoods facing similar encroachment. The left-wing blogger Maksim Serov put the fight in terms familiar to veterans of the Bolotnaya movement and the opposition's confrontation with the “patriotic” anti-Maidan and the National Liberation Movement: “It's them or us! The residents of our city, or the fascist obscurantists!”³⁸

And so the frame was set. As both sides dug in, many protesters evidently came to see their cause as bigger than the park, somehow bound up in the broader effort to block what some in the opposition called a creeping clericalization of Russian life and politics. In this, they were aided by the language that the Church's supporters used and the associations they formed: a page was launched on the Russian social networking site VKontakte in support of the construction of the Torfyanka church, combining religious symbolism with pictures of soldiers and references to patriotism, while the National Liberation Movement called the protests a threat to Russian sovereignty.³⁹ As the conflict dragged on into 2016, it was picked up by the “Russian Spring” movement that had supported the Russian mobilization in and around eastern Ukraine, calling for their own rally at Torfyanka and making the message even starker:

For us one thing in the situation with Torfyanka is obvious: “our” Moscow church-fighters and the Kiev Euromaidaners are one and the same. The same faces, the same methods, the same approaches, the same grantmakers. . . . They are preparing and training with an eye on a “Moscow Maidan” in 2016.⁴⁰

A remarkably similar dynamic took hold in a very different protest movement, or-

ganized by a network of independent truck drivers from around the country.

Trucks carry about 5.4 billion tons of goods per year in Russia, far outstripping any other mode of transportation for shipments of things other than natural resources. They do so, however, on roads that are both notoriously poor and notoriously expensive to build and maintain, the precise reasons for which do not need to be explored here. To help cover the cost, the Russian government decided to charge the owners of all trucks in excess of twelve tons a tax of 3.73 rubles per kilometer hauled.⁴¹ That was bad enough, particularly for the private truckers who account for roughly half of the sector. The big logistics companies had the bargaining power to pass the cost on to their clients (mostly retailers and distributors), who would then pass it on to consumers. But the privateers were under pressure to swallow the costs in order to compete.

Hearing the rumblings of protest, the government made an initial concession, reducing the rate to 1.53 rubles per kilometer for a few months – and then indefinitely – and putting a moratorium on fines. But for the protesters, the problem was not just the amount, it was the principle – and the fact that the principal beneficiary looked to be a company called RTITS, which won the concession to collect the tax and pocket half of the proceeds and was owned by Igor Rotenberg, the son of Arkadii Rotenberg, a close friend and associate of Putin. One popular protest placard featured the number 3.73 with a line through it; another said “the Rotenbergs are worse than ISIS.”⁴²

But the government was not budging. The strike began on November 21, 2015, initially in Dagestan; from there and elsewhere, columns of truckers began moving toward St. Petersburg and Moscow.⁴³ The same day, Yevgenii Fyodorov, a member of the Duma and leader of the Kremlin-backed National Liberation Movement,

broadcast an address to the truckers, which began as follows:

Samuel A.
Greene

We can see, you and I, that the United States of America is not sleeping. And now, through their “fifth column,” through national traitors, they have landed yet another blow against the Russian Federation. Specifically I am talking about the actions of the long-distance truckers, who are trying, on the orders of the United States of America, to liquidate Russian statehood.⁴⁴

Four days later, opposition leader Aleksei Navalny posted his own video message to the truckers on YouTube and on the website of his Anti-Corruption Foundation. With somewhat less emotion and hyperbole than Fyodorov had mustered, Navalny argued that the heart of the matter was corruption, and that the truckers and his activists – whatever other political differences they might have – should thus be able to find some common cause.⁴⁵

As the columns of truckers drew closer to Moscow, one of them – a twenty-seven-year-old trucker named Vladimir Georgiyevich from Leningrad oblast’ – told his story to *Colta*, a highbrow news and opinion website popular with the oppositional intelligentsia. It wasn’t politics that brought us out, he seemed to say, it was community:

The truckers – we’re not about politics. What’s that worth to an average worker? The average worker needs to work, to get his salary and feed his family. And that’s all he needs. But if they really start to go after us, are we just supposed to look on? I mean, here, we’ll give you some money for something that doesn’t exist and never will. There won’t be any roads. How many times have they lied to us: they promised to end the transport tax, and they didn’t. It’s the same with this system – they lied once, lied twice. They probably thought it would all go down quietly.⁴⁶

But if the Kremlin failed to predict the truckers’ reaction, so, too, did the truck-

ers fail to foresee the turn the government would take. As columns of trucks converged on Moscow, more and more messages flooded television and the Internet accusing the truckers of ties to Navalny, Washington, and the Euromaidan. Indeed, there was a kernel of truth: one of the protest coordinators was Sergei Gulyayev, a St. Petersburg activist who had been prominent in that city's contribution to the 2011 – 2012 election protests.⁴⁷ On December 3, when the truckers closed ranks outside Moscow and held their “snail day” protest, driving ever-so-slowly around the beltway, Putin gave his annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly; the truckers did not rate a mention. In an interview on the independent television station Dozhd', one of the truckers' representatives, Nadezhda Kurazhkovskaya, explained:

The president didn't meet our expectations. We expected more from him. We thought, after all, that he would stand with his people, but it didn't happen. We will fight to the last man, as they say.⁴⁸

The reaction from ordinary Muscovites, however, was warmer. Perhaps already accustomed to snail's-pace traffic, drivers took to social media – and, in particular, to the traffic monitoring and navigation apps that allow drivers to post messages about road conditions – to express their support and solidarity; “Nationalize the palaces of the Rotenbergs” was a common refrain.⁴⁹

When Putin departs the scene, the palaces of the Rotenbergs – at least those that are in Russia – could well be nationalized; at the very least, it would not be historically unprecedented in the universe of authoritarian transitions for a successor regime, whether democratically elected or otherwise, to target the cronies of its predecessor. But would either of those factors – Putin's departure and the disenfranchisement of his elite – change anything?

From the standpoint of sociopolitical mobilization, Putin's departure, when it happens, will be important. Mobilizational frames consist, first and foremost, of an injustice to be righted and a target who can be blamed for its persistence. The departure of a dictator will open up new political opportunities for movement organizations to seek direct political leverage, relieving the pressure for street-level activism. Putin's departure will also send activists out in search of new targets to blame: once problems begin to persist into the reign of his successor, blaming Putin will cease to be a viable mobilizational strategy.

The hardening of politics in Putin's third term – the deepening of dichotomies, the sharpening of political and ideational dividing lines, the increasing role of fear and coercion – has contributed to the consolidation both of the regime and its opponents. This was, of course, an inevitable result: civil society, as citizens' mobilized response to the state's intrusions into their private and public lives, reflects the contours of the state and thus consolidates to the extent that its primarily interlocutor makes itself tangible. Putin's state-led mobilization has brought new constituents from what had been the soft center of Russian politics more firmly into his camp, effectively preventing them from falling into opposition; but others have been pushed in the opposite direction. This is not an entirely new phenomenon, but it has gathered such force and velocity as to allow us to claim that Russian politics today are fundamentally different from what they were before.

When Putin goes, the regime, for a time, will become less tangible. The expectations that have crystallized over the last few years will shatter, as actors on all sides begin to form new sets of roles and understandings. The dividing lines will blur again, and Russians on both sides of today's politics will move back toward the middle. Thus, it is hard to overestimate the impact that Pu-

tin's departure will have on Russian civil society: it will radically reshape the landscape.

But in other ways, Putin's departure will change very little. The underlying tectonics of Russians' relationship with their state – their preparedness to see it as simultaneously dysfunctional and yet legitimate, unjust and yet worthy – does not change just because Putin leaves. It is noteworthy that none of the mobilizational efforts described above – nor, indeed, any of the mobilizational efforts described in any of the other studies of Russia cited here – could reasonably be called proactive. In fairness,

most mobilization is reactive, not least because most people live most of their lives in the private realm, venturing into the public only when provoked. But the absence of proactive public mobilization is not everywhere as nearly absolute as it is in Russia. Civil-social mobilization in Russia can, in fact, be powerful: it resists the state, pushes back against it, delays or stops its advances, and sometimes wins a reversal, all the while galvanizing communities of interest and ideology. The question is, can civil society become convinced that the state itself can change?

ENDNOTES

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