
CAN RUSSIA CHANGE?

15.06.2017

Slate (15 June 2017)

On Monday, protesters in about 200 Russian cities held demonstrations against government corruption. Russian authorities responded to the protests by arresting more than 1,000 people, including Aleksei Navalny, the anti-corruption activist considered Vladimir Putins chief political rival (such as one exists). The size and scope of the protests [] their youthful makeup [] observers in Russia, a country that hasnt seen demonstrations like this in years.

To discuss the latest developments, I spoke by phone with Masha Gessen, an expert on Russian politics whose latest book, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Claimed Russia*, comes out in October. (Part 2 of our conversation, about Trumps autocratic tendencies and similarities to Putin, will be published on Thursday.) During the course of our discussion, which has been edited and condensed for clarity, we talked about what the protests signify, why Navalny is no liberal, and the real reason Russians havent turned on Putin.

Isaac Chotiner: Were you surprised by the size of the protests, and the fact that they occurred in so many cities?

Masha Gessen: Yes, I was surprised and impressed, and this is by far the largest geographic spread of protests in Russia. At the height of the protests in 2011 and 2012, there were 99 cities that participated. This is an extraordinary thing.

For Navalny, it is a battle for his political and physical survival. Considering that this is happening on the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the crackdown, and the crackdown came after the protests of 2011 [] it makes sense to take stock. Every person who was involved in organizing those protests, including me, is either in exile or in prison or dead, except for Navalny. And Navalny is the one oppositional activist who is recognizable and active in Russia, and he is in actual physical danger.

Get Slate in your inbox.

So what did you make of the scope? Does it signify that the opposition to Putin is not a Moscow-centered middle-class thing?

You know, it was never a middle-class thing and never a Moscow thing. That was a Kremlin line that got a lot of traction with Western media, unfortunately.

Like me, apparently.

Yeah. As I said, at the height of the protests in 2011 [] it was 99 cities. It was all over Russia, and it was people from all different classes. There is some pretty good sociology on that. It wasn't the middle class; the middle class in Russia is actually tiny. It wouldn't have counted for a lot in terms of protests.

This time is bigger and testifies to, on the one hand, Navalny's effectiveness as an internet communicator [] has become his own medium, with his channel and his blog. He is more effective than any Russian-language media outlet with the exception of the entire state monopoly, which is amazing. But the other thing [] this is the less-optimistic part of it [] that part of the reason his message gets traction is that it's not really an anti-Putin message. It's a good government message. He speaks out against corruption. He doesn't speak out against the war in Ukraine. He doesn't speak out against the political crackdown as such. He doesn't speak out in defense of democracy. He is a single-minded fighter against corruption, and there is a risk in that. It's a great mobilizing tool, but it also suggests that you could actually have good governance carried out by an illegitimate government. Navalny is not saying that Putin was never elected legitimately. He is saying that he's stealing our money and we want him to stop that. That's different and makes the protests more appealing to more people but also makes it less political and less revolutionary.

Navalny has gotten in trouble for saying things about, say, immigrants, that would not be pleasing to liberal ears. Is your sense this is caginess on his part because he wants to get a broader message out, or that he is a version of Russian nationalist?

There is nothing liberal about Navalny. Navalny is not a liberal. Navalny is a product of his country and his generation. Basically for his entire adult life he has lived under Putin. He is not a very well-educated man. He is incredibly creative as an activist, but he was kicked out of the not-so-liberal Yabloko party for his nationalist views and his support for gun ownership, which is just silly because it's not even an issue in Russia. But he is naturally drawn to simple, extremely populist ideas. I have a lot of respect for him, and especially for his creativity in organizing, and his courage and innate sense of freedom and ability to claim that freedom in a really unfree country. But other than that, he is not a liberal.

The sense here is that Putin is still very popular. Is it true that even if people are fed up with corruption he remains popular?

That's the \$64,000 question. And that gets at something really important, which is Russian doublethink, which is a direct descendant of Soviet doublethink. There is a great sociologist, the late great Yuri Levada, and his student Lev Gudkov, who is the greatest sociologist working in Russia now, who have done a lot of studies on that. And basically their concept is that the Soviet person, Homo Sovieticus, splits his consciousness into a kind of public identity and a kind of private identity. Not to say that the private one is true and the public one is untrue: They are both equally valid and equally a part of what this person is. But in one's public identity, it is very important for people to identify with a strong state and a great empire. And that's what Putin has tapped into ever since he started waging wars. And that's why his popularity rating has been hovering around 85 percent and shows no signs of going down. But that public identity has no relationship to people's private sense of always being cheated and never given their fair share of anything and the government always being out to fool them.

I can tell you why Putin is popular - there is food in stores, crime against regular people went way down, roads are being fixed, a driver running over a pedestrian while running red light may even go to jail.

Kaynak/Source: