

For the Russian authorities, the threat of Navalny lies in the message not the man

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The arrest of Alexei Navalny for organising an ‘unauthorised’ anti-corruption rally on 12 June represents the latest in a long line of run-ins with the authorities and simply adds to his credentials as one of Russia’s leading opposition figures, writes [Sean Roberts](#). However, the real issue for the Kremlin is his anti-corruption message and its contagious spread across the country amid continuing economic difficulties and ahead of the all-important March 2018 presidential election.



Vladimir Putin, Credit: kremlin.ru

On 12 June, Alexei Navalny was arrested outside his Moscow home, 30 minutes before the start of his own anti-corruption rally that saw up to 30,000 protestors (5,000 according to official estimates) converge on the capital’s central Tverskaya Street. This rally, held on the ‘Russia Day’ national holiday, was repeated across the country in at least 169 locations and by the end of the day, police had detained close to 2,000 protestors for various infringements. For Navalny, his late decision to switch venues for the Moscow rally broke Russia’s strict public assembly laws and left him with a 30 day prison sentence. Buoyed by the success of the nationwide protests, he even found time to joke to his 2.2 million twitter followers about missing July’s Depeche Mode concert.

For the authorities, protests are no joking matter, in particular Navalny’s penchant for them. This is the second time this year that Navalny has received a prison sentence for organising unsanctioned mass-actions and the second time sizeable, anti-corruption protests have occurred across Russia’s regions. On 26 March, an estimated 60,000 protestors took to the streets of over 80 towns and cities to vent their anger at government corruption. Like the protests held on 12 June, the anti-corruption message was accompanied by an anti-regime message, including the ‘Putin must go’ demand popularised in 2012 – the last year Russia experienced sustained political unrest.

Navalny, who has already declared his intention to run for president in 2018, seems increasingly able to reach supporters beyond his Moscow stronghold. This fact, along with his growing name recognition, suggests he can mount a credible presidential challenge along the lines of his remarkable 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign, when against all the odds, he gained an impressive 27% of the vote behind the eventual winner, Sergei Sobyenin.

But despite Navalny's undoubted talents, there is little reason for the authorities to fear Navalny's presidential challenge. The 'legalism' that characterises Russian elections offers numerous means to filter out undesirable candidates. If Navalny were to run as an independent candidate, for example, (as his Party of Progress has still not been registered by the Justice Ministry) he would need to collect 300,000 signatures in support of his candidature, with each signature carefully scrutinised for any irregularity. Another prison sentence (and he has been the subject of numerous criminal investigations) would also remove the threat.

More importantly, even if Navalny is allowed to compete, he faces a formidable challenge converting name recognition into votes. Recent opinion polls suggest that almost half of respondents know who Navalny is (compared to single digit recognition in 2011), but that most have a negative or neutral view of him. This is almost certainly an effect of Russia's state-controlled television, including the infamous 'anatomy of a protest' documentaries, aired on NTV during the 2012 protests and accusing Navalny and other opposition figures of instigating mass disorder. Navalny's inclusion in the 2018 presidential election may add intrigue, but he has little chance of winning.

On the contrary, it is his anti-corruption message that is the real problem for the Kremlin, in particular its growing resonance beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg. Anti-corruption is the antithesis of the Putin regime, which has failed to address this issue in any meaningful way over the past 17 years. Despite high-profile initiatives, notably former President Dmitry Medvedev's National Anti-Corruption Plan (2009), corruption remains pervasive. In 2016, Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) ranked Russia 131st out of 176 countries and some way behind BRICS rivals (Brazil, China and India ranked equal 79th South Africa 64).

But the problem for the regime is immediate and personal too. Although many Russians view their leaders as victims of corruption, as good-intentioned 'managers' fighting an incorrigible bureaucratic system, this may be changing. In April 2016, the leaked Panama Papers implicated Putin in a complex multi-billion dollar corruption trail, while in March 2017 Medvedev, the former President, current Prime Minister and anti-corruption stalwart, also found himself in the spotlight. It was Navalny's YouTube video detailing Medvedev's elaborate corruption network that went viral, sparking March's nationwide protests, and dealing yet another blow to the legitimacy of the ruling group.

While it is true that Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation has enjoyed success in uncovering high-level corruption, it is a great deal easier to control an individual than an idea. There are persistent rumours concerning Navalny's relationship with the Kremlin, and it seems likely he has high-placed backers and that he is wittingly or unwittingly part of a bigger power struggle. But it is the potential of the anti-corruption idea to 'unite' and 'combine' that represents the larger significance of these latest protests. Corruption is the one issue capable of galvanising public opinion across the Russian Federation.

It should be noted that the huge protests seen in Russia in 2012 were also a response to corruption – anger at perceived electoral fraud – and although public opinion can be ambivalent, there is significantly less tolerance toward high-level corruption. Corruption is also the one issue capable of uniting a fractious opposition. In fact, opposition parties have already drawn lessons from Navalny's anti-corruption platform, increasing the likelihood that this issue will be salient during September's regional elections and the 2018 presidential election.

Corruption is also an issue that can combine with other issues. Navalny's anti-corruption protests may have caught the eye, but there have been others this year. The authorities have struggled to placate striking lorry drivers, who have successfully coordinated action across Russia, including the sensitive Dagestan region. This is the tip of the iceberg, with strikes much more widespread and under-reported in the regions, in particular among less visible groups. So far, protests directed at the country's deteriorating economic situation have not combined with the anti-corruption issue, but the mental leap required to do so is not great.

With the 'Crimea effect' showing signs of waning (Putin's rating jumped from 61% to 85% following the annexation of Crimea in 2014), and with the unofficial campaign period for the March 2018 presidential election underway, the battle for ideas is just heating up. The opposition have one, potentially unifying idea. At this moment in time, this seems to be one more than the Kremlin.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Sean Roberts – *University of Portsmouth*

Sean Roberts is a Lecturer in International Relations and Politics at the University of Portsmouth. His research interests include post-Soviet party and electoral politics, domestic political developments in Russia, and Russian foreign policy.



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