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Putin and the Navalny Factor

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

The mass protests over the arrest of Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny have led to renewed speculation that President Putin's grip on power could be in serious political trouble. In fact, that is not the case, at least till 2024, when his current term of office ends.

COMMENTARY

THAT PUTIN'S government is under the cosh today is not in doubt, due to the socio-economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, weak economic growth as a result of domestic structural challenges, and various sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union.

On the other hand, the strong Putin edifice is not easily shaken notwithstanding the fallout from the Alexei Navalny case.

No mass support for Navalny

Navalny's expose of high-level corruption is nothing new; in the latest case, a two-hour long video, which this author watched, of a huge and luxurious palace, allegedly built for Putin, was quite effective in triggering mass demonstrations. Corruption has always been and remains a sore point for the Russian people.

The latest polls conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre in late January 2021 show that the president's popularity has fallen to 53% (it had been over 60% in late 2020). These polls were the first measure of the political temperature in the wake of the protests.

However, while Navalny might be popular in the West, in Russia, polls taken in

September and December 2020 show that “those who disapproved of Navalny (50%) were far more numerous than those who approved of him (20%),” according to Russian observer, Andrei Kolesnikov, in his Carnegie Moscow Centre commentary dated 26 January 2021.

He added that many of those polled believed Navalny “to be a tool used by Western security services, and this is the version that Putin himself has publicly endorsed and . . . being actively promoted by state media”.

Observers have also noted that the protestors were not led by a united and consolidated front – the rallying and unifying force was the demonstrators’ dissatisfaction with the authorities, no doubt fuelled by the current difficult socio-economic situation. In other words, Navalny was and is not their natural leader.

Carrot-and-Stick Approach

To weaken current anti-government sentiments, including those recently generated by Navalny and his supporters, one might expect the government to accelerate the implementation of some of the massive US\$400 billion National Projects.

It might also use resources from the National Welfare Fund (NWF) for stimulus spending, in the coming months and years, especially in the run-up to the September 2021 Duma (parliamentary) elections. (The NWF, Russia’s sovereign wealth fund, held almost US\$180 billion as of November 2020).

Apart from the carrot of more public spending to benefit the population, President Putin has a powerful instrument of coercion at his disposal in the National Guard (NG), led by Viktor Zolotov, whom he has personally known and worked with, since the 1990s. The NG reports directly to the president and among other functions, is meant to protect public order. It is said to number about 400,000.

The goal of Navalny’s supporters in their protests on 31 January and 2 February was to pressure the authorities not to convert his suspended sentence into imprisonment. That was in vain since the government could not afford to be seen to be yielding to pressure either from the West or its own people to release the oppositionist. Navalny was jailed for two years and eight months on 2 February.

The Russian authorities had issued widespread warnings to members of the public not to take part in any unsanctioned demonstrations and had closed locations for demonstrations in Moscow and other cities. A few thousand protestors were arrested during the demonstrations.

If the protests see growing numbers and continue unabated in the next few weeks, the NG might be deployed in force not only to restore order but also to send a signal to the demonstrators and members of the public at large, the depth of the authorities’ commitment to maintaining stability.

Factors Guiding Putin's Approach

Given the socio-economic and political trauma of the 1990s, it is not an exaggeration

to argue that the Russian people will not want a return to that era. The majority of Russians, very conservative in nature, craved and still crave stability. Putin has cleverly exploited these sentiments and not only promised but brought the country a measure of stability and prosperity.

Putin and his government will therefore find success in continuing to portray Navalny as a danger to the country's stability and prosperity and as a tool of the West. The West's support of him and calls on Russia to release him from confinement only strengthen Putin's hand, in this regard.

There are several factors that guide Putin's current and future approach with respect to Western criticism over Navalny's imprisonment.

First, the current tense state of relations with the West is not due solely to Navalny, as there are other already well-known factors. Hence, Putin does not have enough incentive to act on the West's calls for Navalny's release, let alone refrain from politically neutralising him.

Second, the West's criticisms are considered as hypocrisy and arrogance, when seen against the current spate of mass demonstrations in the EU against pandemic restrictions and other issues (like in France, where protests have taken place against a French security law or in Poland, against a ban on abortions), and open political divisions in the US.

Putin's Future in Doubt?

Third, linkage no longer totally governs Russo-US/West relations; this fact is clear from President Joe Biden's first phone conversation with President Putin on 26 January 2021, during which they agreed to extend the New START arms control treaty for another five years. (It was due to expire on 5 February).

This testifies to the fact that US/Western geopolitical and national security considerations will always take precedence over other factors like political or human rights.

However, in response to the Navalny factor, there are now growing calls in Western Europe to halt the significant Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project from Russia to Germany. The US and some Eastern and Central European countries have opposed it from the beginning. It remains to be seen what Germany will do going forward.

Domestically, the mass response to Navalny's call illustrates the fact that the state cannot match the power of social media wielded by him and his followers. According to Kolesnikov, "about 4.5 million people watched the live transmission of the 23 January protests on Navalny's online channel. Nearly 11 million watched Dozhd's (Russian independent television channel) transmission via YouTube, while TikTok videos featuring Navalny-related hashtags garnered more than 1 billion views".

Finally, Navalny's dedicated supporters are said to be younger, higher-educated and reasonably well-off individuals. Should the socio-economic situation deteriorate, their numbers could increase over time.

If Navalny's supporters are able to unify the currently disunited and disaffected anti-establishment elements into a coherent whole, and if the loyal opposition parties in the Duma cannot attract these elements, Putin's political position and future would then be in some doubt. The outcome of the September 2021 Duma elections will provide a clearer picture.

Christopher Cheang is a Senior Fellow in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore where his research focus is on Russia.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg