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Commentary: Russian protests will keep haunting Putin



By **Marvin Zonis**

Tens of thousands took to the streets in more than 90 Russian cities in late March protesting rampant corruption in the country. Blogger and anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny called for the demonstrations after posting a video on the internet showing the massive wealth acquired by Prime Minister [Dmitri Medvedev](#). Caught off guard, government authorities were shocked by the scope of the demonstrations. Now the risk is that President [Vladimir Putin](#) will create an international crisis to mobilize domestic support.

According to Transparency International, the Berlin-based corruption monitor, Russia's public sector corruption is staggering — more corrupt than India or China or Indonesia. Russia is even more corrupt than those champions of corruption, Egypt, Pakistan and Armenia.

Navalny, who has said he will run for president in 2018, is a new-style politician who belongs to no political party but heads an organization called the Anti-Corruption Foundation. With wildly popular blogs and internet postings, Navalny has been railing against corruption for years. He recently posted a video detailing the corruption of Medvedev that shows the mansions, vineyards, luxury cars, yachts (and on and on) owned by Medvedev. The prime minister is an easy target. He appears to be hated equally by the siloviki, members of the former KGB and other security services who came to power with Putin, and by the liberal intelligentsia.

When Navalny called for the demonstrations, people poured onto the streets. Russian state television, of course, blocked out the marches, but they were covered on the internet. Hundreds in Moscow and St. Petersburg were arrested, including Navalny, who was quickly sentenced to 15 days in prison for convening an unauthorized demonstration.

Authorities were shocked by the number of marchers, none more so than Putin. After several days of silence, he declared that "This tool was used at the beginning of the so-called '[Arab Spring](#).' ... We know very well what this led to, what bloody events this led to."

Putin's comment came days before a subway blast killed at least 10 people Monday in St. Petersburg. Authorities called it a likely terrorist attack, but no group immediately claimed responsibility.

Still, the recent protests will have a lasting impact, as Putin now faces a major internal challenge.

The Russian economy will be of little help. After seven quarters of contraction that decimated the middle class, the economy did grow 0.3 percent in the final quarter of 2016. But prospects remain muted because Russia still depends almost entirely on oil and gas revenues for growth. As long as oil prices remain in their present range, they will offer little to boost growth.

The last popular challenge to Putin occurred in 2012. He was re-elected president with widespread allegations of voter fraud and video evidence of people bused from polling station to polling station to cast multiple ballots — known in Russia as "carousel voting." Street protests occurred immediately. More protests broke out in May 2012, when Putin was formally inaugurated. Up to 100 people were injured in Moscow as the protests turned violent.

Putin responded by promising economic gains. But in 2013, economic growth fell to 1.3 percent from 2012's 3.5 percent. In 2014, growth fell again to 0.7 percent before collapsing in 2015 to minus 3.7 percent.

Putin needed a domestic boost. He got it when he seized Crimea in 2014. (Boris Nemtsov, the leading opposition figure at the time, was mysteriously murdered outside the Kremlin in 2015 as he walked home.)

If Putin really sees these current demonstrations as comparable to the beginning of the Arab Spring, expect him to respond with a major international adventure to distract the Russian public and mobilize domestic support.

We have entered a very dangerous time.

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