

Who's afraid of Nizhny Tagil? Protest potential in industrial Russia

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IN 2011, NIZHNY TAGIL – a metallurgical centre in the Urals and the heart of Russian battle tank manufacturing – was nicknamed Putingrad, because of its strong support for the Russian leader. When extensive protests against fraudulent elections erupted in Moscow in 2011, a foreman at the Uralvagonzavod factory in Nizhny Tagil offered the Kremlin to send busloads of pro-Putin workers to meet the urban protesters and stand up for the stability that they considered Putin has provided. The question is whether the same readiness would be shown today. Opinion polls show a growing discontent among the population with the country's leadership. When the vote on constitutional reforms took place in 2020, the turnout was low, even in the former stronghold of Nizhny Tagil.

The Kremlin has learnt how to defuse the fragmented liberal opposition through targeted arrests and massive police presence. One thing that could prove an even greater challenge to Russia's much-touted political stability is a political awakening in industrial cities such as Nizhny Tagil, the so-called "Second Russia".

The concept of "Second Russia" derives from professor of economic geography Natalya Zubarevich's division of Russia into four categories, the "Four Russias," so diverging in terms of challenges and conditions that they are almost separate countries.

According to Zubarevich's categorisation, First Russia constitutes the outward face of the country, the land of large cities to which economic resources and a highly educated labour force is concentrated. Second Russia is comprised of the mid-sized industrial cities, while Third Russia is the vast, sparsely filled spaces of an aging, depopulating periphery. Fourth Russia is formed by the underdeveloped territories of Caucasus and south Siberia, characterised by incomplete industrial transformation.

Second Russia is particularly interesting, not least since it offers the greatest diversity. Cities of the same size can differ widely. Some are administrative centres and benefit from migration flows within their regions; some are dependent on subsidies from the centre; and in some a dominating industry decides the life and conditions of the inhabitants, while others are educational centres

built around universities and research institutes. Economic crises usually hit Second Russia hard, since the impact on its industries is more immediate and direct than on other branches of the economy elsewhere. In addition, the mobility of the population in industrial centres tends to be low. Whereas Fourth Russia suffers from insufficient industrialisation, Second Russia needs deindustrialisation. A matter of particular vulnerability is the mono-economic company towns (monotowns). As a Soviet legacy, these are founded around one single industry and are home to a total of over thirteen million people. Proximity to raw materials and considerations of national security were usually deciding factors when these cities, often in geographically isolated locations, were founded. Employment is often entangled with municipal services; therefore, as a city's single industry declines, the city crumbles. This blue-collar Russia – embodied in Russian mass media awareness by Nizhny Tagil – is regarded not only as a guarantor of stability, but also as a sleeping giant.

The ruling party, United Russia, tends to perform best in winning elections – be it by stuffing ballots, voting at workplaces, or distributing coal on voting day – in regions where there is a high degree of state dependence. But this is also the Russia in which Putin enjoys the greatest popularity and the one that is primarily addressed in his emphasis on social stability. In Kemerovo oblast, in Siberia, where about one and a half million people dwell in monotowns, voting patterns usually favour United Russia in an overwhelming fashion. In neighbouring Tomsk, where every fifth inhabitant is a student, support is significantly lower.

The Second Russia constitutes around 25% of the population and would present a considerable force in the event that it withdrew its support for the political system that Putin personifies. It may not share the more resourceful First Russia's demands for democratic freedoms, but it is still far from having the minimal protest potential represented by the poorer Third Russia. Indeed, protests do occur in Second Russia. In Kemerovo, in 2018, a fire in a leisure complex that took the lives of 60 people sparked a large demonstration. In Archangelsk, a planned landfill for waste from Moscow galvanised protests

into a long-lasting grassroots movement in 2018–2020. In 2020, in the Far East, protests erupted in Chabarovsk and lived on for months in support of its detained governor, Sergey Furgal. In Pikalyovo, in Leningrad oblast, discontent over a plant shutdown in 2009 led local citizens to block a major highway. Yet, what is common between these protests is that they are not system critical in nature. Rather, they are reactions to local – and emotionally compelling – issues.

Russian authorities tend to pacify Second Russia not only through well-calibrated political concessions, but also through federal subsidies targeted at regions where unrest could be looming. This is a tactic, however, that tends to arrest development and block much needed deindustrialisation and relocation.

The question is what will happen if Second Russia no longer trusts Putin to deliver on his promises of economic growth and social stability. Manipulated elections, constraints on oppositional organising and the regions'

dependence towards the central power make it difficult for the regime to predict the tipping point for Second Russia's forbearance. Factory workers in Nizhny Tagil are unlikely to feel affinity with the liberal opposition in Moscow, but discontent following the pandemic and the dropping real incomes could have consequences for the protest potential in Second Russia. The uneven distribution of support packages is also a possible source of dissatisfaction. In that case, elites in disadvantaged regions could use protests as a bargaining tool to apply pressure upwards in the political food chain. Though experience shows that protests are not primarily sparked by economic or political issues, local protests in Chabarovsk and in Archangelsk contain a notable component of centre-periphery conflict. Adding economic recession to the dynamics, protests of civic nature can be forged into a movement directed at the political system as a whole. ■

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