

• Author: [Georgy Boyt](#)

[The \(Hushed Up\) Story of Russia's Trucker Revolt](#)



The commencement of protest action by long-distance truckers carried out across different regions of Russia in late March has become conspicuous by its absence from the Russia's media space. Up to this point, the lack of media coverage of the truckers' strike has been symptomatic of the capabilities the authorities now have to control the information space. "Hushing up" the protests is evidently more important to those in control than taking steps aimed at resolving the conflict or appeasing the protesters.

The only information "breakthrough" came in mid-April. Valentina Matviyenko, the speaker of the Federation Council, instructed two committees of the upper house of parliament to "analyze the feasibility and efficiency" of the so-called Platon system of transportation tax. It is a policy that has riled truckers from the moment of its introduction, placing a heavy tax burden on the use of federal roads that has only got worse as the Russian economy struggles. Salting the wounds is how the collection of tolls under this system lacks transparency, but appears to deliver large profits to those with close ties to the Kremlin.

The speaker's [brief instruction](#) came in response to a request by Senator Vyacheslav Markhaev, a member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). The *RIA Novosti* news agency even [quoted Markhaev](#): "Trucker protests against the Platon system cannot be ignored". According to former Soviet (and, apparently, today's Russian) standards, such a quotation in the national mass media serves as evidence that the authorities are taking the protests seriously and that they are a cause for concern.

Amorphous Road Rage

Russia's trucker revolt has been fairly amorphous — there is no centralised decision making body. This has its downsides and upsides. The main downside is of course a lack of coherent planning or a fixed set of negotiators. The upsides, though, are pretty clear in today's Russia. Were there a dedicated office or anything like that, it would have already been closed down by the authorities, while any official protest leader would probably have already been rounded up and accused of some misdemeanor or other. Then again, that is just judging by the tendency of the authorities to stamp out other such attempts at organizing protests. Protest organizers would most likely have been accused of "extremism," as is tradition in such matters.

In this case, the authorities have gone so far in their response as to arrest individual activists on various charges that are cynical and implausible, such as charges of driving without a driver's license. But it is not so effective as a way of stamping out this type of movement; the protests have a grassroots momentum that cannot be stopped by the jailing of individual activists here and there.

That is why the main strategy of the government has been to exploit the movement's weakness: communication. The government is isolating the movement with success; the protests have failed to attract widespread publicity from the press or via social media. A lack of organisation is to blame for failing to get traction on social media. However, the traditional media failure is mostly due to the suppression by authorities of any news reports about the protests which could appear online.

Not only have the authorities cordoned off news about the protests from citizens, but attempts have been made to black out communication between those protesting. Roskomnadzor, Russia's official media regulator,

[has blocked](#) the “Zello” walkie-talkie app, popular with truckers, citing that the ban was brought on by the refusal of “Zello” to register properly as a purveyor of information dissemination. The communication between truckers has been significantly hindered as a result of this ban.

In the meantime, many drivers have chosen to protest passively – they refuse to report for duty but do not participate in protest actions. Some are pessimistic about the outcome of the protests; others feel intimidated by the threats of repression they face, and have no access to reliable information concerning the actions of colleagues in other regions; they are largely kept in the dark about signs of solidarity from other social groups.

Settling for passive protesting, the so-called “garage strike,” already strengthens the leverage of the authorities, as it gathers less traction, and is even less likely to come to popular attention. It would lead to a stalemate that would be welcomed by authorities, who are in no hurry to meet the demands of the protesters, and could sit and wait until the protests eventually fizzle out.

The current protest is the second in two years. Protestors have been up in arms about the Platon system on both occasions. The specific problem is largely the same: the taxes are levied on owners of vehicles weighing over 12 tons whose routes include federal roads. This would leave them with a hefty bill. The total length of federal roads in Russia exceeds 50 thousand km out of the total 1.5m km of all Russian roads, making it virtually impossible for truckers to avoid using federal roads, especially given the relative lack of local roads.

Crooked Toll Collection

What protesters have continuously found even more difficult to swallow is that Vladimir Putin’s close associate, Igor Rotenberg, owns a 50 percent stake in a company which collects more than 40 percent of tolls. The remaining 50 percent stake is owned by the “RT-Invest” company. Entrepreneur Andrey Shipelov — and the Rostec corporation headed by another one of Putin’s close friends Sergey Chemezov — are among the founders. The Platon toll collection system generated 20bn rubles in revenue in 2016, of which, the system operator was set to receive 10.6bn rubles under the concession agreement in return for services rendered. Officially, this revenue is supposed to be spent on repairing Russia’s roads — but as anyone who has driven on these roads know, these roads are often in a dismal state.

In late 2015, protests against Platon broke out in over 20 Russian regions. A “March on Moscow” was planned but the action was ultimately suppressed. The authorities reduced the toll from 3.73 rubles per kilometer to 1.53 rubles per kilometer prior to the Platon launch. Fines for failing to pay the toll were reduced dramatically (one-ninetieth of the initial penalties).

Economic Deterioration

Since those protests, though, the economic situation is far worse. Truckers have experienced two dreadful years of the adverse effects of the Platon system: long-distance tariffs (for routes from, say, Siberia to central Russia) have increased by at least 12-15 percent. At the same time, the total increase in the tonnage of goods transported by road within the country has been as low as 1 percent (the total volume of 400m tons, 70 percent of freight).

Consequently, the average small carrier has seen his income plummet.

An average trucker could earn 55-60 thousand rubles per month were it not for Platon tolls; but his salary is a mere 40-45 thousand rubles taking tolls into account. In addition, a trucker could be liable to pay fines totaling between 10 and 50 thousand rubles. Worse, a driver can be hit with multiple fines, issued by traffic police at various points along his route. Up to 20 percent of private carriers have gone bankrupt and have been forced to leave the freight services industry — a result of a pincer effect from the general economic crisis suppressing trade volumes on one side, and toll costs cutting into their earnings on the other. These companies being pushed out of business were mostly the small players — those with between one and three registered trucks.

This year’s trucker revolt sparked off when negotiations broke down despite the government initially being in a more conciliatory mood. Anti-corruption protests erupted across over 80 cities in Russia on March 26. Those protests were against the ill-gotten billions now under the control of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The

prospect of the Truckers threatening a second general strike to coincide with this was enough to get the government offering glimmers of compromise. The toll was raised by as little as 25 percent despite earlier plans to double it (hiking it from 1.53 rubles per kilometer to 3.06 rubles per kilometer.)

This offer, however, failed to appease. Estimates by protesters themselves suggest that 20 thousand people in 80 regions out of 85 have taken part. Up to 35 percent of carriers have participated in the strike overall.

This time, protesters are calling for the government to step down. Distrust of the president was also expressed. A protest organized by “the average Joe” is far more perilous in the eyes of the authorities than peaceful marches of the “cosmopolitan” *intelligentsia* within the Boulevard Ring in Moscow.

Drama in Dagestan

The most dramatic situation is unfolding in Dagestan. Driving a truck for a living is the only means of making ends meet for thousands of families in this republic against the backdrop of mass poverty and unemployment.

The freight services industry in Dagestan is made up almost exclusively of small entrepreneurs. Cargo delivery routes span the republic from the North Caucasus to Azerbaijan to Iran etc, primarily transporting fruit and vegetables. The market share of black market carriers is also huge. (One of the declared goals of the “Platon” system is taking on the black market).

It means mafia structures are bound to play a certain mobilizing role in this case. This does not encompass the entire complexity of protests in Dagestan, however, as they were hardly peaceful from the very outset; the authorities had to summon the National Guard of the Russian Federation (Rosgvardia) along with regular troops to set up roadblocks. These were designed to confront the mass gatherings, and of course, no reports appeared in the press concerning these developments.

The dramatic nature of the situation is aggravated by general political instability in the republic. Local authorities have failed to cope with an Islamist underground network. Besides, a complex clan-based social structure as well as unprecedented levels of corruption, even by Russian standards, are characteristic of Dagestan. It is too early to assume that a strike by Dagestani truckers will become the spark that will ignite mass (even armed) rallies. One thing is for sure, however, it will not contribute to stability in this republic.

The Prospects of Protest

What are the prospects of trucker protests and will they lead to the mobilization of other social groups?

The authorities are likely to make some symbolic concessions in a bid to “eradicate the problem”.

First of all, they will encourage the further withdrawal of small freighters from the market as well as the consolidation of companies (large enterprises are more prone to government pressure).

The share of small carriers exceeds 60 percent of the market. That this will lead to tariff increases and pressure on consumers is less important to the authorities, who value politics over the economy. The registration of trucks by private individuals is expected to be banned altogether. Today, 3.7m trucks out of 6.2m Russian trucks are registered to individuals. 2.4m trucks are registered to companies, half of which are sole proprietors. The possibilities for consolidating the market are not boundless.

In the short term, the likelihood the truckers’ demands will be ignored is quite high. The near absolute control of the authorities over the mass media will limit any solidarity from other groups, which is what the truckers’ require for more leverage.

At the same time, methods of dealing with social problems such as curtailing market competition (even if huge volumes of black market freight activities are legalized) and forcing small businesses out of the economy will create new problems and stir up dissent amongst other social groups (which is related to higher prices, among other things).

The situation will be exacerbated further in regions such as Dagestan, where carriers’ private problems impact

the general landscape of social malaise.

So it will be impossible to suppress dissent indefinitely, even given the authorities' absolute control over the media and their tightening of the screws. According to the newly adopted laws, virtually any type of public protest is deemed "illegal". By suppressing an organized and peaceful protest and by reducing the possibilities for a civilized dialogue with dissatisfied social groups, the authorities are effectively kicking the can down the road.

Tags

[protests](#)

[truck drivers](#)

Category

[Politics](#)

© Intersection - for republishing rights, please contact the editorial team at intersection@intersectionproject.eu