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## [Two Protests, One Leader](#)



The remarkably frequent anti-government protests of the last six months are of interest to the average Russian, who, as surveys indicate, is tired of stagnation. Our research at the Levada Center shows how these protests, in general, give a sense of motion and hope. The first “shock wave” of protests was a public appeal meant to have a direct impact on the authorities. However, as long as the stability of the state in Russia is maintained by the exclusion of civil society from the system of power relations, such an appeal usually goes unnoticed. All the protesters’ demands, such as a halt to “renovation” or censorship, or a fight against corruption among high-ranking officials, are regarded as political and “oppositionist” by the authorities, since the power elite believes they infringe upon its exclusive right to shape the public agenda.

The protests of March 26 and June 12, however, have gained widespread attention despite the customary attempts of the government to hide civil unrest from the view of the wider public. On a social level, this is significant. Snatches of news, analytical materials and conversations shape a set of ideas about who took to the streets and why. The reaction of the authorities (or the lack thereof), as well as the behavior of the protesters, help observers to form their attitudes. The mythology of the protests can significantly change the perception of events over time, and create public sentiment.

The events of March 26 and June 12 have a lot in common: location (after the rally moved from Sakharov Avenue to Tverskaya Street); format of “festivities”; and the resulting silence in state-owned media. The rallies [enjoyed similar levels of public attention](#): 61% of the Russians have at least “heard something” about them. Public approval of both rallies is at the same level: 39% approve of participants in anti-corruption rallies. Is that a lot? The Levada Center asked Russians about their attitudes to the idea of anti-corruption rallies. Most often, respondents did not know about the action planned for June 12 or its organizers. Obviously, negative publicity about the organizers of the rallies, namely Navalny, negatively affects the level of support. Still, despite the campaign to discredit this politician (with the primary message that Navalny is trying to profit politically from the fight against corruption), his actions enjoyed relatively high support after the rally.

The first change that is probably immediately obvious for analysts concerns an attempt to privatize the protests, i.e. to integrate civil protest into Navalny’s political campaign, which has been noticed not only by experts. The Russians who are aware of the rallies ascribe different motives to the participants of March and June “festivities”.

### **IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT MADE PEOPLE PROTEST ON JUNE 12?**



Similar to the spring rallies, the common element in June was general discontent with developments in the country, most vividly exemplified by indignation with corruption. Purely emotional discontent with the lack of changes, initially building up within quite a narrow milieu of residents of large cities, took the form of specific accusations, and therefore became a means of communication with broader circles. Today, whenever a person wants to express their dissatisfaction with the authorities, the simplest way is to mention corruption of high-ranking officials. “Legalization” of the author of this language - Alexei Navalny - within the political field accompanies this process. Compared to the March rally, the number of people who say abstract discontent

explains the behavior of the protesters decreased, while the importance of the “Navalny factor” grew.

Quite a lot has been said about youth support for Navalny’s campaigns. “Support for Navalny” is a more common motive for protests in this milieu: this reason for protesting was mentioned by 23% of those aged 18-24 in June 2017, compared to 10% in March. Young protesters perceive the demonstrations in an increasingly personified way, which is no longer limited to the wild guesses of public opinion leaders. Attitudes toward Navalny are becoming more clearly articulated among the youth. The neutral assessment that “Navalny is conducting his election campaign” has become less popular. This oppositionist is now more often described either as a true patriot of Russia, or as a puppet in the hands of one of the “Kremlin towers.”

The main fear of the liberal community – that the rapid growth of Navalny's popularity will result in him being the only opposition leader – are not shared in the wider circles of his supporters. For Russian society at large, the idea of an oppositionist coming to power seems unrealistic. Nevertheless, qualitative sociological research allows us to outline an image of the ideal politician: a rather authoritarian, strong leader. This is shared even by supporters of changes.

Against this backdrop, Navalny’s growing personal contribution to the organization of the opposition is unlikely to be seen as a threat, even among those who would like to see a change of power in Russia. They want a change of power, but not a collapse of the political system. An oppositionist becomes an uncontested leader within the opposition and this trait of his – a “young Yeltsin” or “young Putin” – repels “old” liberals, but bolsters his credibility in the eyes of those who want to shift responsibility for the country to a younger and more ambitious leader. Russians who want to see changes in the country agree that today’s system is reminiscent of the late Soviet days, and a complete breakdown of the system seems to be one of the most likely (though undesirable) outcomes.

## **IN YOUR OPINION, WHOSE INTERESTS IS ALEXEI NAVALNY PURSUING BY PUBLISHING HIS INVESTIGATIONS INTO CORRUPTION OF RUSSIA’S LEADERSHIP?**



Apart from young people, there is one more group of respondents who feel sympathy for the protesters: middle-aged and elderly Russians who admit that they can barely afford food. As a rule, they assess the activity of Navalny himself negatively, but support anti-corruption initiatives in general more than the youth do. [According to opinion polls](#), discontent with today’s authorities is above average among the poor. And the number of such people exceeds that of the “progressive youth.” Previous years have proved that discontent as such cannot become a mobilizing factor; all political protests have occurred among those who go beyond their private interests. From the point of view of a given rational individual, participation in a protest in Russia is an absolutely unnecessary task. Regional social protests rarely become politicized, and are almost never visible at the federal level. The truck drivers’ protest rejected the help of the opposition forces, and failed to develop a political agenda.

## **PROBABILITY OF A PROTEST WITH POLITICAL DEMANDS**



Small groups of Moscow intelligentsia or students can act as “drivers” of discontent, affecting sentiment in society to some extent. Surveys by the Levada Center conducted in April and June showed an [increase in protest moods](#) by 9 percentage points, across all age groups. However, protest moods themselves are unlikely to cause significant changes in social sentiments. The latest rallies attracted less attention than the 2011 demonstrations. Protests fade out when their leaders and supporters start going round in circles. If you cannot have political influence, you should at least maintain and renew the emotional charge of collective actions. These rallies expressed the dissatisfaction and accumulated fatigue even of those who did not participate in them but understand and share the feelings of the participants. If not a real presidential candidate, Navalny is perceived as a nursemaid to the system – as a “shadow” prosecutor who keeps Russia’s power elite on its toes.

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