

What We Can Learn from the Moscow Protests

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August 4, 2019

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Lessons of the Moscow Protests

Yesterday, Moscow witnessed one of the largest protest rallies in recent memory. There were huge numbers of arrests.

Estimates of the protesters range from 1,500 to 10,000. 1,001 of them were detained. Since Belarus and Russia constantly exchange know-how in crushing protests and, as genuine autocracies, invest huge resources in doing it, we really should study the methods used in Moscow to make our own subsequent uprising more effective.

The first thing that catches the eye is that the Russian authorities were seriously and thoroughly prepared. There are really smart people in high places who imagined what was going to happen and how to deal with it as effectively as possible. They did not just send a mob of riot cops onto the streets to beat up and disperse everyone. Instead, they employed a whole set of well-designed, complementary measures.

Here is a list of the lessons we can learn.

1. The cops are afraid of being deanonymized. During yesterday's protest rally, unlike previous protests, the riot cops wore masks because cops who did not hide their faces on July 27 have been subsequently deanonymized in huge numbers and harassed on social media. They fear for their own safety, meaning the longer things drag on, the more they are cognizant of their own mortality and physical vulnerability. This is a good thing.
It was also curious that the agitprop cop using a bullhorn to persuade protesters to disperse appealed to national unity: "Citizens, do not disturb the peace. Russian National Guardsmen are on duty to ensure your safety. Most of them are your sons. Do not disturb the peace and break the law."
In the future, we will hear tons of this kind of spiel in Minsk from the "moderate opposition," from the negotiators and compromisers of all stripes who will pop up like earthworms from the moist soil as soon as Lukashenko's throne goes wobbly. This is a separate issue, however.
2. The Russian authorities are not shy about employing the resources at their disposal. Helicopters were employed in addition to tens of thousands of personnel. Private companies were pressured into going over to the bad guys.
 - The car-sharing service YouDrive banned customers from leaving cars inside the Garden Ring.
 - Cell phone providers turned off mobile Internet services.
 - Wi-Fi was turned off in restaurants and cafes near the protest area.
3. The regime has deployed heavy forces on the digital front.
 - There have been DDOS attacks on the main opposition websites.
 - Pro-regime trolls have been mobilized on group pages and in comments on social media. They have been working overtime cobbling together battle scenes, the reactions of "ordinary citizens," and so on.

4. As usual, the authorities want to prevent the protests from radicalizing. Random passersby had their bags checked: the police were looking for cans of mace and anything that could be used as a weapon. The high-risk category, from the police's viewpoint, is middle-aged men, which speaks for itself.
5. When protesters are detained, their mobile phones are confiscated for two weeks under the pretext they are physical evidence in a criminal case. Later, the authorities try to hack them using equipment supplied to authoritarian countries by Israeli and Chinese companies. Encrypt your mobile devices! Update their operating systems before it is too late.
6. The authorities have been filing criminal charges against the protesters mercilessly and without hesitation. The only point is intimidating real and potential protesters. How I am going to move from my cozy home and family to a prison cell for many long years? they ask themselves.

Conclusions

Decentralized protests have been effective. Generally, despite facing equal numbers of people, the regime has to deploy more resources to crush such protests than it does to put paid to centralized protests.

But legal defenses have not been effective. Do you want to not give defense lawyers and children's ombudsmen access to detainees? Do you want to beat up detainees who are not resisting, refuse them medical care, and forcibly fingerprint them? It is easy as pie. The dogs in uniform are not guardians of law and order. They guard the privileges of the elites along with their power and property. There are thus no obstacles to direct, flagrant, and sustained law-breaking.

The logical conclusion is it is stupid and short-sighted for protesters to try and keep themselves and their protests on the right side of the law, appealing endlessly to the law as a supreme value and, moreover, outing protesters who break the law as "provocateurs," one of the favorite hobbies of the legal opposition. It is like trying to win a fight without breaking rules drawn up by your enemy. So it is quite pretty to read the Russian Constitution out loud to riot policemen, but it is also naive, pretentious, and frivolous. They care a thousand times more about their discounted apartments and bonuses than they care about the Constitution.

This does not mean, of course, we should engage in violence left and right. We simply have to remember we have an a priori right to self-defense.

It is worth pointing out that Sergey Kusyuk, a former deputy commander in Ukraine's Berkut riot police, who was noted for the extreme cruelty with which he treated protesters at the Euro-maidan in Kyiv before fleeing the country, has been spotted among the police putting down the protest in Moscow. The Russian regime knows what it is doing: it hires people who have burned all their bridges. Kusyuk has nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. If the current Russian regime collapses, he and his kind can expect to be killed or imprisoned for life. So, he will claw and bite the regime's enemies until the bitter end. Accordingly, people who are just as willing to fight to the bitter end, but for the good guys, can face these monsters down.

The conclusion is simple: get ready to fight.

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Retrieved on 29th November 2020 from therussianreader.com

Translated by the *Russian Reader*

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