Twitter Thread by Alexander Gabuev ■■■



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THREAD

What is overlooked in analysis of #RussiaProtest after @navalny's arrest? It's sophistication that the Kremlin has developed in addressing such threats, and lack of realistic strategy by Putin's opponents. Let's put together some unpleasant facts ■

2/ Of course, it's hard not to be impressed by @navalny's and his family's courage, as well as by energy and scale of protests on January 23. Good summary by @yaffaesque for @NewYorker here: https://t.co/4CicVioBQc

3/ @navalny's investigation about Putin's palace (>96 million views now!) and street protests are seen as a serious challenge by the Kremlin, which is visible in heavy-handed crackdown on Navalny's team&family, as @HenryJFoy & @maxseddon document here: https://t.co/4yWnJFQVqn

4/ Jan 23 protest had the widest geographic coverage (>120 cities all across Russia), and the crowd numbers were significant, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It's important to note that the price tag for unsanctioned rallies is now higher than before...

5/... and protesters risk much more than 100k people who came to Bolotnaya Square in Moscow back in 2011. Add COVID, and 40k crowd (@Reuters estimate) in the capital will look like a success. But here comes the tricky part.

6/ We've seen many elements of this movie before—even if they haven't appeared together. In 2017, following release of @navalny's investigation about @MedvedevRussiaE, protests happened in 100 cities. Moscow saw big unsanctioned protests too, with >10k participants.

7/ Then there was Moscow protest movement in summer 2019 following regime's failure to register @SobolLubov and other members of @navalny's team for city council elections. 100s have been arrested, some have been convicted for throwing paper cups in police officers' direction...

8/... but no political gains have been achieved. The Kremlin's reaction has demonstrated, that the regime has learned a simple truth: right combination of calculated police brutality, legal pressure, and patience will pay bigger dividends than broader crackdown.

9/ Russia has become a country of protest over the last couple of years, with 1500 mass protests in 2019 alone. Russians are angry about declining incomes, environment, local corruption...you name it. It all adds do gradual fracturing of regime's legitimacy.

10/ But what's underappreciated is how the Kremlin has learned to manage, not to solve the multiple crisis - without reforming the system that Vladimir Putin has built. Most of the times the regime prefers to outwait the protesters' enthusiasm - just like it did in Khabarovsk.

11/ Remember this city that was dubbed the most serious challenge to Putin in years? Demonstrations lasting 100+ days with >60k participants? Last week Khabarovsk mustered... only 1500 protesters in support of @navalny. Regime's tactic has worked. https://t.co/EpEQ12lllc

12/ So far, the Kremlin has managed to check most of its important boxes. The elites are united behind the regime, law enforcement and interior troops remain loyal, and the bulk of the population is too disinterested or scared to present a serious challenge to Putin’s rule.

13/ Last week has shown a more active participation of younger Russians, as @AndrKolesnikov argues, and this group is more opposed to Putin and more supportive to @navalny. But it still doesn't produce crowd sizes that could pose a serious challenge. https://t.co/lUEGs8peYY

14/ Then many observers have noticed a surprising desire to push back against the police, as this viral video of a young Chechen MMA fighter battling OMON illustrates (or snowballing police officers hours later). https://t.co/8JFXdFHbLd

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> — \u0441\u0430\u0448\u0430 \u0441\u044b\u0440\u043d\u0438\u043a\u043e\u0432) (@alexskryll) January 23, 2021

15/ But violent incidents were limited, and, as @baunov notes, point to broader participation of young "post-industrial proletariat" - a group that is unlikely to sustain a forceful police pushback (and one never can exclude work of agents provocateurs) https://t.co/7rSPyc4W07

16/ Needless to say, the violence on display by protesters was a precious gift to the Russian state propaganda that has used the troubling images to castigate @navalny supporters as rioters and, predictably, @CIA stooges.

17/ As for police violence, it was there as has been the case previously, and has caused rightful indignation of international observers and Russians. But ■■ security services have clearly learned the lesson of neighboring Belarus—that excessive violence only causes more trouble.

18/ This doesn't mean police will remain more restrained in the future. We are unlikely to see the Belarus levels of repression with massive prison tortures etc. But it's very likely that response to the upcoming rally on Sunday will be much more muscular from the start...

19/... since @navalny team has chosen Lubyanka in proximity of heavily guarded FSB building and the Presidential Administration. Dangerous incidents will be hard to avoid, and the state propaganda's job to portray protestors as "domestic terrorists" will be all too easy.

20/ At the same time, the government is actively using various tools of intimidation to scare people off - and is already piling up multiple cases against arrested protesters. Just read this chilling dispatch by @bbcrussian's @lizafoht: https://t.co/CDdvQHo9lB

21/ Still the regime has barely started to unpack its vast toolkit of intimidation. And that's why it's wishful thinking to portray a 40k crowd in Moscow (with a population of nearly 13 million) or St. Petersburg (with more than 5 million) as a real danger to the regime.

22/ It is very hard to see how weekly protests, even if they continue like in Belarus, will somehow force a regime willing to poison a prominent opposition leader with a deadly nerve agent to simply let @navalny go free.

23/ This raises uncomfortable questions about whether the opposition has a realistic strategy beyond channeling outrage of society. Team Navalny is great at chipping away at the legitimacy of the regime, but that's hardly sufficient to get the hard men in the Kremlin go away.

24/ Moreover, the @navalny controversy will further empower the darkest elements of Putin's regime. Even before 2014, these figures have been successful in putting Russia's domestic and foreign policy on a more confrontational trajectory. They will continue to do so.

25/ I know not many people like to hear that, but it still needs to be said. For a more articulated and nuanced view, read my short essay for @ForeignPolicy. https://t.co/gQf2v4AxZH