

WITNESS

Russia's Protest Movement: A View from a Young Participant

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Abstract

A college sophomore describes her experience participating in St. Petersburg's December 18, 2011, protest. Her insider perspective gives a sense of what it felt like to be there, what the protesters experienced, and what they expect the consequences of these political actions to be. Her article shows one way in which contemporary Russians are overcoming the Soviet legacy.

How It All Began

When I started planning to write this article, I assumed that there would be nothing new and exciting about the Russian elections this year. I wanted to talk about Russians' traditional skepticism and distrust of democracy. I wanted to talk about the population's political apathy caused by its Soviet mentality, which instead of being eradicated has been passed on from generation to generation. But my views changed dramatically as a result of the protest wave which began in Russia on December 4th, immediately following the State Duma elections.

I think that the starting point of it all was September 24, 2011, when President Dmitry Medvedev announced that Vladimir Putin was going to run for president again. Many experts say that Russia's biggest problem is the absence of political competition. For years there has been no figure that could somehow compete with Vladimir Putin. Many Russians put their hopes in Medvedev even though Putin effectively appointed him to the presidency. It was obvious that Medvedev would never have become president were it not for the constitutional term-limits that forced Putin to give up the presidential seat. It was also obvious that Putin had not given up power, but that it was passed on to a very carefully picked candidate who would not dare to become independent.

During his time in office, however, Medvedev created the illusion that he was slowly moving away from Putin. They were never shown together on the television; they never openly praised or supported each other. Their focus and political strategy aimed at very different groups of the population. Medvedev appealed to the educated, intellectual masses, and the businessmen. His rhetoric was always pro-liberal and pro-modernization. He positioned himself as an intellectual, democratic, European-minded politician. A graduate of St. Petersburg State University, with a PhD in law, he fit perfectly with the image of a liberal reformer.

Meanwhile Putin cultivated the image of a brutal and direct politician, a man of actions rather than words. His speeches were often rude and abusive, and were filled with scorn and sarcasm. Putin is a very smart man and he knows that such language speaks to a large part of Russia's population. As opposed to Medvedev's highly

civilized and educated speaking style, Putin's language, although grammatically correct, is a fusion of working class and prisoners' slang. The image of a leader who thought like the working class and was sympathetic to it has always been extremely important to Putin. At the recent United Russia convention, the prime minister's candidacy won praise from Valeriy Yalushkevich, a steel-maker from Nizhniy Tagil. He said that Putin "visits our factory from time to time; gives us advice and makes suggestions. That is why we do our job well." Direct involvement in the factories' business has been Putin's calling card for years. He became popular by publicly exposing the corruption and crimes of the factories' managers.

The two political leaders—Medvedev and Putin—seemed to be so different that many believed the tandem was falling apart and envisioned Medvedev as a figure of the future.

I was hoping that Medvedev would leave United Russia and run for the president against Putin, which would create real competition in the political system. Medvedev's opposition to Putin, I thought, would lead to the birth of a new party led by Medvedev and capable



"You do not even represent us"
Photo: © Evgenia Olimpieva

of competing with Putin's United Russia. What made me very hopeful was Medvedev's political speech at the opening of Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum in the summer of 2011, where he talked about

modernization plans for Russia's economy, repeating over and over again that it was his choice, his view of Russia, as if it was opposed to somebody else's view: "my choice is a policy that give millions of people maximum opportunities for economic activity, and protects them with laws backed by the full weight of state power. My choice is a Russia that, over the next decade, will build an economy offering a high standard of life and an economy that makes life comfortable and interesting and produces what is necessary to make Russia one of the world's leaders."¹

But it was all a show, a play with only two actors. On September 24, 2011 at the twelfth congress of United Russia, Medvedev made clear that Putin would be Russia's leader. When I heard that for the first time, I felt like I had been fooled, I felt like they had been purposefully tricking me all these years. But, worst of all, was that the tandem decided to announce that this rotation had been planned long ago. It almost seemed that they wanted to say "we have fooled you and we are not ashamed of it," and they said it with big smiles on their faces. At the protest I saw an old lady holding a poster that said "They grin when they sin," and unfortunately she was right.

When the rotation became a reality, the tandem lost the trust and respect of millions of people. Both Medvedev and Putin became the targets of endless, often very talented mockery. Simply try searching it online and you will get thousands of the funniest and at the same time the saddest pictures and videos. While Putin is still up on the stage getting ready for the future elections, Medvedev is slowly fading away in people's minds: he indeed turned out to be nothing but Putin's puppet. Somebody put it perfectly in a joke: "Medvedev seat warmers—guaranteed for four years."

"The Russian Spring"

The protest wave started on the night of December 4, right after the Duma election results were published and reached a peak in an all-Russia protest action on December 10: people from 99 Russian cities and 42 cities around the world went out on to the streets to attend peaceful demonstrations to show their disagreement with the results of the elections. On December 18, organized protests took place in several Russian cities. Finally (for 2011, at least), on December 24 as many as one hundred thousand people rallied in Moscow—making this protest the biggest that Russia has seen in decades.

People of various ages and political beliefs, citizens who previously had been completely apolitical, even

those who had never attended any of the protests organized themselves mainly via social networks and went out on the streets to show that they cannot be silent anymore. There was one major feeling uniting all of these people—a feeling of disgust with the shameless lies of



*Trucks of the security forces in St. Petersburg.
Photo: © Evgenia Olimpiewa*

the authorities, a feeling of a deep offense received from the government. The first protests were violently suppressed by the police and additional special forces. Many people were arrested and then sentenced without having an opportunity to see a lawyer. A number of people arrested had nothing to do with the protests—they were passing by the demonstrations and happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Later on, seeing that so many people were going out on the streets, the authorities allowed the protests, and since then they have been happening legally and peacefully.

Unfortunately, I was not in the country on December 10—the day of the all-Russia protest action—but I attended the demonstration in St. Petersburg on December 18. I did not know what to expect, but it definitely felt like something truly historical was happening; it seemed that having learned the lessons of the past, this time Russia was doing something right. I was not worried or scared. If this protest had happened a month earlier, or had it been the first one in the sequence and illegal, I probably would not have attended the demonstration at all. But this time everything was different, and it seemed that indeed "fighting for one's rights is pleasant and easy," as Navalny said at one of the Moscow protests. The organizers encouraged people not to be afraid since the protest was completely legal. Another comforting factor for me was that a number of well-known writers and journalists (Boris Akunin, Dmitry Bykov, Leonid Parfyenov) had attended the demonstrations and encouraged people to do so as well. I also heard many positive reports from my friends who had attended previous rallies. The more I was afraid of public demonstrations in the past, the more I felt that

¹ <http://rt.com/politics/official-word/medvedev-economic-forum-speech/>

this time, under such safe and favorable conditions, I have no right and no excuse not to go out and support the movement I liked the ideology of the protest. In the center was the demand to hold new, this time honest, elections for the Duma. Many people understood that this demand was unrealistic, but it was good because it was legitimate, nonviolent, and it united people from all kinds of political movements. Most of the people I talked to thought that it was important to have such protests to show the authorities that we exist and that we care, to show that we hold them responsible for their actions, and that not everybody in Russia can be fooled by government-controlled television.

I asked the lady standing next to me why she was attending the protest. She said that on December 4 she did not find her name on the ballot list, so she could not vote. In addition to that she was mad at the government for shaming Russia in front of the whole world. Many people said that they would not mind United Russia as long as their power was legitimate. As one of the speakers said, "Our country needs laws that work equally for everybody." These demands for legitimacy and appealing to the already existing constitution chased away my fears of the protest turning into something revolutionary, violent and uncontrolled.

What concerned me the most about the protest was the extensive presence of radical nationalist organizations. They did not behave well; they booed some speakers and in the end of the protest a couple of them took over the stage. But what made me happy was the reaction of the people to their actions. For example, when their speaker tried to instigate the crowd to move the protest to the square in front of the St. Petersburg State building, which would be illegal and would provoke confrontation with the police, the crowd shouted back "This is provocation! We are not going to move!" Except for such little incidents, the protest was very well-organized and very peaceful. Police were very polite and did not intrude at all.

Many people brought white flowers and white balloons. The symbol of the protest was a white ribbon, which Putin said he mistook for a condom during his televised call-in show with Russian citizens. "Why did they unwrap it?" was the first question that came to the president's mind. That is how Putin became the main ideologist for the anti-Putin campaign, inspiring many more protesters. What a bottomless source of inspiration that TV-show has been for the protesters! People went out on the streets ready to give a high-quality response to Putin's statements. I saw posters saying "Use contraception against political AIDS!" or the extremely crude "Dutin—Pick," where transposing the first letters of the two words suggested the source of "political

AIDS" and the nature of that source. Since Putin also suggested that everybody who attended the protests on December 10 had been paid by the United States to do so, people brought posters that said: "I am here for free" or "The United States gave me \$10 for being here."



"[The Statue of Liberty with a veil] gave me 10\$ and asked me to stand here"

Photo: © Evgenia Olimpiewa

In that same infamous TV show, after saying that those who attended the demonstrations acted in favor of foreign countries, Putin compared the protesters to the monkeys from "The Jungle Book". Of course, this statement too was not left without a response. I saw a man wearing a monkey mask holding a poster that said "Have you called for me?" (in the "The Jungle Book" cartoon known to all Russians, the python Kaa hypnotizes the monkeys and calls them to move closer, and it was Kaa that Putin quoted on the TV-show: "Come to me!"). There were also posters saying: "I want to be friends with the West" and "We don't believe in the foreign enemy."

The Significance

To people familiar with Russia, it was unthinkable that there would be protests with more than 300 participants. It is important to remember that Russia is not the kind of country where protesting is a typical tool for the expression of civic concerns and demands. We are not there yet. We do not demand; it is not in our mentality to demand from those higher in rank. We do not express our concerns or complains by going out on the streets partly because the ghost of the revolutions is still hunting us.

During one of my first days at home I saw a lady, probably in her sixties, yelling at a young man of my age and accusing him of instigating a new revolution. She was furious. He was peacefully handing out flyers inviting citizens to the legally coordinated rally "For honest elections", which I attended the next day and which, as I have mentioned, was far from anything that can be characterized as revolutionary. The young man

did not try to fight back just as a few days later I chose not to argue with my grandmother who, although not as passionately, also shared the views of the furious lady. And it is not only the old generation who is afraid of the “uncontrolled masses”: I think we all are. This is one of the reasons why for Russians protesting has not become a natural method of fighting for one’s rights. The ghost of bloody revolution in addition to the Soviet mentality, the happy possessors of which always feel that it is safer not to speak up and that the authorities know better, made protests the last tool that a Russian citizen turns to.

Just a month ago Russians protested only when the issue was a matter of life and death and when there were simply no other options left. Other than that, it was only nationalists or communists who went out on the streets. And now I see thousands of people attending political demonstrations. Wherever I go, I hear political discussions. As one of my friends said, “it seems that everything changed overnight; something that was unthinkable a couple of days ago is a reality today.”

What’s Next?

How will the protests affect the upcoming presidential elections? Will Putin come back? Probably yes, because there is no strong alternative that could unite all those who do not want to see Putin in the Kremlin. During the protest I asked the same lady about her expectations for the presidential elections: “I do not know what to do. They will give me a heart attack. There is no one to vote for, we have not been given an opportunity by our two ‘cuties.’ Yavlinskiy—a member of the intelligentsia—won’t be able to do anything. The Communist party cannot restore anything, [...]. All these Prokhorovs...they are all incapable of changing things!” Then I asked her whether the opposition will be able to nominate a new leader: “I believe in that. I want a new leader. I hope so. And I think that this time I will find my name on the list.”

Unfortunately, so far there has not appeared a new leader who would be strong enough to unite the majority of the opposition. Excluding the Communists, whom many consider to be a fake opposition, possibilities might include: Yavlinskiy (a leader of the relatively weak Yabloko party), the oligarch Prokhorov (who some people think is part of a Kremlin effort to deceive the voters), and Navalny (a relatively new figure, a political activist and an internet blog star who, however, dis-

credits himself by his nationalist views). None of these figures is strong enough to unite the opposition and to compete with Putin for the presidential post. Thus, Putin will be back for at least one more term.



“Have you called for me?”

Photo: © Evgenia Olimpueva

Putin’s return does not mean, however, that the protests have been pointless. The government was forced to recognize the existence of civil society and the power of its own people. The authorities saw that the Russian society that they are dealing with has changed and is different from what they thought it was. It is no longer a politically apathetic society, but a demanding society that holds its government responsible for its actions and words. I think it was not just the government that learned something about its people, but the society itself realized its present state.

It is important that due to the “Russian spring”, people with deep political self-consciousness became aware of their own power and saw that they are not alone. Hopefully, the protests are a sign that civil society in Russia is starting to wake up and grow, and that it will rapidly force the government to recognize its wishes. Moreover, protests influenced the strengthening of the opposition. The opposition might not have much power this year, but it will in the future if Russia’s civil society keeps growing.

Protests became a sign of the change in people’s attitude towards their own role in the country. We have grown up as a society. Now we want the government to grow up as well and to keep up with its people. The changes in Russian society now demand corresponding changes among those who hold political power.

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