

Russian Protesters: Not Optimistic But Here to Stay

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Abstract

The Russian protest movement that exploded into public consciousness in December 2011 has been gathering strength slowly over time. Therefore, an increase in repression is not likely to make it go away any time soon. Few protesters expected their actions to produce immediate political change, so there is no reason to think that they are now disappointed and will forsake active political participation.

An Evolving Society

For many foreign and domestic observers, the wave of protest that Russia has experienced since the Duma elections in 2011 was a dramatic revelation. On December 10th, celebrated Russian journalist Yegenia Albats, told the *New York Times*, “Today we just proved that civil society does exist in Russia, that the middle class does exist and that this country is not lost.” Russia had woken up. Or at least, its middle classes had woken up. Appropriately for winter in Russia, however, civil society’s day in the sun turned out to be short. December’s dreams turned into May’s reality: The inauguration of the new-old president in a deserted Moscow and the president’s press-secretary calling for protesters’ lives to be “smeared on the asphalt.”¹

This at least is one common narrative of Russia’s “snow revolution”—it arrived unexpectedly and melted quickly with the spring. However, as appealing as this narrative is, it is wrong in both respects. First, neither Russia nor its middle class were really asleep and they certainly did not “just wake up.” Societies or classes don’t wake up suddenly as if from a deep sleep. Instead, changes usually occur gradually, often below the surface, or away from the attention of the media. And this has clearly been the case in Russia. In fact, Russian society has been slowly but steadily changing since the mid-2000s. As a result, by the time the electoral farce of 2011 came along, the organizational and cultural apparatus for large scale protests was already in place. Second, while it is true that some of the flightier hopes of December and January have faded and some disappointment has set in, Russian protesters and their sympathizers are impressively hard-headed about what they might expect to achieve. A few optimistic placards notwithstanding, the protest wave was never likely to end up with Putin staring out from the defendant’s cage of the Basmannyi Court. However, the basic political cleavage, the organizational capacity, and the protest culture that produced the wave have, if anything, been deepened by the winter’s events and are not going away any time soon.

From Hunger Strikes to Political Rallies

In the 1990s, Russian society was in the kind of disarray rarely seen in peacetime. Social bonds had been falling apart for a decade. Organizational sources of solidarity among people beyond immediate family relationships were almost destroyed. Hierarchical, often repressive, forms of political organization had become dominant as power and wealth had grown enormously concentrated. Resistance to the brutal post-Soviet order was not absent, but it was isolated both in space and time. Small groups of people were able to organize to resist the suppression of their rights, but creating broader movements to fight systemic problems rather than particular abuses was almost impossible and few succeeded. Resistance, where it did occur, very often consisted of direct actions like blocking railroads or highways or occupying buildings. Forms of protest frequently associated with prisoners or others with no expectation of political voice, such as self-harm and, especially, hunger strikes became an almost daily occurrence. The demands made at these protests were overwhelmingly local and material in nature—most frequently demands for unpaid wages. Furthermore, acts of protest were generally isolated too in the sense of being far from the centers of power, frequent in the struggling provinces and rare in the far more prosperous capital.

Nevertheless, the 2000s—the first Putin decade—saw slow, but immensely significant changes taking place in Russian society in general, and in its capacity for—and propensity to—protest in particular. The end of more than a decade of crisis, a measure of prosperity and the return of the notion that the state should be an active player in Russian politics began to reverse the process of disintegration and to create new possibilities for organized solidarity. The first expression of this came from opposite ends of the age spectrum—with militant pensioners and youth groups like the National Bolshevik Party, *Oborona*, the Avantguard of Left Youth and myriad other anarchists and leftists uniting first to fight the monetization of social benefits and then to protest explicitly against the Putin regime. These organizations and others came together to create proto-opposition fronts like the United Civic Front (OGF), the Other

1 <http://pik.tv/en/news/story/37165-presidential-spokesman-we-should-smash-protesters-livers>

Russia Movement and the Petersburg Civic Opposition (PGS), as activists solved the problem of working together across huge ideological divides by focusing on shared antipathy to the Putin regime and a flexible set of issues that arose from below.

While the Moscow protests of December 2011 were the first to attract major attention from the mainstream Russian media and the international community, they were far from being the first large scale protests of the Putin era. In March 2006, for example, an estimated 125,000 demonstrators gathered in more than 360 cities and towns to protest increases in utility prices and rents. In February of the same year, thousands of motorists in 22 cities rallied to protest the jailing of a railway worker who failed to get out of the way of a speeding Mercedes carrying the governor of Altai Krai.² In early 2007, activists across Russia organized a series of high-profile demonstrations, called Dissenters' Marches, in Nizhnyi Novgorod, St. Petersburg and Moscow. In fact, as data gathered by the Institute of Collective Action (IKD) show, these events were only a few of thousands taking place across Russia during the latter half of the 2000s.³

Using the IKD data and contrasting it with data from the 1990s, we can see that between 2000 and 2011, the character of protest in Russia changed completely.⁴ Direct action and hunger strikes were no longer major parts of the protest repertoire. Instead, more "democratic" styles of symbolic expression like marches, gatherings and rallies had come to dominate the ways in which people protested. New, creative and highly provocative forms of street theater and performance art too joined the arsenal of anti-regime techniques. Well before Web 2.0, Russian protesters had become expert at using cell phones to organize flash mobs, at raising phallic bridges to insult Prime Minister Putin, and at giving kisses to destabilize the authority of the Moscow militia.⁵ Protest demands too had changed. Gone was the overwhelming economic crisis and emerging were pains associated with burgeoning growth—environmental preservation and disputes over increasingly valuable real estate—as well as demands for the upholding of laws and the curbing of corruption. Finally, protest was on the move spatially—no longer was it largely confined to Russia's vast provinces, but now the capital

(as in most democracies) had become a dominant location for protests to be organized.

By showing that the transformation of protest in Russia did not begin in December 2011, this brief account highlights that many of the features of the December–March protests—the creativity, the large presence in the capital and the claims made in the name of laws and rights rather than particular interests—had become well established before the latest election cycle. Moreover, much of the organizational apparatus of the December protests, and many of the key organizers were far from new to protest. The post-election protests drew heavily on people who had participated in and organized previous events through Strategy-31, Solidarity, Other Russia, the Left Front, the Russian Social Forum and many other organizations and campaigns. The issue of size aside, everything else about the December–May protest cycle from repertoire, to demands, to location and the people involved represent continuity not change with long-term trends in Russian politics and society.

The Upside of Low Expectations

The second mistake that is commonly made about the protest cycle of recent months in Russia is to think that Vladimir Putin's relatively dominant performance in the presidential election (even taking into account the non-trivial amount of fraud), the ease with which the Duma was seated and began considering more repressive legislation against protests, and the toughening of the prosecutorial line against demonstrators has led to disillusion and a return to the supposed apathy of the pre-election period. There are many reasons to believe that this is not so, and that the organizational capacity and disposition to protest that we have seen in recent months is not going away anytime soon.

First, if it is true, as I have argued above, that the protests were not simply a flash in the pan but rather a very visible manifestation of long-term processes in Russia, then there is no reason to expect that either the maintenance of the incumbent regime or a moderate increase in repression will do much to alter the secular trend.

Second, there does not seem to be much evidence of disappointment or disillusionment among those sections of the population most opposed to the Putin regime. Or at least there is not much evidence of an outbreak of optimism followed by a profound disillusionment—there was not much optimism, and so not much disillusion either. In a survey of 1,800 internet-using, highly educated, upper income Russians living in cities of over 1 million—in other words precisely Vladislav Surkov's "angry urbanites"—conducted two weeks *before* the presidential elections, 59 percent of respondents agreed that "Russia will not change much after the presidential elec-

2 The governor's Mercedes crashed into a tree, killing the governor, his bodyguard and the driver. RFE/RL described both protests on March 7, 2006.

3 www.ikd.ru

4 Data from the 1990s are from Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

5 <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/brown/voina4-29-11.asp>



“Angry urbanites”: The “Second March of Millions” in Moscow, 12 June 2012.

Photo: Christoph Laug

tions in March”. Only 11 percent disagreed.⁶ One month after the elections, there was a little more resignation—now 69 percent agreed and 8 percent disagreed (Figure 1 on p. 5). On the other hand, the proportion who agreed that “there is more possibility for change now than I had thought possible until recently” barely budged over the period—from 34 percent before the elections to 32 percent one month after (Figure 2 on p. 5).

In other words, even the “angry urbanites” were never that optimistic that short-term change would be achieved in the first place. Asked two weeks before the presidential election who they thought would win the presidential election, an overwhelming 92 percent of those who expressed an opinion said Vladimir Putin (Figure 4 on p. 6). More than 41 percent agreed that “nothing will ever change as a result of the street protests” and only 25 percent disagreed (Figure 3 on p. 6). Almost no one saw either the Arab Spring (4 percent) or even Ukraine’s Orange Revolution (5 percent) as positive examples for Russia to follow (Figure 6 on p. 7).

Despite the low expectations, many respondents saw real if limited results from the protests. While only 31 percent felt the protesters had achieved little or nothing,

28 percent attributed increases in the numbers of election observers to the protests, 28 percent thought the protests had “woken Russian society up,” 21 percent felt the demonstrators had “initiated a process of dialogue between the authorities and society,” 19 percent felt the protests had forced the reintroduction of direct elections for regional governors, and 17 percent thought the protests had made the presidential elections cleaner than they would otherwise have been (Figure 5 on p. 7). Not exactly earth-shattering, but certainly more than might have been expected before December.

Third, it seems clear that the cleavage that has opened up between richer, better educated urbanites and, more specifically, between residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg and the rest of the country is deep and here to stay. National surveys have shown that university-educated and middle and upper income Russians are much more concerned with issues like corruption, moral decline and the loss of civil rights. Working class and less educated Russians, by contrast, care more about economics—prices, poverty, unemployment and the like. Moreover, independent of socioeconomic characteristics, Muscovites and Piterburgers care more about corruption and inequality. Moreover, the differences can’t easily be placed on a single liberal/authoritarian dimension—residents of the two “capitals” are also much more exercised about immigration and immigrants than people elsewhere.⁷

In other words, the disillusionment story is at best weakly grounded in reality and the cleavages along lines of class and geography that the protests highlighted are deep, and likely to be quite enduring. This means that the populist rhetoric that Vladimir Putin has long been a master of is unlikely to give way to a kinder, gentler attitude to the urban intelligentsia any time soon. The politics of Uralvagonzavod are here to stay, and so are the angry urbanites.⁸

About the Author

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⁶ The surveys were sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development.

⁷ Based on national surveys sponsored by Democracy International with funding from the United States Agency for International Development.

⁸ Uralvagonzavod makes railway cars, tanks and other vehicles in Nizhny Tagil. Workers there were associated with a pro-Putin organization and one who offered live on a presidential phone-in to bring some friends to deal with Moscow protesters was appointed Presidential Representative to the Urals Federal Region. <http://www.itar-tass.com/en/c142/425908.html>