

Local Democracy in Russia: An Antidote for an Aimless Protest Movement

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Abstract

The Russian middle class is losing interest in the protest movement. However, young people are not returning to apathy. Instead they are finding hope in local politics and activism.

Prospects for Change

When the Russian middle class joined street protests against a fraudulent December 2011 Duma election, commentators took notice. Unlike previous anti-government demonstrations confined to a handful of fringe groups, the so-called “Snow Revolution” included some of Russia’s most respectable citizens. Excited by this unprecedented trend, many observers pointed to a shift in political culture. As *New York Times* Columnist Thomas Friedman, with his flair for the dramatic, declared: “Have no doubt about this: politics is back in Russia.”¹ They argued that an active and disgruntled middle class signified the beginning of the end for Putin. The regime might not crumble tomorrow, but no longer could the government expect complacency from its citizens. Even as the movement loses steam, such observers assert that the state may never reclaim the legitimacy it once enjoyed.

Although this narrative recognizes how crucial the middle class is in terms of driving change, it fails to acknowledge that many are now fleeing the protest movement. This summer I spent a month in Moscow conducting interviews with Russia’s young professionals, an influential segment of the middle class. They are between the ages of 20 and 35 and work in a variety of fields that include marketing, financial consulting and humanitarian law. Just six months after the first winter demonstrations engulfed Moscow, the message reiterated in my interviews was that young urbanites see the current opposition as reckless and incapable of maintaining progress.

Young professionals’ initial enthusiasm sprang from the belief that demonstrations could result in substantive change, specifically the annulment of a clearly fraudulent Duma election. Once this goal no longer appeared feasible and as a coherent leadership failed to arise, Russia’s professional urbanites distanced themselves from the street rallies. Many now believe that the opposition movement is a fruitless endeavor, dominated by radicals and corrupt officials from the former Yeltsin regime seeking another opportunity to fill their pockets.

These findings indicate that the middle class requires legitimate political avenues to invest their energies. As an investment officer at the International Finance Corporation (IFC) put it, “I really can’t support the protests until I see a clear program and clear set of leaders. Right now the movement is unsustainable, and we need a sustainable opposition.”

An unavoidable irony confronts Russia’s young professionals. Their liberal perspective, the product of higher education and international exposure, is at odds with Putin’s repressive regime. Yet at the same time, this perspective limits their willingness to challenge the government. As successful and pragmatic individuals, they are seeking paths of political self-expression that stand a reasonable chance of succeeding, paths which do not exist in a semi-authoritarian state.

So what does the future hold for the middle class? One likely scenario is that it will increasingly look toward local grassroots initiatives as a means of enacting change and achieving civic fulfillment. Indeed, the popularity of a federal system coupled with the emergence of various municipal projects that seek to increase citizen influence on the political process suggests this is a growing trend.

An Extraordinary Movement

While in Russia, I interviewed 25 young Muscovites. We met in cafes, in parks, at their places of work, wherever and whenever it was convenient. I relied upon snowball sampling, obtaining additional contacts after each interview.

The majority described a feeling of nostalgia when reliving the first protests of December 2011 and February 2012. They recounted the excitement and hope swirling around those early gatherings that led them to believe in the demonstrations. Two elements made the movement unique from others, and in the opinion of young educated Muscovites, ripe for success.

First, the opposition shared the common goal of demanding an official review of the Duma election results. Rallying around a single issue bestowed the movement with direction and a clear-cut purpose that increased the likelihood of a government response. One human rights lawyer and early supporter remarked: “There was a reason to go to the streets. The reason was

1 Thomas Friedman, “The Politics of Dignity,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2012.

the elections . . . I really thought I was going to be one of the millions who was going to change the system.”

Fighting electoral misconduct, to the young elite, signified a practical attempt to improve the country. They recognized the importance of creating solutions and protesting specific grievances, rather than issuing a blanket denunciation of government that could lead to an unproductive stand-off and perhaps violence.

Second, the sheer numbers of people on the streets (20,000 to 60,000, depending on who is counting), indicated something fundamentally different was afoot, and that the same old tactics of repression might no longer work. Perhaps more importantly, skeptical young urbanites viewed the movement as credible when they saw people with similar educational and professional backgrounds in attendance. Explaining his initial concern about going to the December 10 demonstration and his delight at what he found, one Muscovite, who attained a M.B.A. from Case Western Reserve in Cleveland and now works in marketing, commented: “I thought, are they just hippies? . . . When I went there, I was deeply surprised that there were a lot of people just like me demanding what I really think is important.”

A focused mission and the size of the protests led Moscow’s young professionals to embrace the opposition in its infant stages. It would be a mistake however, to imply that the middle class took to the streets solely from its conviction of the protest movement’s potential. Frustration over corruption has existed for a long time, only to boil over with the announcement in September 2011 of Putin’s return to the presidency and yet another “stolen” election.

The most devastating form of corruption for the middle class is that which impedes them from achieving their professional and personal goals. An investment banker admitted, “It is really difficult to do business in Russia. Because when your business starts making real money, some people can just come and take it away.” They resent the bribes they must pay to mid-level bureaucrats, seeing the corruption as an obstacle that restricts their upward mobility.

From Optimism to Disillusionment

The excitement that characterized the 2011–12 upheavals gave way to distrust and resentment. Increases in violence registered as the number one concern among young urbanites I interviewed. With the mission of annulling the Duma elections dissipating, the movement lost direction, and radical groups began to take control. Instead of inspiring speeches that spoke of freedom and democracy, crude nationalistic slogans and unproductive chants grew in frequency. “Russia for ethnic Russians” and “Down with Putin!” now dominate.

The turning point came during the May 6 protest in which clashes broke out between riot police and demonstrators. Regardless of who was to blame, at this point, young professionals became convinced that the opposition no longer possessed the qualities necessary to enact change. “The movement had been hijacked by professional revolutionaries,” explained a 25-year-old entrepreneur and co-owner of a hostel in central Moscow.

Besides the increasingly violent tone of the opposition, its lack of a platform or objectives also raises concern. Without election reform to rally around, protesters these days blindly shout for the overthrow of the government and offer no alternatives. A 24-year-old market analyst working for a U.S. company, noted: “Yeah, it is cool to have a civil society, but they [the opposition], are not showing any solutions. They are just kind of there to be there.” Void of a clear political agenda, the educated youth of Moscow and other cities no longer consider the present protest movement as a legitimate challenge to the regime.

They doubt the type of leadership capable of building a coherent platform exists. The main organizers include anti-corruption blogger Alexey Navalny and TV personality Kseniya Sobchak, who because of her celebrity status and famous father, Anatoly Sobchak, the once liberal mayor of St. Petersburg, is often referred to as the Russian Paris Hilton. While exceling at publicizing various issues and mobilizing core followers, these organizers lack the skill set to transform a raw protest movement into a real political challenger. Many are also wary of these organizers’ true intentions. The cynicism of Russian politics is too great for blind faith, and some acknowledge their fear that Navalny is working with the regime. Referring to him as a “Kremlin project,” they speculate Putin is utilizing the blogger to split and control the opposition. This is a minority point of view, but certainly one which is present, even among the most educated of the populace.

Even more hated are old school liberal politicians from the 90’s, who have reemerged with the protest movement. Most widely known is Boris Nemtsov, deputy prime minister under Yeltsin in 1997, and Alexei Kudrin, the former finance minister, who resigned under pressure after publically criticizing President Dmitry Medvedev’s financial policies. Those I interviewed unanimously resent such individuals, citing their corrupt tendencies when previously in office.

Local Experiments in Democracy

As young professionals abandon the protest movement, it is unlikely that they will simply give in to political apathy. Though few respectable and substantive opportunities for engagement exist on the national stage, there is another option.

The middle class is likely to opt for local civic projects and politics. Though these are low impact endeavors, young professionals can exercise control over them and promote a truly liberal agenda. Indeed, what originally drew people toward Navalny was his various grassroots schemes that sought to make incremental progress on the local level. Over our second cup of coffee, a human rights lawyer and graduate of Oxford University commented, “He [Navalny] organized several effective local projects . . . like RosYama, ‘holes in the roads.’ The same technique can be used to advance other issues, such as access for the disabled to state buildings.” RosYama is a campaign in which citizens photograph potholes across Russian cities and send the documentation to the government in an effort to have them repaired.

These relatively small scale efforts are also productive because they offer a template for building democracy within Russia as a whole. Mikhail Velmakin, the 30-year-old organizer of Our City, a spontaneously-formed campaign to elect young Muscovites to District Council seats, told *The New York Times*, “This small seizure of municipal councils — it is not a small thing, especially under the dictatorship that now exists.”² Of some 200 candidates it put up over the last year, Our City has won 70 seats.

In addition, the Blue Buckets society, an organization formed in 2009, continues to grow in prominence. Members decorate the top of their cars with blue buckets as a means of drawing attention to government officials who abuse their police lights when in traffic. An advocate of the Society, Yevgeny Starshov, explained how such approaches are spreading: “Now most of the action is organized not by the political parties sitting in the Duma but by average Russians.”³

Efforts to build local civic activity are also occurring through volunteer groups. In the wake of devastating floods in the southern city of Krymsk in July, a grassroots aid collection effort launched within 48 hours of the tragedy. Hundreds donated clothes, bedding, med-

ication, drinking water and money, which were shipped from Moscow to Krymsk. Masha Gessen, a Russian journalist, reported on the unprecedented nature of such grassroots activity, even for Moscow.⁴

Ventures like Our City and Blue Buckets may not appear far reaching relative to Western conceptions of democracy. After all, supporters of these projects are not necessarily opposed to authoritative elements within government. Still, such efforts seek to provide citizens with greater influence over Russia’s political direction, and therefore are definable, in broad terms, as local experiments with democracy.

Young urbanites are not interested in the radicalism of the protest movement or the charade of what they refer to as a “system opposition”—several national political parties operating under the protective eye of the Kremlin. Their vision of the country is one in which local autonomy reigns supreme. When asked to identify one change he would make to Russia’s government, the IFC investment officer remarked: “Decentralization. More authority to local leaders, and they have to be elected and report to their constituents directly.”

Of course, the big question still remains how Putin will respond. Some reason he might accept this trend. In April 2012, for instance, the Kremlin passed a bill restoring the election of regional governors, a privilege taken away in 2004.

Responding to criticism regarding authoritarian practices, Putin continues to uphold the notion of sovereign democracy, a concept that states Russia will take a unique path toward democratization, though he has not specified the logistics. Allowing for controlled local experiments with democracy might very well align with this doctrine. Certainly, China, an ally of Russia, is beginning to permit popular elections on the village level in what they call “guided democracy.” Could local politics and civic activity indeed act as a model for authoritarian countries transitioning toward democracy? For Russia, only time will tell.

About the Author

Andrew Jarrell is currently pursuing a BA in political science at Northwestern University.

2 Michael Schwartz, “Opposition to Its Surprise, Wins a Bit of Power in Moscow,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2012.

3 “‘Birth of civil society’ + ‘politically mobilized middle class’ = end to Russia’s status quo?,” Democracy Digest Blog, February 29, 2012.

4 Masha Gessen, “The Flood That Changed Russia,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2012.