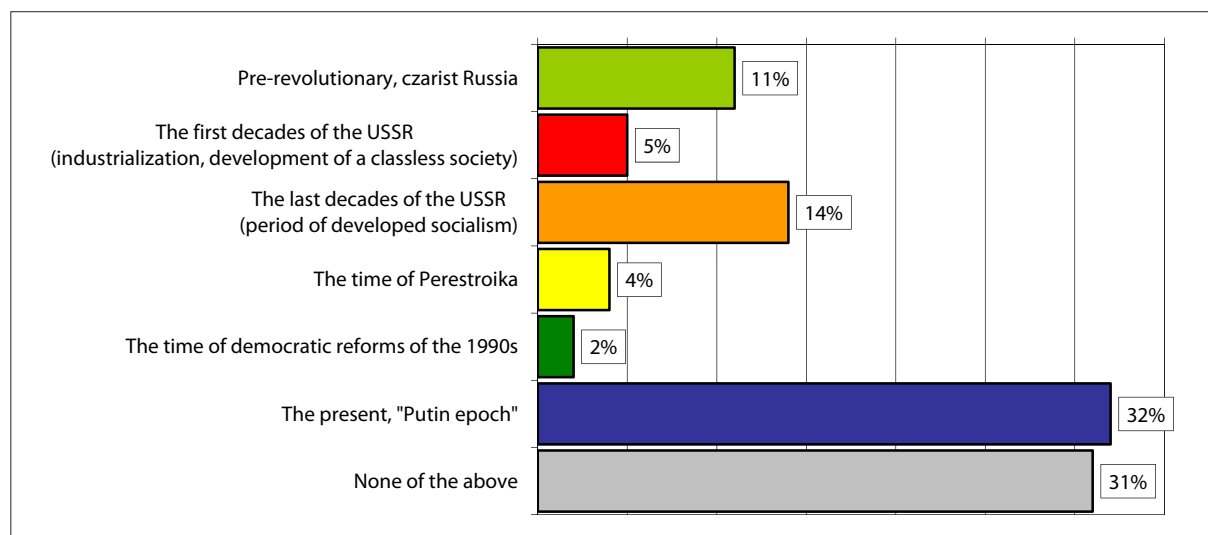


Figure 6: Which Period of Russia's History Most Corresponds to the Ideals of Russian Citizens and Their Ideas of What Russia Should Be?



Source: Hett, Felix; Krumm, Reinhard: *Gerechtigkeit, Freiheit und ein starker Staat. Konturen eines widersprüchlichen Russischen Traums*. FES Internationaler Dialog, FES Moskau, Perspektive, July 2012 <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/09212.pdf>

ANALYSIS

Seven Challenges of the Russian Protest Movement

By Oleg Kozlovsky, Washington

Abstract

This article describes some of the tests facing the Russian protest movement in 2013. These include balancing between moderates and radicals, dealing with regime defectors, reducing the influence of extremists, institutionalizing the movement, broadening its appeal to a wider public, encouraging citizens to play a more active role in politics, and developing support in the regions outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

An Evolving Movement

The Russian democratic movement (a.k.a. the "protest movement") made international headlines in December 2011 when tens of thousands took to the streets of Moscow and other cities to protest fraud in the Parliamentary elections. After initial confusion, the regime eventually regained confidence and responded with a series of repressive actions, from restricting freedom of assembly and going after independent NGOs to jailing opponents. As a result, the protest movement lost its momentum and found itself in a defensive, reactive position, unable to assert its own agenda.

However, the movement is far from being dead, as was demonstrated by the recent protests in Moscow against the "anti-Magnitsky law," banning Americans

from adopting Russian babies, and by its unceasing online activity. In order to overcome the present crisis, the protesters will have to find solutions to numerous problems, some of the most crucial of which I will pose and briefly discuss in this article.

Moderates and Radicals

Inherent to all social movements is the array of opinions ranging from moderation to radicalism, and this range is reflected in both the strategic and tactical approaches of activists. Some strive for a regime change and the effective recreation of the state, while others simply want to reform it by removing the ugliest forms of corruption and autocracy, leaving the rest to take care of itself. Some believe that it is more important to guarantee the safety

of protesters, even at the price of accepting sometimes embarrassing conditions, whereas others claim that no compromise is possible with the regime.

This was one of the earliest conflicts that the protest movement experienced when the relocation of a rally from Revolution Square to Bolotnaya Square in December 2011 caused the first split between the camps. Negotiations have the potential to display goodwill and trustworthiness, but can also be seen as a sign of weakness or used to force a group into a disadvantageous position. There is little trust between the regime and the opposition, with each side expecting dishonesty and provocations from their counterpart. On the other hand, refusal to compromise increases pressure on the regime, shows the protesters' determination and raises tension, but if used too often and without success, can marginalize the movement. In reality, of course, there are more than two views on the issue, and the truth, it appears, lies between the extremes.

It appears reasonable to argue that a movement should only negotiate when the process can be used to gain advantage. Further, a movement can only gain such advantage if it is strong enough to enforce any potential agreement, or at least to create significant problems for the opposition, should it choose to dishonor its obligations. In fact, what is really important is not even the movement's and regime's *actual* relative strength, but their *perceptions* of it. There was a brief period, from December 2011 to February 2012, when such negotiations could possibly have been used advantageously by the opposition, but the movement was too disorganized to make good use of its position. Now that the regime feels more secure, any such talks become impossible again until the situation changes.

Love-Hate Relationship

Another problem is how the opposition movement should deal with regime agents and defectors. It is an almost universal understanding now that a split within the elites is desirable and even necessary for peaceful change, but its accomplishment is a much more difficult task. It is not just hard to be friendly with the police force, for instance, when it keeps arresting your comrades, but the "us-versus-them" attitude also plays an important role in maintaining the identity and motivation of movement members. Many protest campaigns in other countries that have faced similar problems, including Serbia in 2001 and Ukraine in 2004, have used the formula of "regime's victims" to describe both themselves and members of the police and armed forces. This approach was not entirely successful in the sense that the officers did not defect to the opposition side *en masse*, but the eventual peaceful resolution of those conflicts suggests

that such an approach may make it harder for authoritarian regimes to repress opponents.

This problem also applies to defectors from the regime. Since the protests began, and especially in their first weeks, a number of well-known members of the political, economic, and cultural elite have criticized the regime or openly sided with the protesters. Each such move, however, elicited a controversial reaction from within the movement as activists decided whether to welcome defectors as new allies or distance themselves from them. For instance, Ksenia Sobchak managed to become one of the movement's new leaders despite facing a degree of opposition, while former Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin is still widely viewed with suspicion. This issue will only become more important as the movement gains strength and attracts more defectors.

Anger Management

It is generally acknowledged that when a movement faces a crisis and its strategy seems ineffective, the most extreme elements in it gain strength. This is particularly dangerous in Russia, with its long history of associating political struggle with physical destruction of the adversary. The current protest movement has been remarkably peaceful, even in face of government violence. Even immediately after the clashes with the police on Bolotnaya Square on May 6, 2012, the protests returned to their previous non-violent form. Perhaps the historical memory of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War remains a strong deterrent for most protesters.

Despite this, Russia is not immune from political violence. Some radical groups from the far-right and the far-left have been using it against each other for years. Moreover, a significant portion of the public supports at least some forms of violence. A quarter of protesters surveyed in January by the Levada Center said that the government "only understands the language of force" while earlier polls indicated that 25% to 47% Russians sympathized with the so-called "Primorye guerillas" who were killing police officers near Vladivostok in 2010.

While eruption of large-scale political violence remains a relatively unlikely event in the immediate future, isolated cases of it pose serious danger to the movement's goals and the nation's well-being in general. The government predictably used the May 6 clashes to crack down on the opposition, raise the level of fear among citizens, and to portray the protesters as irresponsible hooligans who lead the country to bloodshed. The protesters would be best-served by maintaining non-violent methods, despite growing repression by the regime.

Uniting and Institutionalizing

When the protest movement appeared in December 2011, it was completely spontaneous. There were some activists who organized the rallies, but the vast majority of protesters didn't know—or care—who these figures were. What filled the vacuum was the so-called Organizing Committee, an informal body of self-appointed leaders without strict membership that claimed responsibility for coordinating the protests. However, this body almost immediately faced serious problems both from within the movement and from the outside. Not only were most of their decisions criticized, which is certainly normal, but their very legitimacy was questioned by activists and groups that believed they were underrepresented. Vladimir Putin and his allies used the lack of internal structure of the movement to mock the idea of negotiations: “Are we supposed to speak to *all* these people simultaneously?” they asked rhetorically.

After several months of internal discussion of a possible structure of the movement, an ambitious idea was proposed—to elect its leaders. Most surprisingly, it was quite successfully done, and in late October 2012 more than 80,000 opposition-minded Russian citizens participated in the biggest unofficial elections in nation's recent history. The elected 45 activists represent every major ideological camp within the movement, but, remarkably, a majority of them may be called liberal democrats.

The work of this Coordinating Council hasn't been particularly effective so far. In the first four months of its existence, the Council has only managed to stage one protest, adopt several statements, and develop a strategy which is yet to be implemented. One of the problems impeding the Council's progress is a de facto boycott by a number of opposition groups and leaders, including the “systemic opposition” (Yabloko, the Communists, and A Just Russia leadership). It should not surprise us; these organizations have demonstrated the same pattern of behavior in the past, for instance in their relationship with the Other Russia coalition between 2006 and 2008 or their reluctant support (with some notable exceptions) of the December 2011 protests. In any case, the Coordinating Council hasn't yet been able to win the sympathies of a majority of the movement. According the Levada Center poll, only a third of them approve of its work (still slightly better than any other opposition platform).

Demands and Demographics

One problem that haunts every political force is the choice between having a clear and concise message and broadening its support base. In terms of the Russian protest movement, this most importantly deals with the question of bringing in economic and social demands.

From the onset, the movement was unique in being almost totally about political and ethical issues. What citizens have been demanding was democracy, rule of law, respect, the truth, and so on—all the things considered “abstract” by many people. It has been argued by some activists, mostly left-wing, that the only way to get more people to support the movement is to introduce economic demands. As of now, however, nobody has managed to present a particular set of such demands that would resonate within the movement and outside of it.

Moreover, the opponents of this approach warn of the risks of shifting the focus of the movement to the economy. It would be relatively easy for the Kremlin to break such a protest by some monetary concessions, as has been done frequently in the past (for instance, during the anti-welfare reform rallies of early 2005). This step could also lead to the movement being hijacked and carried away from its original aims by populists and demagogues. Developing a formula of such demands, or timing their introduction is another challenge that the opposition faces.

Small Victories Go a Long Way

Like in most authoritarian and hybrid regimes, the political system in Russia is based on the apathy and passivity of its citizens (as opposed to civic participation in democracy and fanatical loyalty in totalitarianism). Indeed, surveys and discussions with ordinary Russians demonstrate that the primary factor preventing mass protests is not support of Vladimir Putin's system or fear of repression, but people's skepticism regarding their ability to improve the situation. Although no government institution is trusted by a majority of the population (Levada Center, June 2012), few see grassroots activism and democratic politics as an effective way of producing positive change. This fundamental pessimism is partly reflected even among the demonstrators themselves: according to a survey conducted among rally attendees on January 13, 2013 by the Levada Center, 24% of the demonstration participants do not believe that street protests can lead to “a real change in the country.”

If the opposition wants to regain momentum and overcome demoralization, it must raise the morale of its present and potential supporters. In order to do this, it is necessary to identify, publicize, and celebrate even the smallest accomplishments of the movement. Praising their own achievements is almost, by definition, a difficult task for activists, who tend to focus on problems but pay little attention to victories (perhaps, because they see them merely as a “normal” state of affairs). For instance, opposition leaders failed to recognize the concessions made by the regime in December 2011 with the liberalization of political party registration and elec-

tions or the fact that Vladimir Putin received the fewest votes since the 2000 elections. It looks like the protesters implicitly expected a complete and unconditional surrender and defeat of Putin in the elections. As a result, disappointment has become widespread among the less patient protesters: "I have already attended four rallies, but Putin is still in the Kremlin." Expectations elevated too high and an all-or-nothing approach should give way to a more realist, adequate worldview and a conscious search for achievements to celebrate.

All Roads Lead out of Rome

The last, but definitely not least, dilemma that the opposition faces is between concentrating most forces on Moscow and going to "the regions." The capital, with its better educated, wealthier, more Internet-savvy and more politicized citizens has become the focal point of the movement. The Moscow protests weren't just the biggest ones, even in comparison to the city population; they were setting all the trends, creating all the controversies, and giving birth to new opposition leaders. Unsurprisingly, 35 out of 45 elected members of the Opposition Coordinating Council are Muscovites. Moreover, while the early protests in December

2011 were supported by numerous, if not massive, rallies in the provinces, the activities of the movement have become much more Moscow-centric over the last year. All the efforts to boost activism beyond the Moscow Ring Road only led to brief, unsustainable changes that were undone after the "sorties" ended.

In a super-centralized country like Russia, the role of Moscow in producing political change will always remain crucial. The future of the Russian political system will be decided primarily in the capital. But the role of the regions should not be underestimated. Not only will they demonstrate who the "real Russia" stands behind, but their votes will be decisive in any election. It is sufficient to say that if the whole country voted in March 2012 as Moscow did, Putin would not win in the first round. But it is necessary to recognize that the level of political awareness and activism is objectively much lower in the smaller cities than it is in the capital. Attempts to artificially raise it through one-time actions will barely change this situation. What is required is a long-term, strategic effort aimed at developing local groups and organizations that will be able to change attitudes in their communities over time.

About the Author

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