

## Events in Moscow 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010: Political Crisis

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### Abstract

The clashes on 11 December 2011 in the Manezh Square in Moscow between ultranationalist groups, football supporters, migrant groups and the police, following the shooting of a football supporter by a migrant from the North Caucasus, demonstrated yet again that inter-ethnic tension and xenophobia continues to be a critical issue for Russia today. This article examines the way in which growing societal insecurity and discontent is being channelled and expressed through ethnic hatred, and anti-Caucasian and anti-Muslim feelings in Russia today.

A common Russian saying is that a man's life can hang on where a comma lies within a sentence, determining whether he is pardoned or sentenced. Similarly, the line between viewing societal problems as common issue for all of the population and blaming specific ethnic groups for all the ills of society is a thin one. At the heart of the events of 11 December in the Manezh Square, was the desire to redress societal problems, primarily the need for a just judicial system with no corruption, which are concerns shared by all Russians and hence should in theory serve to bind society together. However, the demands of the youth that came out to voice their frustrations on that day were channelled through ethnicity, directly blaming other ethnic groups for all societal problems. The way these demands are being articulated threaten to breakup society within a multiethnic country such as Russia, provoking dangerous conflicts and significantly lowering the probability of successful modernisation.

### Where is Social Protest Directed?

Neither the summer fires in Moscow, nor the closure of airports leaving thousands stranded in Winter brought people out onto the street. Yet, 5,000 (Police sources) to 12,000 (Expert assessments) demonstrators came out onto the Manezh Square under slogans such as "Russians forwards", "Russia for Russians—Moscow for Muscovites", "Moscow is not the Caucasus". These protesters were not bussed in nor bribed by third parties, nor were they tempted by promises of a pop-concert, but turned out on their own accord. Indeed, these demonstrations spilled over into 15 other towns. The level of public support and sympathy for this political action, according to expert sociological centres, was 25–27%. About the same amount stated they were uncertain whether they supported the protests. Is this significant support or not?

In October 1922, 8,000 black shirts relying on the support of a tiny section of the Italian population marched on Rome, leading to Mussolini coming to power. Similarly to the Manezh Square protests, the ideas that united the black shirts were social justice

and the rehabilitation of a humiliated nation. This is how Italy was raised from its knees in the 1920s. However, the whole Italian nation was not behind the cause of the Black Shirts, instead support for their ideas was splintered—those from the North hated Southerners, who in return hated Northerners. A similar context is evident in Russia today in relation to the Manezh protesters and their ideas. However, there is a significant difference between the two cases. In the 1920s there was no internet, but in the contemporary world groups are able to almost instantly organize thousands of people via social networks, as happened in Moscow on 11<sup>th</sup> December. This potential of the internet as a tool for organizing large groups of people in a short space of time is illustrated by direct quotes from the social networks used to organise the Manezh gatherings: one site states that "the group itself appeared on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2010, before that we only had one meeting, now the group has over 5000 people", another outlines that "the idea of the Manezh Square came immediately, as soon as we managed to cordon off the traffic on Leningradskaya, we then immediately posted the information", while another details that "we have been in contact since the 6<sup>th</sup> December, as everyone knows the march was organized for the 11<sup>th</sup> December. 9000 people registered for the march in advance". This is the method by which these demonstrations were organized, with dozens of volunteer coordinators, aged between 14 and 20, able to bring together many thousands of people. Older organizers of the demonstrations relied on other less open ways of coordinating, including conspiratorial flats. Regardless of age, all those involved were united by a common idea, which closely resembles that outlined in an anonymous letter to General Shamanov, the head of Russian Airborne Troops, which has circulated on the internet. This letter demanded the use of Russian paratroopers to fight against not only against the lawlessness from the Caucasus but also against officials that do nothing about it. Citing both these concerns, the nationalistic youth are looking for a leader in the military sphere. In this light, the case of "Kvachkov" is not so far-fetched.

Kvachkov was accused of organizing militia groups in different Russian cities, who on his order were supposedly meant to take over military facilities and march on Moscow in support of the Patriotic Youth. A similar scenario is not impossible. Indeed, other threats and trends are even more likely before 2012.

### **The Transformation of Supporters to Attackers**

In the 1990s Russia had many problems, but social processes were developing in the same direction as in other countries of the North. Russian youth showed a strong inclination for modernizing reforms and high ethnic tolerance in comparison with the elderly. Since the start of the 2000s the situation has changed, and it is the youth that has become the main proponent for traditionalism and xenophobia. In the 1990s football supporters often pitted themselves against nationalists and neo-Nazi groups. During this period, a common story circulated among all groups of football supporters about a Spartak supporter, who was hanged by Nazi skinheads using his own Spartak scarf. In the 2000s, this previous hatred has become love, leading to dozens of reports in many towns of incidents of armed attacks with signs of racial and ethnic hatred involving both nationalists and football supporters. In parallel, other protest movements began to take on an ethnic component, such as the 2004 protests against the modernisation of social benefits, which were accompanied in many places by xenophobic slogans, the events of Kondopoga in 2006 and other local clashes across Russia.

Increasingly the ethnic Russian Self is being constructed against an opposing ethnic Other in response to earlier consolidation of identity by ethnic minorities. This process was accelerated by the Chechen War, as well as significantly by Putin's encouragement of official suspicion—"enemies are everywhere, who want to take fat chunks out of our territory" or "foreign enemies are encouraging domestic enemies". This approach by Putin created the psychology of a victimized nation. Ethnocization was intensified by politicians of all political persuasions. The first political grouping to identify that this sense of victimhood could be utilized to mobilise mass support were the new nationalist parties, groups and movements. More established parties also tried to exploit this, such as LDPR, which changed its slogan from "cleaning our boots in the Indian Ocean" to a simpler one "we are for the poor, we are for Russians". The Communist Parties changed its position from "internationalism" towards presenting itself as a party of the ethnic majority. In the Presidential elections of 2008, the leader of the Communist Party was described as "not liked by the international governing elite and the Putin

team not only because he is a communist, but because he is the only one of the candidates that is Russian by blood and spirit".

And even some politicians, who describe themselves as liberal, put forward the idea of liberal-nationalism. Within this position, the only thing that is left from liberalism is the name, but even this served to make them unpopular with Russian nationalists, for whom "liberals" is a word associated with "enemies", "foreigners" and "homosexuals". Furthermore, the ideology of the different strands of Russian nationalism is categorically against liberalism, they are against liberty, let alone equality. They demand that the dominant position of the Russian ethnic group is legally institutionalized as part of a one-nation Russia.

### **The Drift of Power: the Eyes Fear—the Hands Do**

A common but mistaken view amongst the Russia media is that the events on the Manezh Square were provoked/orchestrated by the authorities. The Russian authorities have been scared by these events, which highlighted that they are less and less able to control the growth and behavior of Russian nationalism. The state's attempts to manufacture a certain type of nationalism, which could be controlled and manipulated have failed. Therefore, the Russian authorities have had to come up with their own nationalist project, the "Rodina" Party. Whilst the Russian authorities initially institutionalized the new national holiday, National Unity Day held on the 4<sup>th</sup> November, they are now concerned about this particular holiday and deploy OMON troops to control the thousands of people that take part in Russian-nationalist marches every year. Indeed, it was on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2010 marches that the people involved in the Manezh Square protests were trained. Today, Russian nationalism cannot be domesticated by or allied to the authorities, because it is primarily centred upon protest movements.

While the political elites cannot control nationalism, they can push it along. Following the ethnic pogrom in Kondopoga 2006, the authorities began to speak about the need to guarantee the primary place of the titular population in Russia. In the wake of the war with Georgia 2008, quotas were introduced for foreigners coming to Russia, and in light of the events in the Manezh Square, debate in the State Council moved beyond limiting travel to Russia to restrictions on the registration regulations for internal migrants—Russian citizens, moving from one Russian region to another. Such suggestions seem absurd considering that even supporters of limiting migration from abroad have argued that the loss of external migrants should be mitigated by increased internal migration. They say "we should replace street

cleaners in Moscow from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for the ones from Ryazan'. Indeed, internal migrants are not just street cleaners, but make up a good proportion of the Kremlin and the White House. The demonstrators at Manezh called for a limit on internal migration, but from only certain regions of Southern Russia and for migrants of certain ethnic backgrounds. Hence, it is clear for whom the tightened registration regulations have been created. However, the increased concessions by the authorities to the nationalists lead to increased demands. Currently, the nationalists demand not only controls on the arrival of migrants from other ethnic groups into Moscow, but also the deportation of those that have come earlier.

At the same time as revoking the rights of certain ethnic groups, the Russian authorities are calling for greater patriotism from all ethnic groups within Russia. How will these ethnic groups respond? A real danger exists that the response will lead to increased incidents of local clashes on ethnic grounds. The SOVA centre investigated such incidents in 2010, finding that they occurred in 44 Russian regions, resulting in 37 deaths and 368 injured people.

### Religious Mobilisation

If in regions with a predominantly ethnic-Russian population social dissatisfaction is being expressed through increasing ethnic tension, in those Republics historically linked with Islam, ethnic mobilisation is being replaced by religious mobilisation.

In Russia a special zone has emerged—the Chechen Republic, in which a theocratic regime has been established that can only be compared with the regimes found in Iran, Sudan and Afghanistan under the Taleban. An illustration of this brand of Islamic theocracy is that all woman and young girls (not only those working in offi-

cial building, but also in universities and schools) are now required to wear headscarves and long skirts. Those that break this norm are punished. This is illustrative of the growing Islamization of Chechnya under Kadyrov.

Although little information about Chechnya reaches the rest of the country, the presence of such a theocratic regime is impacting on Russian views of their own country in ways that are hard to quantify. It also causes many Chechens to migrate to other parts of the country. Many of these internal migrants maintain official registration in Chechnya or other Republics, but live primarily in central regions of Russia. It is important to highlight that citizens of Russia from the North Caucasus attract much greater ethnic hatred than other immigrants from the CIS. Relations between the ethnically Russian populations of many towns and cities with internal migrants from the North Caucasus are often more conflictual than with other new immigrants, because these migrants seek to demonstrate their right to preserve their own specific norms of behavior more strongly.

In other Republics (predominantly Muslim), social conflicts are framed along the lines of traditional vs. non-traditional Islam. This is a process that began in the North Caucasus at the end of the 1990s and is now in evidence in the centre of Russia as well, in the Republics of the Volga region. The deputy Mufti of the Republic of Tatarstan, Valiulla Yakupov states that “the majority of young people are supporters of foreign religious influences”. He also predicts that “knowing the evolution of this movement on other Republics of the post-Soviet space, in which Islamization is greater than in Tatarstan, maybe we can see what will happen to us”.

What awaits the rest of the country. For now only one thing—growing radicalization and antagonistic relations between different ethnic groups of a broken down society.

#### *About the Author*

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