

Is Russian Society Waking Up?

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Nikolay Petrov
Carnegie Moscow Center

In December 2011, a volcano of social activism that had long been dormant started to erupt in Russia, thrusting the country's domestic politics into headlines around a world recently captivated by the Arab Spring. Contrary to the expectations of the Kremlin and some observers, the eruptions did not stop after the presidential elections in March 2012, when Vladimir Putin was successfully elected president for the third time.

It is noteworthy that Moscow plays the role of the central square for the country, but the regions cannot be underestimated. In order to foresee further developments, it is important to understand the nature of discontent in Russia. What sparked the protests, where did they take place, who was involved, and where is the movement going?

Prehistory of the Latest Protests

The new tidal wave of large-scale social protests recalls the one that took place two years earlier, in late 2008-early 2009, in Vladivostok in the Far East and then in Kaliningrad in the far west. Geography matters here in two different ways: on the one hand, border regions had suffered more from the government's protectionist measures. On the other hand, Russian inhabitants of border regions are less paternal-minded and rely more on themselves than on the central government. At the time, Moscow used a combination of sticks and carrots to successfully pacify the protests.

However, mass dissent still poked up from time to time in different parts of the country. Each time the reasons were local and concrete, like anger at the closing of factories in factory towns (Pikalevo, November 2008-June 2009), pollution issues (Irkutsk, 2010; Krasnoyarsk, 2010-2011), or environmental degradation due to large-scale construction projects (Moscow region, 2010-2011). The last case is well known—the Khimki forest protests. These were the first to politicize and transform a local issue into a national one, receiving support in different parts of the country. Its prominent leader,

Yevgenia Chirikova, became one of the leaders of the December 2011 political protests in Moscow.

Loss of trust in the state, especially among Muscovites, is another important factor in explaining what happened in December 2011. In the summer of 2010, there had been disastrous forest fires around Moscow. Authorities demonstrated both irresponsibility and an inability to react efficiently. At the same time, there were very inspiring cases of social self-organization by means of an Internet campaign to fight the fires without federal help. Then, in the fall of 2011, the Kremlin decided to dismiss longtime Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov. In order to diminish his popularity, the Kremlin organized an unprecedented propaganda attack accusing him of enormous corruption (and other sins). The attack against Luzhkov, longtime co-chairman of the ruling United Russia party and a pillar of the regime for almost two decades, achieved its goal but at the cost of accelerating a collapse of trust in the authorities.

The 2011-2012 Election Cycle Protests

The crisis of the Russian political regime, like the regime itself, is personal. It can be attributed to two persons: Putin and Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin.

Putin, at the party congress, announced he was returning as president and said that this had been decided long ago between him and President Dmitry Medvedev. Such manipulation and the horror of having to live with Putin for twelve years more years caused frustration among many Russians who were tired of seeing the same face for so long and were hoping for some modest reforms stemming from Medvedev's rhetoric of modernization.

In December, the accumulated negativism toward the party of power resulted in relatively poor election results. This was especially true in Moscow, where the newly appointed mayor felt pressure to prove his effectiveness as a manager by delivering the needed results. Sobyenin ordered the reporting of a fraudulent vote count, just like his predecessor used to do. Thousands of Muscovites went to the streets to protest not so much the election results (the Russian parliament does not play any serious role in politics anyway) so much as the ugly methods of the authorities and the disdain with which they treated their citizens. Similar protests occurred elsewhere, including St. Petersburg, but as Russia is a very centralized country, what happens in its capital is of major importance. If only the Kremlin and Sobyenin had been more modest and reported the real 30-35 percent that United Russia had received in Moscow, instead of 47 percent, the political crisis would not have started in December.

Different political forces organized various protests for the night after the December 4 elections and for the next several days, but the first really large-scale rally took place on December 10 on Moscow's Bolotnaya Square. With 30-40,000 participants, this rally started a growing wave of protests. Similar smaller-scale actions took place in dozens of urban centers across the country. The Kremlin's expectations that these protests had let off enough steam proved false when another big rally on Moscow's Sakharov Avenue on December 24 attracted twice as many participants.

Before the March 5 presidential elections, there was one more large-scale action in Moscow—at Yakimanka and Bolotnaya on February 4, which gathered tens of thousands in spite of -20 degree (Celsius) temperatures. Other events included the “white circle,” when people walked the Moscow boulevard ring-road. All these mass actions resembled carnivals: no animosity, a very friendly atmosphere, and a lot of humor in the form of creative slogans and other devices. These were not hooligans looking for buildings to set on fire. After the elections, the protests looked to have ebbed, though two rallies in the center of Moscow on March 5 and March 10 gathered about 15-20,000 each.

However on May 6, on the eve of Putin’s inauguration the so-called “March of Millions” gathered numerous protesters across the country, including 30-40,000 in Moscow, which ended in clashes with the police, who were brutal. Since then, protest activism has been ongoing but instead of approved rallies, they have taken the shape of people’s “festivities,” including a walk with writers at the center of Moscow on May 13 (attended by 15-20,000) and the tongue-in-cheek “Occupy Abai” camp at Chisty Prudy.

The Reason for the Protests

In general, there is growing dissatisfaction in society with the authorities and their treatment of Russia’s citizens. For many years, it has been assumed that a kind of social contract operates in Russia. This social contract is sometimes defined in different ways. Either citizens receive economic benefits in lieu of political freedoms, or the state does not interfere in people’s private lives while raising their standard of living, in exchange for citizens minding their own business and keeping out of politics.

When the economic crises came, it became less and less possible for the state to realize its part of the contract. A revision of the whole scheme became inevitable. The Kremlin’s tacit pact with Russia’s conservative popular majority to deliver public goods in exchange for votes still holds. But the other pact with the modernized minority of the population—we do not interfere with your pursuits, and you stay out of politics—has frayed, probably beyond repair. Precisely those Russians who, under Putin, have enjoyed virtually unlimited freedom of self-expression and self-fulfillment are now broadening their vision to include civic values and political issues. With many of them, the private no longer trumps the public.

In my view, there is a single social contract but different social groups, including regional ones, get dissatisfied with it at different times and due to different reasons. Latent dissatisfaction converted into protest actions in Moscow due to the conduct of the 2011 parliamentary elections. Unlike in previous cases of socioeconomic protest, it is difficult for the Kremlin to isolate and pacify Muscovites without changing Russia’s political system. At the same time, it does not make sense to speak about an anti-Putin minority vs. a pro-Putin majority, but about a minority reacting publicly and more quickly while a passive majority also undergoes change, if not to the degree that it pours out onto the streets.

Who are the Protesters?

After the initial wave of protests in December 2011, different terms came to be used to describe their participants: new middle class, angry urbanites, urban creatives, new intelligentsia, and more. The term “middle class” is particularly intriguing. Usually the middle class is considered to be relatively autonomous from the state and a frequent driver for change. In Russia, this is not the case because the majority of those who receive relatively high salaries are either state employees or workers of state companies. Over the last decade, however, several large Russian cities have seen significant growth in the post-industrial service economy. Those involved in services feel far more separated from the state.

So who exactly came to the protests? While 100,000 demonstrators in a city of over 10 million may still not be so many, what is key is that the demonstrators represented a cross-section of society. According to a Levada Center survey for the December 24 demonstration, almost two-thirds of the 761 respondents were younger than 40 years old, 70 percent had higher education, 46 percent were professionals, 25 percent managers and office managers, and 8 percent businesspersons.

Figure 1.

Protesters on December 24 by political viewpoint (it was possible to choose more than one option).

Democrats	38
Liberals	31
Communists “New leftists”	13
Socialists/Social-Democrats	10
“Green”	8
Nationalists-Patriots	6
Conservatives	3
Anarchists	3
“Antifascists”	2
“New leftists”	2
Others	4
Neither of them	6
Hard to answer	3

As well, sociologist Olga Kryshchanovskaya surveyed 112 of about 1000 participants of the Occupy Abai movement. According to her schematic¹, the various components of the movement were as follows:

- (1) **Professional revolutionaries** – leaders and activists of unregistered parties with extensive experience in political struggle, election participation, and protest actions. They formed an organizational core of the protest.
- (2) **Celebrities, media persons** – they attracted media and public attention.
- (3) **Family members of professional revolutionaries** – they provided trustworthy support.
- (4) **Active bloggers** – they were an information army, telling people about the demonstrations and providing coordination of protest actions.
- (5) **Students** – manageable soldiers, brave, looking for action, driven, and filled with energy.
- (6) **Quiet intellectuals** – ideological skeletons of protesters appealing to the West as a source of truth and normality.
- (7) **Off-road vehicles** – marginal persons of different kinds, losers, unemployed, or party freelancers. They looked for entertainment and socializing.
- (8) **Political pensioners** – liberal radio station *Ekho Moskvy* fans. They were focused on politics and abolition of the regime.

Two-thirds of respondents had some kind of higher education, and 10 percent had at least two degrees. Their age varied from 16 to 90, and half of them were between 20 and 30 years old. Forty-five percent were professionals, including computer programmers, translators, lawyers, managers, bank workers, academics, and professors; 35 percent were university and high school students; and 15 percent were businessmen.

The protesters do not constitute a unitary political force. There are all kinds of small groups among them. They have no obvious leader or spokesperson. Being sophisticated intellectually, they are infantile politically. The good news is that they are not manipulated by any political force and represent a truly grassroots citizen movement. The bad news is that they do not have any concrete political program,

Shortsighted authorities consider the lack of influential opposition figures to be a benefit. They seek to foster this situation, to split the organizers, and to isolate those whom they consider to be the greatest potential leaders (like blogger Alexei Navalny and radical leftist Sergey Udaltsov). They do not realize that in the likely event there are more protests, a lack of leadership can lead to chaotic developments rather than the channeling of negative social energies into institutionalized channels.

¹http://slon.ru/russia/kryshchanovskaya_sazhat_navalnogo_bessmyslenno_revolyutsiyey_upravlyayut_akk_aunty-787411.xhtml.

Reactions of the Authorities

It was clear that the December protests shocked the authorities. The one idea they clung to was to survive until the March presidential elections.

The Kremlin's tactics toward the protests were based on two myths: first, that this has been an exclusively Moscow-based phenomenon, particular to those who are too well off for their own good; and, second, that the protests were of an electoral nature and would disappear with the end of the electoral cycle. In order not to aggravate the situation before Putin's election, they let the protests proceed virtually without any police interference. At the same time, political reform did not go forward besides proposals announced in January by Alexei Kudrin and Boris Titov, both of whom are close to Putin. The Kremlin also organized a set of their own rallies (dubbed *Putings*, short for "Putin meetings," by the opposition) to prove that even in Moscow Putin's supporters outnumbered his opponents. But after election day, the police immediately became tougher.

The scale of the May 6 protests amid spring vacations came as a surprise for both the authorities and the opposition. The Kremlin understands that something should be done to make the political system more flexible and less vulnerable but has not yet decided what to do. Recent moves on personnel and political party legislation give some cause to believe the space for public politics will be expanded.

Scenarios for the Future

In a May 2012 report, the well-regarded Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research discussed four future scenarios.² The two it considered most likely were "radical transformation" or "political reaction." The first anticipates the appearance of a coalition comprising promoters of modernization within the elites and the protesters. The second portends violent clashes between protesters and the police, suspension of reforms, and the triumph of the enemies of modernization. They considered another two scenarios, "accelerated modernization" and "inertial development" (including the gradual winding down of protests), to be less likely. Yevgeny Gontmakher of the Civil Initiatives Committee suggested that all four scenarios would probably be realized one after another: "First the inertial, then the reactionary with Putin trying to put protesters under pressure, then radical with disorganization, chaos, and eventual replacement of the regime. It is the new regime already that will finally launch modernization."

However, it already looks as if the political leadership understands that to survive and stay in power it needs to make Russia's political system more sophisticated and flexible, strengthening institutions and restoring elements of political competition and federalism. At the same time, the political transformation has already begun, in terms of letting political parties be registered and restoring gubernatorial elections. Such measures will push political reform forward whether the Kremlin likes it or not.

Authorities made a huge mistake by fighting growing social dissatisfaction rather than seeking to address complaints. If in the autumn the Moscow protests are

² <http://www.inosmi.ru/politic/20120525/192559732.html>

renewed, accompanied by a new wave of socioeconomic unrest in the regions, the situation for the Kremlin will be far less manageable.

Regardless of how the situation develops, the events of last winter and spring played a highly significant and positive role. Not only did they launch the political transformation of Russia, they contributed to the accumulation of social capital and restoration of trust between individuals, provided a positive example of collective action, and helped transform Russians into active citizens.

Elliott School of
International Affairs

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