

The Passive Majority in Russian Politics

CAN QUALITY BEAT QUANTITY?

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Viatcheslav Morozov
University of Tartu (Estonia)

Reacting to the events in Moscow of May 6, 2012, when opposition protests led to massive clashes with the police for the first time, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the protesters as “marginal personalities” who were far outnumbered by those demonstrating in support of President Vladimir Putin. This assessment is widely shared by Russians loyal to the regime, both officials and ordinary people. At a superficial glance, it is also corroborated by polling data. These show support for Putin at levels above 60 percent, while opposition meetings are approved of by about a quarter of voters, with less than 10 percent ready to take part in street actions themselves.

Unsurprisingly, these figures cause little enthusiasm on the part of anti-government activists. In particular, they argue that opinion polls cannot be trusted because their results are suspiciously similar to the outcome of the elections: since the elections were rigged, it can only mean that poll results have been falsified too. This concern has been voiced most dramatically by the president of the INDEM foundation, Georgy Satarov, who in April 2012 described electoral sociology as a “whore” that “is used by the authorities to cover up the ignominy of their falsifications.”

In this memo, I argue that these mutual accusations are based on a number of misconceptions. In particular, they fail to take into account the important difference between political activism (including street action) and voting. It is always a minority who takes politics to the streets, but the consequences of such actions can be radical and revolutionary. National elections, on the contrary, usually mobilize a majority of the adult population but seldom bring about radical change. A failure to appreciate these differences leads to conflicts and conspiriological “explanations,” distorting the wider picture of what is going on across Russia today.

Passive Majority and Regime Support

Prior to December 2012, the oppositional social space in Russia was marginalized and fragmented. The sudden and massive mobilization of the opposition after December 2011 parliamentary elections led to a dramatic expansion and consolidation of various politicized social networks. Online communities were given a huge boost by the fact that many of their members took part in meetings and demonstrations and had a chance to communicate face to face with likeminded people. As I pointed out in a previous memo, the qualitative change in how their social environment was structured provided the opposition supporters with a much stronger feeling of support on the part of their social environment, something that is often termed “ontological security.”¹ Those who previously might have seen themselves as an insignificant minority while most of their compatriots rallied around Putin now felt they were part of a legitimate political force. Moreover, they claimed that this force represented the Russian people against the corrupt state that had been hijacked by the “party of swindlers and thieves” (the ruling party, United Russia).

There is no doubt that the opposition’s claim to represent the Russian people is as legitimate as the government’s. Theoretically speaking, since any political community is infinitely diverse, all claims to representation have equal status before they can be tested in practice. It is only political struggle that decides who gets the power to rule in the name of the people. Empirically speaking, it is also clear that the number of opposition supporters makes it an influential political force and that they might even constitute a majority in Moscow and St. Petersburg, or at least in some districts in these two major cities. These numbers would be much higher if Russian media were free and no political parties or movements were discriminated against. As it was, the number of votes cast for United Russia in parliamentary elections, and for Putin in the presidential one, were likely inflated to a significant degree by outright fraud.

At the same time, many opposition activists tend to underestimate the degree of support that the party of power, and Putin personally, continue to enjoy among the Russian public. This distorted vision is in many respects natural and even inevitable, and has to do with a number of sociological and psychological factors. Generally, people tend to follow media which largely represents their position, and to discuss politics with individuals who share similar views. The uneven geographical distribution of pro-government and opposition support increases the chances that an average Russian will receive positive feedback from their local environment. If one were to treat their own personal circle as a sociological sample, it would be one that was strongly biased in favor of their own standpoint.

¹ “Of Jackals and Hamsters: Dividing Lines in Russian Politics and the Prospects for Democratization,” PONARS Eurasia [Policy Memo No. 193](#), George Washington University (June 2012).

This “excess” of ontological security that many people developed during the surge of political activity at the end of 2011 and first half of 2012 made them look at the results of opinion polls with amazement and mistrust. There are, however, additional factors that help explain the fact that pollsters cannot detect electoral fraud with a sufficient degree of precision. First of all, opinion polls and election results reflect the views of two different groups: respectively, the adult population as a whole and those who made it to the polling stations. The first group includes people who did not vote, either as a result of a conscious decision or because of a lack of motivation.

Second, according to the studies conducted by the Moscow-based Levada Center, the electoral behavior of up to half of Russian voters can be described as driven by either inertia and conformism or habitual submission. They might not hold strong pro-government views, but they still vote as they are told by their bosses or by state-controlled television channels.

Finally, as pointed out by Levada Center director Lev Gudkov in his response to Satarov, most poll samples are naturally skewed toward the social middle and under-represent those groups more likely to be in opposition (the most active people who work and travel more, the richest who value privacy, and the marginalized who fall through the mesh of official registers that pollsters have to use). An estimation of all these factors, according to Gudkov, gives the possible effect of electoral fraud at the level of 3.5-4 million votes, or 4 to 6 percent. If correct, this means that United Russia was supported by at least 40 percent of Russian voters while Putin would still have received more than 55 percent, even if the results were not directly rigged.

We know that such popularity relies to a large extent on brainwashing by the state-controlled media, but this does not make it less real in contemporary Russian political life. No other sources can provide any evidence to suggest a significantly different assessment. The image that some opposition activists seem to share of a government that is hated by the entire population and only held in power by blatant electoral fraud is an illusion.

The Active Minority: Going Beyond the Numbers

The argument in the previous section, however, does not validate Peskov’s claim that anti-government protesters are a bunch of marginal elements with no serious political agenda. As indicated above, “the party of power” depends on passive voters who do not hold any strong political views and vote reluctantly and mostly under pressure. If their material interests are affected in the future (if, for instance, the government is no longer able to provide the same level of social security), it is very likely that they would, at the very least, refuse to support the regime.

Opposition supporters, on the contrary, are far better motivated and conscious about their political choices. Even when they do not vote, it is because they choose to boycott the elections, not because they are too lazy to go out on a cold winter day. Many who go to demonstrations irregularly are very active in their own web-based communities. The most important activity of this kind is sharing information that the authorities prefer to conceal, making the latter task very difficult, if not impossible.

The key point in this regard is that street politics rely on a very different arithmetic and are never conducted by a majority of the population. When the normal institutionalized political process breaks down and people go to the streets, it is the active minority that takes the fate of the nation in their hands. At the peak of demonstrations against the massively unpopular East German communist regime in 1989, the number of protesters reached 500,000. The dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt was brought down in 2011 by Tahrir Square protesters whose numbers never exceeded 300,000. Impressive as they were, these numbers never even came close to anything like a majority of adult citizens. Indeed, it would be completely unrealistic to expect every second adult in a country to be willing and able to leave their daily business and take part in a street action, even if they share its goals. What decided the outcome was a swing of the passive majority away from the government, which gave active adversaries of the regime a chance.

Russia's own recent record is also impressive. The 1991 coup in the USSR was not countered by any mass protest—instead, a relative handful of people gathered around the Russian parliament building in order to protect the democratically elected institutions of the Russian Federation. On the night of August 19, when everyone still took the plotters seriously, there were no more than 4,000 people there. Later on, when the failure of the coup became evident, their number increased by about tenfold. Barricades were also built in St. Petersburg and some of the capitals of the union republics, but the people who erected them were still a tiny minority in relation to the total population of the USSR. And yet, it turned out, they represented their respective nations, which were about to break apart from the Soviet Union.

In short, it is not numbers that decide the outcome of political crises but the overall political situation. In the Soviet Union in 1991, the crucial factors were that the miners and transportation workers were ready to go on strike, while the army was reluctant to use force against civilians. Such circumstances are difficult to predict in advance; political allegiances often switch quickly, especially in turbulent times. That nearly all normal channels of political communication in Russia today are blocked or distorted further increases the chances that the government will one day face an unpleasant surprise.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Recommendations on the basis of the above analysis critically depend on the target audience. Assuming that the key interest of the current regime is self-preservation, portraying the pro-democracy activists as marginal elements sponsored by the West is a smart move. This tactic is further supported by a number of new repressive laws that were hastily adopted in the summer of 2012. However, repression against the opposition does not solve the long-term problem of widespread paternalistic attitudes that hold the government directly responsible for the well-being of the population. A nation in which such attitudes are predominant is easier to govern during times of prosperity, but such periods inevitably come to an end. It is, however, unclear what can be done about this

problem, as any systemic solution would involve a democratization of the Russian political system, something the current elites are eager to avoid by any means.

If, on the contrary, democratization is one's goal, it is important to be realistic about the degree of support the regime continues to enjoy, and to think ahead about a political agenda that could attract today's passive majority. The current liberal opposition might lean too much to the right to be up to the task. A neoliberal phraseology emphasizing the interests of the entrepreneurial class, as well as a rather unsophisticated version of anti-communism, has little appeal among those social groups most likely to switch their loyalties away from the regime (industrial and agricultural workers). So far, the only political platform that sounds appealing to them is radical nationalism.

Finally, the recent crisis has led to a spread of conspirological explanations even within academia. These greatly exaggerate the capacities of the Kremlin and its spin-doctors, obscuring the real state of affairs, and add nothing to our understanding of the current situation. The Russian state is indeed powerful and corrupt, but exactly because it is corrupt, it cannot be as powerful as some imagine. In particular, the Kremlin's influence over the results of elections is rather limited, and not every voter is brainwashed. In sum, various political groups in Russia enjoy far greater political autonomy than most mainstream analysts are prepared to admit. The way out of this predicament is to assess not just the quantitative but the qualitative aspects of the political landscape, in particular differences in motivation and mobilization patterns between pro-government forces and the opposition.

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