

Protests Without Leaders

MAKING MULTIPLE CHOICES INTO A SOURCE OF STRENGTH

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One striking and puzzling feature of the wave of protests that has risen in Moscow since the fraudulent parliamentary elections last December is the absence of a group of leaders united by common goals and organizational ties. Indeed, most successful “color revolutions” (or “velvet revolutions” before them) have had one or more charismatic champion. Take for example the Viktor Yushchenko-Yulia Tymoshenko duo in Ukraine in 2004, or the larger-than-life personalities of Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa that defined the *anno mirabilis* of 1989. On the other hand, the list of triumphant leaderless uprisings—from Berlin’s Alexanderplatz (1989) to Cairo’s Tahrir Square (2011)—is also remarkably long. It is not so much the mythologized history of Russian revolutions as the excessively personalized nature of the current political system that compels observers and rebels to agonize over a key irresolvable question: “If not Vladimir Putin, then who?” It may turn out, however, that the confusing multiplicity of speakers who tried to capitalize on five minutes of fame at rallies on Bolotnaya Square or Sakharova Avenue is not proof of the weakness of the opposition, as President-again Putin tends to believe, but a source of strength.

The Old Guard and the New Energy

There already had been a hard core of professional protesters in Moscow before the eruption of discontent in December. It was only natural that these veterans tried to take charge of the unexpected exponential growth in crowd power. A few of them, such as Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, and Ilya Yashin, succeeded and have spoken or been involved in most of the rallies. Others, like Garry Kasparov, Mikhail Kasyanov, and, most notably, arch-oppositionist and leader of the *Yabloko* party, Grigory Yavlinsky, have essentially opted out, maintaining only a virtual presence in the fast-evolving

campaign. What is clear about both groups is that the public attitude toward them was rather skeptical from the first large event on Bolotnaya Square on December 10, 2011, to the “season finale” on Sakharova Avenue on June 12, 2012; they are widely seen as déjà-vu figures from yesteryear who try to stay relevant but have no clue about the aspirations and opportunities of the new agenda.

Three proto-leaders who managed to gain popularity with the masses and the attention of the media are leftist radical Sergei Udaltsov, anti-corruption blogger Aleksei Navalny, and eco-activist Yevgenia Chirikova, each of whom have built a network of followers. What has granted them credibility with wider audiences is that they have been neither tainted by former involvement with the “corrupt” establishment, like Kasyanov and Nemtsov, nor compromised by failures to build a meaningful opposition group, like Ryzhkov and Yavlinsky. Navalny is also networking with nationalists, while Udaltsov has scored many points by showing undeniable personal courage and a readiness to defy the rules for street protests as set by self-serving authorities.

One distinguished newcomer to the political arena is flamboyant billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who managed to gain 8 percent of the vote in the 2012 presidential election. However, he made only a few cameo appearances at rallies, on the assumption that his support base lies elsewhere. Former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin could hardly have been encouraged by the whistling that accompanied his speech at the Sakharova rally. Mikhail Khodorkovsky could emerge as a leader with unique moral authority, but only after he gains his freedom back, something Putin is determined to prevent. The uprising of the urban middle class inevitably generates splits in the ruling elite, but the street party is not very kind to defectors from the Kremlin camp, and it is definitely not ready to accept them as leaders.

Masters of Culture Take to the Streets

The obvious shortage of moral authority in Russia’s disorganized political “vanity fair” is compensated for by the firm engagement with the protest movement of a remarkably strong cohort of men and women of letters, images, tunes, and tweets. The impact of traditional and modern culture in shaping the brewing discontent among the “creative classes” was important even before the first Bolotnaya rally, but from that event on, a number of well-known artists have stepped forward to initiate and organize mass manifestations.

Keeping with old Russian tradition, writers play the most prominent role in this “cultural offensive.” Two such key figures have been popular novelist Boris Akunin and the variably gifted Dmitri Bykov, who authored a series of satirical shows called *Citizen Poet*. In the tense weeks after Putin’s inauguration, they staged a Writer’s Walk down the boulevards of Moscow. Thousands joined in, reclaiming the right to gather freely in the streets. Print and broadcast journalists added their numbers to the cause—three key members of this guild are Olga Romanova, Leonid Parfenov, and Ksenia Sobchak. There are also a good many bloggers, among whom Rustem Adagamov (Drugoi) stands apart. Together, these people provide appealing information coverage of the activities and make them a “must-go” for the cultural elites, but they do not venture to the podium.

Rock music generally underdelivers in exploiting the rich protest theme, but Yuri Shevchuk has emerged as an iconic figure drawing in thousands of fans. Conspicuous by their absence are movie stars and sports celebrities (although Putin recruited massively from these groups in the course of his election campaign).

It is striking that those like Akunin, Parfenov, Romanova, and Shevchuk have been propelled to take greater responsibilities than they expected, even though they are not entirely comfortable with their roles. This is not so much because they are able to hugely expand audiences by speaking at rallies and initiating discussion in the blogosphere, but because they command far greater respect than most aspiring politicians. This public trust doesn't rub off on Nemtsov or Yashin even when they are standing next to Bykov or Parfenov on the podium.

Micro-Party Politics and Regional Torpor

New legislation on registering political parties and on holding conditional elections for regional governors opens up an opportunity for re-organizing the opposition movement and, over time, facilitating the natural growth of strong leaders. Initial signs, however, are not so encouraging, and the shortage of time is not the only problem. Ryzhkov restored his Republican Party of Russia and merged it with PARNAS,¹ led by Nemtsov and Kasyanov, but in the eyes of many newborn rebels this outfit carries the baggage of old failures. Vladimir Milov formed the Democratic Choice proto-party and began to squabble with most other groups while seeking an alliance with *Yabloko*, which cannot re-energize its tired base among the post-Soviet intelligentsia. Prokhorov has discovered that his six million-strong electorate is not particularly keen to march under his banner and opted for registering a professional party, Civic Platform, that is supposed to provide various political and legal services to independent candidates. Kudrin reduced his aims to chairing an expert club called the Committee for Civil Initiatives, which could be useful for stimulating dissent in the ruling elite but has slim chances of becoming the nucleus of a liberal party.

Attempts to cultivate regional networks in order to add vitality to these micro-parties have brought sour disappointment. Prokhorov had an unpleasant reckoning with reality when, at the mayoral elections in Krasnoyarsk (supposedly his playground), the candidate he promoted came third, far behind the United Russia candidate, while turnout was just 21%. The campaign to rally support for challenger Oleg Shein in the crudely falsified mayoral elections in Astrakhan came to naught, first of all because locals were far more familiar with his checkered background than were the Muscovite "guests." The only regional activist who has managed to gain a national profile is Yevgeny Roizman, who runs the City Free of Drugs campaign in Yekaterinburg, but this fame has been seriously damaging for his cause. The middle class in most regional capitals may be quite skeptical about United Russia, but it is not ready to rise against Putin. Governors presiding over coalitions of local clans are also able to control the political situation, as the first series of regional elections this autumn is set to confirm.

¹ PARNAS: "People's Freedom Party For Russia without Lawlessness and Corruption"

New Political Wine into Old Wineskins

This evaluation of organizational setbacks and non-starters in the opposition camp may appear depressing, but what it really confirms is that traditional forms of structuring discontent have been exhausted, not least because Russia's quasi-democratic regime has invested so much effort into suppressing and compromising them. Putin's henchmen still target Udaltsov, Navalny, and Yashin with calibrated repression, anticipating that "decapitation" will lead to a de-escalation of protest. This policy is clearly not working, as the opposition rank-and-file respond with new mobilization efforts at every turn of the Kremlin screw, but it also does not turn the defiant dissidents into real leaders. The remarkably joyful crowds at the street rallies are not really looking for a champion of their cause; their short speeches provide entertainment rather than casting for a short list of finalists.

The multiplicity of not-quite-leaders makes it possible to unite a wide variety of grievances and aspirations under the "white movement" banner, but it also makes it difficult to formulate meaningful goals other than "Down with Putin!" Few protesters, for that matter, feel inspired by the amorphous *Manifesto of Free Russia*, which was presented at the June 12 rally (available at ej.ru). While some amount of this outpouring of discontent is undergoing a more traditional crystallization, as small groups form larger structures, a larger portion of the emerging creative class is opting for horizontal networking rather than vertical structuring. The rallies have provided a unique opportunity to transform virtual friendships of social networks into an easy camaraderie of street crowds, which in turn has provided a new impetus for the protest blogosphere to expand. This interplay of virtual and real worlds was captured by one of the handmade posters present at the June 12 rally: "Do you see this picture on your computer screen? Get out into the street!"

The joy of discovering a great many real people dissatisfied with their lack of political representation translated into a carnival atmosphere in the streets. But this breakthrough in the evolution of Russian society has not facilitated the growth of political parties. Instead, many experimental forms of political organization have sprung to life. They were visible for a week in the anarchist but perfectly disciplined "Occupy Abai" camp (named for a monument to Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbaev, where the roving protesters had finally settled). They then migrated into the parallel worlds of unregistered networks and social interest groups. It is impossible to measure what quantities of energy are accumulated there, but this diffusion phase is far different from the apathy and "internal emigration" characteristic of the mature Putinism of the late 2000s. Any spark, like the tragedy of Krymsk, which was hit by deadly flooding in July, could trigger a fusion of invisible networks, producing a powerful release of social energy.

Conclusion

In the coming round of escalation in Russia's political crisis this autumn, no single protest leader will emerge. Indeed, a breakdown in Putin's power structures would probably occur more quickly than the opposition would consolidate. It is also clear that

regional political dynamics lag far behind those in Moscow (with St. Petersburg coming in a not-very-close second). It is unlikely that a nationally-recognizable figure will emerge within the fragmenting political space from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. This, however, does not mean that Russia is set to plunge into unstructured political chaos.

The opposition's immediate task is to double the average size of Moscow street rallies to 200,000-250,000 participants. This could be achieved by greater mobilization of students, which in turn requires recruiting several new young leaders rather than improving on the advertising of existing "goods." The turning point would be in another doubling to the half-million crowd, which could very well prompt an implosion of the regime, abandoned by its defenders. Such a breakthrough depends upon connecting streams of political and economic discontent by merging the "white" opposition with the left-leaning "have-nots." This could necessitate alliances with several factions in the Just Russia and Communist parties. The leadership podium would thus become even more crowded. This is a recipe for considerable quarreling and squabbling in any post-Putin turmoil – but not necessarily for disaster. The fundamental political challenge is not to empower a triumvirate of Messrs. X-Y-Z but to dismantle the over-centralization of power and to establish a broad coalition of diverse interests, a separation of powers, and a pattern of responsibility to the electorate – the kinds of things that one usually calls democracy.

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