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Russia

Russia: The Protest Movement is Younger, Poorer, and More Left Wing

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As conspiracy theories about Trump-Russian “collusion” and fatuous claims about Putin’s iron grip have dominated American headlines for the past two years, the politics of the Russian street have undergone a noticeable transformation. Despite the authorities’ best efforts, mass street protests have become a fact of Russian life. The mass protests for fair elections in December 2011 aroused intellectuals’ interest in opposition politics in the large cities. Seven years later, the aesthetics of protest have changed. Today’s protests are more and more defined by youth from poor families from provincial cities. This is a welcomed development, proving once again, that politics in Russia is far more vibrant, especially among young people, than the American media would have us believe.

There have been three waves of protest in Russia over the last decade: protests in response to vote rigging in 2011 parliamentary elections that stretched into 2012; anti-corruption rallies of Alexei Navalny supporters in 2017; and actions by opponents of pension reform in the summer and fall of 2018. The largest of these protests involved, according to estimates, more than a hundred thousand of people.

“The situation today is fundamentally different than 2011, when people were pleasantly surprised to discover they weren’t alone in the streets. The composition and structure of the protest has since changed,” notes Oleg Zhuravlev, a researcher in the Laboratory of Public Sociology and Professor in the School for Advanced Studies at Tyumen State University. Researchers studying the Russian protest movement for several years agree.

Moral Protest

The 2011 protests on Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square are often described as a “middle class revolt,” “a revolution in mink coats” or as rallies of the “creative class” or “office hamsters” (minor office clerks). While the protesters did, indeed, appear wealthier and more educated than the general population, sociologists have disputed the idea that the protests were at the hands of the middle class. Protesters’ social-economic backgrounds were more modest than initially assumed.

According to a Levada Center poll, forty percent of the participants in the 2011-2012 protests in Moscow said that they could afford fancy things, but not a car, an item considered a marker of Russian middle-class life. Thirty percent admitted that they skimp on food and clothing, and only three to five percent stated that they don’t refuse themselves anything. Most of the protesters were between 25 and 40 years old with a college education.

In fact, the protesters tended to avoid associating themselves with any social group and rejected demands that could break the unity around a universal slogan of fair elections. After years of no mass protests, the diversity of participants was a revelation in and of itself. “It showed that not only could we go to work and live our personal lives, but we could also protest together. People reinvented the public sphere anew,” says Oleg Zhuravlev.

According to Artemy Magun, a professor of political theory and democracy at European University, many protesters identified with the people (in the sense of the nation or ordinary people) or with “those who cared.” As Alexander Bikbov, a sociologist with the Independent Research Institute, noted “poverty and social stratification were peripheral for protesters compared to values of honesty and dignity.

The Fleeting Unity of Differences

According to Oleg Zhuravlev, post-Soviet protests are de-ideologized and reactive (“Protect the trees,” “Every vote must be verified.”) and imbued with moral rhetoric. “In 2011, people invested morally in the act of voting. Everyone knew Russian elections are falsified, and no one gave a damn, but now many decided that their vote had been stolen and gathered in the streets as a result.”

“The sudden unity of differences was the essence of the Bolotnaya protests. It was important for many protesters. For example, such people voted in elections for the opposition Coordinating Council (a body established in autumn 2012 to direct the protest movement) and “ticked” a ballot for a leftist, a liberal or a nationalist,” a source told Eurasianet.org. The failure of the protests, the repression of their participants, and the subsequent annexation of Crimea led many to forget about the protests and the euphoria of the time. Many participants in the protests turned away from the opposition. Protest activity declined or transferred to local activist groups created by former “Bolotniki” [participants from the Bolotnaya Square in which tens were tried and imprisoned]. Participants in such initiatives usually devoted themselves to urban renewal and ecology, and split over the question of taking on the annexation of Crimea and the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine. According to Zhuravlev, however, this split was not as much a death knell as previously thought. “Since activists were engaged in specific causes, they decided that “events in Ukraine were not important. It was better to not talk about them to avoid conflict,” says the sociologist.

New Youth

In 2017, the protest movement again loudly reared its head. The anti-corruption slogans largely repeated the demands of 2011’s “Snow Revolution.” Yet, observers were impressed by the massive involvement of teenagers, which stood in contrast to the stereotype of the protester as an educated, middle-aged professional. They quickly christened the events the “revolt of the schoolkids.”

Not everyone agrees. Immediately after the protests in late March 2017, Alexander Bikbov argued that the proportion of teenagers among the protesters was no larger than in December 2011. According to Svetlana Yerpyleva, who studies youth political activity, it wasn’t so much the number of students in the protests, although their numbers undoubtedly increased. It was their role in the movement.

“After the 2011-2012 protests, politically active teens took actions considered ‘suitable for children.’ As one teenage respondent from a local activist group explained, ‘I usually do something small. For example, I distribute flyers or send emails . . . I can’t do anything meaningful because of my age,’” Yerpyleva notes.

Today’s high-school students act without regard for adults, who are often conservative or have lost any hope for change. Teenagers not only attend protests, but often organize them, give speeches, and resist pressure from police and school administration. “None of the eleven teenagers I surveyed thought that people under eighteen were ‘stupid’ or ‘less mature’ than adults. On the contrary, they stressed that they are citizens and should be allowed express their grievances publicly; that it’s teenagers’ future that is at stake,” says Yerpyleva. In her opinion, such changes in self-consciousness sharply distinguish millennials from the young members of the movement for fair elections raised in the 1990s.

Oleg Zhuravlev finds nothing surprising in the politicization of today’s youth. It’s merely a reaction to the invisible but unavoidable presence of opposition politics in our lives. Today’s teens are growing up in a politicized environment, unlike their older brothers and sisters, who were timid when it came to protests.

From Liberalism to Populism

It's not just age. The class composition of opposition protests is also changing. If the metropolitan middle class were the predominant participants in the 2011-2012 protests (or, at least appeared so in eyes of most of the population), then the lower classes were entering the political stage in 2017–2018. “The interviews we conducted at Navalny’s rallies show that they had more poor people, young people and poor teenagers. The protest’s rhetoric also shifted to the left. This is connected both with the change in their social composition and with Navalny’s leftward shift. He’s sensitive to and anticipates public sentiment. By shifting from criticizing dictatorship to criticizing oligarchs, he clearly understood that going beyond a narrowly liberal or nationalist fringe would allow him to expand his constituency and become the sole leader of the opposition,” Oleg Zhuravlev believes.

Navalny’s rhetoric shifted even more to the left after the protests against raising the retirement age in which over 200,000 mostly provincial residents participated last summer and fall. Experts, however, say Navalny is not very pleased with this since it undermines his liberal socio-economic program. In his analysis of the pension protests, Ilya Budraitskis says the main reason for their defeat was the lack of united action, both from the “systemic” opposition of the Communist Party and the Russian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, and from Navalny, who is disinclined to unite with other oppositionists.

The pension protests had the potential of becoming a “unity of differences,” says Oleg Zhuravlev, if the opposition were capable of broad political alliances as in the days of the Bolotnaya protests. “The reform impacted the basic interests of various social groups, but [because of the time it would take to go into effect] it was not a shock for them. It took a lot of work to mobilize people to protest,” he notes.

The populist leadership of the modern Russian opposition movement strikingly distinguishes it from protests at the beginning of the decade. However, according to commentators, the situation may change again. “Since social groups in Russia don’t have a clear identity, the protesters are highly susceptible to the rhetoric of leaders.” “But,” Oleg Zhuravlev adds, “I wouldn’t call the Navalny movement personalistic. A great number of people interviewed at his rallies say: ‘We don’t personally like Navalny, but his protests are the only ones around.’ Today, an increasing number of people think not only in emotionally charged moral categories, but also in terms of group interests. It’s possible, there is already a critical questioning of Navalny from the most radical young protesters.”

Source [LeftEast](#) 19 April 2019.

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