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Russia

The Russia of the indignant

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The elections in Russia took place as usual, with massive fraud and the pressure of the regime to ensure the victory of the ruling party, United Russia. What has changed is the scale of the protests against this fraud. This time, a large part of the population is rising up to testify: “We did not vote for you!” [This article was written on 9 December 2011, in Moscow.]

Carine Clément

The figures do not mean much (but let us recall them all the same: 49.54 per cent for United Russia, 19.16 per cent for the Communist Party, 13.22 per cent for Fair Russia and 11.66 per cent for the party of the nationalist demagogue Zhirinovskiy). So the ruling party has lost the constitutional majority in the Duma and fallen below 50 per cent. But for most commentators, this figure overestimates the real score of United Russia by 10 to 15 per cent. And, in any case, it is a purely “designed” result, as the Russians say. It is the outcome of a concession made to the growing dissatisfaction of a large part of the population towards the “party of swindlers and thieves” (that is how the party in power is commonly designated, following a formulation invented and popularized by the blogger AlexeÏ Nabalny).

Indeed, at the beginning of the campaign, regional governors received from the federal centre objectives of the order of between 60 and 70 per cent of the vote. Unfortunately, this princely gesture was not enough to calm the anger, on the contrary. On the day after the elections, nearly ten thousand people demonstrated in the streets of Moscow, a few less in St. Petersburg. More than 300 people were arrested in Moscow, around 200 in St. Petersburg. That did not prevent the mobilizations from continuing in the following days, as well as the arrests. How to explain this reversal of the situation, whereas the majority of voters had for quite some time become accustomed to the fact that their votes were not worth much? Who are these people who took to the streets in spite of the threat of being arrested?

The mobilization results mainly from the increasing unpopularity of the party in power, not only because of its antisocial policies, but also and especially because of the arrogance of its representatives, of their contempt for ordinary citizens, of their corruption and greed. The most popular slogan during the electoral campaign, in any case among those who take even a little interest in politics, was: “Vote for any party, except that of the swindlers and the thieves!” And people began to hope that it would be possible to cock a snook at this party of bureaucrats and presumptuous leaders who think they can get away with anything.

Much more than during previous elections, ordinary citizens mobilized to be observers, for one or another of the opposition parties or even independently (a campaign to encourage people to be volunteers was conducted by among others the association GOLOS, which was denounced by the government for being in the pay of “foreign powers”). And it is one thing to vaguely hear about fraud, quite another to be physically ejected from a polling station because you cramp their style, to watch ballot boxes being stuffed, to see whole busloads of closely-guarded voters arriving, to have a protocol of the results in your hands and to find completely different figures on the official site of the Central or Regional Electoral Commission. The Internet is awash with videos and indignant testimonies published by these observers. It’s personal, it’s stupefying, it shocks people!

Many of these observers took to the streets, as did many of their friends, colleagues and relatives. And then there were all those who are active on Internet social networks, and all those, disappointed, who were expecting a more marked defeat of United Russia.

There are many young people, much more disrespectful than their elders, who bring a new style, a different relationship with authority.

There are very great numbers of new people, who had never up to that point set foot in any demonstration. And some, among these beginners, found themselves for the first time in a police cell, waiting for 48 hours to appear in court, in police stations that were absolutely not prepared to detain so many people, crowded together, without food. And finally seeing themselves sentenced to be detained for up to 15 days in prison! And to judge by accounts coming from behind prison walls, instead of being intimidated and apologising, these beginners started hunger strikes and radicalized. And once released, they took to the streets again.

Indignation with fraud, with the brutality and cynicism of the fraud, anger at being dispossessed of their vote, solidarity with those who were wrongfully arrested simply for having wanted to express peacefully their rejection of rigged elections – those are the ingredients of the mobilization which is now snowballing.

With, moreover, the support of opinion makers who are popular in their domain. Among them, there is a bit of everything: journalists, singers and other artists, columnists (including society columnists). That is also a sign, when these people openly start criticizing: is street protest becoming fashionable? (It was up to that point the exclusive realm of “losers” or “idiots”).

All the more so as, for once (this had not happened since Perestroika), events are taking place in the capital: it is Moscow, the overfed bourgeois Moscow, the privileged Moscow, which is setting the example. The media (apart from the two official television channels) cannot ignore such massive demonstrations in Moscow. The entire country watches attentively what is happening there, and follows in its footsteps. On December 10 a national day of protest against fraud has been prepared all over the country.

The parliamentary opposition parties play supporting roles, jump on board the moving train (and even then, not all of them and not in all the regions, and to a greater or lesser degree). People organize above all by themselves, through social networks and the Internet. Or else they use events organized by the political parties, but in order to completely take them over.

A word in particular on the liberal Right (represented by Boris Nemtsov, Ilya Yashin and Garry Kasparov, who are presented by the French press as the figureheads of the mobilization). Firstly, the mobilization is completely spontaneous and “from below”, without recognized leaders, and especially without party affiliation, neither to the parties of the official opposition (represented in the federal Duma), nor to those of the unofficial opposition. At most we can speak of sympathy towards this or that opinion leader (in particular the blogger already mentioned, Alexeï Navalny). But no party, no organization – political or social – can claim to be organizing the present wave of anger, even less to represent it. However, that is precisely what some people are busy doing, particularly the stars of the political show referred to above, who lead anti-Putin organizations such as Another Russia and Solidarnost. To make such people the spearheads of the present mobilization in Russia is to be profoundly mistaken, it is to confuse the Orange Revolution in Ukraine with the spontaneous movement of revolt, largely self-organized and refusing to be in any way instrumentalised (people want precisely to get their own voices back!) that is developing in Russia today. As proof of the democratic piety of Nemtsov, for example, it is enough to cite the latest scandal to date: on the night of December 8, behind the backs of the official organizers, Nemtsov came to an agreement with the Moscow City Hall to move the big rally on December 10 from Revolution Square to Bolotnaïa Square (which deserves its name: marshy) – without consulting any of the key people in the mobilization, and while one of the official organizers, Sergueï Udaltsov (Left Front) was lying on a hospital bed after a hunger strike started in prison, and while someone who is highly symbolic of the movement, Alexeï Navalny, was serving his 15 days custodial sentence, following the demonstration on December 5 in Moscow.

Another characteristic should be noted: the rather timid presence of the social movements, and even more so of the trade unions. Here there comes into play the fear of engaging in a fight that is too clearly political and the inflexibility of these movements to open out to causes not directly related to their primary objective of struggle. But although the

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social movements as such participate little, most of their activists are present on the ground. In Moscow, for example, Yevgenia Chirikova, leader of the movement in defence of the forest of Khimki (in the suburbs of Moscow) and rising star of the new social movements, is one of the emblematic figures of the mobilization in the capital.

To sum up, it is an atmosphere of street democracy of that is being created, something that has been rather foreign to post-Soviet Russia up to now. It is the awakening of those who refuse to be manipulated in silence. A big test for the durability and the perspectives of this movement will take place tomorrow, December 10, during the national day of protest.