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Russia

What happened on 26 March? Russia's movement against corruption and perspectives for the Left

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On March 26th, people in many Russian cities participated in rallies connected to the recent anti-corruption investigation by Alexey Navalny's Anti-corruption Foundation. One could say that these were the most numerous street protests of the past few years. In contrast to the Bolotnaya protests of 2012, which focused on demanding fair and open elections, the main issues these rallies addressed were the unjust distribution of resources and the Russian oligarchical system.

Many of the rallies were uncoordinated, which has inspired the intense interest of the police; the official mass media, however, has tried to ignore the events. In the rally in Moscow, there were about 7-8 thousand participants, according to the data of the GUVd (the Moscow State Police); there were about 10 thousand, according to the estimations of the eyewitnesses; and the OVD-info has reported 1,042 people detained. In Petersburg, about 10 thousand people also came out to Marsovo Polye. Afterwards, about 2-3 thousand people set off to the Palace Square, to Isaac's and to the Office of Civic Registration. About 130 people were detained.

More than 2 thousand people rallied in Ekaterinburg and over 4,000 came out in Novosibirsk. In addition, people took to the streets of Tomsk, Chelyabinsk, Saratov, Voronezh, Irkutsk, Perm, and other cities. Based on the data from the local mass media, photos, and the video footage from Echo Moscow, about 60 thousand people participated in rallies all over Russia.

Ilya Budraitskis and Kirill Medvedev tell us how everything went, how the present protest differ from the Bolotnaya rallies five years ago, what we can expect from it, and what this protest means for the Left.

Ilya Budraitskis: Today, a day after the events in Moscow and other cities, the liberal media is full of speculations about the "school kids," the fundamentally new age audience which Navalny was able to mobilize. The mass participation of youth in yesterday's "walks" is, of course, a fact. However, I am more inclined to agree with the sociologist Alexander Bikbov, who noted that, after all, the majority of the protesters belonged to that generation around thirty years old. Nonetheless, these protests extended well beyond the group that came out to the Bolotnaya protests five years ago. For many of the people who came out into the streets—“not only in Moscow, but in a dozen other large cities”—the vital question has become not the lack of political freedoms, but the widening chasm between the absolute majority of the population and the ultra-rich corrupt elite.

The present movement is born out of the economic crisis and the deterioration of the Putin social model. Navalny has deftly captured this mood, increasing the social-populist component of his investigations and public statements throughout the past year. He has clearly indicated that corruption is not a defect, but rather a part of a system which is based on large-scale upward redistribution of property. As to the pathos of his revelations, it has sometimes bordered on the red line of frank hatred towards the hedonist elite. One might say that right now, Navalny is doing what the Left called on the public to do during the Bolotnaya protests five years ago. He is widening the audience, drawing connections between political and social demands. The fundamental difference, however, is that for him, this is an instrumental, technical move, subordinate to an emphasis on his own status as the unquestionable leader of the opposition.

For the Left, this situation presents both new possibilities and new threats: the people, who came out yesterday to rally at the protests are more open to our ideas. And yet, at the same time, the configuration that is concentrated around Navalny's movement complicates the development of any other alternative, organized centers. In contrast to 2011, the protest has not yet become a place for the collision of different ideas. The Left participated quite actively in

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yesterday's protests in Moscow, Petersburg, Vladivostok and other cities, but was unable (and didn't even really try) to designate itself as a noticeable single pole of attraction. It is evident that throughout this year, events will develop at an accelerated rate and we must urgently draw conclusions from the experience of March 26th.

Kiril Medvedev: In part, the people who came out to Tverskaya street in Moscow were the Bolotnaya crowd; others were those who have been recently politicized and, overwhelmingly, as has been mentioned many times already, they were young people.

Importantly, through his film, Navalny has been able to emotionally overcome the effect of the Crimea and Donbass story, the forceful impact of which has paralyzed protest politics for the past three years. That's even more important than the specific facts that are being exposed.

Incredibly ably and practically alone, Navalny is destabilizing the system.

The breach that he is creating, the challenges that he is thrusting at the official Left, forcing it to react and, at least somewhat, become more radicalized, must be exploited. The best possible result would be a conditional unification of the forces unleashed in 1991 and 1993, that is, of those people for whom the fight for democracy is a fight against the usurpation of power by a party and those for whom this is a fight against the possibility of small groups of the rich and the privileged to control the majority (even when it's happening in the most lawful, uncorrupt, and "transitory" fashion). Retrospectively, the social forces of these two years typically get opposed to each other: now we have a chance for their carriers to come together. And, of course, yesterday's school kids, if they don't become disillusioned in politics, will ultimately adopt one of these two perspectives.

This unification would be the most terrible nightmare of the regime, as well as a quite unpleasant piece of news for those nationalists and liberals who hope, above all else, to call it quits on the Soviet heritage and its carriers.

Navalny, in his case, attempts to settle this paradox through the power of his own figure; thus, the unification of the movement is directly dependent on direct loyalty towards his persona. This is a problem. But no other serious oppositional movement, separate from the Navalny-initiated anti-corruption protest, exists or will exist in the near future. Therefore, naturally, we must be with those who participate in it. But by remembering how a pair of irreplaceable national leaders (first Yeltsin, then Putin) was forced upon us (partially by the same circle of people) in the 1990s, it is necessary to participate in these protests with the most democratic and anti-authoritarian program.

We don't need a Navalny cult; we don't need President Navalny or any other president. Nor do we need nationalism, which he tries to mobilize for his own support. Therefore, this is a Trojan horse, which can implode from inside, destroying the entire movement, the society or, at the minimum, will again relinquish the power of initiative to the regime.

We need to reboot the system. We need a new field for political and ideological conflicts, one in which the Left will finally be able to be an independent, mass, democratic force. A field for transferring the expert and creative potential we have gained over the past years into real politics; enabling leftist economists to create a realistic program, in which corruption would not be seen as the main and only evil, but just one of the structural elements of our semi-peripheral capitalism, which must be destroyed. We need left politics and speakers to learn to clothe this program into lucid words and for artists to create it into a story that is as powerful as the Crimea and Donbass story ("Russians never forsake their own!") or as Navalny's film.

In other words, for the Left the time for real politics and mass propaganda is approaching. The goal is to speak and show complex truth in simple, emotional language. Otherwise, we might as well abandon all political ambitions.

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* LeftEast. April 1, 2017:

<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/what-happened-on-march-26th/>

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