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From One Election to Another: Breakthroughs and Deadlocks of the Anti-Putin Movement in Russia

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Context: Russian Post-Shock Society of the 2000s

In the early 1920s Vladimir Lenin coined the popular formula for communism: "Soviet power plus electrification of the entire country." In the early 1990s, the ideologues of "liberal reforms" in Russia began a dangerous game with another, dark and destructive side of electricity, through the application of "shock therapy" in the course of the breathtakingly fast transition from so-called "real socialism" to an extremely brutal and barbaric capitalism. Post-Soviet society now finds itself occupying a peculiar political and institutional landscape. It differs both from the social-democratic model of early Perestroika and from liberal "pro-Western" dreams about an open country close to presupposed European social, political, and cultural "standards." If in Western Europe the welfare state was slowly and gradually dismantled by neoliberalism, and societies therefore had more time and resources for the organization of resistance, in Russia the destruction of the previous social order happened very quickly. Contrary to liberal dreams, "real capitalism" has appeared as something absolutely other — as complete precarization and as difficult survival for the vast majority of the population.

In the 2000s, the social chaos of the 1990s was transformed into many localized catastrophes connected to the exhaustion of old Soviet infrastructures and industries — a long series of catastrophic events, starting with the crash of submarine *Kursk* and continuing up until the recent explosions of power plants, train crashes, and massive forest fires. During a period marked by Vladimir Putin's glorified "stability" program, the forms of post-shock "precarious life" were normalized rather than abolished. The structure of the narratives about a "new stability" invented by the Kremlin's ideologues bears a similarity to myth. It culminates in one founding event: the transition from that "chaos" of the 1990s to new positive "order." This narrative excluded all elements which did not support the picture of a new, stable order: pensioners, students, inhabitants of "depressed regions," migrants, and cultural

and educational workers. In other words, stability was an ideological and mass-media representation of everyday life focused on the “pleasures of consumption” of a minority of the population: the new ruling elite of big businessmen and corrupt state officials.

Precarization and the population’s shared quotidian vulnerability led to development of mafia-like networks of “alternative” forms of social protection, causing widespread skeptical attitudes to any form of open public or political life. People united into groups and tried to organize patriarchal, community-based circles of mutual assistance and mutual dependence. The result of this system was vast depoliticization and broad mistrust of any form of public or political life. At the same time, these networks of informal relations were themselves put into question when, over the last years, the system of double corruption — personal relations as a key to realization of any project, combined with economic bribery and nepotism — expanded onto the whole web of social institutions from top to bottom. Facing a host of problems — both at the workplace or in private life — indignant people who were not willing to join this informal system developed alternative networks of resistance. Gradually, this took the form of independent trade unions, political organizations, or social movements, in which many “new left” groups took part (groups of anarchists, anti-fascists, socialists, separate groups of intellectuals, and politicised cultural workers).

Of course, the mass explosion of protests against voting fraud during the parliamentary elections in December 2011 could not have come out of nothing, nor was it occasioned solely by formal procedural violations. For several years, the “Movement of the Cheated Share Holders” (people who had invested personal money in building houses, but were cheated by developers) has created a huge network of mutual help and juridical assistance for prosecuted activists and organized protest actions in many Russian cities. Another bright example of a successful protest movement was the movement for “Accessible School Education for Russian Children” — hunger strikes of tutors and parents that have since 2010 provoked similar actions all across Russia. Another recent example was the movement focused on saving Khimki Forest, situated near a small town next to Moscow. A significant part of the town’s population was opposed to the development of a new highway that would bring about the destruction of a considerable part of the local forest. This protest has grown into a wide and energetic civil movement, labelled by journalists as the “Battle for Khimki.” Some independent trade unions recently gained visibility by organizing several resonant strikes, including a strike at the Ford factory near Petersburg. On the liberal side of the political spectrum, a number of active and militant organizations and networks have been working against the violation of constitutional and human rights, and there have been many advances in building an alternative public sphere on the web, blogosphere, and social networks.

Mass Mobilization after the December Elections: Are We 146 Percent?

The first trigger for ongoing civil protest was the September 2011 Congress of the United Russia Party (the pro-Putin “ruling party”), at which then-president Dmitry Medvedev declared that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would participate in the next presidential elections. This surprising declaration (though expected by some observers) meant that Putin — applying the recently approved changes to the Constitution of the Russian Federation — had a real chance of being elected again for the next six years, and then maybe then for *another* six years. For many, this twelve-year perspective implied a clear and depressive prolongation of the current status quo of fake “stability.”

Explosive mass politicization became visible on the day of the parliamentary elections held on December 4, 2011, when a large number of city dwellers participated as civil observers at voting stations. It seems that almost every official percentage of votes for “United Russia” became not just a banal fraud, but manifested the quickly shifting balance of power and resistance in Russian society. It seems that virtually every report of the number of votes for “United Russia” was fraudulent. It was a fraud that had the positive effect, however, of provoking the first clashes between obedient and mercenary proponents of Putin’s regime, and a resisting multitude from below. These “proponents” of the regime included passive, lumpenized citizens, ready to forge ballots for fifteen Euros of hush money, as well as the heads of local election committees, police officers, and civil servants, all obeying orders under the threat of being immediately fired. Nevertheless, this huge army of fraudsters could not suffocate a revived civil resistance. Minute by minute, observers uploaded countless outrageous cases of violations of election procedures to web pages and social networks. The fraud was so absurd and clumsy that the ridiculous errors of official media were easily exposed. For example, when a table of voting results from the Rostov region was shown on one state-controlled TV channel, it was easy to see that the sum of the votes given to all the parties equalled 146 percent! The indignant reports of independent observers at voting stations were followed by reports about arrests carried out during spontaneous protests after the elections. They were not simply isolated incidences of a transition from neutral “observer” at a voting station to indignant witness and then to a mobilized activist. Rather, this transition can be extended to a considerable part of Russian society at the present time.

The first big mobilization in Moscow happened on the day following the elections (December 5), when about 7,000 people protested against voting fraud. After an official meeting, some protesters (mostly activists and young people) moved towards Lubyanka Square — the symbolic place of power where state security offices are found. However, the protesters were blocked by police and quickly dispersed, while some of the opposition leaders were arrested. The situation repeated itself the next day when people went to Triumfalnaya Square, another symbolic place in the center of Moscow, marked as a meeting point for the liberal opposition movement “Strategy

31,” which has struggled to defend the right to peaceful assemblies and freedom of speech over the last few years.¹ Authorities forbade the meeting and blocked the area with special fences, and military and police cars patrolled all along Tverskaya Street. On the perimeter of the square, Kremlin-sponsored youth organizations, protected by police, chanted and shouted incessantly “Putin! Russia!” — an uncanny and nightmarish spectacle. The police operated in their habitual mode of aggressive dispersal and the arrest of protesters. That evening, both ordinary participants and journalists were cruelly beaten, and police stations overflowed with arrests.

This action was the starting point of the government’s tactic to create the image of an “enemy” for the “good part of society” that had declared support for “stability” in Russia. The next meetings and rallies were prepared with growing anxiety in the protest community. The fear of the violence seen in 1993 during a rebellion against President Boris Yeltsin’s neoliberal reforms, when tanks shot at Parliament and several hundred participants were killed, found its expression in the popular mantra “Peaceful transition, not revolution!” Facebook users created special instructions aimed at preventing possible “provocations” in upcoming meetings. Many people, who probably took to the streets for first time in their lives, wanted to show the “peaceful and friendly” atmosphere of the rallies as opposed to imitating the provocative style of radical political activists.

The rally in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow on December 10 collected an unprecedented number of participants — from 60,000 to 100,000 people according to evaluations of the opposition press. Other Russian cities also joined in with demonstrations “for fair elections,” with an impressive number of protesters and inventive slogans and banners. People expressed their political opinions and feelings through subversive humor, or equally through genuine fury. For safety reasons, nobody from the opposition committee moved toward the Kremlin in conjunction with the prominent writer and politician Eduard Limonov, leader of the National-Bolshevik party. From this moment on, the protest split into a radical militant part and a previously apolitical, mostly liberal part made up of civil activists and urban citizens. Police tactics also changed. This change was caused by two factors: the negative reactions of international media and the decline in the Russian stock exchange after the violence at Triumfalnaya Square, and the rapid growth of the movement — police authorities were well aware that they would not be able to control the December demos through the exercise of brutal violence.

Thus the huge mass of protestors started to govern themselves. On December 10, the participants of the movement agreed to suppress any attempts at radical actions or appeals to mutually aggressive behavior, even in speeches and slogans. This new agreement about the securitization of protest was, again, the effect of a “post-shock” way of thinking — a kind of deadlock that arises when nobody believes in the positive changes made by revolutionary measures (after the Soviet experience and the 1990s) and nobody really believes in peaceful transformation without more

or less radical action. This tendency to self-securitization continued at the next gathering on Sakharovsky Prospect on December 24 and during the more recent protest march on February 4, 2012. In any case, it was clear for everyone that the peaceful atmosphere of the protests existed only during the biggest meetings and rallies. For example, when people went out to support Sergei Udaltsov, the coordinator for the Left Front coalition arrested during the elections on December 4 in Moscow for allegedly “resisting police officers,” and kept incarcerated for more than two weeks even while on a hunger-strike, the police answered again with the standard methods of violence against activists.

Class Composition of the Movement and Struggles for Hegemony

From the very beginning, the social and political composition of the protest was unstable. Its changes became visible in the shift from the first actions, dominated by political activists and youth, and those protests that followed after, which included middle-aged people, pensioners, precarious cultural and educational workers, as well as managers, office workers, and “middle class” citizens. The balance of power also fluctuated from the hegemony of liberals to attempts to legitimate the ultra-right, which was co-opted into the committee of opposition chaired by Alexei Navalny, a well-known populist blogger with nationalist inclinations (he became well-known after his many investigations of corruption in the biggest Russian corporations). Unlike liberals, leftist voices in the committee were not very strong, partially because of the unspoken agreement to forget about any radical leftist “rhetoric.” The history of the post-Soviet radical Left is another story; suffice it to say that, until now, the Left in public opinion has often been associated with the outdated and conservative Communist Party of Russian Federation and the vicissitudes of the Soviet past. On the other hand, thanks to local activism both from new Left organizations and critical intellectuals and artists, as well as the recent visible traces of global economic turmoil, the social agenda of the Left has acquired increasing importance in public debates.

Liberals attributed rising dissatisfaction with Putin’s politics to the so-called “middle class,” which has grown during the 2000s — during Putin’s era of “stability.” They very quickly adopted the rhetoric of “Peaceful transition, not Revolution” as an argument for future “normal market competition” of political forces in the election process. This idea of a political awakening of the middle class was transferred onto the whole of the Russian protest against unfair elections. However, this monolithic construct reduces or eliminates the many differences among protesters. It is not only a simplification, but also a conscious decision to ignore the social and political differences inside the movement. In fact, we heard demands on behalf of this “middle class,” and official mass-media *post factum* already assigned the label of “revolt of the urban middle class” to the movement.

But what about thousands of newcomers from small Russian towns who don’t have the official status of “registered” Moscow citizens (or similar status in other

big cities)? People from other towns are required to be officially registered with local authorities; without such registration, it is very difficult to cast a vote, as well as to receive medical treatment and other forms of social security. Renting an apartment in Moscow costs more than half of an office worker's average salary. The story is similar for students, teachers, artists, scholars, and pensioners, who now fall into the category of the "extremely poor" — nobody knows how they survive with the incomes they have (200 to 500 Euro per month). There is in fact an invisible army of the poor within the movement. These protesters are a symptom of more profound social dissatisfaction with the humiliating living conditions experienced by many in this well-educated urban population.

"You cannot even imagine/represent us!" This slogan, playing on the Russian verb with the double meaning of both "to imagine" and "to represent," sparked by a Petersburg radical student group in December, has become widespread as the most striking expression of the critical part of the movement. The protesters' distrust of liberal opposition leaders has provoked the mass self-organization of people who wanted to speak about their issues and make different suggestions about the tactics of struggle. For example, at the Sakharovsky Prospect rally on December 24, there were alternative platforms of students, teachers, cultural workers, and traditional civil movements. During the meeting there was an open people's microphone and a "Making your slogans" workshop organized by the Union for Cultural Workers and the Occupy Moscow Movement. Every day, new alternative committees, platforms, and activist initiatives have emerged since January 2012. The "constitutive power" of the people was growing and becoming more aware of the stalemate of all forms of mainstream representative politics. The rallies and actions on February 4 and 26 demonstrated exactly this — the joyful creativity of a network-organized multitude of protesters and their skeptical attitude to traditional political leadership.

After the Elections: The Divided Society

The ideology of the "urban middle class" definitely played a negative role in the protest. For small towns and villages, where people often do not use the Internet at all, the movement was represented via official television and the press as a revolt of the wealthy, who, moreover (as represented by the state media in the form of a bizarre conspiracy theory), are making use of funds from the United States in an effort to come to power, destroy the newly built "sovereignty of Russia," and continue the anti-social politics of the 1990s. Putin's PR supporters were quick to catch up on this "middle class" topos, and to speculate on class differences between Moscow and the provinces, between the well-fed middle class and the poorest segments of the population. The state-controlled media opposed the turmoil brought about by protesters to the populist idea of "stability." If in the beginning this propaganda image of the "enemy" did not have any social face, then it was clear that this image, ironically, was an inversion of old Soviet dogmatic Marxism schema: it was designed as the

face of the enemy of traditional working class, which now in Russia is concentrated mainly in the provinces — as a “bourgeoisie,” concentrated in Moscow, Petersburg, and other big cities.

Such a dangerous scenario formed a key part of the election campaign of the main Kremlin candidate, which has had some real results in raising Putin’s approval ratings. The “United Russia” party and the “Popular Front,” created by the Kremlin to imitate grassroots support of its politics, organized meetings in Moscow and across Russia to praise this notorious “stability” and its almighty champion, Vladimir Putin. A huge number of industrial workers in smaller cities, led by several treacherous trade unions, as well as state-dependent civil servants, were forced to attend the meetings via administrative coercion, blackmail, or payoff. Obsessive propaganda concerning this sacred “stability” and its sole guardian on central TV channels, all of which were fully subordinated to Putin’s campaign headquarters, also had a deep effect on mobilization of his supporters.

The results of the elections were shocking for the opposition movement, which had been full of hopes for the coming destruction of the current political regime after its repetition of the events of December — massive election frauds, followed by new waves of even stronger indignation, the mass mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people, and occupations of city centers until a final victory. Many thousands of people in Moscow, Petersburg, and other big cities applied to be observers at voting stations, and spent the night after Election Day on March 4 struggling to prevent or stop voting fraud until the final count and issuance of voting protocols. There were several initiatives launched for parallel and independent counts of the ballots. Indeed, there were many documented election frauds again which, by different estimates, added from 5 to 10 percent to Putin’s tally. But the official result of the election gave Putin 63.6 percent of the vote, which meant victory without the second round of elections expected by some optimists. Official media and authorities were fast to start solemn praises for the “absolute victory” of the new old sovereign.

Of course, independent of the balance of real votes for Putin and the frauds organized by his faithful servants in local administrations, the opposition committee declared the illegitimacy of the whole electoral procedure and new protest rallies were organized on March 5 and 10. The first rally at Moscow’s Pushkinskaya Square gathered fewer people than expected — around 20,000 participants. The desperate attempt to exceed the time limits of the gathering and to proclaim permanent occupation of the square by the militant wing of protesters led by the coordinator of Left Front, Sergei Udaltsov, was cruelly prevented by riot police, who arrested more than 200 participants. For most of the protesters, the return of police violence to previously peaceful meetings was a sign of the general attitude of authorities to repress any more or less radical protest against the state prior to the time of turmoil, and demonstrating once again “Putin’s strong hand.” However, most people who were arrested were released on the same day or the day after in Moscow, as well as

in Petersburg. The next protest in Moscow brought around 25,000 people into the streets, which clearly indicated a stagnation in mobilization efforts, though people came with the same outraged or hilarious banners — subversive appropriations of mass culture, such as a man wearing a Robocop costume promising to “clean the city from bandits.”

One cannot predict how or at what point the protest might reach its peak again, nor when it will be able to dismantle the regime of so-called “managed democracy” that has dominated Russia for the past decade. After a break in order to permit the rearrangement of actions and strategies, new massive opposition rallies were planned around the date of inauguration of the president on May 7. The obvious question raised by members of the opposition was the notorious “what is to be done?” What should be the next steps taken by protesters? What common political program should they voice in the future? And is it possible to generate a common program at all, taking into account the strong ideological differences within the movement? One part, reformist minded, has elaborated plans to make changes to the constitution, and to democratize laws regulating access to elections and to establish new political parties, and dreams of carrying out work at the micro-level of the municipalities; another is designing new creative and radical actions for civil disobedience. Radical-left participants criticize the liberal part of the movement for its conformism and elitist focus on the demos in Moscow and Petersburg, thus avoiding the difficult task of political work with the obedient pro-Putin voters in smaller towns. Many activists are thinking about long-term struggle and putting their hopes in the democratic elaboration of a more socially and economically attuned political agenda, dealing with topics such as the global crisis of neoliberalism and the question of social justice in front of expectations of a new wave of economic crisis and a new series of anti-social reforms in Russia.

Thus in the great “exodus” from a repressive and corrupted state, undertaken by a multitude of protesters in the last three months, it now looks as if we are in the negative and ambivalent phase of “murmurs in the desert” (to pick up on the well-known episode from the adventures of Moses’s people after their flight from Egypt). And as a whole, after the elections Russian society is deeply divided between passive support for Putin’s mythical stability and vibrant demands for radical change. The heated political debates on the streets, in families, at workplaces, and in universities are a fresh and stunning reality here. Something irreversible has already happened — mass politicization and a rising political consciousness cannot be stopped and trapped in banal mantras of representative democracy or closed off by Putin’s dubious electoral results. This situation of openness is itself an achievement of the movement, an openness which was unthinkable only three months ago in the midst of the despair of imagining the persistence of this uncanny “stability” for the next six to twelve years.

Even taking into account all its specificity, what is happening in Russia is not alien to the whole agenda of mass global protests initiated last year by the revolts in Tunisia

and Egypt, with all their breakthroughs and failures. The paradoxes and deadlocks of representative democracy have become more and more visible today on a global scale. For example, where you have formally correct procedures of representation and non-falsified election results, you also have Occupy Wall Street or the indignados movement as genuine expressions of the disappointment of 99 percent in the capacity of such procedures to really “represent” or transmit their needs and interests, or to address their social and economic concerns. In Russia, we have these representational procedures in violated and cynically distorted forms, and the same mass mobilization of indignant people, aiming (consciously or unconsciously) not only to repair the electoral process but to recognize the same unresolved economic issues and social injustices faced by the majority of citizens in all countries.

Notes

1. Article 31 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation concerns freedom of speech and assembly.

