

The Intelligentsia, the new iClass and the Psychology of Russian Protests

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If we want to understand the reasons behind the Russian protests in the run up to the presidential elections in 2012, then we need to distinguish between the organizers of the protests and the mass of the demonstrators that showed up on the most populous rallies gathering a crowd of some 40 to 50 thousands.

The organizers consist of a wide array of political groupings ranging from rightist liberals to racist nationals and communist anarchists. These people are naturally not unified in any kind of a political program and merely form a [Coalition of the Willing](#) driven by the farfetched idea to overthrow Putin and his party by means of street protests and anarchy using the methods of color revolutions. But these people are lagging behind the people they claim to represent for the Russian electorate has matured enough to analyze politics and social questions with their own brains and make their decisions after weighing the pros and cons of complex matters. In another article, [The Disparate Russian Opposition](#), I wrote about the protest organizers, the “opposition,” and the political map of Russia. Here I want to dwell a bit on the participants that followed the call in masses of 40 to 50 thousand people at the most populous rallies.

The bulk of the hardcore protesters close to the organizers, some 5 to 10 thousand people, consisted of such strange bedfellows as the so-called liberal intelligentsia and the racist nationalists. But at the last major attempt to a massive protest on March 10 on Moscow's Novy Arbat, the nationalists made a show of splitting off with the liberals demonstratively leaving the scene and *promising* not to join forces with the liberals any further.

With the nationalist leaving some 5 thousand people were left, consisting mainly of the liberal intelligentsia, who get their news from Echo Moscow radio station, the internet journal [gazeta.vru](#) (that is not a printing error, vru is Russian for lying), and Radio Liberty. These people are the successors of the Soviet cultural elite who proclaimed themselves “Intelligentsia” in praise of their supposed superior intelligence compared to that of the “mob,” as they think of their fellow citizens. The spiritual roots of this “Intelligentsia” date back to the 19th and 20th century pre-revolutionary Russia. It has been opposing and conspiring against the powers ever since the Decembrist revolt in 1825. It was the “Intelligentsia” who brought about the revolution of 1917, the movement, after the chaos they sowed, having been hijacked by Lenin and the Bolsheviks resulting in the not-so-liberal Soviet Union. It is also the liberal intelligentsia that in turn worked to bring down the same Soviet Union. And now they are at it again.

It is interesting to note that the more these people think of themselves as superior in intellect the thirstier they get for bloody revolutions and chaos as a means of self-affirmation. Recently it has been highlighted how the turn of the 19th and 20th century writers Ivan Bunin and Fyodor

Dostoevsky already identified the destructive and negative character of this self-proclaimed “Intelligentsia” in terms that are completely applicable to their modern day successors.

In *Cursed Days* (based on his diaries of 1918-1920), Bunin wrote about the revolutionary intelligentsia: "It is terrible to say, but true: were it not for the human disasters, thousands of intellectuals would have felt themselves very miserable. What reason then would there have been to gather, to protest, what to scream for and write about?" This is what gave grounds to the idealism of the Intelligentsia, Bunin concluded: “in essence an idealism of a very lordly nature, an eternal opposition, criticism, of everything and everyone. For after all criticizing is so much easier to do than actually creating something by your own work." And “the most distinctive features of the revolution,” Bunin noted was “a mad lust for the game, play-acting, posture, farce. It brought out the animal in humans."

Fyodor Dostoevsky in turn wondered in his diaries over the nature of the Russian liberals saying: "why is our European leaning liberal so often the enemy of the Russian people? Why then do the people that in the very Europe call themselves democrats always side with the people, or at least rely on their support, while our democrat is often an aristocrat who at the end of the day almost always serves the interests that suppress the popular force and end in domineering of the people by the superior ones."

The film director and Putin’s campaign manager Stanislav Govorukhin recently also quite aptly quipped the *dark essence* of the Intelligentsia.

Depending from what point of view to look at it, I find the concept “Intelligentsia” ridiculous and repulsive. It is ridiculous that certain people from the arts, culture, media and the leisured classes in general refer to themselves as “Intelligentsia” with the connotation that they consider themselves “the intellectual elite of the society,” with the further connotation that they regard themselves more intelligent than others. But the average journalist, detective fiction writer, painter, and rock musician is certainly not any better endowed than his fellow citizen to judge and pronounce on matters of social life and democracy. And it is outright repulsive when the people of this self-proclaimed “Intelligentsia” move on to really regard themselves as an “elite” whose opinions are supposed to count more than those of the vast majority of people whom they despise.

Naturally it is only to be recommended that artists, other cultural workers, philosophers and such people participate in political activity, as long as they understand that they do not form any special class of “Intelligentsia.” In fact, only normal people free from such kind of vanity can properly and intelligently judge life around us.



Picture: *Ilya Repin's 17 October, 1905*. -Members of the liberal intelligentsia rabidly demanding a revolution in Russia already in 1905. Note how interestingly Repin has captured the spirit of these revolutionaries in their bizarre facial expressions.

It was neither the nationalists nor the liberal intelligentsia that made up the bulk of the protesters but, as I affirm, basically apolitical affluent urban dwellers. Most political pundits refer to them as the “Middle Class.” But this is wrongheaded and based on a total miscomprehension of the concept Middle Class, a miscomprehension unfortunately shared by people of all political preferences. The mistake is to define [Middle Class](#) exclusively through the prism of people’s purchasing power (affluence) while it should be recognized that more fundamentally it is to be defined through social, cultural and historic factors. I doubt that the concept has much utility for describing social relations in virtually classless European democracies of the 21st century, like Russia. The concept developed in another age for societies that were literally organized according to adherence to classes. There were the classes of feudal landlords, clergy, bourgeois and peasants. Middle Class emerged to denote the salaried and educated urban people that could not be assigned to any of the aforementioned classes. But today all the other classes are gone (at least what comes to number and political influence), and instead the designation of Middle Class fits most all people. Nowadays the differences between people derive to a very small degree from the historic roots of a class society (especially in Russia which is the successor to the USSR where classes were eradicated, whether we are happy or not with the fact and how it happened) and are more based on personal fortunes and misfortunes, health and interests. With universal schooling and a radical change in living conditions in the rural areas and those of factory workers, I am very skeptical of the idea to exclude even those people from the denomination. Considering the ethnic and regional diversity of Russia, I may accede to the idea that not all people of Russia would qualify for being included in Middle Class, but at least 60 to 70% should be counted in (although I then still have a problem with determining who is to be counted out).

No better is the neologism “creative class” by which some political observers refer to the protesters. I wonder what these people are supposed to ever have created. The adventures of

detective Fandorin, or what? For sure they did not create the iPhones and iPads with which to access their Facebooks and Twitters.

People who have their thinking rooted in concepts instead of observed reality insist that in Russia only some 20%, or maximum 30%, constitute the Middle Class (interesting then, to which class do the rest belong?). They arrive at this conclusion by analyzing the figures of economic purchasing power and pronounce that only those people that can afford a second car, so and so many trips abroad, and a “euroremont” of their flats qualify. But if these are the criteria, then I definitely insist that we rather define these people by their iPhones and iPads. In fact, just for this propensity to use the latest gadgets and the mass hysteria social media, I prefer to refer to the bulk of the protesters as the *iClass*. (I owe this concept to a Russian friend of mine who first called these people the “iPhonchiki”). - Curiously enough a market survey (www.smartmarketing.ru) conducted at the site of protests on Bolotnaya Square revealed that the iPhones and iPads of Apple were predominant among the demonstrators, the iPhone being held by 49% of smartphone users while it only represents some 6% of the total Russian market of smartphones.

What motivates the *iClass* does not lend itself to a political analysis rather it is a question of social psychology and an analysis of the phenomena of mass hysteria. Many of the protesters are what we used to call young urban professionals, yuppies. Their grouch with Russia is that it is not like the West: the climate is not right, the beaches are far off, traffic is unbearable, service is poor, and the bureaucrats rude. Well-to-do and mobile they travel a lot. In the West all is better, they are convinced. They have been there. “Nothing to complain about the living conditions and quality of government,” they think after the experience of staying at elite hotels in the glimmering capitals of the world and the jet-set resorts. And what can beat tax-free shopping in London and Milan!

Back in Russia to stuff their pockets, they don’t realize that the 13% tax they pay on their income is only a fraction of what the Western governments grab from their citizens. (Funny enough, in the recent World Bank study on the competitiveness of Russian economy, they cite, approvingly, a study according to which Russians consider this lowest income tax in the world excessive). In Russia they are free to do with their money what they want. A liberal haven. But they don’t get it.

The *iClass* has a good command of English, so they have access to the constant Western propaganda directed against Russia in the Western media. They think they are privy to privileged truths. And they act upon that. All what is wrong they learn from the “free press.” The same press that lies that their protests gather 100 thousand people “braving the bitter cold” and that pro-Putin protests consisting of “bussed in, paid for, and intimidated state employees” garner only 20 thousand (as the venerable Associated Press lied to the global public). Many of them work in Western companies which usually run a more rewarding corporate culture than their Russian peers. They deal with happy foreign management with liberal expat compensation packages and hygienic corporate offices. “This is cool, West is better, Why aren’t we like that,” the *iPhonchik* thinks.

“I’m different, I am independent, I think for myself,” they learn from the *iClass* social media which they blindly trust - collectively. All converge in their new found independence.

Independently they joined the cheers of 30 or 40 thousand of their copies and shouted “Russia without Putin” – hoping the climate would change.

My point is that the iClass protests were driven by perceptions of Russia versus the West (their West of the elite hotels – not the homes with the 15 degree winter room temperature due to lack of central heating, or the households of the 40 to 60% personal income tax).

It is against this psychological backdrop that the real problems of Russia can be exploited, some of which represent fundamental political problems and a couple of mistakes of the leading powers.



Picture: Protests December 5, 2012. The liberal intelligentsia singing the same old song.

The real fundamental problems are corruption and bureaucracy, both inherited from the Soviet Union and aggravated in the years of criminal anarchy of the 1990's. But the iClass does not have any sense of history and no interest to analyze causes and effects. For them Putin is to be blamed just as he is to be blamed for the harsh winter, and the sweltering summer and forest fires. Twelve years in power and still corruption and bureaucracy, the iClass social media tells them to think. At the same time the propaganda they are the targets for tells that Putin is a repressive autocrat, who must be opposed by any means. But this just signifies that they share with Putin the rejection of repression as a means to cure the problems of corruption, but further than that their cognitive processes do not carry. They don't understand that it has been a fundamental condition to enable the fight against corruption to establish a central power with the main state functions in reality being subordinated to the government, something that has been achieved only in the last two or three years. There was no central government when Putin came to power, but now there are the rudiments of it. It is only now, first time in some 90 years, that the Russian state has acquired a legislative base and political force to tackle the problem in an intelligent and effective way. And now because the real Middle Class re-elected Putin we can expect that the fight against corruption will bear tangible results within next two to four years.

But although a lot has been made to fight the manifestations of an excessive, abusive and absurd bureaucracy it is not enough. The efforts here should be seriously stepped up to deliver fast and

tangible results. And no doubt it will happen, and that will be the best result of the iClass revolution. Here the government really needs to be on the right side of history.

Then finally we have the problems of the government's own making: the image of United Russia, the party of power, and the news programs of the state owned channels.

After the Duma elections both Medvedev and Putin acknowledged the image problem of United Russia which is mainly anchored in lining the party leadership and electoral lists with bureaucrats, mayors, and governors who lack popular appeal and a real interest to any kind of political ideology. (Other thing, that the ideology itself is not well articulated. For my part I suggest to build it around a platform of *Social Liberalism and Patriotism*). They occupy their positions in the party hierarchy and electoral lists the same way a bureaucrat is appointed. Many find that repulsive and do not bother any further with the ideology or political program.

The state-controlled television news have done a lot to destroy the image of Putin and Medvedev by constantly devoting so much of the air time to the daily activities of these political leaders. My impression has been that one third of the time goes to showing what Medvedev has done during the day, one third to Putin and the rest to other news. If somebody thinks that this kind of publicity works in favor of these politicians then they are dead wrong.

To conclude, we see that there is no Arab Spring in the air. We have a host of real and perceived problems. And it seems that the people around Putin have identified the real ones. The fight against corruption is now real and will bring results; daily life will be facilitated and bureaucracy will be cut down with tangible results in the coming years; United Russia will be given a facelift and hopefully turned into a real people's party; and there are encouraging signs that the television is changing. Together with continuing economic growth thanks to Putin's social liberal program these measures will secure the needed support for the government.