

The Disparate Russian Opposition

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By Jon Hellevig

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After the election season street protests in Moscow the media has been ripe with speculation as to the composition of the protesters and what is driving them. The Western media was quick to proclaim that the question was about a Middle Class “pro-democracy” movement “against Putin’s authoritarian regime” while the front men of the protest movement claimed that people were protesting against election fraud and “for fair elections.”

The Western narrative of the pro-democracy movement against a supposedly tyrannical Putin was based on wishful thinking and the motivation to fuel up the anti-Putin rhetoric that dominates Western news coverage of Russia. With a readership entirely dulled by a decade long propaganda the demonstrations in Russia were easy to serve up as yet another sequel of the travelling Arab Spring theater of revolutions as John McCain expressed in his tweet (subsequently removed from his Twitter micro blog after this living monument to Democracy in America sobered up.)

The “for fair elections” tag was anyway at least superficially right for it was the disappointment with the Duma elections that ignited the protests. But no supposed fraud neither in Duma nor presidential elections can be put down as the underlying cause of them. It is not what brought the people to the streets. Rather the well-planned “Election Fraud” campaign served as a point of convergence for a host of political groups and citizens without clear political preferences.

To get to the root causes for the (now faded) protest movement we have to first understand who was there. As noted, the political pundits claim that it was a Middle Class protest. But, I cannot agree with this contention. The whole idea is based on a cardinal misconstruction of the concept [Middle Class](#) and the failure to understand that at least some 60 to 70% of the Russian population should be counted in if this concept is to be used at all.

For this analysis it is crucial to distinguish between the protest participants and their organizers. The protests were organized by a host of political interest groups which converge in the belief that whatever is bad for Russia is good for their political prospects. These include the “liberal” pro-American politicians of the old guard like Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, Mikhail Kasyanov and the chess master Garry Kasparov; Yabloko, the party of the eternal political wannabe Grigory Yavlinsky; Alexander Navalny, who at times poses as a blogger and anti-corruption fighter but more fundamentally embraces the radical and racist nationalists; the radical nationalists themselves referred to as “The Russians,” led by people like Alexander Belov, Dmitry Dyomushkin, George Borovikov; the Left Front, a marginal revolutionary anti-capitalist movement whose leader Sergey Udaltsov successfully utilized the protest movement for his private image making campaign; some deputies of the parliamentary Communist Party

and A Just Russia Party. Finally this veritable [Coalition of the Willing](#) was joined by celebrities from culture and arts and not-so-arts like Big Brother hostess Kseniya Sobchak and the writer of some uninspiring historic detective fiction Boris Akunin.

We see from this collection of the willing that they are not unified by any political ideology. Considering this and the fact that there are yet other political forces in Russia, it is not quite correct to refer to these groups as “the opposition.” Well, clearly they are in opposition to the present elected government, but they are not *the* opposition. Bigger opposition forces are the mainstream Communists, who got some 19% of the votes in the Duma elections, and the electorate of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s LDPR (if not the party leader himself). This applies also for the A Just Russia of Sergey Mironov. Opposing the anti-Putin protest movement there were also quite significant groups which nevertheless could not be pinned down as pro-Putin (the “anti-orange revolution” groups).

What emerges is a quite normal political map of sympathies for various ideologies and causes. Which reminds quite a lot, for example, of the situation in my native Finland. The big difference with Russia is that in Finland the silent majority, which corresponds to Putin’s support in Russia, is for historic reasons split into three parties (the Conservative Party, the Center Party and the Social-Democratic Party) with very little differences in political platform, though. It is interesting to note that the winning mainstream candidate, Sauli Niinisto, in January presidential elections in Finland got 62.6 % of the votes (in second round after consolidating the mainstream vote). Compare this with the 63.6% Putin got with more or less similar political platform. It has not yet occurred to anybody to refer to the one third of voters who in Finland did not vote for Niinisto as “the opposition.” Yet less would anybody claim that the losing candidates were “pro-democracy,” as all those that in Russia oppose the democratically elected Putin are called.

It is more difficult to compare the Russian political map with that of USA because in the latter two parties have by hook and by crook monopolized the power so that all other political forces are essentially barred from challenging these twins of the US establishment.

Most importantly, Russia is in this respect a quite normal country. There is a wide spectrum of political preferences, tastes, which may change from time to time from issue to issue. Just like in any European civilization. Hereby the electorate has matured under the years of Putin so as to have the capability of analyzing political and social issues in a complex manner and draw the relevant situation bound conclusions after weighing the pros and cons. Russia is no more a third world country with an autocrat that people either love or hate and where as a consequence of this it would be easy to orchestrate a revolution fueled by hate, which is what “the opposition” is being employed for . When the Russian’s are told that “Putin should go,” then they want to know why so, who would come instead, what the pretender would have to offer, etc. But no program whatsoever was offered. Russians did not warm to the surrogate program consisting of the five official demands of the protest organizers:

1. Freedom for political prisoners
 - Frankly, there are none. Surely there may be criminals with political sympathies, but that is clearly a different thing.
2. Annulment of the election results

- The biggest opposition party of those that did not make it to the parliament, Yabloko, got 3.43% of the vote. Not very many there who would like to smash windows and burn cars on the streets to give it a rerun.
- 3. The resignation of Vladimir Churov, head of the election commission
 - 50% of the people have not even heard of this person. Nothing much to get excited about.
- 4. Registration of the opposition parties and new democratic legislation on parties and elections
 - This coincides with the government's initiatives and will come into law very soon. So no point in making a revolution for the sake of it.
- 5. New democratic and open elections
 - This point by definition repeats the second demand on the annulment of the results.

As Putin recently said: This part of the opposition needs to grow up and get serious about its demands and political programs. And so think the people who abandoned the protests after the initial euphoria. But as they start to formulate and communicate their programs and register their parties according to the new law, it will be evident that at least some 5 quite different parties will appear. We have already seen how the nationalists have walked out of the coalition.

To note that above I was only speaking about the organizers of the protests, not the participants in them. I think it is fair to estimate that the various groupings close to the organizers can in Moscow gather a following of 5 to maximum 10 thousand people to their street protests. (When the radical nationalists publicly stampeded out from the last protest held on March 10 on Novy Arbat only some 5 thousand protesters were left on ground). Yet some 40 to 50 thousand people may have participated in the three most populous protests in December through March. These 30 to 40 thousand other people, on top of the hardcore supporters, came for totally different reasons, which I claim have to do more with an overall frustration connected with their perceptions on how Russia compares with the West. But now as the protests have faded out we can for sure conclude that these frustrations were not addressed by the "the opposition" either with their demands on firing of Churkov and freeing the imaginary political prisoners. After all, they could see from their own experience that they were not imprisoned for showing up at the rallies.