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# New Eastern Europe



## THE ART OF REVOLUTION

# Whatever happened to “Russia without Putin”?

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*“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.” Karl Marx, 1852.*

Five years ago, tens of thousands flooded Moscow’s streets to protest against mass electoral fraud in Russia’s parliamentary elections. The elections were to determine the Russian Duma for the next five years. But they were really a vote for or against Vladimir Putin: the man, the politician and the system that he created. A few months before, Putin told the Russian people that he would run for a third term, rotating positions with then President Dmitry Medvedev, who would become prime minister. Many Russians viewed this “castling” as belittling. Insult became injury when images and videos of mass electoral fraud began flooding the social networks. Having had enough, the people hit the streets to exert their political agency.

The following months were rightly filled with euphoria. The protests were the largest in Russia since 1991. Politics “from below” had returned. Instead of lamenting the bleakness of the political present, many Russians, particularly the young, were imagining the political future. The protests gave birth to new leaders. But most importantly, the demonstrations demanded political recognition and representation. Alexei Navalny, riding a wave to become Russia’s oppositionist leader,



declared at the December 5th 2011 rally: “We exist! We are the power here!” One pithy protest slogan summed things up: “*Vy nas dazhe ne prestavlyae*te” a clever play on words which translates into English as both “You can’t even imagine us” and “You don’t even represent us.”

### Putin’s Nixonian moment

The mass protests in late 2011 and early 2012 changed Russia, but not in the ways the tens of thousands who protested that winter had hoped. Rather than a flowering of democracy as many desired, Putin has only further consolidated his authoritarian dominance over the last five years. Though crisis continues to plague Russia, five years after the people imagined a “Russia without Putin”, many today struggle to foresee a viable alternative to him. The Kremlin ultimately crushed any opposition through a mixture of co-option and coercion. But the defeat of Russia’s protest movement is larger than this. The Kremlin skilfully morphed Russian demands for recognition and representation from expressions of revolutionary desire to the basis of reactionary consolidation. One could call this Putin’s “Nixonian

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moment”, where Russia’s “silent majority” became the source for a new consensus. For what followed in Russia is a story about recognition and representation, a chronicle about who is and who is not a legitimate manifestation of the “people.”

The mass protests in Russia in 2011/2012 were part of a wider global explosion in the name of “democracy.” This “democratic spring” includes the “coloured” revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, and the anti-austerity protests in Ireland, Spain, Greece, the United States and the global Occupy movement more generally. Despite their regional specificity, particular demands, or distinct forms, all of these eruptions spoke to a “crisis of representation” and a popular surge for democracy, a desire that the voices of the “people” be recognised and taken into account.

In this sense, for Russians, the effrontery in the winter of 2011 was not simply Putin’s return but the manner in which it was announced. As Victor Shenderovich, a commentator on Ekho Moskvyy, noted: “These are people protesting because they were humiliated. They were not asked. They were just told, ‘Putin is coming back.’” For some, this humiliation was symbolic of the numerous humiliations in Russian daily life. As one journalist told the Levada Center’s Denis Volkov, “It is humiliat-

ing to live in this country. Surely, the protest and the slogan, ‘For transparent elections!’ is because of that. It is about everyday humiliations associated with living in Russia ... It is always unpredictable and humiliating. Elections, in this sense, are a very prominent example of this humiliation.”

For many observers and participants, the sheer existence of the protests – Navalny’s “we exist” – was considered a success, a political force in and of itself. Taken this way, the Russian crowd fell victim to what Jodi Dean calls the fantasy of the “beautiful moment” where the unleashing of the crowd’s “playful, carnivalesque, and spontaneous” communal energy “is taken to indicate political success.” The “beautiful moment” of the crowd’s success was echoed in the notion that the protests signified to many that Russia had crossed an irreversible threshold towards democracy. A *Gazeta.ru* editorial stated, “One thing is clear: The country will not be the same as before. It simply cannot be.” Similarly, novelist and protest participant Boris Akunin declared: “There is no way back from events such as these” and Masha Gessen opined in the *New York Times* “When there’s no going back” and prognosticated that “it may take months or it may take a few years, but the Putin bubble will burst”.

Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin’s architect of “sovereign democracy,” declared on Facebook that the crowd’s existence signified “We are already in the future.” Thus, the “beautiful moment” of the crowd stood for political change in and of itself. However, as Dean asserts, “the politics of the beautiful moment is no politics at all”. The crowd only opens the *possibility* for political change but does not represent change as such.

### Putin’s children

This is not to say that the crowd, especially as the protests grew in size, did not represent a power *in becoming*. At first the Kremlin was shocked that thousands of Muscovites packed the streets. Until then, protests in the capital were ritualistic dramaturgy where small crowds of left-wing radicals, nationalists or disaffected liberals gathered and were then duly dispersed by the police. This ritual caused a certain myopia within the Kremlin leadership when faced with truly mass demonstrations. Reports from Kremlin insiders suggest a period of panic and confusion within the leadership. Konstantin Kostin, then a Kremlin aide for domestic politics, said: “No one expected that tens of thousands of people would go out on the street.” This even extended to who exactly was protesting. “After December 5th, we understood there was a new element,” Kostin told UCLA political scientist Daniel Treisman.

Who was the new element? Many protesters and analysts hailed the birth of a new revolutionary subject: the Russian urban middle class. This class was given a variety of monikers: “the creative class”, “new Decembrists” (after the failed noble revolt in 1825), “angry urbanites” or “Putin’s children.” For many observers, the presence of this class – a middle class exercising political agency – fit into a self-evident historical eschatology. The assumption is that once authoritarian countries develop a middle class, that class inevitably presses for democracy. The middle class, therefore, inherently possesses a democratic consciousness which is activated once society reaches a certain level of modernisation. Disciples of this historical teleology present it as universal, regardless of a nation’s particular history, culture or societal configuration.

However, focusing merely on Moscow and St Petersburg silences the many protests in the provinces that suggest a far more diverse class composition irreducible to a concretised “middle class”. Some research has noted that the concept of a Russian “middle class” was a very amorphous and tenuous category that ran across the anti- and pro-Putin political divide. Nevertheless, both the opposition camp and the Russian government fell into the false narrative of the protests as simply the providence of the middle class urbanite. This would prove detrimental for the former and advantageous for the latter. For many within the Moscow protest leadership, crowds were a narcissistic reaffirmation that they represented the most

For many within the Moscow protest leadership, the crowds were a **narcissistic reaffirmation** that they represented the most conscious, progressive and active elements of Russian society.

conscious, progressive and active elements of Russian society. As oppositionist parliamentarian Dmitry Gudkov told journalist Mark Bennetts: “The conservative heartland will just sit and watch television to see what’s going on in Moscow. And if one day, instead of Putin, someone else will appear on TV, they’ll just continue to watch. They’ll say: ‘Oh, we’ve got Navalny, now. Or Gudkov. Let’s see what they tell us to do.’ And we will tell them.”

This was a major misstep on the part of the Moscow protest leaders and its spokespersons. Carving an artificial class divide imposed a chasm between them and the rest of “real Russia.” It is important to recognise that while the protests were on the surface about civil and political rights, social and economic justice was not outside the pale. Like other eruptions around the world, the Russian protests were in the wake of the 2008 economic crash.



## Invisible army of the poor

Putin’s social contract in the 2000s was based on economic stability in exchange for political acquiesce. However, the 2008–2009 economic crisis exposed cracks in this stability. Russia entered deep recession in late 2008 with GDP falling 9.5 per cent in the first quarter of 2009, real incomes dropping 6.7 per cent, the number of poor increasing by roughly 2.7 million people and unemployment hovering around 13 per cent. Wage arrears rose to the level where, according to one survey, 24 per cent of the population reported not having been paid for some period in 2009. There were even reports of the return of bartering, an ominous spectre of the 1990s.

In her examination of the class character of the protests, Maria Chehonadskih identified “an invisible army of the poor” of recently Moscow newcomers of office workers, students, teachers, artists, scientists and pensioners. These people fell into the category of the “extremely poor” since their monthly income was approximately 250–700 US dollars. Chehonadskih’s findings suggest that the protests were “a symptom of more profound social dissatisfaction and unrest over the humiliating conditions of life for many within the educated urban population”. When the protests are considered in this light, they were not a middle class fulfilling its historical mission. Rather, they were a response of a growing ignobility that could have potentially united urban and rural classes. The protesters’ failure to capitalise on this economic dissatisfaction and expand its representation opened up a space for the Kremlin to pit the anti-government “urban middle class” against the pro-government “rural working class.” One common refrain during the protests was that Putin was out of touch with the “people” and failed to recognise the seriousness of the protests, opting instead to merely paint them as part of a foreign conspiracy. While there is certainly truth to this, it is also important to ask: who are the “people”?

After the initial shock, the Kremlin began to delegitimise the protests as representatives of the Russian people. The Kremlin and its proxies organised pro-government rallies to counter anti-government ones, black PR against oppositionist leaders and targeted repression. Perhaps more importantly, Putin used his dominance over Russia’s media landscape to position himself as the representative of Russia’s “silent majority” and the protesters as exploiters of the “people” and sowers of chaos. Putin did this at several pivotal public appearances throughout the winter of 2011 and 2012. These were all part of his presidential campaign, where he ran not against other candidates, but against the protests and the supposed “instability” they would bring to Russia. His speeches featured patriotic rhetoric, expressions of love for “Russia,” vows to protect its sovereignty, and appeals to “stability.”



For example, during his annual Q&A television programme called *Direct Line* in December 2011, Putin positioned the protests as “a proved scheme to destabilise society”, suggesting that certain members of the opposition were “bringing practices” they had honed in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. He also played on the notion that the Moscow opposition were just using disgruntled citizens:

“Did you hear what some of the opposition leaders were saying who called upon these people to protest? Do you know what they said to urge the people forward? ‘Go, you sheep!’ What’s that all about? Is it right to treat people like cattle? People are discontent with the government. But are these the people that they want in the government instead?” Ironically, at the same time, he personally took credit for the “fresh, healthy, intelligent and energetic faces ... actively expressing their views” as a “result of the Putin regime.”

### **“Come to me, Bandar-logs”**

Putin continued to carve a wedge between those with legitimate grievances and those seeking to manipulate them, between the sowers of chaos and those within the “law”. “As for those who, as you put it, reject me in principle, in general one should treat all our citizens with respect. There are of course people who hold a Russian passport but act in the interests of a foreign state and are paid foreign money and we will try to reach these people as well, though this is often futile or impossible.”

He then added perhaps one of the most memorable comments on the protests: “What can one say in this respect? At the end of the day, all you can say is, ‘Come to me, Bandar-logs,’” a quote from Rudyard Kipling’s story “Kaa’s Hunting” with Putin positioning himself as the hypnotic python Kaa who coaxes the Bandar-log to march into her mouth.

This reference to Kipling is worth unpacking since it shows Putin rhetorically separating the protesters from the wider Russian public. The Bandar-log in Kipling’s *Jungle Book* are the “monkey-people,” the “people without law – the eaters of everything. That is a great shame,” as the panther Bagheera tells Mowgli. In another part of the story, Baloo tells Mowgli that the Bandar-log “desire, if they have any fixed desire, to be noticed by the Jungle People [i.e. those with law]. But we do *not* notice them even when they throw nuts and filth on our heads.” Later, Mowgli finds that Baloo’s warnings are correct. “[The Bandar-log] have no law ... and no leaders – nothing but foolish words and little picking thievish hands.” Moreover, the Bandar-log’s slogan serves as a lampoon of the self-importance that many protesters, like Gudkov, ascribed themselves: “We are great. We are free. We are wonderful. We are the most wonderful people in all the jungle! We all say so, and so it must be true,” Kipling’s Bandar-log declare.

Putin’s supporters reinforced this rhetoric. In another iconic moment during the Direct Line, Igor Kholmanskikh, a foreman at the Ural Tank Factory, midwifed Putin’s image as the defender of the working man: “Mr. Putin, you visited our plant in hard times and helped us ... Today, thousands of people at our plant have work,




get paid for their work and have a good outlook for the future. This stability is important to us. We don't want to return to the past. I have a point to make about the protest demonstrations. If our militia, or what it's called now – the police, cannot deal with this situation, we are ready to go out onto the streets and stand up for stability, of course, within the law.” A few months later, Kholmanskikh would declare from the stage of a pro-Putin rally, “This is our country. It does not belong to those loafers who are always grumbling.”

### **New tenuous consensus**

A reader might ask: What about the repressions? The violence provoked by the police at Bolotnaya Square in May 2012 allowed the authorities to further unleash repression against protest leaders and participants and laws curtailing the activities of NGOs, the right to protest and other forms of legal and extra-legal pressure. These actions mattered a lot in the systematic destruction of the Russian opposition.

Nevertheless, Putin's Nixonian move to position himself as the representative of the “silent majority” and cast the protestors as illegitimate (which was further sealed by Bolotnaya) was key, and in many respects justified repression.

Defeat provides lessons and opportunities. Putin has based the consolidation of “traditional Russia” on this consensus of the “silent majority”. However, it has merely pushed the “crisis of representation” under the rug. Indeed, Putin's consensus has proven tenuous and requiring repeated renewal. The so-called “Crimean consensus” gave some breathing room, but now under the stress of economic crisis that too is mostly deflated. Also, by positioning himself as the champion of the “people”, Putin now has to *represent* them – an arduous task when the government lacks petrol money to throw at problems.

This presents potential opportunities for Russia's fledgling opposition. Five years ago, they sought to represent the “people” but in the end mostly represented themselves. Will the coming presidential election in 2018 open up the possibility for forms of representation that can overcome Russia's class divisions? 

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