

Russia's Protest Movement and the Lessons of History

By Andrei Yakovlev, Moscow

Abstract

The December protests in Moscow do not represent a “Russian Spring,” “Orange Revolution,” or new version of Perestroika. Rather they have more in common with the Progressive movement that fought corruption in the U.S. during the early part of the twentieth century. The demonstrations made clear that Russian citizens now want to play an active role in their country's political life.

The Use of Analogies

The recent new year's holiday season provided an opportunity to contemplate the stormy political events of December 2011 and try to address the questions they raised. Answers have already been provided for the first obvious question: Why did tens of thousands of people in Moscow take to the streets and what do they want? People are tired of the authorities' lies and want honest elections. However, a much more important question remains open: What are the actual consequences of the December protests? In answering this question, it makes sense to look at several historical analogies. As is often the case with such analogies, they can be useful in helping to understand what is *not* happening in Russia.

Analogy 1: “The Arab Spring” and the “Colored Revolutions”

Against the background of the unexpected and spontaneous revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya during spring 2011, leading to the overthrow and criminal trials for the corrupt dictators, many representatives of the Russian “democratic opposition” predicted a similar outcome for the “Putin regime,” but only 5–7 years from now, after it had used up all of its reserves and there remained nothing left to provide the population subsidies for various social services. But this comparison does not work—in the Middle East (as in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010) most protesters were young, unemployed people from the lower social layers of society, and the protests turned into bloody battles with the authorities. By contrast, on Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Prospect in Moscow, the protesters were mainly well educated citizens who are 30–45 years old. The demonstrators strove to avoid any confrontations and the use of force.

In terms of the social make-up of the protesters and the character of the protests (including their main cause—electoral fraud), the Moscow events, at first glance, seem similar to Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004–5. However, even here there are serious differences. Behind the demonstrations on the Maidan stood serious political competition based on the powerful opposition parties headed by Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko. Moreover, a significant part of

Ukraine's business community supported this opposition financially. There was nothing similar in Moscow. Russia's extra-parliamentary opposition was not prepared for such large protests and the reaction of the protesters to the speeches of the main opposition leaders made clear that they did not reflect the mood of the people standing before the tribune.

Analogy 2: “70–80” and “Perestroika”

In the last two to three years of Putin's decade-long rule, it has become popular to compare his stewardship to the period of “late Brezhnevism.” There is even a convenient phrase “70–80” which simultaneously refers to the 1970s–1980s and to the fact that then oil sold for 70–80 dollars a barrel. Such a price level today would make it possible to support a stable political system. The leaders of the opposition themselves favor this comparison, particularly in their plans to organize another large protest for February 4, the 22nd anniversary of a march along Moscow's Ring Road, after which the USSR Supreme Soviet moved the clause from the Constitution guaranteeing the Communist Party of the Soviet Union a “leading and guiding role.”

However, if it is possible to describe accurately the period of the 1970s and 1980s with the term “stagnation,” it does not apply to the 2000s, despite all the talk about Russia's growing corruption and the lack of innovation. A much better fit is with another period of Soviet history, namely the 1920s. The first time I encountered this idea was three years ago at the height of the economic crisis, when in an informal conversation, the terms that were so characteristic of the 1920s—“bourgeois specialists” and “military specialists” (“*voenspetsy*”)¹ came up. Colleagues who know our currently policy-making system from the inside used precisely these terms to define the roles of the Moscow “liberal technocrats” in their relationship with the “Petersburg group,” who make up the core of today's ruling elite.

¹ These terms refer to technical specialists, engineers, former officers of the czarist army who in the 1920s worked in Soviet institutions, government enterprises, or served in the Red Army.

Such associations with the 1920s came up again for me at a conference marking “Twenty Years after the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” which took place in Berlin in December 2011.² In addition to economists, the conference brought together historians, sociologists, and literature scholars. From their various papers and the discussions during coffee breaks, I experienced an interesting sensation. As in the 1920s, so also in the 2000s, there was a strengthening of the political regime with a base in one political party. Then it was accompanied by “philosophy steamers,”³ political police (OGPU), the Solovki prison camps, and the Industrial Party Affair. Today’s analogies include the tight state control over the main television networks, the forced exile of Gusinsky and Berezovsky and the Yukos Affair, the hostile takeover of the Evroset telecom company, and the Magnitsky Affair. However, as in the 1920s, today there are numerous forms of media operating, the police break up opposition demonstrations, and the blogger Alexey Navalny exposes corruption in state purchases. Then it was also popular to fight with bureaucratism, the authorities dismantled the Trotskyist opposition, and rallies took place, as now, primarily in the capitals. As in the 1920s, there are dozens of new books, films, and plays, and stormy political discussions. In other words, as in the 1920s, today after great chaos and destruction there was a decade of economic growth and active social life.

It is well known how the 1920s ended and what happened to the “bourgeois specialists” and “military specialists.” The ruling party elite tried to overcome the objective economic contradictions between the city and countryside through collectivization and industrialization accompanied by the permanent “search for enemies” that turned into “red terror.” The contradictions of unbalanced growth were clearly visible in the 2000s. The de facto nationalization of natural resource rents that took place after the Yukos Affair was a reaction to serious social contradictions and disproportions at the beginning of the 2000s. Nevertheless, can today’s authorities go farther in the “search for enemies” and start massive repressions?

My answer is no. In the 1920s, the country was ruled by a quasi-religious order, many of whose members fanatically believed in their ideas and were prepared to die and sacrifice half the country to realize these ideas.

Today’s ruling elites are not fanatics, but pragmatists. And they depend on Europe and the US much more than the current opposition members since their children are in London, they own villas on Mediterranean shores, and hold money in Swiss bank accounts or in the Bahamas. Nevertheless, the recent examples of Mubarak and Kaddafi shows that even billions of dollars taken out of the country did not save them. Despite the obvious analogies to the 1920s, this pragmatism of the current Russian elite can become a prerequisite to movement in the direction of common sense and to compromise with society because these people, in contrast to the ideological Leninists, have something to lose.

In this way, the comparison with the 1920s makes it possible to answer the question of why in December the authorities gave a command not to use force, and most likely won’t use it in the future. However, this comparison does not explain the situation on the side of the protesters: What kind of program can realistically unite the very different people participating in the December rallies in Moscow?

Analogy 3: “Progressives” of the 21st Century?

The 1990s in Russia are often compared to the period of “wild capitalism” in the US at the end of the 19th century. This comparison usually highlighted the functioning of the market mechanisms and the brutal methods used for the “primary accumulation of capital.” However, it also relates to the political system and the civil service, which in the US of that time was even more corrupt than the contemporary Russian bureaucracy.

Democratic Party founder and U.S. President from 1829–1837 Andrew Jackson began this process. In particular, in addition to giving all white males the right to vote, Jackson introduced the spoils system which distributed government jobs among supporters of the party that won the election. One of the starkest examples of this system was the activity of William Marcy Tweed (“Boss” Tweed), who led the Tammany Hall political machine of the Democratic Party in New York and, with its help, controlled the appointment of key positions in the state and distributed money from publicly-financed projects.⁴

In 1858 Tweed pushed through the state senate a bill on the construction of a new courthouse. New York state initially set aside \$250,000 in public money for the building. Then, over the course of 13 years, construction costs consumed almost \$13 million, including \$5.6

2 http://www.kompost.uni-muenchen.de/events/ende_su/programm_en_111124.pdf

3 In 1922 Lenin’s government sent inconvenient Russian intellectuals abroad. In September and November 1922, the Soviet authorities deported 160 people from Petrograd to Stettin on the German passenger ships “Oberbürgermeister Haken” and the “Prussia.” Among the passengers were the philosophers Nikolai Berdyayev, Ivan Ilin, Semen Frank, and many others.

4 Jack H. Knott and Gary J. Miller. 1987. *Reforming Bureaucracy: The Politics of Institutional Choice*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, pp. 18–19.

million for furniture, carpets, and curtains, an amount that exceeded all of the federal expenses to support the US postal service. Nevertheless, by 1871, the courthouse remained unfinished and unfurnished. According to contemporary accounts, Tweed personally received kickbacks worth 65 percent of the contracts he distributed. It is estimated that between 1857 and 1870 Tweed and his closest allies took for their personal use from the budget of New York between \$30 million and \$200 million.⁵ Despite the open theft, Tweed remained in power for almost 20 years. His success was possible because the police officers he appointed did not allow the opposition to vote and closed their eyes to the immigrants who cast multiple ballots for Tweed's allies. At the same time, the prosecutors and judges bought by Tweed did not allow suits brought against him to proceed in court.

Nevertheless, ultimately in 1870 Tweed lost the elections, ended up in court, and finished his life in jail. However, the political machines became a ubiquitous phenomenon in American politics and Tammany Hall remained one of the most influential organizations in the Democratic Party until the 1930s. The result of the heavy influence of money in politics at the end of the 19th century led to the growth of monopolies in industry, transportation, and in the banking sector because their "merger with politics" allowed businessmen to gain advantages and privileges while keeping out unwanted competitors. The cost of paying bribes to the politicians was compensated by the resulting higher prices charged to customers. (The main difference from the current Russian situation was that the US federal government during this period was extremely weak; however, there was competition among the states, where real politics was then conducted.)

Social protests against such faults of capitalism were the basis for the Progressive movement, the peak of which in the US was at the beginning of the 20th century. The core demands of the Progressives included an improvement of state management and having the government fulfill its obligations (especially at the local and state levels) in terms of controlling monopoly pricing, providing security, supporting schools and the mail service, and building and repairing roads. As Knott and Miller (see footnote 4) point out, the Progressive coalition was diverse, including at least five different social groups:

- Former "populists"—farmers and small businessmen from the West and South who protested against the constantly rising railroad and insurance prices

and demanded the introduction of antimonopoly regulations.

- "Gentlemen reformers" (or Mugwumps)—representatives of aristocratic families from the East Coast, who considered it imperative to get rid of the spoils system (with its de facto sale of government jobs) and the introduction of civil service principles based on a meritocracy and "scientific management." They set up the New York Bureau of Municipal Research in 1906 and over the course of 20 years it identified, analyzed, and disseminated a variety of municipal management best practices.
- The middle class representatives in big cities (engineers, doctors, and teachers) who paid taxes and regularly participated in elections. They demanded that instead of handing out jobs to their allies and developing big companies through tax breaks and advantages, the authorities should instead do their job: cleaning the streets, fighting crime, and ensuring that all children can go to good schools.
- Urban merchants who wanted to work in conditions in which their customers did not have to think about dirt on the streets and pick pockets robbing them, the police defended business from crime, the fire fighters actually put out blazes, and the Post Office delivered the mail on time.
- Social reformers (united in the Association for Improving the Conditions for the Poor), representatives of higher and middle classes who felt it necessary to guarantee minimal acceptable living standards for the urban poor, and in addition to collecting money for orphans and the homeless, demanded the introduction in the cities of sanitary standards for preventing the outbreak of epidemics.

The Progressives were not associated with any of the traditional political parties, since both the Republicans and Democrats at this time were equally corrupt. And although the Progressives considered President Theodore Roosevelt their leader, his conflict with other influential republicans ultimately led his supporters to create the Progressive Party in August 1912. However, after Roosevelt's failure to win another presidential term, the new party disintegrated. This loss was not surprising. In reality, the Progressives made up a minority of the American voters who at the beginning of the 20th century were distinguished from today's Russian citizens by their low willingness to spend time defending their rights and their even smaller desire to participate in collective action.

Accordingly, the main accomplishment of the Progressives was the introduction of new principles in organizing the civil service, including the separation of politics from administration, hiring professional managers

⁵ <http://712educators.about.com/cs/biographies/p/bosstweed.htm>
In today's terms, this sum is more than the combined wealth of Abramovich and Berezovsky.

for government service, developing and applying administrative regulations, introducing hierarchical, organizational specialization and clear responsibilities for public officials. The process started at the municipal level in a few states (where Progressives were successful in implementing their reforms by playing off the differences between Democrats and Republicans) and only later, during the 1920s and 1930s moved up to the level of federal agencies. Nevertheless, today many believe that it was the Progressive movement that created the current effective system of public administration in the US and made it possible to significantly reduce the scale of corruption in the public sphere.

Taking Lessons from the Past

Can the ideas of the Progressives today, 120 years later, form the basis for the kind of social movement that flowed into the streets of Moscow after the December 4 elections? Yes and no. Obviously, we are living in a different time, with completely different technology. For example, improving the postal service (which was such an important issue to the Progressives, who pointed to the efficient post offices of Germany and England, even though they operated in monarchical political systems) is not a pressing problem today. However the general idea of holding the authorities accountable and removing corruption from politics, increasing the effectiveness of state institutions in providing public services, creating feedback mechanisms with active voters even as most voters remain passive and are subject to various kinds of manipulation, can be translated to Russian reality.

Such ideas have been discussed for a long time and are gradually being implemented by the “liberal technocrats”

in the government, including A. Kudrin, A. Zhukov, I. Shvalov, G. Gref, I. Artemev, and E. Nabiullina (all of whom are similar to America’s “gentlemen reformers”). For example, the same law on public procurement (94-FL) which made all tenders for state supplies public and which is defended now in public discussions by the blogger Navalny, was initiated by the government rather than the opposition. Additionally, the government strengthened the anti-monopoly legislation and made the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service one of the most influential economic institutions. The Kremlin administration, not the opposition, forced bureaucrats and members of their families to declare their income.

Of course, these measures frequently do not work well, in part because they were part of reforms from above and face opposition and sabotage on the part of the bureaucracy. Therefore the authorities recognized that they needed feedback mechanisms with the “active minority,” including groups like the Agency for Strategic Initiatives and the web site “Russia without Fools.” Naturally, all this does not eliminate the presence at various levels of the “power vertical” and people seeking to realize their own personal interests despite the cost to society. But without out pressure from the side of society, such people will not leave office on their own.

The December demonstrations in Moscow demonstrated that the decade of economic growth and social-political stability led to the appearance of a layer within society that wants to have the right to its own voice and is ready to put pressure on the authorities. It is important that now new leaders who are able to put forward a constructive program and engage in dialogue with the authorities in the name of civil society step forward.

About the Author:

Andrei Yakovlev is Vice-rector of the University—Higher School of Economics and Director of the Institute for Industrial and Market Studies in Moscow. This comment is based on the results of a research project supported by the HSE Basic Research Program.