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## THE 2011-2012 ELECTION-RELATED PROTEST MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA AND ITS FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

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### Summary

The 2011-2012 protests in Russia were a landmark event. Firstly, these demonstrations signaled the emergence of a more unified civil society. Secondly, the Internet was a primary platform for cooperation and coordination among protesters. Finally, this movement established ties, which can serve as a network for future mobilization. That is why the Duma related protests had a great significance. They set up the framework, which will force people to express disapproval publically in case of future injustice.

**Keywords:** Russia, protest movement, civil society, the Snow Revolution.

### Introduction

In December 2011, thousands of people crowded the Bolotnaya square in Moscow. So did citizens of many other Russian regions. They protested against electoral fraud during the parliamentary elections held in the same month. This meeting boosted a popular uprising in Russia, which led to further rallies during the presidential elections in 2012. These protests, at first glance, were aimed against vote rigging. However, broadly the main cause of the 2011-2012 meetings was Putin's and Medvedev's second casting. A lot of people disagreed with the cyclical impasse of the Russian political system development, which is characterized by a one-party dominated parliament and the unchangeable leadership of Putin.

One of the underlying reasons for the protest was dissatisfaction with the electoral system in

Russia. In theory, the mechanism of elections is a democratic feature, used to change the power structure peacefully. However, in Russia the elective practices are employed not as rules for competition, but as tools of preserving power by the current authorities (Gel'man, 2012). Elections in Russia became an informal institution of 'electoral authoritarianism' (Gel'man, 2012). Therefore, the 2011-2012 demonstrations were addressing the problem of elections and the overall stagnation of the political rule.

Although the 2011-2012 movement was the largest in post-Soviet Russia, it disappeared rapidly after Putin's re-election. Understanding of its causes and consequences may show the recent changes in the Russian society and explain how the contemporary Russian economic and foreign policy crises will change the social landscape.

### **The emergence of the protest**

The considered election-related movement was a very distinct process from the previous protest models in Russia, which were characterized by a more individualized behavior. Except for the 2005 pensioners' demonstrations against social benefits being monetized, political participation in Russia has been characterized by personal grievances and not organized collective actions (Henry, 2012). Such a model of disapproval expression is quite suitable for the Russian government because it makes the degree of the social unrest observable. For example, people address their day-to-day problems directly through the "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin". It is an annual TV show where Putin answers questions from the public spending about 4 hours. This populist type of program was broadcasted even when Putin was the Prime Minister of Russia.

However, the Bolotnaya and Sakharova squares rallies interrupted such a conduct. The reason for that is that complaint-making serves as a response to routine individual injustice, which is relatively low-scaled. At the same moment, vast demonstrations need people with shared identities that are very important for social mobilization. Shared identity is a necessary element of social movements. Collective identities usually arise in the result of shared perceptions, which underlie social activities and it is not the same as common ideological commitment (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Hence, the 2011-2012 movement was created by a common affinity on the problem of electoral manipulations, which consolidated representatives of various political wings: from communists to nationalist (Barry, 2011). Deeper understanding of identities was suggested by William Gamson who emphasized that social movements come up in response to injustice frames (Gamson, 1992). Injustice itself, even if it does not affect people directly, is like a red rag to a bull. Personal linkage with a particular collectivity is the result of this group being wronged by the observable object, which can be blamed. Therefore, collective actions frames are important elements of political consciousness. The Russian election-related demonstrations in this context attracted lots of people because electoral fraud was seen as a significant abuse of power by the top politicians in Russia.

Moreover, Gamson indicated the role of experiential knowledge in linking perception of injustice and participation in the social movement. Background in previous protests can make a person more willing to attend new social movements. In addition, media helps to transfer experiential knowledge from one individual to another without personal contact making it shared by a larger amount of people. This idea answers a very important question: why did not mass protests appeared in Russia before in the same circumstances of injustice. The explanation is the emergence of new media and different type of protesters in Russia. Such pro-opposition news resources as the Dozhd channel, Lenta.ru, Slon.ru and a plenty of Internet bloggers made an important contribution in

covering Alexey Navalny's and Yevgenia Chirikova's activities against corruption and authority abuse in Russia (Osborn, 2011).

To sum up, the 2011-2012 protest movement is a landmark process because it is the first campaign, which attracted so many people to public opposition for the government. Unlike pensioners' movement in 2005, the 2011 Duma related demonstrations were equally composed of different social groups' representatives in terms of age, political preferences and material status (Volkov, 2012). And most of all, people shared the feeling of being cheated by the government what determined their identity. This common solidarity served as the basis for participation of individuals who did not even experience any personal sacrifices from the 2011-2012 electoral fraud. It reflects one further difference of the 'Snow Revolution' from the previous grievances. In the 1990's protests were characterized by material incentives: wages, pensions, social benefits, student funding. 2000's – 2010's demonstrations after major economic improvements were aimed at issues that are more moral: civil rights, independent media, freedom of speech. The last protests became more symbolic in nature and more rights-oriented. The reason for that is the sense of affinity with other people attending meetings after the parliamentary and presidential elections. The injustice frames were facilitated by the experiential knowledge of previous issue or area oriented protesters who established ties empowering the 2011-2012 anti-fraud movement by the means of new media. Exactly these connections are the subject for consideration in the next part.

### **The protest mechanism**

The importance of experiential knowledge in creating ties expressed by Gamson has been studied before by some scholars. One of the deepest analysis on this topic has been done by Mark Granovetter in his article "The Strength of Weak Ties" (Granovetter, 1973). He indicated that the personal experience on the micro level underlies macro level social activities. The basis for this interdependence consists of ties between people. Granovetter distinguished such linkages in strong ties and weak ties. By strong ties is meant personal contact while weak ties are indirect communication through the individuals with strong ties. Moreover, weak ties are more important than strong ties in integrating people into large communities.

In the context of 2011-2012 protests, these findings bring the idea that many people gathered on the squares because they were mobilized through weak ties. A wide range of bloggers in Russia, such as Navalny, Chirikova, Akunin, Kashin, Bykov and others, have their own communities of supports and followers in different blogs (Twitter, LiveJournal) and social-network systems (Facebook, Vkontakte). This core of activists urged their proponents to take part in manifestations against vote fraud and united them into a larger group, which was the basis for the election-related social movement. Thus, weak ties played a crucial role in creating homophily among protesters and establishing a common identity. The Levada Center report about the 2011-2012 protest movement outlines the existence of connections and previous experience of interaction between opposition politicians, civic activists, journalists and cultural figures (Volkov, 2012). It took a long time until these people established contacts with the wider public and among themselves. That is an explanation why previous lawlessness in Russia did not attract such a popular concern.

Overall, the 2011-2012 campaign was one of the first mass Internet-based protests in Russia. In this sense, the Arab Spring and the 'Snow Revolution' in Russia were similar in their degree of social mobilization online. The main driving force of the movement were people from the Rунet (Russian Internet) who used their experiential knowledge and networks of followers to bring

together people who shared the same feeling of being cheated on the elections into public places.

### **The end of the protest movement**

Although the Russian protests in winter and some subsequent manifestations were significant in scale, they disappeared rapidly from the political landscape. The reason for that can be explained from different perspectives. Sidney Tarrow indicated that demobilization of the protest could be the result of both or either repression and facilitation (Tarrow, 2011). In such terms, the Russian government reacted by imprisoning some of the protesters and imposing restrictions on the right for assembly (Balmforth, 2011). Furthermore, the new regulation of NGOs foreign funding and the Internet censorship was accepted (Robertson, 2013). At the same time, some of the protesters' demands were satisfied. This includes resignations of Surkov and Gryzlov from their previous positions of the Kremlin Chief of Staff and the Chairman of the State Duma accordingly. Moreover, the new extremely liberal legislation on political parties' registration was adopted. In addition, regional governors became elected and not appointed by the President (Robertson, 2013).

An important approach to the analysis of the social movements' limitations is political opportunity structures. It emphasizes that institutional system of a particular government and historical constraints serve as a restricting regulator of the social environment (Kitschelt, 1986). That is why the ability of social movements to change the structure affects their strategies and prospects. In case of the Russian protests, this analytical concept may be used in describing the state's response to the mass rallies. The government reacted with a crackdown what reflected the political opportunity structure in Russia. Abuse of power by all the authorities, including police, was one of the reasons of the protest movement's slump. People simply did not believe they could significantly change the situation due to the 'Power Vertical' of Putin, i.e. direct hierarchy of accountability of all the officials to the President.

Besides, the decline of the 2011-2012 protests can be associated with the dynamics of international migration in Russia. The important paper on the similar subject has been written by Albert Hirschman: "Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History" (Hirschman, 1993). He argued that the degree of international migration outflows is interdependent with the public expression of discontent. Apparently, it seems that the absence of changes and positive responses to demonstrations can make people more willing to leave the country. Hirschman modified this idea and added that in GDR in 1980's the diminishing pressure on Exit was a signal that the state was becoming less tough in its responses and facilitated Voice.

However, such a conclusion was relevant to the study of the political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. That is why such a correlation is not quite applicable in the framework of the Russian protests. The argument in favor of such an idea is the data on the international migration in Russia. The amount of people leaving the country after a gradual fall during the 2000's was followed by a significant increase from 2011 to 2013 reaching the peak in 2014 (Federal State Statistics Service). In the absence of other noticeable explanations, such as unemployment, which has decreased for the last 5 years, emigration can be considered as an answer for the protest movement weakening and a direct numerical interdependence proves it (Trading Economics).

## Conclusion

The explanation of protests appearance lies in the sense of injustice on the issue of electoral fraud during the 2011 Duma elections and subsequent political developments, which include Putin's come back. Nevertheless, the feeling of unfair treatment itself is not enough to bring people to the streets. That is why the role of experiential knowledge and new media is worth considering. The background of previous movements and the network of weak ties by the means of social media facilitated participation in the election-related movement.

Although the manifestations were significant in scale, their influence on the Russian political system was minor. This outcome can be described from different viewpoints. Firstly, the structure of power distribution in Russia is characterized by the unlimited authority of 'siloviki' and the President who appoints all the high-level judges in Russia (The Constitution of the Russian Federation, Article 128). Such a governmental system retains little space for changes and a few political opportunities for social movements. That is why the anticipated reaction of the Russian political regime was repression. Increased constraints forced many people to leave the country what is indicated by significantly growing emigration from Russia.

Another problem of the 2011-2012 protests is that they were not supported by larger masses of people. The image of the 1917 revolution and 1991 collapse of the USSR is successfully used by the Russian officials in forming the public mind against major transformations of the current social status quo. The contemporary social contract in Russia has been based on the non-interference of large masses into the sphere of politics in exchange for material prosperity. Such a trade-off can be describe by a phrase: who cares if they cheat, life is getting better. This informal agreement characterized the first reign of Putin and worked in cooling down the 2011-2012 waves of discontent. However, the worsening economic situation in Russia can make more citizens willing to protest because the degree of corruption and inefficiency of government instructions will be more noticeable.

To cut it short, the year 2011 was a turning point in the Russian protest life. Unprecedented before developments were a signal that the society has changed and there is no way back. The established network of protesters can make sure that further issues will not be neglected. Therefore, it represents an unparalleled challenge for the Russian government. The election-related protests were only the first step in the long way. Before authoritarian regimes are overthrown, a number of failed attempts should be carried out (Bunce, & Wolchik, 2011).

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