



THE USUAL SUSPECTS

PROTESTING IN RUSSIA BY SVETLANA REITER

On March 8, 2013, International Women’s Day, OVDinfo.org reported 24 arrests at the demonstration “Feminism Is Liberation” held on Moscow’s Novopushkinskii Square. “The police roughly seized people outside the territory of the demonstration as well as on the agreed-upon territory,” and then took them to the station in police vans, the portal records. Moreover, those arrested have stated that they were beaten in transit. The central office for the capital police

responded that on that day in Novopushkinskii Square, a demonstration took place that had been approved by authorities, in which approximately 100 people took part. Interfax carried the following explanation of the events from the press service for the Central Administration of the Moscow Ministry for Internal Affairs: “Toward the end of the demonstration a group of citizens, advancing slogans not agreed upon earlier and which violated the rules pertaining



Demonstrators and security forces square off at the Bolotnaya Square demonstration of May 6, 2012. All photos are by Artem Drachev.



to conducting the demonstration, was taken into custody.” One of those detained informed Gazeta.Ru that the Krasnoselskaya OVD (Department of Internal Affairs) “did not admit them and that they were carted around in the police van for two hours,” before finally ending up in the Krasnopresenskaya OVD. She maintained that the arrests at the demonstration for gender equality were carried out roughly: members of law enforcement agencies kicked activists by the police vans, one of the members under arrest lost consciousness, and one of the women suffered an injury to her arm. One of the arrested members informed the press that they all had to wait around in the police station for more than an hour, and that the police refused to inform them of the reason for their arrest or write up the charges. “We were merely sent,” an unnamed person related. Later it was reported that they had begun to release those under arrest in the police stations: some were charged with breaking Article

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20.2 for violating rules pertaining to the conducting of meetings, rallies, etc.; others were released after making a statement. Meanwhile, OVD-Info reports that three young women under arrest face charges of breaking Article 19.3 (disobeying the orders of a police officer). Earlier on the same day, near the Moscow office of the Federal Prison Service, the police arrested

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10 lonely picketers supporting Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina, members of Pussy Riot, the feminist punk-rock group. These news items represent a fair indication of the present state of Russian protests that began in the winter of 2011.

The spontaneous demonstration on Chistye Prudy is rightly considered the starting point of the protests. On December 5, 2012, after the Duma elections, the citizens of the city, incensed by what they considered to be the illegitimate victory of the United Russia Party, made their way to the Griboyedov monument.

I remember that day very well, as I remember down to the tiniest details what preceded it, namely, Election Day. On that day I got up at 7:00, since like most of my colleagues and friends, I was going to be an observer in a mobile brigade that would visit polling stations at the first sign of election tampering. I’ll be cautious and put the number of these signs at around 40. The brigades that had been organized by Citizen Observer were comprised of two people, a journalist and a lawyer. I was one of the journalists, but I would like to look a bit more closely at the lawyer paired with me: Maria V. had earned her legal degree a long time ago, but for all practical purposes had never worked in her specialty.

Her story strikes me as typical for Russia of the late Putin era. A good-looking blonde about 40 who drives a jeep of alarming proportions, Masha married early and, as they say, well. Her husband was a classmate who had had his fill of the law and started working in construction. Five years ago he received a large government order for the construction of the residence of an important bureaucrat. Afterwards his competitors fabricated a criminal case against him, and then against their son. Later, just to make sure, they kidnapped the son’s daughter. After the girl, fortunately, was rescued (with the assistance of a public prosecutor and enormous administrative resources), Masha decided to be an observer for the parliamentary elections. “Because I simply hate all this,” she explained to me, adding later: “But I might start a fight at the election polls.” I think a lot of people felt the same. That day we traveled to five polling places and in each one witnessed infringements of varying degrees of seriousness. The most common: attempts made on various pretexts to send the observer away from the polling place; not allowing the observer to move freely around the polling place; forbidding taking photographs; attempts to beat the observer; forbidding the observer to be present during the vote count; not delivering the count on time.



Twenty people were arrested and charged in the disturbances of May 6.



Security forces and police corral peaceful protestors.

First observers were not allowed to enter the polling stations, and then the press. Those who managed to make their way inside the polling station were not allowed to see the ballot-box before it was sealed. There were scandals of various sorts: at the polling station near the Preobrazhenskaya metro stop the corpulent chairman of the election committee kicked out the second observer from the Yabloko Party. The remaining observers were corralled into an area enclosed by school desks, and the ballot boxes resourcefully obscured by the corpulent woman could barely be seen. “The fact that ballots were being deposited,” one of the observers reported, “could only be determined by a dull thud.” In several polling stations the observers were seated so that they couldn’t see the ballot boxes, they were shouted at and treated rudely. One of the observers from KPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation) was beaten several meters from the polling site. All this notwithstanding, United Russia, according to the testimony of observers, barely garnered 30 percent of the vote, but the results of the election, if you are to believe Russian national television (which nobody has believed for a long time) comprised the impossible number of 144 percent.

On the next day, those who would later be labeled “irate citizens” and the “creative classes” set out for the

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Griboyedov monument on Chistye Prudy. Correspondents for Lenta.Ru and bloggers who went to Chistye Prudy say that it’s extremely difficult to estimate the number of people on account of the big crowds, but the majority agree that at least 5,000 people came to Chistoprudnyi Boulevard. At one point officers of the MVD stopped

letting people inside; as a result a large crowd gathered on the boulevard and near the metro station. Traffic on Chistoprudnyi Boulevard ground to a halt, people occupied the tram tracks. A correspondent for Interfax puts the number of people directly in front of the stage at 1,500.

Among them was my close friend, the mathematician Vasily Shabat: 40 years old, good job, three children, a two-car family. He could live and enjoy his prosperity and tranquility, but to his great misfortune he became an election observer. I remember how he called me on December 5, and told me in a trembling voice that at his polling station United Russia received 25 percent of the votes, and Yabloko 64. As he was instructed at the training sessions, Vasya took home a copy of the ballot count, which had been stamped and signed by members of the election commission, and the next morning decided to compare the results with the report on the website of the Central Election Commission. An experienced mathematician, Vasya couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the following totals in the corresponding columns: United Russia 64%, Yabloko 25%.

People went to that first winter demonstration to protest lying, and that bound together these essentially very diverse groups of people, like cement binds bricks.

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Unfortunately, they didn't succeed.

Exactly a year later, when activism on the part of protesters had for all practical purposes reached the zero mark and you didn't have 50,000 people coming out for a demonstration, but if you're lucky a hundred, I interviewed one of the most remarkable men of our time, the human rights activist Sergey Adamovich Kovalyov. The well-known dissident, who had stoically passed through all the circles of Soviet hell—from underground activity and samizdat to grinding poverty in camp barracks—used the following remarkable formulation to explain the difference

When you see injustice and lying, you simply need to act. You need to get to the truth. The main thing is not to stop.

between the former dissidents and today's "street Fronde." In answer to my question about his thoughts on the street protests, Kovalyov answered:

Despite what I will say in a moment, this phenomenon is both long in coming and unexpected. Its foundation was laid by the indignation at the lying: "Enough lying, no election took place. Nobody chose you, you appointed yourselves, you came to an arrangement back on September 24 about who would be president and who would be premier." And in that sense, and in that sense only, the street protests have something in common with the dissidence movement of the 1960s–'80s. A moral impulse was the main reason then and is now as well. In every other regard, these phenomena are different. On my part, being a representative of the Paleozoic era, I prefer the dissident movement. You see, for example, despite our naiveté we took a deeper look at things. The movement today places the same value on everything, the same two kopecks: housing problems and the separation of powers; the preservation of architectural treasures or afforestation and the administration of justice. But in reality there are only three things outside politics and above politics: honest elections with transparent competition among political opponents, an independent justice system, and independent mass media.

I think that over the course of a year we have forgotten about the most important things, and have frittered away our energies. The "Bolotnaya Square case," which began after the disturbances that took place at the last mass meeting of the opposition on May 6, has done a good job of splitting the "creative class" into two unequal groups: some are of the opinion

that it's not at all necessary to stand up for the 20 people arrested and charged in the disturbances ("They're guilty, they should have minded their own business"). Some are mad at the Coordination Committee of the Opposition ("Why aren't they doing anything?"). Others are looking for betrayers among the opposition's ranks; some are of the opinion that demonstrations are not enough and are demanding stern measures.

I think that engaging in this blame game has caused us to forget the main thing: When you see injustice and lying, you simply need to act. You need to get to the truth.

It's not important how you do this—alone or with somebody else.

The main thing is not to stop.

Translated by Ronald Meyer

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