

Representation and Self-Empowerment: *Russian Street Protests, 2011–2012*

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Abstract: The article introduces into forms of political and social representation specific to the recent Russian civil protests. The analysis is based on numerous interviews with protesters and observation of evolution of the movement. The data challenges the frequently referenced “crisis” of representation and bring to light a variety of coordination centers set in competition for a political mandate of the protest movement, as far as a vague will of a considerable part of protesters to be represented. Media coverage of the street rallies, including their global attribution to a “middle class,” is critically examined along with the protesters’ own statements and rallies agenda, in order to check the presence of an actual social or revolutionary representation. The article reveals a break with apparatus and hegemonic models of collective action in current mobilization which provides it with new (in the Russian context) forms of political subjectivity based on self-empowerment and self-trial.



WHILE explaining the mass street protests of 2011–2012 in Russia’s major cities, Russian commentators have tried out a multitude of metaphors: from revolution to carnival. However, all of them were only weakly connected to the facts inasmuch as they did not rely on research. International commentators, in turn, made comparisons with the Arab Spring, the *Indignados* and other world movements without taking into account the denial of the Russian protest to articulate demands for social justice and to publicly criticise representative democracy.¹ The formal incentive for the mass protests for “fair elections” were violations of the electoral procedure reported by hundreds of observers and revealed through social networks and mass media. However, a series of sociological interviews conducted at the street protests by the Independent Research Initiative (*NII Mitingov*)² showed that the protests correlated only implicitly with electoral motives. The violation of electoral procedures, indeed, served as a trigger for the mobilisation but the dilemmas of institutional representation and citizen control, as well as social equality, did not become the directive for protest actions. The demands to “repair” public institutions stood side by side with the distrust of permanent representation that could have solidified the outcomes of the movement institutionally.

1. Demands for direct democracy were, first and foremost, voiced by radical activists familiar with international practices.
2. The Independent Research Initiative (*NII Mitingov*) collected over 500 interviews at both protest and pro-government actions in 2011–2013. Alan Amerkhanov, Alexander Bikbov, Alexandrina Vanke, Ksenia Vin’kova, Anna Grigoryeva, Svetlana Erpyleva, Anastasiya Kalk, Carine Clément, Georgii Konovalov, El’vira Kul’chitskaia, Pavel Mitenko, Olga Nikolaeva, Mariia Petrukhina, Egor Sokolov, Irina Surkichanova, Arsenii Sysoev, Denis Tailakov, Ekaterina Tarnovskaia, Aleksandr Tropin, Alexander Fudin, and Dar’ia Shafrina have been involved in the collection and analysis of the data at various times.

In my earlier article, I defined the semantic structure of mobilisation as constellated by the anger directed against the elitist privileges of state officials, maximalist legalism, apolitical irony and the assertion of the protesters' own cultural sophistication as opposed to the "cultural ignorance of the authorities" [Bikbov 2012a: 2]. In this present article, I shall characterise the structure of the social action that generated this semantic field by means of connecting with each other the contradictory demands for both a system of political delegation "working fairly" and the inclination of the protest participants to self-representation.

The Non-Electoral Protest "For Fair Elections"

What the critical public campaign preceding the parliamentary elections on December 4, 2011 and the presidential elections on March 5, 2012 promoted was not singular candidates but rather the importance of negative choice: "For any party but United Russia,"³ "For any candidate but Putin." A few years earlier, in 2007–2008, some losing candidates had already tried to prove fraud but did not find mass support because of the general distrust of institutional players. The criticism of 2011, addressed to the entire (in)operating electoral system, and the appeal to sideline important monopolists proved to be efficient precisely because it ceased to demand loyalty to any one party or candidate. As a consequence, the willingness to participate in the elections did not tie a voter with project expectations to any potential winner: "Putin's not great, Zyuganov is rather old, but I take well to communism. Out of the new faces, Prokhorov is pleasant, but I doubt him"⁴ (Moscow, 4.02.12,⁵ f., approx' 25 years old, h/e, private entrepreneur).⁶ "I don't support any of the existing forces. But anyway, I'll support some of them against the existing party of power" (m., approx' 30 years old, h/e, IT specialist).

Electoral activity was not completely negative but, nevertheless, critical distance to candidates and their programs was inscribed into posi-

3. United Russia is the ruling party.

4. In the conventional network of political coordinates, Gennady Zyuganov (the Communist party) and Mikhail Prokhorov (a right-wing liberal party) are complete opposites.

5. Here and further on, the first indication in parenthesis is the place and date of the rally at which the interview was taken. If in the subsequent quotations a different place and date are not stated it means that the interview was taken at the same rally.

6. Here and further on, abbreviations in the characteristics of respondents mean: m.—male, f.—female, h/e—higher education, s/e—secondary education, approx'—approximately.

tive motivation: “I voted for the party *Yabloko*,⁷ I sympathise with them but not in everything. But if there is a movement or party that corresponds better with my requirements and interests <...> then maybe I’ll myself show more attention” (m., approx’ 25 years old, h/e, PR manager). The same incredulity marked the possible professionalisation of the protest’s moral representatives as institutional: “I don’t have a liking for a lot of the organisers <...> Akunin, Parfyonov⁸—yes, of course, they are all the intelligentsia, but I can’t imagine them becoming politicians” (Moscow 24.12.11, f., approx’ 45 years old, h/e, biologist in a pharmaceutical company).

The semantic border dividing the sensitivity of a situational civil protest from the world of “dirty” institutional politics preserved its constitutive character throughout these two years of mobilisation. Attempts by existing parties to take over the stage of the protest provoked rejection: “I didn’t like that party representatives are trying to use this rally for their own advantage. As if they tried to draw more voters to themselves <...> In reality we are trying to get rid of Putin but what is happening on the stage looks as if somebody is trying to decide for us who will perform” (m., approx’ 25 years old, transport worker). This was assonant to the reactions of the protests’ situational coordinators’ to professional politicians: “We’ve gathered here not for your sake!”

What was the sense of this movement, if not electoral? Many among the protesters understood the call for fair elections as a metaphor for a much deeper *reformation of all society*: “Fair elections is like a sign of changes in the country <...> If the elections are fair then it will mean respectively that law has taken hold much more broadly in the country” (f., two h/e, employed). “So that everybody bears responsibility. So that the laws simply work, so that the courts are fair, so that the army is strong... that is, I mean, so that everything works and functions normally” (m., approx’ 30 years old, h/e, engineer). The essential factor here was not a demand for a radical change of the regime but the expectation of its peaceful optimisation. The street movement, to a large extent, unfurled as a protest in the name of *fair stability*.

Those who declared their readiness to be represented did not see themselves as participants in political work. Criticising institutional politicians, they expected not to take dangerous power into their own hands but rather to compel others, who are already in power or might come into it, to act less greedily and selfishly: “I don’t want to partic-

7. *Yabloko* is a party with a social-democratic version of the liberal program.

8. Boris Akunin is a famous detective writer, Leonid Parfyonov is a popular TV presenter from the 2000s.

ipate in politics because I understand that it is a very dirty business <...> The only way I can have an impact on pushing the course of this dirty water in the direction I need is to have choice, but choice is what I don't have" (m., approx' 30 years old, h/e, IT specialist). "We need a certain committee with certain powers, whereas only certain people should negotiate at the level of the authorities" (Moscow, 24.12.11, f., over 60 years old, school mentor). Institutional representatives acted here not as trusted delegates but professionals, capable of conducting hard technical work.

Not being electoral, the protest also did not have a class dimension. Russian and international media regularly appealed to the spirit of "the middle class." As I have demonstrated earlier [Bikbov 2012c], those few participants who agreed with this label expressed their reservation about its realism: "I hope to reckon myself among the middle class but, frankly speaking, I have quite a vague perception of what that is" (m., approx' 25 years old, h/e, PR manager). While "the middle class" was mentioned in the mass media about twice as frequently in the first three months of mobilisation than in the previous three months, reference of this in blogs did not undergo any noticeable change throughout the same six months of mobilisation. The attribution of the protests to "the middle class" right after the first mass actions on the December 5–6, 2011 turned out to be an exceptionally swift and effective media campaign in which both liberal and pro-government mass media were in agreement. The social demands of the vulnerable strata, such as affordable education and a decrease in the cost of housing services and utilities, along with the problematization of high taxes and bureaucratic expenses for business by the successful strata, were subject to (self) censorship in the public agenda of the protests. As a consequence, street actions did not reproduce the participants into a mobilised class. The collective identity of the movement was defined by the mottos of a universal consolidation and appeals to defeat first "the common enemy," and only then to think about political differences.

The Protest Between the Hegemonical Representation and the Non-Hegemonical Moderation

Non-politically affiliated participants demonstrated their anti-institutional preferences in the form of protest. It was not only perverse utterances in the street space and in the social networks, ironically mocking the figures of "high" politics. The actual fact of participating in the protests did not imply the mandate of trust. It sufficed for many protesters just to know the time and place of a legalized rally in order to present

themselves with their banners, not approved by anybody but family or friends and not agreed with any coordinating body. The inclination of the protesters to show up correlated with a high, on average, level of education⁹ and a professional or educational specialisation in intellectual and service sectors. In fact, in the street mobilisation that followed the elections “with no real choice,” the utopia of other, better representatives of the future peacefully coexisted with the participants’ readiness to or capability of cultural *self-representation*.¹⁰

More politically experienced participants suggested two competing models of coordinating protest actions. Radical political activists, who joined the civil movement, tried to realise a hegemony,¹¹ “having taken the lead” of the protests through traditional representative structures. Inexperienced civil activists, professionalising in the course of the protests, more often offered situational projects built on non-hegemonical and non-leadership principles.

One of the key agencies of coordination, the Organising Committee, turned out to be a hybrid body. Being constituted of political figures from the opposition, civil activists and media figures, it initially emerged as a technical group negotiating the time and place of the protest with the mayor’s office and Police of Moscow. As a result of the unannounced redefinition of technical tasks into representative ones, it soon turned into a monopolized control centre that announced the next stage of mobilisation, formed the public agenda and spoke with journalists on behalf of protesters. What is remarkable is the collision that made this centre the result of a compromise between official authorities and the opposition, “open to dialogue.” Even before the parliamentary elections on December 4, 2011, radical groups of liberal and left-wing activists agreed with Moscow City Government that a rally should be held on the December, 10 in one of the squares in the city center. When it became obvious after the spontaneous mobilisation of the December, 4–6 that the number of participants in the legal protest would significantly exceed the stated three hundred people, the Government demanded a change

9. On average, two thirds of the protests were formed by people with higher education. It is one of a few points of agreement between the results gathered by the Independent Research Initiative (*NII Mitingov*) and the data of large poll agencies.

10. I discuss the function of the first protests as the city stage of self-representation in more detail in my article [Bikbov 2012b].

11. By hegemonical practice I, first of all, imply the direction of collective actions by the politically most experienced and ideologically prepared representative (elected or appointed). This model is characteristic of both traditional parties and a range of non-party activist groups and non-governmental organisations.

of location. But it did not enter into dialogue with the official organisers, instead appointing to this role a famous politician of Yeltsin's period, Boris Nemtsov, in such a way providing him with a critical resource for recruiting the future Organising Committee.¹²

As a counter to this behind-the-scenes Organising Committee, radical political and civil activists created an alternative centre of representation, the Civil Movement.¹³ Originally its structure resembled a talk shop, but the first compromise votings reproduced it as a political organ. With all their differences, self-proclaimed delegates leaned towards a hegemonical perception of political action, that is, they intended to give direction and a program to a spontaneous street protest. Their political suggestions were majorly ignored by the Organising Committee, except for the publication of a list of political prisoners. In January 2012, the Civil Movement, amounting to 300–500 participants, carried out elections for an internal representative body, allocating quotas to civil organisations and the three major political factions in its make-up: liberal, ultra-left and ultra-nationalistic.¹⁴

Both the Organising Committee and the Civil Movement aimed at the *permanent* representation of the protest, operating between mass street actions and laying claim to their technical and program preparation. On the opposite pole, *situational* coordination centres were formed. The declaratively apolitical Workshop of Protest Actions, the politically charged Occupy-assemblies, the initiative group White Ribbon and mobile groups of civil observers could be reckoned among them. In the majority of cases, they declared their non-leadership character or adhered to it in practice. Moderators acted here not as permanent delegates of the protest but mediators in the discussion, facilitating the participants public statements and action. Such structures were not devoid of the asymmetries of political and symbolic power: the team of moderators was relatively stable and received much media acknowledgement.¹⁵ However, titular and political hierarchies were sus-

12. The role of Nemtsov as a delegate-negotiator for the movement, agitating for re-election, was all the more ambiguous for only a few days earlier he encouraged a boycott of the elections altogether.
13. This body changed several names, I use one of them for convenience purposes. It is worth mentioning that while the absolute majority of the participants of the Civil Movement were not admitted to the meetings of the Organising Committee, a reverse inclusion was regular.
14. The voting was conducted by means of text messaging. Votes given to certain candidates amounted predominantly to dozens and hundreds, which serves as yet one more indication of the specifically activist character of this body.
15. Among whom can also be reckoned the moderators of Moscow Occupy-assemblies, the key role in public recognition and acknowledgement of which be-

ended in favour of practical and communicative competence, whereas decisions were limited to the tactical tasks of a specific action or a series of such.

The principle of coordination in these cases was the authorisation of all the participants to personally contribute to the debate, which counterposed them to the hegemonical practice of doctrinal discussion. Participants in situational communication were granted procedural equality, doctrinal disputes were censored. Both the Occupy-assemblies, organised by non-authoritarian left-wing activists, and the Workshop of Protest Actions, under the patronage of journalist Masha Gessen, created work groups, authorised by the respective centre, that did not delegate their powers to anybody and had to “do everything themselves.” Such mechanics of inclusion disposed its participants to a self-trial—the transferral of their skills and intuitions into the protest space. The distinguishing trait accompanying such *pedagogics of (self)empowerment* was the rejection of revolutionary preparatory asceticism and of the hegemonical stigmatisation of “laymen” and “commonness,” characteristic of activism exercising a shepherd’s control over the ideologically “immature” neophytes. In the agencies of situational coordination, extreme tolerance was shown to the absence of an ideological commitment, whilst privileged attention was given (in the case of the Workshop) to the depoliticized skills and resources of the participants. This pedagogics did not dictate a separation from one’s professional, family and other “non-activist” time in one’s life, admitting in advance the limitation of free resources and highlighting the value of the fact that participants were ready to “drop everything and come,” “fly off to a meeting,” etc.

In October 2012, representatives, who nominated themselves in the wake of the street movement, tried to legitimise themselves through the project of the Coordinating Council of Opposition. Potentially, this body was a united “catch-all” [Kirchheimer 1966] opposition proto-party, uniting “nonsystemic” forces ranging from the social democrats and liberals to the ultra-nationalists; in reality—a variant of an alternative parliament. Agitation and the procedure of voting for candidates were built upon the presumption of mass involvement and replicated the model of general parliamentary elections.¹⁶ The organisation inherited from the Civil Movement the principle of quota representation for social activists, liberals, the left and nationalists. According to pub-

longed to both the activist networks formed before the start of mobilisation, or in its course (especially street-media), and the “big” mass media.

16. As the results of the voting showed, expectations were inflated. According to the organisers’ data, only slightly over eighty thousand people took part in it.

lic announcements from the project's authors, they intended to secure for themselves the permanent representation of the protest by means of political mandate: "We should do everything so that the elected leaders of the protest movement have legitimacy, so that they speak on behalf of citizens who have chosen them and not as if they were self-nominated" (Dmitry Gudkov) [Faibisovich 2012].

In general, throughout all the series of attempts to speak with the authorities on behalf of the protest movement, journalists and even its participants, there was the constantly reproduced act of *converting* organisational mediation into political representation. Both "old" political groups and newly emerged alliances became prospective authorised agents as soon as they took upon themselves the functions of technical mediators and received recognition from the mass media. None of these permanent bodies received the decisive reciprocated authorisation from mass participants of the protest movement who preferred self-representation and situational coordination. The Coordinating Council of Opposition once again merely superseded the tension, begotten by the collective desire to postpone delegation in the protest, and masked it by the procedural form of parliamentary elections in miniature.

Self-Empowerment, Self-Trial and Normalisation

Not only the authorising pedagogics of certain protest initiatives, but also the actual appeal to go out onto the streets were successful among an educated public thanks largely to the following model: *I will do it, if you want you can join me.*¹⁷ It provided the pleasure of being together, inseparable from the protest action, formerly stigmatized, whether it be public criticism of the political establishment or a united shouting of slogans. Those who were already sufficiently empowered in terms of their position in society, possessors of the skills of professional autonomy and social initiative, tended to reproduce a similar unordinary experience in their personal experiment. Among those interviewed, people with higher education having some sort of experience of *governing their own lives* were represented in an unquestionably higher proportion: they had the knowledge of searching for their place in the market of employment and freelance occupation, of working in research institutes, of partaking in charitable and local initiatives such as volunteering for orphanages or combating forest fires in the summer of 2010, etc.

17. I discuss this regime of mobilisation in greater detail in my articles published in Russian.

Along with the opportunity of acquiring activist experience *in the course of* a conjoined public action (and not by means of doctrinal training *beforehand*), the remarkable trait of the movement was its *educational* character. The desire to “simply get to know” something about the unfolding events often sounded as the motive for participation: “To hear the presenters, to see how many people would come, just to be here” (Moscow, 24.12.2012, f., approx’ 25 years old, s/e, IT specialist); “Just to come out and see how many people support the same point of view” (f., approx’ 25 years old, h/e, scientist). The broad convergence of political and intellectual significations of such an experiment suspended all the preliminary conditions characteristic of conventional politics. Political opponents, having gained access to a new and attentive audience, agreed to appear together, whereas the mass participants tried to hear out everyone. Apolitical protesters ceased taking into account the formally “dangerous” or simply discredited reputation of certain speakers, perceiving them as “democratic” on the basis of their united presence on the main stage of mobilisation.¹⁸ The veto on anyone’s exclusion from the common movement gave the highest legitimacy not to independent representatives but to the very idea of unity. This served as the direct antithesis to the hostile tactics of the authorities: “It seems that the whole spectrum is represented here and all people stand calmly side by side. This is how a normal society should be organised” (f., approx’ 50 years old, h/e, chief accountant). In such a way, the protest experiment was not only critically addressed to the government, it became a transient realisation of the utopia of a reunion of a politically divided society, a return to communal belonging that phantasmatically preceded any differences.

This explains the durability of the movement that was regularly resumed, not with an electoral or class agenda, but as a result of the gap between an abnormal (corrupt), splitting governance and the normative ideal of public institutions that would allow people to gather together freely, parties to act on behalf of the citizens’ interests, officials not to steal and the state to work for the greater public good. An even more sturdy reference mark of the presumption of norm was the personal experience of “normal life” by the participants. Explaining a possible contribution to the alteration of society, the protesters offered such solutions as, among others:¹⁹ “To obey the laws, to treat people around me well;” “I simply support civil responsibility every day. I give a seat

18. It should not go unnoticed that such attention, among other things, legitimised as democratic delegates those who organically stand against democracy, a range of the ultra-nationalists and ultra-liberals in particular.

19. The full formulation of the question: “What can you personally do to alter the situation [in the country]?”

to the elderly, I help them by carrying their bags;” “Not to litter, not to spit cigarette butts on the ground;” “We can bring up our cool son so he becomes a good person;” “To do all the right things;” “To help simply by my being present here;” “To go to the elections and vote;” “The only thing we can do is just to keep doing what we are doing right here and now. <...> We need to participate online. Facebook;” “To participate in volunteer initiatives,” etc.²⁰

In other words, the participants saw the extraordinary measure of changing the unacceptable order in its coercion to a privately accepted norm. No matter how discouraging the conviction “I can do only what I am doing now” might sound in the view of public changes, it had sense and value in the latent logic of self-empowerment and individual self-representation. The practices of “normal” life bore no relation whatsoever to the official order that realised itself in fraud, the non-motivated violence of the police, the corruption of the courts and control institutions. The “normality” of the protesters authorised them to initiate a street experiment in which the abnormal institutional order was subjected to a critical trial [Boltanski, Thévenot 2006]. The result was not only the participation in legal protests but also other forms of self-trial, when habitual city practices were used as protest ones. This was expressed in collective “walks,” held without slogans or banners, that functioned as a protest message; in the conjugation of participants in the habitual recreation zones of the city; in the gathering on the Red Square in white clothes without political markings, which induced the police to arrest mere flaneurs and tourists because it was impossible to distinguish a symbol of protest from an image of seasonal fashion. This abnormal order also turned elections from a usual routine practice into a civil achievement, inviting violence from the police and members of the election committees [Bikbov 2014].

The readiness to self-trial became the mechanism of the protest complementing the distrust toward institutional representatives. The movement did not aspire to solidify their conquests institutionally because the protest experiment was focused on the self-revelation of the abnormality of the order, manifested in the reactions of the police, city and state authorities and the pro-governmental mass media. Not having led to a swift political emancipation, the street protest became, for its participants, the ground for an educational experiment.

20. The quotations are taken from interviews with participants of the protests, recorded in December 2011—February 2012 in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Paris (the latter considers a Russian-speaking mobilisation in solidarity with the protest movement in Russia).

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