

The “Colorless” Protests in Russia: Mixed Messages and an Uncertain Future

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1 Introduction

The recent 5 years witnessed an unprecedented rise of social protests: The Arab Spring; Occupy Wall Street; mass protests in Greece, Spain, Brazil, and Turkey; the Maidan revolution in Ukraine; and student demonstrations in Hong Kong. Protesters' similar, yet diverse, demands and social bases, global geographical scope of protests, their new organizational forms and unexpected implications (Mubarak is out of power, Putin won the presidency for the third time) rekindled researchers' interest in the contemporary social movements. They are interested in protests' potential for regime change, the “boomerang effect” (Keck and Sikkink 1998), transnationalism, and “global framing” (Tarrow 2005).

This time, Russia, with its domestic and international image of politically infantile citizens and unquestionable authority of the ruling elite, proved no exception. The Russian State Duma elections in December 2011 are strikingly different from many other “window-dressing” democratic procedures in that they provoked real protest movements, unprecedented in their numbers, geographical scope, and socio-economic diversity of participants within the last two decades. During 2011–2013, the protest movements manifested themselves in various ways ranging from live circles to sit-in camps. Are these protests a product of the well-known modernization theory (Lipset 1959; Huntington 1991)? Whereas some researchers claim that the Russian protests are incapable of ousting a dictator, noting that “Russia is clearly neither Georgia nor Kyrgyzstan” (Robertson 2013, p. 22), others question whether

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the Russian protests can be interpreted along the lines of the Color Revolutions (Wolchik 2012).¹ Are they agents of domestic or global change? Will they ever become a part of the “regime change cascade” (Hale 2013), or will they remain the “regime contention” movement² (Weyland 2010; della Porta and Tarrow 2012; Markoff 1996)?

In our view, this question cannot be answered in isolation and requires an understanding of whether these protests fit the emerging paradigm of contemporary social movements that can be characterized by (1) an important role of digital communication technologies and, partly as a consequence, the role of mass media, in facilitating collective action problems among protesters, (2) an increasing number of protesters with higher education and decent wages, (3) fragmented character of opposition forces and lack of strong leadership, (4) “permanent” presence of protesters in the political landscape waiting for “political opportunity structures”, and (5) “globalization” and “interactive diffusion” of protests in that participants from different countries learn from each other.

These features square well with Hale’s four broad causes of what he terms “regime change cascades”: demonstration effects, active mediation, common external causes, and contemporaneous domestic triggers (Hale 2013). He evaluates different weights these reasons possessed for the successful regime change (as opposed to mere protest demonstrations, or those that brought about individual, but not system-level changes) within four cases: the 1848 revolutions, 1989 collapse of European communism, 1998–2005 revolutions, and the Arab Spring. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on his conclusions regarding the last two as (1) the most recent examples, and (2) the two most often compared to the Russian case. Whereas the demonstration effect played an important, although far from sufficient, role in provoking the Arab Spring protests, it is not regarded as crucial for the Color Revolutions, where elections as focal points for opposition coordination appear to be of far greater importance.

The mediators (especially democracy-promoting activists, international organizations, and NGOs) seem to play an important role, although debated in the literature, in instigating the Color Revolutions, whereas only a modest one in inflaming the Arab Spring. However, Lynch (2012) ascribed importance to activist movements in facilitating demonstration effects. Common external causes cannot constitute a sufficient explanation for either Arab Spring or the Color Revolutions (although some researchers see an important role of the EU policies in regime change for the latter case). Contemporaneous, but domestically originated catalysts are shown to be important for the

¹The fact that in 1998–2005 six post-communist European states witnessed their authoritarian leaders fall because of the actions of both domestic and external opposition, which even ushered in a new era of democratization in some countries, allows Wolchik to ask whether the Russian social movements can be interpreted along the same lines (Wolchik 2012).

²Hale (2013) provides an excellent survey of the literature on what he refers to as “regime change cascades”. Although similar to alternative concepts of mass protests diffusion (cascade also means that earlier events in one country triggered similar events in other countries), the concept differs in that it attempts to spot reasons of only those protests, movements, and revolutions that actually led to regime change.

Color Revolutions (e.g., unpopular incumbents) and Arab Spring (e.g., succession crises).

The case-study of Russia, usually portrayed as a unique country with its own “Sonderweg” that cannot be analyzed within Western theories and standards, can be added as another point to the data on contemporary social movements. However, certain reservations should be expressed: the Russian social movement development is overshadowed by the Soviet past, peculiarities of the Russian modern “managed democracy”, and an abysmal discontinuity between the social portraits, political preferences, and demands of metropolitan protesters and the rest of Russia. The latter features make it particularly difficult to predict the viability of the Russian social movement in the future and its ability to change the regime, either evolutionarily or revolutionarily.

In what follows, I argue that the Russian protests are presently more of a “regime contention” movement exploiting certain focal points for mass protest actions that to date failed to succeed. However, its democratizing effect is unclear: the participants’ social portraits, grievances, and demands are too variegated to give democracy a place of pride, and the elite opposition is too weak to set a united agenda. Nevertheless, it seems that the very emergence of the movement signals its potential to become more institutionalized, but with local and civic, rather than political, demands. In addition, the use of international symbols and borrowing protest practices hint at the slow transnationalization of the movement, which is an important step forward given the isolated past of the Soviet man. In this sense, forming expectations about the overall possibility of bottom-up change can bear a self-fulfilling impact across nations and thus become the most important “global framing” (Tarrow 2005).

The final outcome depends on the strategic interplay between the ruling elite, the opposition, and civic society. Despite signs that the Russian opposition movement is petering out, the current economic turmoil as a direct consequence of the ruling elite policy will put Russia into a long-term recession and allows us to anticipate a reinvigoration of the movement. The question whether the movement will be able to dislodge the existing regime, as opposed to merely ousting the current elite, should not be overlooked in the literature and merits scholarly attention.

2 Brief Chronology

On December 5, 2011, several thousand people took to the streets near metro station Chistye Prudy in Moscow to protest against the fraudulent State Duma Elections held the previous day. In less than a week, around 50,000–60,000 protesters gathered at Bolotnaia Square in the center of Moscow (Savina et al. 2011). The 24th of December witnessed more than a 100,000 protest participants on Sakharov Avenue, which qualifies for the largest protest in Russia in two decades (“Zhurnalisty naschitali” 2011). Concurrently, and in the ensuing months, similar demonstrations inflamed in 96 cities across Russia (Wolchik 2012). Arkhangelsk, with more than 8000 protesters in spring 2012, came third after Moscow and St. Petersburg, largely

because the presidential and mayoral elections were held the same day (Sobolev 2012).³ In general, protests shifted from province to capital cities. If in 1997 more than 97% of the protests from the data took place outside of Moscow or St. Petersburg, in 2011—these two cities hosted more than half of the protests (Robertson 2013). However, many researchers warrant against overselling these numbers given the size of the Russian population of circa 143 million people (Dmitriev and Treisman 2012) and in comparison to the recent social movements in MENA countries (“Zhurnalisty naschitali” 2011), to the Russian protests in the 1990s and Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, which mobilized 500,000 and 1 million protesters, respectively (Wolchik 2012).

Small rallies continued through the winter and spring 2013 culminating in the mass protests on March 5th and May 6th against the reelection of Vladimir Putin for a third presidential term. The latter turned into a pitched battle between policemen and around 50,000 protesters (Kolpakov and Tsybulskii 2012). The police responses oscillated between professional (e.g., controlling entry to the cordoned areas using metal detectors) and brutal (e.g., breaking the arm of one of the activists during the mass protests on June 6, 2012). Each episode of uncalled-for brutality brought more momentum to the protests and new actions from the protesters.

According to the report by the independent media project OVD-Info, in 2011–2012 after 228 protests (only in Moscow and adjacent territories inside Moscow Oblast) 5169 people were detained for political reasons. Although there are signs that the protest movement is waning (e.g., Gelman 2014), it did not vanish completely. At the time of this writing, protesters plan their next meeting on January 15, 2015, against the prosecutors’ recommendation of long prison terms for Navalny (Russian famous anti-regime blogger, an anti-corruption activist, and an informal leader of nonsystemic opposition) and his brother (allegedly for politically motivated state-fabricated convictions).

Finally, the Russians were primed for an action, which allowed some researchers to talk about the “Slavic Spring”. As staged as the protests may seem in hindsight, let alone conspiracy theories assigning the prime role to the US or Russian government, most researchers admit the spontaneous beginning of the Russian protests (Greene 2013; Lankina 2014; but see Robertson 2013). At the same time, the reasons for protesting are much deeper and more systemic than the fraud-ridden elections, which served only as a catalyst, and the roots of the protest movement can be traced back to the earlier years. The appropriate research question to pose is not simply why the protests occurred, but why, given that falsified elections were a pertinent feature of the political landscape in Russia for a long time, they had not happened earlier (Shevtsova 2012; Volkov 2012a; Greene 2013; Gelman 2012, 2014; Krastev and Holmes 2012). What was different this time?

³Curiously, the geographical conditions and technology (Internet) penetration rate were shown to predict the scope of protests in the Russian regions (Sobolev 2012).

3 Origins of Protests

There are two contrasting answers to the question why protests erupted in December 2011 and not earlier. Some researchers acknowledge that the Russian protests took the authorities and other citizens by surprise (see, for example, Greene 2013; Lankina 2014), whereas others view the same protests as a logical continuation of the previous social events (e.g., Robertson 2013) and local civic organizations (Kleman et al. 2010). We will briefly survey each viewpoint.

In consensus with the broad literature on social movements and contention (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Touraine et al. 1983), historical perspective on the protests in Russia in the post-communist era gives an opportunity to evaluate their potential more rigorously (Robertson 2013). The preceding protests (i.e., before December 2011) illuminate such important features of the recent protests as identity and demands of protesters, political geography of protests, their exact timing, and even probability of success. The existing small local activist groups, often formed with the sole intention of addressing very concrete socio-economic problems, were assessed to possess a voluminous potential to turn into activists with broad political identity (Kleman et al. 2010).

The preceding protests are diverse and include labor strikes at automobile plants in Vsevolozhsk and Moscow in 2009, mass protests in Vladivostok and other monocities in 2009 against the imposition of higher tariffs on used cars, protests in Kaliningrad in 2010 calling on Putin to resign, protests against the construction of a superhighway through the forest in the Moscow suburb of Khimki, public unrest regarding a car accident that involved vice-president of the Russian oil company Lukoil, riots at Manezhnaya Square in 2010 (that included violent skirmishes with police) against the supposedly corrupt handling of the killing of a Russian football team Spartak fan by a North Caucasus native. Although these protests and public scandals were minor in terms of numbers of people taking to the streets, their participants and broader segments of the society updated their beliefs about the unaccountability of their authorities, primarily through independent media and the Internet.⁴ By this token, according to Robertson (2013), these protests had two functions. First, they prepared a new ground for interpreting and framing events of 2011 as violating peoples’ basic rights. Second, they supplied the 2011 social movement with the necessary human and organizational capital (Robertson 2013). Indeed, most participants of protests in December 2011 were experienced old hands in the protests (Paniushkin 2011). The fusion of old and new participants provided for an efficient delegation of responsibilities (e.g., representatives of broad opposition coalitions such as “Solidarnost” took organizational matters in their hands that required much effort and specific knowledge regarding red tape obstacles, etc.). According to Robertson (2013), the main reason why protests did not happen earlier is because the necessary interpretive framework and human and organization capital were not mature enough.

⁴In fact, the 2005 protests against monetization of a range of benefits are viewed as the most direct predecessor to the 2011 protests in that they spread all over Russia, and the core activists of these movements are basically the same people (Robertson 2009, 2013).

Without diminishing the role of the previous protests, it is necessary to take into account structural indicators. The particular role should be attributed to the young generation that is free from the Soviet memory, especially, nostalgia for those times, its stereotypes and fears, and view themselves as the future leaders of a country (Gelman 2014; Shevtsova 2012; Lipman and Petrov 2011). Deteriorating corruption and disenchantment with modernization under Medvedev, coupled with the consequences of the 2008 world financial crisis, also added to revealing the country's economic and financial vulnerability, not least by robbing the ruling regime from its scarce achievements, such as growth in households' incomes (Gudkov 2012; Volkov 2012a; Shevtsova 2012; Gelman 2014; Chaisty and Whitefield 2012, 2013). Gelman (2014) attributes much of the opposition's success in 2011–2013 to its turn from political and civic agenda to a populist strategy—exposing the “party of crooks and thieves”, a popular expression in Russia put into use by Navalny in 2011. However, the protest-learned human capital accumulation, structural changes, and external shocks cannot explain the exact timing of the first large demonstrations that took advantage of the window of opportunity in the form of elections.

4 The Straw That Broke the Camel's Back

Under autocracies and hybrid regimes, elections, usually marred by fraud, are shown to play a crucial role in provoking protests and occasionally regime change by providing opposition elements with necessary focal points (Hale 2005; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Schedler 2006; Tucker 2007; Levitsky and Way 2010; Radnitz 2010; Reuter and Gandhi 2010; Koesel and Bunce 2012; Morse 2012; Chaisty and Whitefield 2013). Russia was no exception, albeit without a regime change.

In the absence of direct vote counts abuse, the State Duma 2011 elections were still rigged by denying opposition parties either equal access to campaign resources or overall participation in the elections. According to the independent media sources, the real support for the United Russia was around 35% against the official 49.3% of votes (Shevtsova 2012) and for Putin 46% against the official 63.6% (Shevtsova 2012). However, many acknowledge that the fraud magnitude did not exceed that of the previous elections, both at the federal and municipal levels (Gudkov 2012; Oreshkin 2012; Krastev and Holmes 2012).

This ballot-stuffing was, however, qualitatively different from all the previous elections in that it failed to give the society any hope for much-needed systemic change (Gudkov 2012). This fact was reflected in the protesters' explanations for why they took to the streets, with the most common being “I'm sick of it.” (Shuster 2011). In addition, this time, the protests' fraudulence received an unprecedented coverage by the independent media, mostly through Internet sources such as YouTube video clips or an interactive map of falsifications at the website of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. The elections-monitoring organization “Citizen Observer”, with the support of an opposition political movement, “Solidarnost”, was formed as well (Volkov 2012a).

The elections campaign itself was shaken by numerous scandals with its pinnacle “Putin-Medvedev casting”⁵ deserving particular attention: not only did it dash hopes of many citizens for any change but also split the ruling elite itself (Volkov 2012a). Krastev and Holmes (2012) doubt that the MENA events can be solely responsible for the Russian peoples’ decision to flood the streets in December⁶ and conclude that “what enflamed [sic] the protesters can only have been Putin’s decision to return to the presidency” (Krastev and Holmes 2012, p. 41).

By their elections-triggered inception, the Russian protests are similar to the Color Revolutions, but, as the next section will show, are much different in terms of the negligible role of organized democratic structures. In addition, the Russian protests take roots in the domestic turmoil of independent origin, and in contrast to the Arab spring, are marginally affected by any type of cascading, or diffusion.

5 Who Are the Protesters?

The composition of the protesters astoundingly changed in comparison to the participants of the previous protests; most importantly, in 1993, they became younger and grew in numbers (Barakovskaia 2011). Most reports and articles document that these protests were prevalently attended by young people who were especially comfortable with new media technologies (e.g., Volkov 2012a; Barakovskaia 2011). “Hipsters—twenty-something, young, cosmopolitan urbanites” (Greene 2013, p. 48) replaced “crowds of impoverished old women”—the core of the previous Russian protesters (Robertson 2013, p. 17). However, by the beginning of 2012, the demography of protesters shifted to the middle-aged men with the youth (19–24) and elderly (55 and older) each representing one-fifth of the protesters (Volkov 2012b). The cherished hopes for the awakened middle class in Russia (Petrov 2012; Robertson 2009) were soon dissipated by other scholars who emphasized the absence of any class, social, or professional identities among the protesters (Bikbov 2012; Gabowitsch 2013). The “catch-all” portrait of protesters allows some scholars to even talk about ideological elements of populism (Magun 2014) and social racism (Matveev 2014).

By their priorities and the degree of “politization”, according to Volkov (2012a), protesters can be classified into four broad groups: First, the veterans of the Russian ‘nonsystemic’ opposition (Iashin, Nemtsov, Ryzhkov); second, civil movement activists (e.g., anti-corruption campaigner Navalny, environmental advocate Chirikova); third, famous journalists; and fourth, other representatives of intelligentsia (poets, artists, etc.). Kudrin, then the long-serving Russian finance minister, resigned and joined protests against fraud elections. Relatedly, based on the network analysis of Facebook

⁵Return of Putin to the third term as president after an intermission as Prime-Minister, switching places with Medvedev, the former president and current Prime-Minister of Russia.

⁶Middle-aged and relatively well-off Russian protesters still feared a revolutionary scenario, unlike young and resolved Arab protest participants.

users, Greene (2013) concludes that the distinguishing feature of this new Russian movement was not the inflow of new participants, but rather the establishment of new connections and relations between the existing political opposition groups and coalitions.

By their demographics, socio-economic statuses, and political views, protesters were radically different from the rest of Russia and even Moscow (Dmitriev and Treisman 2012; Gudkov 2012; Volkov 2012a). About 80% claimed at least some post-secondary education compared to only one-third of all Russians (Volkov 2012a). About 65% were male, given Russia's male/female ratio of 0.86%. Those who were able to afford expensive things, but not a vehicle; those who were able to buy a vehicle and those who were able to buy anything they want constituted 70% of the social movement participants as opposed to 22% in Russia. In contrast, those who did not have enough money to buy groceries; those who had enough to buy products, but not clothes; and those who had just enough to buy both constituted around 28% compared to 79% among all Russians. 70% of protesters cited the Internet as their primary source of information, in contrast to a mere 13% among the total Russian population.

Ideologically, protesters identified themselves as democrats (38% in December and 30% in February) and liberals (31 and 28%) followed by communists (13 and 18%), nationalists (6 and 14%), and socio-democrats (10%). In fact, a partnership between liberals and nationalists is viewed as the most striking feature of the protests by Popescu (2012). These two groups started to embrace each other's ideas. For example, there were nationalists who started to favor democracy instead of authoritarianism and liberals who supported such campaigns as "Stop Feeding the Caucasus" (Popescu 2012). It is not clear, however, whether liberal opposition candidly embraces nationalist ideas—at least some of them—or whether it opportunistically flirts with nationalists to court more supporters. Neither is it clear whether nationalists truly share democratic values.

6 What Do Protesters Want?

During the 2011–2013 Russian protests, people took to the streets with mottos as diverse as "Time to take power", "Revolution", "Navalny as President", "Russia without Putin", "One for all, and all for one", and "Russia will be free" (Barakovskaia 2011). What did these people really want?

Protesters' demands shifted from socio-economic issues in Yeltsin's years (payment of wages and other material rights) to a political and civic agenda: anti-corruption, human rights, civil development planning, and environmental preservation (Robertson 2013). The latter was also confirmed by the analysis of the unique dataset on 5100 protest events in Russia which occurred between April 2007 and December 2013, gathered from the website started by Garry Kasparov, a famous chess player and a representative of Russia's liberal opposition (Lankina 2014, 2015). More specifically, Lankina (2014) also noticed that if viewed in dynamics, although protests waned after

Putin’s reelection, they reemerged in the second half of 2013, albeit with less political and more civic demands. Volkov (2012b) also sees one of the main drivers of the Russian protest movements in “the confluence of material privilege with political impotence and defenselessness” and “inability of citizens to address Russia’s systemic corruption through legislative or judicial means” (Volkov 2012b, p. 55). However, the mismatch between protesters’ economic influence and political impotency was only one among many.

The initial direct demands put forward by protesters can be summarized as punishing those behind the staged elections, annulling results of the latter and holding free and fair elections. Statistically speaking, the most popular reasons why people took to the Sakharov Prospekt, December 24th, were dissatisfaction with the current situation in the country (73%), falsified elections results (73%), and disappointment in Medvedev-led modernization (42%). However, this is, of course, was only the tip of the iceberg, which was soon proved by the fact that voters started to oppose the failure of the system as a whole. Overall, the feeling of social injustice for the authorities riding roughshod over people’s basic rights, such as rights to assemble, to protect the environment, and to fair prosecution is cited as the root of protest movements (Robertson 2013; Volkov 2012a).

The above mentioned demographic and socio-economic gap between protesters and the rest of Russia translated into the same gap in their political attitudes. “For example, 97 percent of protesters called for the removal of Vladimir Churov, the head of Russia’s Central Election Commission, while just 39 percent of Russians felt similarly. Almost 85 percent of protesters called for the release of political prisoners; only 35 percent of Russians shared a similar sentiment. Ninety-five percent of protesters called for new parliamentary elections; only 29 percent of Russians agreed. Eighty-nine percent of protesters liked the slogan “Not one vote for Vladimir Putin!”; only 24 percent of Russians agreed” (Volkov 2012b, p. 57).

However, analyzing the results of 62 focus groups conducted by the Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research (CSR) with representatives of 16 Russian regions, Dmitriev and Treisman (2012) state that a provincial man, typically imagined as pro-regime and longing for the Soviet times, is an artifact of the past. Today, although these people do not share protest sentiments with Moscow and St. Petersburg residents, they are far from supportive of the Russian political system, labeling it as highly corrupt and incapable of providing public goods at a decent level. Curiously, in contrast to metropolitan elites who shout out abstract and cloudy concepts such as democracy and freedom, provincial men tend to exhibit concerns about concrete issues such as education, housing, healthcare, and properly functioning courts.

It is also noteworthy that the Russian protesters have already overcome bread-and-butter issues and are now concerned with the civic and political agendas as well (Dmitriev and Treisman 2012; Lankina 2014; Volkov 2012b). According to the Levada Center opinion polls, as stated in Dmitriev and Treisman (2012), if in 2000 47% of Russians viewed political opposition as necessary, now it is 72%.

Today, there is an emerging demand—tantamount to the consensus in the 1990s on the necessity of grand political transformation—that unites all Russians, and not only the relatively well-off, educated and urban-based protesters, for increasing

quality of public goods provision, stifling corruption, and strengthening institutions (Nekrasov et al. 2012). However, the unique survey data from Chaisty and Whitefield (2013) show that protesters themselves were more likely to support authoritarian leadership rather than a transition to democracy.⁷ In addition, Busygina and Filippov (2015) argue that a broad opposition coalition in support of democracy in Russia is largely prevented by the citizens' entrenched expectations of highly unequal and unfair redistributive consequences of any political reforms.

7 How Do the Protesters Coordinate?

Protesters' mobilization through the Internet and social networks has become a powerful tool in solving the collection action problem (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The trend has already manifested in the "Twitter revolutions" in Moldova and Iran and in Facebook's impact during the Arab spring, to name a few (Greene 2013). The increased use of online media (especially blog platform LiveJournal, microblogging platform Twitter, online social networks Facebook and Vkontakte) among social and political activists in mobilizing protesters as well as impacting their preferences, both worldwide and in Russia, has been extensively documented (Aron 2011; Machleder and Asmolv 2011; Greene 2012a, b, 2013; Volkov 2012a; Gelman 2014; Etling et al. 2010). At least one-third of the protesters were mobilized through online media (Volkov 2012a). Curiously enough, while the Russian social network Vkontakte (national analog of Facebook) has approximately 20 times the user base of Facebook in Russia (100 million versus 5 million), the protest community on Facebook was significantly larger (around 45,000 versus 20,000) (Panchenko 2012).

The analysis of 11,000 tweets during the presidential elections in March 2012 allows Greene (2012b) to identify three main functions of this microblogging platform: information aggregation, transmission, and reinforcing group solidarity. Greene (2013) concludes that the primary role of Internet networking was to appeal to and mobilize those citizens that were previously politicized, but passive. Krastev and Holmes (2012) view the Internet more as confirming the overall feeling of injustice and dissatisfaction with the system rather than providing information about such deficiencies.

The comparison between bloggers, all Internet users, and representatives of the TV audience revealed far more oppositional sentiments among bloggers (Etling et al. 2010). The opposition networks, on average more dispersed and informal than pro-regime activists, were shown to dominate Twitter in that period and to make an extensive use of the opposition-minded media, more so than professional journalists, full-time bloggers, politicians etc. (Greene 2012b; Neyaskin 2012) concludes that Ru.net prefers opposition. Bode and Makarychev (2013) raised a related yet distinct

⁷Curiously, as Beissinger (2013) argues, democracy was not the primary driver even of the makers of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2005.

question about the Internet being an intimidation, propaganda, and coercion tool employed by the ruling elite, and came to the conclusion that new technologies served to empower opposition to a much greater extent than the ruling authorities.

On the other hand, some (Volkov 2012a; see also Gelman 2014) caution against overestimating the mobilizing effect of the social network because it largely depends on the public sentiments.

Not only is the magnitude of Internet impact highly contested, there is also a high degree of disagreement on which exact organizational types, social networks, and communities the Internet can enable. Greene (2012b) finds that there is a significant structure within the Network Internet community. For example, the Facebook group “We were at Bolotnaia and we will return” served as the main coordinating device for discussing and subsequently disseminating information about the place, time, and number of protesters permitted by the government in Russia (Volkov 2012a). Sidorenko (see in Lipman and Petrov 2011) goes so far as to predict that the 2011 elections would result in what he calls a “revolution of bloggers”. Suvorov (2012), based on the analysis of protesters’ Internet profiles, views protests as political flashmobs of alienated individuals with no hierarchy or structure (out of 20,000 participants, 8000 do not have friends from Bolotnaya).

Theoretically speaking, the resistance movements in Russia may be conceptualized as part of what Hardt and Negri (2000) called “the movement of movements” which is not necessarily to evolve into party-like structures. “They are most likely to avoid institutionalization and preserve their networked status to challenge the system from outside” (Bode and Makarychev 2013, p. 55).

As the protests became more digital, they also ended up leaderless. A lot of respondents did not trust their leaders (Volkov 2012a). Some respondents point out that in many cases it is leaders who had to follow the masses and often lagged behind, not vice versa (Volkov 2012a). The analysis of the social network (Facebook and V Kontakte) profiles of 20,000 protesters revealed the lack of visible leaders at either high-, meso-, or low-level. Some think that “the Internet compensated for the organizational weakness of the opposition, making a virtue out of the nonpolitical nature of the protesters and the lack of popular leaders. It was through voting on the Internet, for instance, that the protesters selected who addressed them at Prospekt Akademika Sakharova on December 24” (Krastev and Holmes 2012, p. 42).

Not only did the means of communication and coordination change, but also the methods used in the protests themselves. The comparison of the unique data gathered from the website organized by the leftist opposition Institute of Collective Action on the protests during Yeltsin’s and Putin’s term reveals that manifestation of protests shifted dramatically from direct (industrial strikes, hunger strikes, road blockades) to more creative, especially symbolic, actions (demonstrations and marches) (Robertson 2013). Even the preceding protests took symbolic form: for instance, the Blue Bucket movement (protesting corrupt government officials in the cars with blue flashing lights by taping blue buckets to the roof of their own cars) and Pussy Riot (the punk group that performed an anti-Putin song in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012). Apart from the improvements in the economic conditions and changed characteristics of the protesters, one important explanation

of such a shift to symbolism is that protesters change their strategy in order to appeal to broader segments of society and politicians (Robertson 2013).

8 Institutionalization

The diversity of protest activities allows Volkov to identify three major manifestations that constitute the modern social protest movement in Russia: political protests (e.g., pickets, marches, etc.), new forms of civil activity (white rings, walking, camping), and monitoring elections (Volkov 2012b). New creative forms of protests and organizations were partly sparked by the violent responses by the police. The former included famous poets' and artists' walking to protest radicalization of protest and bring it back to the peaceful means, whereas the latter included a new institutional body such as the Committee 6th of May that aimed at assisting detained protesters.

Overall, several movement organizations, such as the Coordination Council of Opposition, White Ribbon, White Streets, The League of Voters and Citizen Observer, and We Were on Bolotnaia Square and Will were created and attracted support and membership from the previously existing nongovernmental and opposition organizations, e.g., the election monitors of the Golos association and the banned People's Freedom Party (Parnas). These organizations contributed not only to disseminating important information regarding protest movements, its goals and actual meetings, and thereby attracting new members, but also to the peaceful character of protests (Volkov 2012a). However, these structures appeared to be superficial, leaderless, and under-institutionalized, which calls their ability to maintain the oppositional movement active in question. Neither did the systemic opposition contribute much to the protest movements. The Coordination Council of Opposition, to which elections were held through the Internet with more than 81,000 Russians voicing their choices, was naively supposed to become a truly democratic analog of parliament but failed largely because of the lack of positive political agenda (Gelman 2014).

Lankina (2014) finds that the Russian protests act as communicating vessels: when political agenda is off the table (at times of increased political repression), protests transform into civic actions, and vice versa. Lankina (2014) interprets this as indicating the much higher potential of the Russian civil movement, which might be overlooked due to its latent character. This very swinging between the political and civic focus of protests contributes to maintaining the abeyance structures that are necessary to keep the movement alive. Examples of civic actions range from effective public charity operations to volunteer firefighting in the summer of 2010. The resulting local groups and initiatives can be viewed as a sort of "institutionalization" of collective solidarity (Della Porta and Tarrow 2012) and thus a true embryo of the Russian civil society with a potential of not just civil, but political, mobilization (Erpyleva and Magun 2014).

To conclude, the organization of the Russian protest movements can be characterized by the following features, which are shared by most contemporary social

movements: first, the increased role of the Internet as a soft power instrument of opposition; second, a shift to symbolic actions; third, lack of strong leadership; and finally, some degree of institutionalization, albeit in the Russian case insufficient for maintaining a permanent presence of opposition movement in the political landscape. Given that people still take to the streets, there is a hidden potential in these scattered, seemingly unrelated protests and structures to become a full-blown social movement in the future.

9 Government Response

The Russian government employed the whole gamut of response measures that square nicely with what Treisman (2013, p. 254) summarized as “coopt, intimidate, and disable” (see also Smyth et al. 2013; Smyth and Soboleva 2014). This begs an important question: whether these measures suffice to nip the Russian civil movement in the bud or if they will anger and mobilize even more protesters.

The ruling elite’s response tactics are various and include repressive measures, both on spots (riot police, staged investigations, arrests and biased court decisions) and institutional (new restrictive laws), regaining initiative and copying actions of protesters (the so-called “Putings” e.g., pro-regime events such as marches led by top-down movements such as Nashi or the Youth Movement of the People’s Front), blackwashing protesters through state-controlled media, as well as cosmetic, and always non-credible, concessions, perhaps, to partly mask the scope of repression (Volkov 2012a). Some suggest that it is also the ruling authority who drives a wedge between the urban, relatively well-off, pro-change and the provincial, worse-off, anti-change Russia, not least by the extensive use of the state-controlled media that helps to create the image of the social movement as feminist, LGBT, and bourgeois (Krastev and Holmes 2012; Treisman 2013). The top influential politicians from the ruling elite resorted to the well-known tactics of playing off different elite factions against each other in order to prevent the real split in their ranks and putting business, especially oligarchs closely connected with the Kremlin, in their place in order to prevent them from siding with the opposition (Treisman 2013).

The concessions granted to the opposition (e.g., restoration of direct elections of regional governors, adopting milder registration requirements for political parties, resources decentralization to the regional and local level) appeared to be cosmetic and failed to work in reality (Treisman 2013). In addition, they were overshadowed by the draconian laws that, as many argue, encroached upon civil rights: new legislation requiring NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as “foreign agents”, exclusion of foreign broadcast media, Internet restrictions, increased fines for participating in unsanctioned protests,⁸ blasphemy law, a law banning

⁸The law dramatically severed punishments for unsanctioned public meetings and violence during sanctioned meetings, echoing the Belorussian law of 2010. The new law made organizations

LGBT propaganda, prohibition of the adoption of Russian orphans by Americans and of all children by Russian single-sex couples, and an expanded definition of treason (Treisman 2013; Kramer 2013).

Not only do such actions irritate the already angered protesters, but they can also destroy the existing peaceful channels of protest. Given that the problems do not disappear, and the situation is getting worse, this may only trigger a violent response from protesters. On the other hand, given the revived economy in 2011, the government easily convinced the majority of Russians that mass protests were to hamper economic achievements and, therefore, should be resented. In addition, the opposition made several unforgivable mistakes such as tolerating a rather long hiatus between protest activities at the very beginning of the movement's birth, which was frequently proven wrong in history. It is necessary to exploit every opportunity to mobilize people so that such mobilization happens frequently enough to sustain the movement (Kramer 2013).

10 What Is Next?

Many view the protests on December 4, 2011, as game-changing (Shevtsova 2012; Krastev and Holmes 2012; Robertson 2013). The protests clearly exposed the vulnerability of the political status quo, questioned its legitimacy in the eyes of the whole of Russia and the international community, and, in the view of Krastev and Holmes (2012), robbed the regime of its main legitimizing tool—rigged elections that usually go unnoticed.⁹ Robertson (2013) acknowledges that the “December movement” marks the beginning of real pressure upon the existing authorities from below, from the slowly emerging Russian civil society. Despite some signs of the movement's demise, protests against the draconian law on demonstrations as well as Navalny's ability to obtain 27% of the vote at the mayoral elections (no one predicted such a high level) indicate the possible revival of the movement (Treisman 2013).

At the same time, many would agree that “the political and social actors ready to exert this kind of sustained, organized pressure have not yet emerged” (Shevtsova

responsible for the actions of other protests and introduced penalties for advertising unsanctioned gatherings online, which can be evaluated as targeting two factors crucial for the success of protesters: leadership and the Internet. Not only did the law make some activists in their blogs welcome Russians to a new “North Korea”, but also its draft, less predictably, provoked the first filibuster in the Russian rubber-stamp State Duma (Davidoff 2012).

⁹Krastev and Holmes (2012) refer to the political regime in Russia as “managed democracy”. Rigged elections, among other functions, serve to maintain autocracy (rather than imitate democracy as in hybrid regimes) by demonstrating a ruling elite's ability to extensively manipulate political process. Thus, the protests unfolding after rigged elections deprived the regime of such ability. For a related, but qualitatively different, concept of “overmanaged democracy”, see Petrov et al. (2010).

2012, p. 30). On December 5, 2014, the ruble had depreciated against the dollar by 70% over the last 3 years, oil prices had dropped by 29%, and the “Bolotnaia” square in Moscow was empty. As of December 2014, instead of celebrating its 3-year anniversary, the Russian protest movement experienced a serious crisis (e.g., Gelman 2014). The Russian Coordination Opposition Council ceased to exist. According to the figures provided by the opposition itself, the monthly number of protest participants shrank from 210,000 in December 2011 to a mere 5000 in July 2013 (Treisman 2013).

As time passed, reservations about the ability of the Russian social movement to transform into an influential political actor and really make a difference were expressed more often (e.g., Matveychev 2014). Among the most plausible reasons are failure among the participants to form a necessary collective political identity (Erpyleva and Magun 2014), disappointment in opposition leaders, fear of the “Russian Maidan” and a short-term euphoria about the Crimea. According to Levinson (2014), summer 2014 witnessed the lowest point in the history of the Russian social protest movement during Putin’s epoch: 81% of respondents do not see mass political protests in their towns/districts as plausible, and 86% are in favor of the current political course. Strikingly, the lowest percentage of those who are ready to protest is among the youth (8%). The data are consistent with the theory offered by Busygina and Filippov (2015): the highly uncertain redistributive consequences of the next political regime (in case the opposition wins) make protests a too costly investment for the majority of Russians. Such considerations allow the authors to predict waning of pro-democracy protests and reduce their role, albeit very important, in cementing socio-economic and political cleavages and agendas (Busygina and Filippov 2015). Whether the Russian movement is petering out or awaiting its second breath is a subject of scholarly debate.

What is next crucially depends on several factors: first, whether the opposition can court supporters from the “provincial” Russia (Volkov 2012b; Kramer 2013); second, whether the opposition can reconcile ideological differences among its members and draw their own unified and, most importantly, positive political agenda as opposed to the existing negative consensus, and create an organizational structure and fight for institutional change (Gelman 2014); and third, whether the ruling elite can maintain order and prevent its own splitting (Treisman 2013; Lankina 2014).

Volkov (2012b) argues that so long as the gap between the protesting minority and supportive majority is preserved, primarily because the former cannot accommodate the concerns of the latter, the protest movement is deemed to fail. To that condition Kramer (2013) adds the protesters’ ability to sustain the so-called abeyance structures that keep the movement alive in the absence of any obvious catalysts. The surveys in the Russian provinces reveal the increasing dissatisfaction with the status quo policies, especially public goods provision, which allows some to predict that the next rallies will be held in the provinces (Dmitriev and Treisman 2012; Treisman 2013). Relatedly, the most striking trend revealed by Lankina (2014) is that at times of the increased political repression, whether direct or institutional, protesters manage to reframe their contentions from a national to local-politics level, e.g., blaming municipal politicians for rent-seeking. This strategy of “going local” might be indicative of the opposition’s resolve to win the hearts and minds of the provinces.

From the ideological standpoint, it is not clear whether ultranationalists' bandwagoning with liberals could subvert the peaceful character of the Russian protest movement and turn its (although yet negligible) results to null, not least by splitting the opposition and providing the ruling elite with a comfortable pretext for quelling the protest (Popescu 2012; Umland 2012).

The ruling elite seems to split. Lankina's data analysis reveals that the protesters, including public figures from the ruling elite itself and representatives of large businesses, tend to deny any possibility of a top-down policy change, which, first and foremost, prompt a split within the seemingly pro-regime forces (Lankina 2014). Treisman (2013) also shows the increasing divide among members of the ruling elite and predicts the reinvigoration of protests given the worsening economy and dysfunctional government. In a paper written a year later, Lankina (2014) views the actual economic hardships (not least due to the foreign sanctions against Russian policy towards Ukraine's civil war and the plunging oil prices) coupled with the already existing "political opportunity structures" as enabling a new wave of protests in the future, albeit in a more overt and violent form. The financial difficulties faced by Russia with the predicted 2-year recession certainly qualify for a "suddenly imposed grievance" that might trigger not only protests by provincial Russia but also split the ruling elite.

11 Reaching Out to the Broader Context: Tahrir vs. Slavic Russia?

The Arab Spring and "Slavic Winter", according to Carr and Koulinka (2012), do share the starting conditions such as growing income, mounting inequality, heightened corruption, and strengthened authoritarian rule (see in Carr and Koulinka 2012). Absent a clear plan for the future, protesters united in their dissatisfaction with the status-quo and loathing for the current political regime. They demanded democracy, freedom, civil and political rights, an uncorrupt society, and good governance in general (e.g., high level of public goods provision).

In addition, young people constituted a significant number of protesters in these countries. Many protest participants do not beg for food and clothes, they are well-off, educated, and web-savvy representatives of society. New social media, in particular, played a crucial, if not decisive, role in facilitating collective action in both cases.

However, protests in MENA and Russia reveal important distinctions. The share of the young population among protesters was much higher in MENA, mostly due to demographic reasons (Eremenko 2014). In addition, the social base of the MENA protesters was much more diverse and embraced its core activists from the working class, who were still relatively poor and thus frustrated with their economic situation, which might have determined their high resolve to use violent methods if necessary (Carr and Koulinka 2012; Eremenko 2014). Not surprisingly, in contrast to, say, Egypt, protests in Russia did not result in ousting the incumbent out of power.

In some sense, the systemic-level reasons for the rapid emergence and spread of the protests in Russia are much closer to those in Turkey than in the “Arab Spring” countries: the lack of political alternatives, fierce corruption, poorly functioning institutions, and deteriorating social and economic conditions. No wonder that in both cases violent responses by the police only triggered further resistance from the protesters, although both Putin and Erdogan still enjoy their leadership.

Not only did the protests occur under similar settings, but also protesters extensively borrowed tactics from recent as well as historical social movements. For instance, protesters in Russia formed human chains (a tactic borrowed from the Baltic-state independence activists of the 1980s (Shevtsova 2012)). In addition, the Occupy Abai movement (its first sit-in was organized under the statue of the Kazakh poet Abai) was partly inspired by the Act Up movements in New York City in the 1980s (Volkov 2012a). The campers actively borrowed practices from the Occupy Wall Street movement, such as general assemblies (decision-making bodies that use egalitarian principles to come to consensus), human microphones (people repeat a speaker’s words), etc. During the surveys, journalists often referred to the historical and modern examples of violent coups ranging from the murder of Emperor Pavel I to the recent overthrows of Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt. Some protesters were even shouting “Tahrir Russia”. According to Shevtsova (2012), not only the Russian opposition, but also the Russian elite learned a lesson from the Arab spring: “Lose your grip on power, and you end up like Hosni Mubarak or Muammar Gaddafi” (Shevtsova 2012, p. 28). So, confirming the words of Tarrow, an “interactive diffusion” took place. However, as confirmed by the case of Russia, the protests fell short of being global and can be best understood if framed as sovereign agents for change. However, their potential to become global should not be overlooked.¹⁰

12 Conclusion

The analysis of the Russian case presented in this paper allows me to conclude that the Russian protest events in 2011–2013 cannot be described within one theoretical framework alone. They are similar to the Color Revolutions in their usage of elections as focal points but dissimilar in terms of the essential role of democracy-diffusing activists. In contrast, they are similar to the Arab spring in being started by “loose coalitions of disparate groups and individuals” (Lynch 2012, p. 70), but dissimilar in the strength of the cascading effects. Protesters’ grievances and social

¹⁰Qualitatively, these movements, including the case of Russia, are much more resembling of the “austerity protests” that unfolded in 1976–1992 in 39 countries against IMF policies (Tarrow 2005). Indeed, protesters represented similar socio-demographic strata, they shared the same grievances and used similar tactics and mottos—and even borrowed them from each other. Geographically, protests in Latin America “boomeranged” into the protests in Asia, MENA, and even Central and Eastern Europe (Tarrow 2005). However, Tarrow (2005) himself contrasts these protests to what he calls “global protests”.

portraits, certain government and opposition tactics, especially the wide use of the Internet by young opposition members, also resemble the Arab Spring.

Most importantly, the Russian social protests are qualitatively different from both the Color Revolutions and most of the Arab spring cases in that they failed not only in changing the regime but also in ousting its leaders from power. That is why the important question is whether changing the status-quo in the democratic direction was what the Russian protesters had in mind when taking to the streets in 2011–2013. Apparently, as my analysis demonstrates, democracy was not the main, if at all, demand of the protesters, but rather grievances for social justice, human dignity, and a corruption-free country. As a result, many protests now “go local”.

As I stated earlier, the Russian social movement is in a sense a “regime contention” type, albeit unsuccessful. Three important features hinder the Russian case from successful regime change: the lack of a split in the ruling elite, a lack of the organized pro-democracy social activists (both in contrast to the Color Revolutions), and a lack of a common narrative behind the social movement, largely due to the identified differences between protesting Muscovites and humble provincials (in contrast to the Arab spring). Guided by the careful analysis of the recent surveys and secondary sources, one can claim that all three features are starting to change: the iron-clad ruling elite is beginning to split, the gap between the capital and provincial Russia is narrowing, and the opposition is able to maintain its activities.

The long-term outcome of the movement will much depend on the ability of civic and local movements to accumulate necessary social and human capital and form expectations about the possibility of success among the Russian citizens and opposition elite. Such expectations are essential for enabling regime change (Olson 1990; Kuran 1989; Hale 2013). Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009, p. 416) emphasize the significance of elites’ and citizens’ “perception of the likelihood of regime change”. Morse (2012, p. 178) contends that the likelihood of elections bringing about change is “conditional upon the perceived vulnerability of the regime”.

The future of the Russian social protest movement and whether it can succeed at changing the current political regime depends on the strategic actions of both political incumbents and opposition as well as exogenous shocks that may result in long-term economic turmoil and thereby serve as a trigger for the rebirth of the Russian social movement.

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Non-Western Social Movements and Participatory
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