
Protesting Putinism

The Election Protests of 2011–2012 in Broader Perspective

Graeme Robertson

The recent election-related protests in Russia are neither a radical break with the past nor a flicker of unrest but a continuation of longer-term trends on the Russian protest scene. Looking at the December–May protest cycle in the context of these trends both changes how we understand the causes of the protests and has implications for the expected consequences.

THE cycle of protest against electoral fraud that followed the Russian State Duma elections of December 4, 2011, has been seen by many as a landmark event in Russia's post-communist politics. Most authoritative commentators in Russia originally seemed to share the view of Lilia Shevtsova, who argued that the protests “put an end to the post-communist status quo” (2012, 19). As the celebrated Russian journalist Yevgenia Albats told the *New York Times*, “Today we just proved that civil society does exist in Russia, that the middle class does exist and that this country is not lost.” The *Times* itself, no friend of the current Russian authorities, gushed that the protests were “a watershed moment, ending years of quiet acceptance of the political consolidation Mr. Putin introduced” (Barry 2011).

Other more world-weary Russia watchers have taken a rather different view. For those who have witnessed false dawns of Russian democracy many times before, the protests are interesting but unlikely to herald major change.¹ In this view, the “snow revolution,” as some dubbed it, melted with the spring. December's dreams turned into May's reality: the inauguration of the new-old president in a deserted Moscow and the president's press secretary calling for protesters' lives to be “smeared on the asphalt” (Kara-Murza 2012). For those who view Russia from this perspective, the convoluted nature of reforms to the process for electing regional governors, the excessively liberal opening of registration to political parties, the subsequent clamp-down by Russian au-

GRAEME ROBERTSON is associate professor of political science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

thorities on protest, and the passing of new legislation on foreign funding of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and on the Internet are signs that the effects of the 2011–2012 protest are likely to be limited.

In this article I argue that neither of these views is particularly helpful as a way of understanding the significance of the recent protest cycle in Russia. Instead, to understand both the causes of what happened and the likely consequences, we need to put the particular protest wave of December–May into the broader context of how protest in Russia has developed during the post-communist era. When we do this, the protests are at the same time less groundbreaking and dramatic than the optimists portray them and more significant and consequential than the pessimists would have it.

Rather than the Russian people suddenly waking up, the protests are the result of a longer slow stirring that is evident in thousands of protest events that have taken place over recent years. These previous protests presaged the election protest cycle in many ways—in the form and style of the protests, in the political geography of protest, and in the nature of the demands being made. The previous history of protest also illustrates the role of local activism and concrete complaints in building a movement of the kind that took to the streets this winter and so helps explain why electoral fraud produced protest in 2011, when similar fraud had been met with quiescence before. Thus, the electoral protest cycle was less the beginning of something new than the continuation of long-standing trends in Russian politics and society that most scholars and journalists neglected.

If the recent protests are not as novel as the optimists think, putting them into broader context also suggests that the protest cycle is likely to be more significant than the pessimists think. As Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik (2011) demonstrate, successful attempts to use protest to overthrow authoritarian incumbents generally take place only after a series of failed attempts. Building a movement big enough to attract CNN to town takes time and learning. Putting the election protests in context suggests that at least some of that time has already passed and many lessons have already been learned. The so-called “December movement” should be seen as the latest and most prominent moment so far in building this movement. It is, however, just one of many such moments that date from at least the antimonetization protests of 2005 (Robertson 2009).

In this article, I use an original data set of protest compiled from reports on protest collected by the Russian Institute of Collective Action (IKD—Institut “Kollektiv-

noe Deistvie”) to identify the key characteristics of protest in the second half of the 2000s. I contrast this picture with protest patterns in the 1990s under Yeltsin compiled on the basis of Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) police reports (Robertson 2011). In particular, I focus on three aspects of protest that illustrate well the changes that have taken place. First, I show that the repertoire of protest—the kinds of actions that people typically resort to in order to express dissent—has changed dramatically in the decade separating the two data collections. Where protest in Russia had previously featured a substantial component of direct actions or actions designed to inflict suffering on the protesters themselves, by the end of the 2000s the protest repertoire was dominated by symbolic, and sometimes highly creative, forms of public expression.

Second, protest has been on the move spatially. Once largely confined to Russia’s vast provinces, the capital (as in most democracies) has become the dominant location for protests to be organized. I argue that the emergence in recent years of protest in the capital both laid the organizational groundwork and created the human capital necessary for the December protests. In the longer term, too, the shifting geographical patterns of protest are a sign of political consolidation under Putin, which, while not sufficient for democracy, is a necessary element of future democratic development.

Third, I demonstrate that the nature of protest demands has changed enormously in the intervening decade. In the 1990s, prolonged economic crisis meant that protest demands were first and foremost about economic issues and, most notably, were demands for the payment of wages that were owed but in arrears. By the second half of the 2000s, however, the demands generated by economic crisis had largely (though not entirely) been replaced by demands associated with the growing pains of a rapidly transforming economy and society. In addition, demands on the justice system, a desire for anticorruption measures, and other more abstract claims about civil and workers’ rights had come to play a much bigger role in protests.

So what? Is there anything beyond historical interest (not that that is not important!) in showing that the protests of December–May have deeper roots than they are usually portrayed as having? I believe so. The evidence of longer-term trends in protest presented here provides part of the answer to the question of why election fraud produced mass protest in 2011, when extensive fraud in previous elections did not. Previous protests in Moscow had established both the cultural and human capital nec-

essary to organize large-scale gatherings of the kind we have seen.

Furthermore, whereas spontaneous, wildcat protests from below that are ignited by the particular circumstances of a given moment are generally of little concern to incumbent authoritarians, protests that have been slowly building, and protesters who have been gradually learning and uniting over time, may ultimately represent a real challenge (Wolchik 2012). Consequently, from the Kremlin's perspective, the data presented in this article should be quite disturbing. As I show, the "December movement," while important in itself, is also a symptom of long-term changes in Russian society that are likely to be hard to reverse whatever the Kremlin's strategy for managing discontent. The election protests are further evidence of the gradual growth of real pressure from below on the sclerotic institutions of Russia's pseudo-democracy.

Finally, that the election protests have deeper roots is also strategically important. The experience gained through years of struggling with the regime has made the opposition much more creative and much more flexible than it would otherwise have been. Although a history of failed protest is clearly not enough in itself to guarantee future success, experience of previous struggle is important in shaping the protest leadership's ideas about the range of issues that represent opportunities for building a movement. The deep causes of the protests in 2011 were far from limited to either election fraud or the insulting presentation of Putin and Medvedev trading jobs for a second time (Krastev and Holmes 2012). The longer perspective on Russian protest presented here draws attention to the role of ecological destruction, housing and development fraud, repression of artists and journalists, and myriad other concrete violations of "the vital needs of specific people" in laying the groundwork for the protests (Havel 1985; Volkov 2012, 61). Since many of the key leaders of the December movement have long experience of these previous events, they too understand the importance for the future of building on such "parallel structures" (Havel 1985; Volkov 2012).

I begin by reviewing some of the literature on the relationship between political regimes and protest characteristics, arguing that the kinds of things people do when they protest, where they do them, and what they demand can tell us a lot about the nature and likely dynamics of political regimes. I then describe the data on which this article is largely based, assessing its strengths and weaknesses and what the data can tell us and what they cannot. I then present each of the three dimensions of protest in

turn (protest repertoire, location, and demands), describing changes over time and highlighting the significance of each in turn. I conclude with some thoughts on future research in this dynamic arena of Russian politics.

Political Regimes and Protest Characteristics

In this section, I outline some of the vast range of research connecting political systems and protest. I argue that scholars have seen protest in democracies and autocracies as being quite different. Although reality is necessarily more complex than the ideal types that the literature tends to deal with, the basic distinctions are useful and provide a basis for analyzing politically significant changes in the nature of protest in Russia over the last decade. Understanding these long-term changes, I argue, is important for grasping the context and political significance of the recent round of election-related protest.

There is a long-standing consensus in a range of social sciences that suggests there are strong connections between different kinds of political regime and the nature of political protest, or "contention," that is observed.² Simplifying somewhat, rather than being exceptional behavior, protest is thought to be a normal and frequent element of political life in democracies. In fact, many prominent scholars argue that contemporary democracies are really "movement" societies in which the diffusion, institutionalization, and professionalization of protest have turned formerly controversial acts by the politically excluded into part of the standard repertoire of political participation for many ordinary citizens (Goldstone 2004).

The corollary of protest being a daily occurrence in democracies is that the kinds of things people do to protest are generally not particularly disruptive. Violence and damage to people and property are generally avoided, and most protest tends to be both moderate and public and more likely to involve making claims, verbalizing challenges, and demonstrating worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment than about taking direct action (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 269).

In autocracies, by contrast, protest is usually thought of as being rare and dangerous. At the extreme, totalitarian regimes try to monopolize all forms of public participation, criminalizing and repressing all unsanctioned activity (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956; Linz 2000). While complete social control is never realized in practice, pervasive repression does have enormous effects on the volume and nature of contention. Consequently, in the most

authoritarian of contexts, the kinds of “protest” that are most common are likely to consist of “everyday forms of resistance” that are hidden or disguised so as to avoid direct confrontation with the authorities (Scott 1985). When protest is public, it tends to occur around official events like state funerals or official holidays, which offer both the excuse to gather together and the space for challenges to the regime, whether large or small (Tilly 2004, 30). Apart from such events, protest in authoritarian regimes most often consists of direct actions, ranging from limited and local acts of violence or property seizure, to large-scale armed insurrections against the incumbent regime (Wood 2000). As Charles Tilly puts it, protest “either . . . adopts forbidden clandestine attacks on officials or it crowds into the relatively protected spaces of authorized public gatherings such as funerals, holidays, and civic ceremonies” (2004, 30).

These analyses of democratic and authoritarian protest are clearly ideal types. For example, recent literature has suggested that the traditional view of protest in authoritarian contexts needs to be modified somewhat. Protest was both more common and more politically significant in the USSR, for example, than is usually thought (Kozlov 2002; Viola 2002). Indeed, even in harshly repressive contemporary authoritarian regimes like China, where any political opposition is officially proscribed, protest is both a frequent and a functional part of the political system (O’Brien and Li 2006; Chen 2012). The picture of protest in democracies is also simplified. It is true that protest is common and mostly peaceful, but it is also the case that access to the polity is highly uneven and excluded groups and new entrants often have to resort to quite disruptive measures to get attention (Guidry and Sawyer 2003).

Furthermore, while there is strong consensus on the kinds of protest we should see in democracies and the most repressive of autocracies, there is little agreement on the kinds of protest we should expect in regimes like those in post-communist Russia that are hybrids of authoritarian control and open political competition. In fact, hybridity is compatible with a range of outcomes depending on organizational ecology, state mobilization strategies, and elite unity (Robertson 2011). These elements each changed radically from the Yeltsin era to the Putin era. The data presented in the next section illustrate the effects of these changes using quantitative data.

These caveats notwithstanding, the basic distinctions drawn in the literature between protest in authoritarian regimes and protest in democracies is extremely useful for tracking major changes in the nature of protest in

Russia. As I show in the next section, whatever the underlying explanation for changes in the quality of Russian protest, the extent of those changes over a decade is dramatic. I focus on three aspects of protest that clearly illustrate a dramatic shift in Russia from protest that looks very much like the authoritarian model of protest, to one that looks much more like the democratic model. To illustrate this shift, I present evidence on the kinds of actions that protesters undertake (*repertoire*), the political geography of protest (*location*), and the kinds of claims that protesters make (*demands*)—all of which, I argue, prefigure key characteristics of the December 2011–May 2012 protest cycle.

Protest Data

To illustrate the dramatic changes that have been taking place in the nature of political protest in Russia over the last decade, I draw on data from two different sources that allow a comparison between protest patterns in the 1997–2000 period and the 2007–2011 period. Both sources of data provide sufficient detail to allow a comparison of key characteristics of protest beyond simple numbers of events and participants. Although comparing two different sources of data presents significant problems, as I discuss below, there are good reasons to believe that the sharp contrasts between these periods that the data show are indeed real and not just a function of the different data sources.

The baseline data cover the 1997–2000 period and are drawn from a compilation of MVD reports on protest (Robertson 2011). These reports were written daily in every local MVD office in Russia and were compiled into a series of documents (*svodki*) that reported to Moscow all protest events, strikes, hunger strikes, and other forms of action relevant to the political and security situation in the country. The individual reports were added together to create a data base of protest that presented detailed data on eight different dimensions—type of event (strikes, hunger strikes, factory occupations, pogroms, etc.—35 categories in total), location (both region and specific town or county), type of participants (workers, pensioners, women, students, etc.—245 categories), number of participants, economic sector (34 categories), nature of the demands made (619 categories), location of protest (e.g., Red Square, Trans-Siberian Railroad, etc.—164 categories), and duration.

Unfortunately, the MVD data cover only the period from 1997 to 2000; so, while it is an excellent source of data for the Yeltsin period, it is extremely limited in what

it can tell us about protest in the Putin era. To build a picture of protest in that era, I used a similar event-count methodology as the MVD data to code the most comprehensive publicly available daily collection of information on protest—the Web site www.ikd.ru. The Institute of Collective Action is a group of sociologists who have for several years compiled weekly reports of all protest actions in Russia as reported by correspondents and newspapers throughout the Russian Federation. As sociologists with frankly oppositionist views, their focus in collecting data is on events critical of the authorities at all levels in Russia. The data collection effort and the degree of detail presented in each report are impressive. Detailed information on each event is presented in the “news wire” (*lenta novostei*) section of the Web site. These text reports were compiled into quantitative event data using the same procedure as the MVD data, resulting in information on the same eight dimensions.

On its face, the need to compare data from two different sources is a problem. How are we to know that any differences between the sets of data reflect real differences on the ground and not just differences in the way that the data are generated? The truth is that we cannot know with 100 percent certainty. Nevertheless, since that level of confidence is rarely available to the social scientist, careful consideration of the likely systematic differences between the data sets should allow us to get a sense of which comparisons we can make with confidence and which call for a higher degree of caution.

The comparison between the data sets is fascinating. On one level, the accounts are very similar, in the sense that they are daily text reports that provide a large amount of detail that allows us to look beyond simple numbers of events and protesters to get a sense of what motivates protest (demands), the kinds of action that are the most common (repertoire) and the political geography of protest (location). On another level, though, the bureaucratic processes that generate the data are radically different. The MVD data present the world as seen by policemen. The IKD data reflect the world as seen by sympathetic journalists and sociologists. We have the view from two different sides of the line of helmeted officers. Clearly, these views are likely to differ in quite systematic ways that need to be taken into account.

The most difficult comparison to make is likely to be between levels of protest and numbers of protest participants. Although official police compilers of data on protest may have competing incentives—on the one hand, to exaggerate the level of unrest to attract more resources, and on the other, to minimize reporting to show

that matters are well under control—international comparisons of police-reported data suggest that police tend to understate the number of people participating in protests. Mark Beissinger also argues that police reporting of protest and unrest in the Soviet period consistently understated the level of activity (1998, 286–87). On this basis, we might treat the aggregate numbers of protests and protesters generated from the MVD reports as being a conservative estimate (Robertson 2011, 47). Oppositionists, by contrast, are likely to have quite clear incentives in compiling data. The larger the number of events, and the larger the number of protesters, the more important the challenge to the regime and the work of the compilers.

However, we cannot simply assume from these differing incentives that for any given level of “real” protest the IKD should show higher numbers than the MVD data. Although the two sets of compilers are likely to have opposite incentives, they also have quite different levels of resources and bureaucratic capacity. The MVD has officers reporting from every population settlement in Russia and has been systematically providing data to Moscow for decades. The IKD, by contrast, relies largely on volunteers and reports from journalists, news Web sites, and activists across the Russian Federation. Consequently, it is vastly more likely that any given event will be noticed by the MVD than by the IKD. As a result, it is difficult to make comparisons of overall numbers across the two data sets.

This article, however, is less concerned with quantitative comparisons of numbers than with making claims about qualitative differences between the periods in terms of repertoire, demands, and location. How valid are these comparisons? On these dimensions, there are good reasons to believe that comparisons are more valid. Since the comparisons I make will be in terms of proportions of events within each data set, the relevant question to ask is whether there are reasons to believe that the MVD and the IKD will systematically report higher proportions of different kinds of events, with different kinds of demands occurring in different places.

In terms of the repertoire of protest, it is not clear why one source or the other would focus more or less on different kinds of actions. The incentives of MVD bureaucrats with regard to violent or disruptive action are probably the same as they are with regard to reporting protest in general—ambiguous. What might be gained in additional resources for dealing with a problem might be more than lost in drawing attention to local difficulties better hidden from the center. Nor are there likely to be

clear biases on this dimension within the IKD data set. As social scientists, we can assume quite safely that the first instinct of the IKD compilers is to be as comprehensive as possible. Even if, however, we assume that the IKD data collection is also (like all data collection) a political project, then the incentives of the compilers would also probably be ambiguous. On the one hand, highlighting violent or dramatic direct action is likely to increase the attention paid to protest. On the other hand, such attention might also detract from sympathy for the protesters. As a result, it is unlikely that we should see systematic differences in the proportion of different kinds of events.

In terms of protest location, it is also not clear that there should be systematic bias that would make the proportion of events radically different in each data source. The key question for the claims made here is whether we might have reasons to expect that the MVD systematically underreports events in Moscow and St. Petersburg relative to the IKD. If the pro-Moscow bias in the IKD data is large and there is a corresponding anti-Moscow bias in the MVD data, then the argument for a shift in the geography of protest made here may be overstated. Empirically, it is difficult to test the extent of geographic bias in either source as we have neither a common time period that we could check against a third source nor an independent “objective” source for either period. Nevertheless, there are theoretical reasons to suspect that differences in the degree of geographic bias between sources are likely to be relatively small.

Both sources rely on networks of agents/reporters across the country and aspire to national coverage. As a result, they provide a much more accurate picture than typical event counts compiled from newspapers that have strong biases toward events in the capital (Wada 2004). Although the MVD has complete coverage of the country, officials probably find it easier to suppress information about events taking place in the provinces away from the daily experience of Moscow-based leaders. Similarly, despite its networked nature, the IKD data may also have some Moscow bias due to the greater concentration of journalists and media in the capital. Consequently, while it is hard to demonstrate empirically that the two sources are both similarly biased in the geography of their reporting, there are no obvious reasons to assume opposite biases.

The final key dimension of interest is the demands of the protesters. We might expect local MVD officials to be less quick to report complaints about the local administration than demands about national politics. Similarly,

criminal justice complaints and civil rights and corruption claims might be less likely to be reported. As we will see below, the MVD data do show much lower incidence of these complaints than the IKD data, though the differences are very large indeed and unlikely to be explained by reporting tendencies alone. IKD researchers, for their part, have a clear leftist political agenda and might be likely to focus more on demands that are consistent with this worldview. This preference might mean more focus on rights, but it also might mean more focus on material demands. The IKD agenda is also likely to make the sociologists less sensitive to right-wing or nationalist demands—and indeed the presence of ethnic or nationalist events in the data set is much lower than an anecdotal understanding of contemporary Russia would suggest. With these caveats in mind, we turn now to comparing protest between the eras in question.

Repertoire

The most striking transformation in protest in Russia between the 1990s and the second half of the Putin–Medvedev–Putin era is a dramatic shift from protest dominated by direct actions like industrial strikes, hunger strikes, and road and rail blockades to one in which the vast majority of protest events are purely symbolic in nature, involving demonstrations and marches, typically with the prearranged permission of the local authorities. This shift represents the biggest step in the transformation of Russian protesters from following a style of dissent more typical of authoritarian political systems to one that is typical of the long-standing democracies.

Some forty years ago, Charles Tilly observed that “a population’s repertoire of collective action generally includes only a handful of alternatives” (Tilly 1978, 156). By studying that repertoire, Tilly argued, we can learn a lot not only about protest but about the nature of the political context in which the protest takes place. Where protesters have few institutional levers at their disposal and limited voice in the political arena, protest will tend to take the form of direct actions to remedy specific problems rather than broader appeals couched in terms of general rules applying to broad classes of people. In extremis—for example, among the incarcerated, to whom voice is to all practical purposes completely denied—protesters will often resort to self-harm, undertaking hunger strikes and other similar actions (Biggs 2003).

By contrast, in democracies the “handful of alternatives” will look quite different. Access to institutional

means for changing policy, to courts that give at least some hearing to legal appeals, and to broader publics whose sympathy might be crucial in creating pressure for changes in policy lead protesters to focus on peaceful protests that can be integrated into the political process and that can complement, rather than completely replace, institutional means of policy making.

Following these broad distinctions, I divide the repertoire of protest broadly into actions that are largely symbolic in intent and direct actions. Figure 1 shows the distribution of protest in Russia between different kinds of action in the 1997–2000 period. The MVD data set records some 5,822 protest events between 1997 and 2000. As Tilly suggested, some 96 percent of these come from one of four categories: strikes, road and rail blockades, hunger strikes, and demonstrations. In terms of the broad distinction between symbolic protests and direct actions, about one-third of the repertoire (35 percent) consists of clearly symbolic actions such as strikes and marches. Unambiguously direct actions such as blockades, occupations, and hunger strikes make up one-quarter of events (25 percent). This leaves the largest single component, strikes, at 41 percent of the repertoire.³

Whether strikes are direct or symbolic is open for discussion. Classically, strikes would be thought of as direct actions—inflicting direct economic harm to press employers and/or the state for concessions. In the Russian context of the late 1990s, where many of the enterprises in question were not economically viable and were not producing much anyway, many strikes had a more symbolic impact than they would in a functioning economic system.

Whatever the appropriate interpretation of strikes, the contrast between the repertoire of the late 1990s and that of recent years in Russia is dramatic. Figure 2 presents an analysis of the 5,726 events recorded in the IKD data set between 2007 and 2011. Here again the same four categories (strikes, blockades, hunger strikes, and demonstrations) make up the vast bulk of the repertoire—some 95 percent. The distribution within these categories, however, is dramatically different. By far the largest category of events is symbolic demonstrations (87 percent, if we include marches). Direct actions, by contrast, make up only about 13 percent of events. The number of strikes has fallen by an order of magnitude, even though the 216 strikes recorded in the period by the IKD data set is itself an order of magnitude larger than the 15 strikes recorded in official statistics.⁴ Hunger strikes, a major feature of the late 1990s, remain part of the repertoire, but they have become much less common.⁵ Another ma-

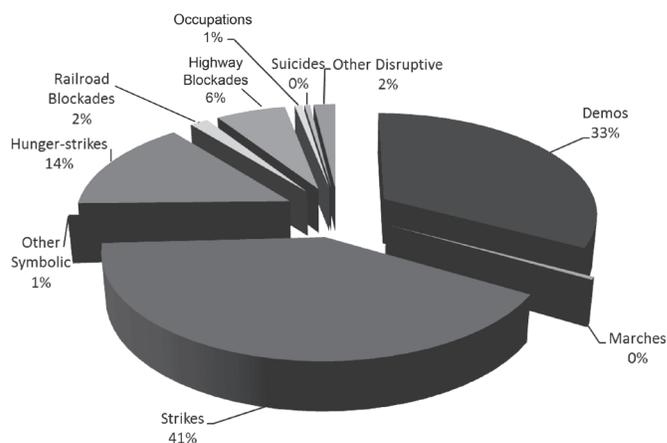


Figure 1. Protest Repertoire, 1997–2000

major feature of the 1990s repertoire, blocking roads and railroads, has also become much less common. In the late 1990s, Siberian coal miners and others took to the rails and roads in the famous “rail wars,” trying to extract concessions from a largely disinterested federal government by blocking key transit roads across the country. Although such blockades still take place from time to time, they are clearly much less frequent than before.

Whatever the changes in the classes of action, the Russian protest repertoire has in recent years also shown significant changes in the quality and creativity of protest action. Many commentators on the election cycle protest noted enthusiastically the intelligence and creativity of the protests, citing this as a significant change. Protest that had previously been symbolized by crowds of impoverished old women was now hip and smart. New, creative, and highly provocative forms of street theater and performance art had, however, joined the arsenal of antiregime techniques in Russia long before December 2011. Well before the recent election cycle, Russian protesters had become expert at using cell phones to organize flash mobs, at raising phallic bridges to insult Prime Minister Putin, and at giving kisses to destabilize the authority of the Moscow militia (Bown 2011). From Blue Bucket protesters climbing on official cars to the street theater of Oborona to Pussy Riot, Russian protesters had already taken things to a much more interesting and creative level before the election protests brought them wider attention.⁶

How should we interpret these dramatic changes in protest repertoire? Part of the explanation is probably the more ordered political environment of the Putin years relative to the Yeltsin period. Improved state capacity makes the cost of trying to block roads and railroads, for example, significantly higher than in the Yeltsin era.

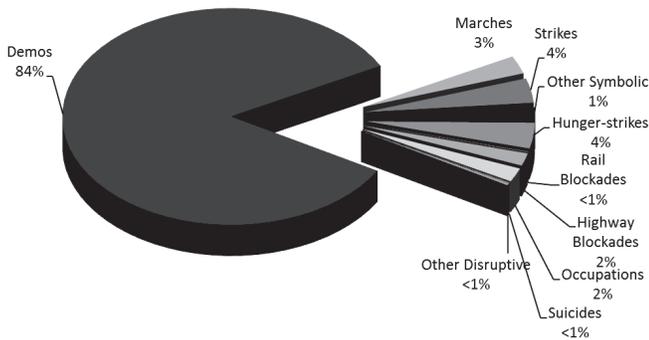


Figure 2. Protest Repertoire, 2007-2011

Part of the explanation, at least as far as strikes go, is the vastly improved economic situation relative to the 1990s. The vast majority of strikes in the 1990s were about unpaid wages, a problem that has not disappeared but is of much less significance than it was then (Greene and Robertson 2010).

The extent of improvements in the quality of the Russian state, however, should not be overstated (Taylor 2011). Moreover, even if the state is able to use force more effectively to prevent blockades, it is not clear how increased repressive capacity would reduce the proportion of hunger strikes. The large changes we see in the repertoire instead suggest a significant change in the strategy of protesters in Russia. The emphasis has clearly changed from using direct action to try to force redress of specific problems to adopting a strategy in which public displays of symbolic dissent are increasingly (though far from exclusively) used in an attempt to influence broader publics and political decision makers. Using symbolic protest to make demands on the political system is seen, at least potentially, as a worthwhile form of political participation, in a way that was not the case in the 1990s. This is a dramatic change and one that underlies the resort to the streets in the 2011–2012 election cycle.

Location

The qualitative changes in the repertoire of protest are reflected in equally significant changes in the political geography of protest. Whereas in the 1990s protest was closely tied to local politics and to the political strategies of local elites (Robertson 2007), by the latter part of the Putin–Medvedev–Putin years, much of the protest had moved to Moscow. Although Moscow has yet to account for a majority of protests, the shift to the center follows the general centralization of power that we have seen in

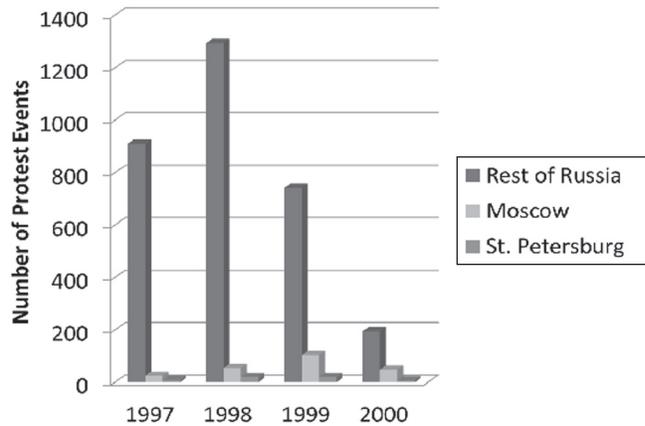


Figure 3. Regionalized Protest Under Yeltsin

the Russian system. This shift helps explain the rather novel political geography of the election cycle protests and may have implications for longer-term regime development in Russia.

Figure 3 shows the regional distribution of protest in the 1997–2000 period. The political geography is striking. Protests in most countries are more common in capital cities than elsewhere, but Russia in the late Yeltsin years was atypical in this regard (as in so many others). In 1997, more than 97 percent of recorded protests took place in neither Moscow nor St. Petersburg.⁷ In 1998, 96 percent of protests took place outside the two “capitals.” The proportion of protest in Moscow increased in 1999 to just over 8 percent, and again to almost 14 percent in 2000, while the proportion in St. Petersburg remained trivial.

By the latter half of the 2000s, however, the political geography had changed dramatically. Between 2007 and 2010, fully one-third of protest events were to be seen on the streets of Moscow and about 10 percent in St. Petersburg. In 2011, Moscow and St. Petersburg accounted for more than half of the protest events as the Moscow proportion increased to 44 percent (see Figure 4).

What accounts for this dramatic change? First, as noted above, part of the change may be due to better reporting of protests in the capital. This is a feature of most protest event counts. Nevertheless, data reporting does not account for all of this dramatic change. In fact, the first indicators of change on a large scale in the geography of protest came with the monetization protests of 2005, when protest against the replacement of a range of benefits with cash payments of lower value led to an explosion of protest that began in St. Petersburg and spread quickly to Moscow and the rest of Russia (Rob-

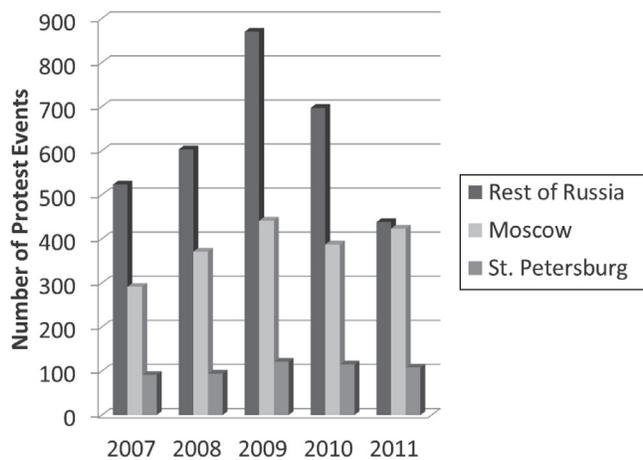


Figure 4. Capitalizing Protest: Moscow and St. Petersburg as Protest Centers

ertson 2009). From this moment on, the basic dynamics of protest in Russia changed from being primarily about regional supplicants bargaining for resources from Moscow and became much more about protest from below making organized claims on the political system in Moscow.

This shift from the regions to St. Petersburg and, most notably to Moscow, was clear by the time of the election protests in 2011–2012. There were protests in the regions and St. Petersburg, but by far the largest and most significant protests were in the capital (“Protesty” 2012). Such large-scale protests in Moscow would have been unthinkable in the late 1990s. By the time the election fiasco of 2011 came around, however, Moscow had become accustomed to protests, and Muscovites to protesting. Many of the key leaders of the 2011 protests—including Evgeniia Chirikova, Garry Kasparov, Alexei Navalny, Boris Nemtsov, Ilya Ponomarev, Vladimir Ryzhkov, Sergei Udaltsov, and Ilya Iashin—were veterans of previous protests on the streets of Moscow (most of them had been arrested at previous protests). Moreover, although there is no direct data, many of the “rank-and-file” protesters probably had participated in previous protests, too. According to a Levada Center poll taken at the December 24, 2011, march on Sakharov Avenue in Moscow, 22 percent of respondents said that they had been present at the unsanctioned demonstration on December 5 in the Chistye Prudy neighborhood (Levada Center 2011). This number is particularly interesting because the December 5 event resembled previous protests in Moscow far more than the later ones did. The turnout on December 5 was estimated at about eight thousand people—large but not that much larger than many previ-

ous protests in Moscow. Moreover, the most active participants came from groups long used to participation in street protests in Moscow, such as Solidarnost, Yabloko, and the Movement for the Protection of Khimki Forest. Thus, although the numbers of protesters on the streets in the protest cycle of 2011–2012 were larger than usual, the core of protesters had been gathering in Moscow’s streets long before the elections took place.

In broader comparative perspective, the changes in the location of Russian protest over the last decade are a sign of extremely significant changes in the Russian state. Historically, the movement of protest from the regions to the capital was one of the key signs of increasing state consolidation and the parliamentarization of politics in the West that was a common path to democratization (Tilly 1997). What we have seen in Russia is certainly not a parliamentarization of power—the Duma is a weaker body now than it was in the 1990s. However, the shift of protest to Moscow signifies the reconsolidation of the central Russian state as both an inciter of people’s claims and as an object of those claims (Tilly 1997, 248). Although clearly not a sufficient condition for the emergence of democratic governance, this process is most likely a necessary condition for democratization in Russia, as it has been in other states.

Demands

A third sign of the changes in Russian protest patterns that was evident before the 2011–2012 protest cycle is a transformation in the nature of demands made by protesters. Whereas protest in the 1990s was primarily about poverty, unpaid wages, and material deprivation, protest in recent years in Russia has increasingly been about the problems of growth, not decline. Issues of development planning and environmental preservation have taken a front seat as contention over increasingly valuable real estate has intensified. There has been tremendous growth, too, in protest over civil and political rights, both in general and with regard to specific cases where individuals’ rights have been violated. These changes are hugely significant, since they are early warning signs that the implicit exchange of economic growth for political stability of the early Putin years may be coming undone.

Figure 5 illustrates the nature of protest demands recorded in the MVD data set between 1997 and 2000. Above all, what motivated Russian protesters in this period was a demand for the payment of wages and benefits owed by the state and private employers. Some 74 percent of all protest events featured this kind of demand.

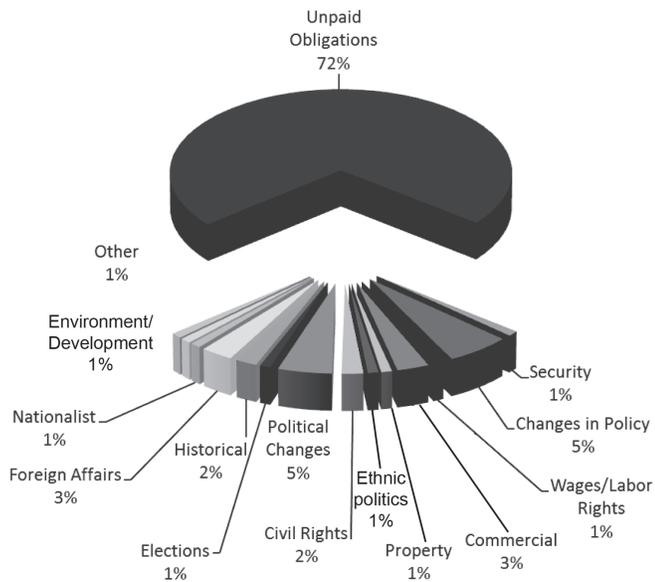


Figure 5. Protest Demands, 1997-2000

This far outweighs any other type of claim, with the next largest set—claims for more social spending or changes in its material distribution—being featured at only 6 percent of events. Issues of environment, civil rights, criminal justice, or labor rights all played a vanishingly small role in protests.⁸

By the 2007–2011 period, protest demands had changed radically (Figure 6). Unpaid wages and other demands for material rights to be upheld had not disappeared entirely, but their importance had declined enormously. Only about 6 percent of protest events featured claims over nonpayment of legal obligations. Instead, demands for policy changes affecting the distribution of resources had become much more widespread—appearing in about one-fifth of protest events. More important still were two sorts of demands largely absent in the 1990s. Russia’s burgeoning economic growth has led to intense conflicts over development, both in terms of the ecological consequences of development and in terms of conflicts over ownership and compensation for those displaced by new development. Demands of this sort made up the single largest number of protest events—almost 30 percent of all events concerned environmental or development issues. The other category of demands that emerged as extremely important in this period were demands related either to civil rights (the right to assembly, gay rights, etc.) or to specific cases in which criminal justice was seen to have gone astray. The majority of the latter cases were protests in sympathy with either journalists or artists who had been arrested or persecuted by federal or local authorities.

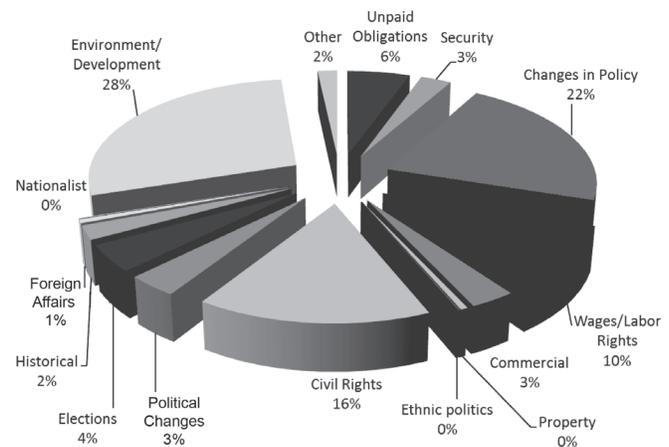


Figure 6. Protest Demands, 2007-2011

The significance of these changes both for the election cycle protests and for the future of Russian politics is enormous. In terms of preparing the ground for the election protests, the range of demands is indicative of the broad range of people with experience both of concrete violations of their (or others’) rights and of organizing collectively to take action in protests. It is not that there were many protests around election violations specifically before 2011—in fact, the data show only 3 percent of events were about elections. Rather, what was crucial was the growing and widespread sense of official impunity that provided the interpretive frame for the political events of late 2011. In the Levada study of participants in the Sakharov Avenue protests of December 24 cited above, 73 percent of respondents cited a desire to express their discontent at the falsification of elections. The same proportion, however, also cited growing dissatisfaction with the general situation in the country, and 52 percent (the next largest group) cited dissatisfaction with how the authorities treated ordinary people. Hence, while it is true that there was considerable irritation at what Russians called the “castling move” (*rokirovka*) (Krastev and Holmes 2012) and outrage at election falsifications, the frame within which these developments were interpreted was one in which many had experience of authorities arrogantly and abusively riding roughshod over their rights. From famous cases like those of Sergei Magnitsky, the Defense of Khimki Forest, and the Strategy 31 campaign for the right to assembly to dozens of lesser-known violations of citizens’ rights involving artists, journalists, apartment dwellers, and jilted investors, the sense of injustice was widespread. These violations had led to growing protest and citizen organization long before December 2011 (Volkov 2012). This experience

of previous protest is a key part of the explanation of why fraud in 2011 was explosive, when it had passed largely without protest in previous elections.

The changing nature of protest demands in Russia is also significant beyond the immediate issue of the December–May protest cycle. Citizens are increasingly, it seems, willing or able to make connections between material issues and more abstract issues like civil rights or election fraud. Moreover, as the set of concerns that lead to protest becomes more diverse, so the human and organizational capital that can be drawn on to challenge the authorities becomes both more widely diffused and stronger. While previous protests are not a necessary precondition for future challenges to the state, most of the literature on social movements and contention underlines the important role of previous experience of protest in building and strengthening movements (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Touraine et al. 1983). People who have organized in the past to protest cuts to pensioners' benefits or violation of planning laws are a key resource in building the capacity for future protests. As Denis Volkov notes, myriad violations of "the vital needs of specific people" (Havel 1985) laid the groundwork for building a broad coalition capable of challenging the political dominance of the authorities (Volkov 2012, 61).

Conclusion

In this article I have used comparisons between two protest event data sets, one from the late 1990s and one from 2007–2011, to illustrate the dramatic changes that have taken place in the nature and location of protest and the demands of protesters since Vladimir Putin first came to national office. I have shown that in the intervening years protest has become more symbolic in nature, more centered in the capital, and much more diverse and rights-oriented than in the 1990s. As a result, protest in Russia has increasingly come to look more like that in democracies than like protest in authoritarian regimes. Consequently, I argue, the protest cycle of 2011–2012 was less novel than most commentators recognized. Although much larger than any single set of protests in the capital, the style, location, and nature of the demands were very much in line with the kinds of protests that had been taking place in recent years. Rather than being something really new, the election-related protests were a new stage of longer-term processes in Russian politics and society.

I have also tried to show that putting the protest cycle in the context of the changing dynamics of protest in

Russia leads to a different understanding of the causes and likely consequences of the protests. In terms of causes, I have argued that growing unrest and increased organization on the part of citizens over previous years was a *sine qua non* of the December–May protests. Electoral fraud was a key element in igniting the protests, but previous protests about ecological destruction, the defrauding of ordinary people, and repression against high-profile journalists and artists made two key differences. First, previous protests changed how election fraud was interpreted. Cheating that had before gone largely unremarked was now seen in the context of wider discontent. The interpretive frame for election fraud in 2003 and 2007 was one of "who cares if they cheat, life is getting better." By 2011, the frame had changed to one in which the authorities were increasingly seen as arrogant and abusive for other reasons, and now the cheating made everything illegitimate. This is perhaps particularly true in the capital, where surveys show increasingly levels of discontent with corruption and dissatisfaction with the way in which Russia is governed, but it is also true in provincial cities where there is increasing evidence of similar complaints (Dmitriev and Treisman 2012).

Second, in addition to providing a different interpretive frame, the previous protests had provided both the human and organizational capital to get significant protests under way in Moscow right after the elections themselves. Most of the organizers and many of the protesters had experience of organizing events before, particularly through Dissenters' Marches (Paniushkin 2011) and Strategy 31. The protests on December 5, although unsanctioned by the authorities, were far from spontaneous.

As far as the consequences of the protests are concerned, putting the recent protests in context helps us see that protest is unlikely just to disappear in response to greater repression by the regime. The core of the protesters has been hardened over the years, and the various opposition groups have developed good organizational networks and a creative and attractive protest repertoire. Moreover, simply throwing a few election-related concessions the way of the protesters is unlikely to eliminate protests either, because the range of issues around which people have organized in recent years has become increasingly diverse and reflects deep issues that are probably beyond the capacity of the administration to affect quickly (even if they wanted to).

Nevertheless, as we have seen since May 6, when large unsanctioned protests against President Putin's inauguration ended in significant police repression and

some violence, it is difficult to sustain large street protests for prolonged periods. This is true in general, but it is particularly true when, as in this case, there is a focal event like an election and no obvious path through which the demands of the protesters for new, clean elections could be achieved. Moreover, would-be protesters are now operating in a context of increasing repression, including arrests, criminal prosecutions, and increased fines for participation in unsanctioned protests. Each of these factors contributed to a reduction in high-profile, large-scale protest over the summer and winter of 2012.

However, it is precisely in this context of increased repression and protest decline that the arguments I have made in this paper are significant. I have argued here that looking at the protest wave of December 2011–May 2012 in isolation might lead one to think that protest rose with the election and fell with the inauguration, and that is basically all that there is to the story. Yet, when we look at the evolution of protest in Russia since the 1990s and put the recent protests in that context, then the picture changes to one of an evolving society and culture of organization and opposition that is more interesting than the headline-grabbing protests themselves. Street protests, after all, were never likely to overthrow the regime put in place since 2000; Russia is clearly neither Georgia nor Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, the large-scale protests did mark a stage in the evolution of a larger social base that is increasingly unwilling to put up with corruption and incompetence at the local, as well as the national, level and are evidence of an increasing number of people with the motivation and the skills to take action to defend their rights and push a political agenda. Seen in this way, the December–May protest cycle reflects deep changes in the preceding years in crucial parts of Russian society, including remarkable growth in the number and variety of civil society organizations and NGOs (Evans et al. 2005), and is more evidence of a growing and broader challenge to governments in Russia at all levels rather than a direct threat to overthrow the Putin regime.

In terms of future research, putting the election protests in context raises some intriguing theoretical questions. Showing, as I have done, that key changes in the protest repertoire, geography, and demands occurred, of course, is not the same as explaining why these changes happened. More research is needed to understand why and how such dramatic changes took place in a relatively short time. This question cannot be answered satisfactorily here, but there are a number of candidate explanations that stand out. Most clearly, as we have seen in the data on protest demands presented here, the dramat-

ic turnaround from an economy that had been sinking steadily for a decade to one that experienced multiple years of strong economic growth had a dramatic effect on the kinds of issues people were concerned about and their ability and willingness to organize to press their demands. This phenomenon was particularly true in the case of labor unions, which were significantly strengthened in Russia by economic growth and by an influx of foreign investment trying to take advantage of the growing Russian market (Greene and Robertson 2010). The data on demands presented here is broader evidence of this phenomenon and of how economic growth can bring problems as well as resources for authoritarians.

A second key explanation is the effect and experience of political events on the organizational capacity for protest in Russia. Here a key turning point was the antimonetization protests in January and February 2005. These (not the election protests) were the first mass protests of the Putin era and acted both as a catalyst for changes in the regime's approach to the politics of the streets, and as a key element in creating new forms of opposition unity and organization. The monetization protest illustrated the weakness of the authorities in the face of mass protest on the streets and the possibilities for collaboration among oppositions of a broad range of different political positions and views (Robertson 2009).

However, the Russian experience of the effects of authoritarian government and economic growth does not seem typical of the former USSR more broadly. Changes in Russian society seem much larger than those that have taken place in, for example, Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan. Consequently, understanding better what happened in Russia in the 2000s should help us understand better the dynamics of other hybrid regimes in the former USSR and elsewhere.

Notes

1. In early 2012, this was certainly a minority view. See, e.g., Gunitskiy 2012.

2. In the interests of simplicity, I use the terms "protest," "political protest," "protest politics," "contention," and "contentious politics" synonymously, although technically "protest" is a subset of "contentious politics," which also includes civil wars, rebellions, riots, and so on. For a definition of contention, see Tarrow 1998.

3. For much more detail on the repertoire of protest in Russia in this period, see Robertson 2011, chap. 2.

4. The strike numbers from the IKD data are in line with reports from the independent unions (Olimpieva and Orttung 2013).

5. Greene and Robertson (2010) show that hunger strikes still play a role in labor disputes, while the recent election-related protests in Astrakhan also prominently feature hunger strikes.

6. For footage of a Blue Bucket protester climbing on an official car in May 2010, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wfrMEaJkRk&feature=related,

accessed January 8, 2013. For footage of Pussy Riot mocking the glamour of the Putin era in November 2011, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZUhwiv7M, accessed January 8, 2013.

7. In this section, Moscow includes Moscow oblast and St. Petersburg includes Leningrad oblast.

8. For more detail on protest demands in this period, see Robertson 2011, chap. 2.

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