

# Kremlin Misreading Latest Round of Protests

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[Window on Eurasia](#) covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA — Officials in Moscow are misreading last weekend's protests, viewing the relatively small size of the demonstrations as evidence that the population is "satisfied" with its situation rather than understanding that any decline in popular participation reflects the increasing "alienation" of the people and government.

That is the conclusion offered by the editors of Nezavisimaya Gazeta in a [lead article](#) published on Tuesday. And they add that unless Moscow understands this reality and unless the government takes steps to overcome this "alienation," Russia's future will be anything but bright.

Most Russian commentary on the protests has focused on the relatively small size

of the demonstrations, and using that facet of the situation alone, the editors say, the powers that be have concluded that the citizens are "satisfied," that the government's policies are working and that the tandem power structure shared by President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is a success.

In the same vein, the commentaries have insisted and the powers that be have assumed that the Russian people are turning away from the opposition because of "the correct course of United Russia, which is firmly marching forward toward the parliamentary elections despite the petty snares of [its] political opponents."

But a closer examination of the situation, Nezavisimaya Gazeta's editors say, points in a different direction. Unemployment has risen, not fallen, and the government's programs to deal with the problem of single-industry towns like Pikalyovo are not working. More and more groups, including pensioners, are suffering from rising prices.

The commentaries, and, it should be said, Nezavisimaya Gazeta as well, put little stress on the efforts the powers that be made to keep the size of protests down, not only hacking the web site coordinating the various protests but also limiting media coverage of them and using the siloviki to disrupt the activities of organizers and protesters themselves.

At the same time, neither the commentaries that Nezavisimaya Gazeta refers to nor that paper itself mention one of the most potentially significant aspects of last weekend's protests: They took place in [50 cities](#) at once, perhaps the largest coordinated effort within the Russian Federation ever.

The editors of Nezavisimaya Gazeta focus on the following reality: "People are not hurrying to go into the streets" despite their deteriorating situation, and they "are not demanding anything from the government." The reason why, the editors say, is that "people simply do not believe that the government can help them."

Over the last two decades at least, "those taking part in meetings have always appealed to the powers that be. [But] today Russians understand just how useful an activity that is," even when it involves something as "innocent" as "the defense of one of the paragraphs" of the country's Constitution.

Russian citizens now, the paper continues, "have selected another path. Now, they dream only about a situation in which the powers that be will leave them in peace and not interfere. And then people with their own efforts will begin to construct around themselves an infrastructure of survival." With petty bribes if needed, the paper says, but on their own.

The real situation in Russia becomes obvious if one contrasts the country with the United States. On Sunday, the U.S. Congress voted for the reform of health care, following "a hot discussion" that reflected an awareness among the American people that this measure would affect each one of them.

"What problem of state importance would be capable of awakening [such] civic feelings in the population of Russia?" the paper asks. "The construction of a nanocity? Conservative modernization?" Certainly not those ideas, it suggests, arguing that "the powers that be also are living their own lives," largely out of touch with the rest of the population.

And that means that the real problem Russia faces is the failure of any feedback loop "between society and the powers that be." As a result, "mutual distrust is growing," with some in the government wary of an Orange Revolution-type scenario and much of the population becoming ever less willing to "connect with the powers that be for the solution of problems."

"It is difficult to plan the future of a country," the paper says, without knowing the desires of the people. "And it is impossible to carry out reforms without operating on the conscious desire of the citizens to participate in them." Tragically, the population of Russia is increasingly convinced that "everything the powers that be do is intended to benefit only themselves."

Last weekend's protests, their small size in many places notwithstanding, shows that "the powers that be have build up a debt to the citizens." Overcoming this "alienation" will require that those in positions of power take "concrete steps to meet society" — not simply the establishment of more "councils" or "chambers."

It is far from clear whether the powers that be understand any of this, but unless they stop misinterpreting the social scene in Russia and recognize just how alienated the people are from themselves, it is unlikely that they will take any of the right steps. Instead, it is probable that the alienation now on display will intensify.

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