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The Real Reason for Moscow's Traffic Jams

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On Sunday, at least 2,000 people turned out for a demonstration in defense of the Tsagovsky forest. This was in Zhukovsky, a city of roughly 100,000 people. That means about one in every 50 took part.

A June 17 protest against the construction of a silicon plant in Abakan — population 160,000 — drew 5,000 to 7,000 people. In other words, about one in every 30 people protested. What's more, 40,000 residents — one in every four people — signed a petition demanding a halt to construction of the plant.

On Oct. 30 in Nizhny Tagil, 1,000 people gathered in support of anti-drug crusader Yegor Bychkov. With a population of 370,000, one in every 370 residents participated.

On Feb. 13, more than 2,000 of the 570,000 residents of Irkutsk staged a protest against billionaire Oleg Deripaska and in defense of Lake Baikal. That comes out to one in every 285

people.

With a population of 420,000, Kaliningrad was the site of a major demonstration on Jan. 30 in which 10,000 people protested a 25 percent hike in transportation taxes and called for the ouster of Governor Georgy Boos and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Now let's compare those figures with the rallies held in Moscow, a city of roughly 15 million people. The monthly Dissenters' Marches initially drew several hundred participants, but that number has slowly climbed to the current level of 1,000 to 2,000 people per march. On Nov. 14 — the same day of the 2,000-member rally in Zhukovsky — a mere 600 to 700 Muscovites gathered in support of journalists who been beaten, including well-known Khimki journalist Mikhail Beketov and Kommersant correspondent Oleg Kashin. Another rally in support of Bychkov held in Moscow a week prior to the rally in Nizhny Talin mentioned above, drew far fewer participants.

These events illustrate two points. First, people are concerned not about large, abstract principles, such as freedom of speech, but about specific problems that affect them directly: the Tsagovsky forest, a silicon factory or transportation taxes. Incidentally, the Boston Tea Party was not a protest against a restriction of freedoms but an expression of outrage over unreasonably high taxes on tea. In a similar fashion, the recent wave of protests in Russia has been sparked by anger over very concrete injustices affecting local residents.

Second, this shows that democracy does not mix well with overpopulated megalopolises. This is true for almost all societies at all times. The residents of bitterly cold and sparsely populated Iceland gathered in the country's national parliament, those in the frosty climes of medieval Novgorod had their veche, or council, but the people of the overpopulated historical cities of Babylon or Luoyang, a cradle of ancient Chinese civilization, had no such councils or parliaments.

Democracy cannot thrive in the absence of social cohesion or a shared sense of community. Any small city in the world is really a large village where everyone knows one another. By contrast, a gigantic metropolis such as Moscow is atomized into a collection of millions of individuals, all largely disconnected from one another. Worse, the horrendous traffic jams make attending a demonstration an all-day affair for Muscovites.

The Kremlin can take some comfort in the fact that Moscow's overpopulation, horrendous traffic jams and the isolation of its residents guarantee the stability of the ruling regime.

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