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Why Aren't Russians in Revolt?

By Paul Goble

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Vienna — The spread of political protests in the Middle East and increasing problems inside Russia including corruption, income differentiation and official arbitrariness have prompted ever more Russian analysts to ask why is it that Russians are not going into the streets more often and revolting against the powers that be.

Such queries were given a new focus recently when Lev Gudkov, the head of the Levada Analytic Center, told the Moscow media that "85 percent of the population of Russia considers that they are not in a position to influence anything in the country" and thus do not try to change things by engaging in public protests.

But Gudkov insisted, Russians should not be blamed for this apparent social apathy. In his opinion, the figures mean "not that people do not sympathize with the victims [of this or that disaster or policy] but rather that they are not prepared to do something because of this." In short, "cases of force generate [both] horror and indifference."

"Hatred of the force structures, the growth of corruption, and [so on] taken together weaken

the generally accepted rules of behavior," Gudkov says. "the normative system of society is breaking down like a rotten fabric," something he suggested is linked to "disappointment in reformism."

As a result, "people continue to show loyalty to the powers that be. But the trend of the day is indifference," all the more so because the media insist and the Russian people believe that there is no alternative for them. That sense, of course, makes it easier for the authorities to rule them because it leads people to ask "for what should [we] protest?"

Mikhail Vinogradov, a professor of psychiatry, said that he considers Gudkov's argument to be "a provocation" against both the people and the powers that be. And he suggested that "the level of civic activity [among Russians] is completely sufficient" given the challenges and possibilities in their country.

Russians today, he suggested, "do not have the occations [for protest] comparable to those in Algeria or France." Instead, "we have our own process of socialization," and "we have inherited from the former regime a very complicated government. Today reforms are taking place." Consequently, there is nothing and no one to struggle against.

Sergey Udaltsov, the leader of the Left Front, in contrast had a somewhat different take on the situation. "Undoubtedly," he said, "the distinctive characteristic of Russian society today is apathy, indifference, individualism and a lack of faith in the possibility of changing anything" at any level.

That represents a change from the late 1980s and 1990s, and Udaltsov said it reflected the institutionalization of "semi-totalitarian democracy" by Vladimir Putin beginning in 2000. Such public passivity, he said, "is characteristic for all totalitarian societies. If one recalls Soviet times, there weren't any mass protests either."

Then, Udaltsov continued, the reason was that "the idea that they cannot influence the actions of the powers that be was drilled into the consciousness of the people" by the system. Now, he said, "the powers that be actively through the mass media are pushing this [same] ideological doctrine."

The current powers that be, he said, "do everything in order to show citizens that protests do not influence the decisions" of the powers." If people protest something as they do, the authorities respond in almost all cases by doing nothing until there is a sufficient interval to cast doubt on the notion that the protests played any role in any change.

"How all this will end," Udaltsov added, "we know. The period of apathy will not continue forever. The problems will not become fewer, people will express their dissatisfaction in the Internet (in Soviet times, they did so in their kitchens)." And if the state does not begin a dialogue with the society, such feelings will lead to "a social explosion."

A third observer, Geydar Dzhemal, the chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, offered yet another view. Today, he said, unlike "at the end of the 1980s and at the start of the 1990s," the population lacks the leaders who might take them into the street, either genuine ones or false ones supplied by the security services.

Moreover, Dzhemal argued, "the picture of the world [that gave rise to protests 20 years ago] has been destroyed. Earlier the intelligentsia had the idea that in the West was a gleaming island of democracy and in the Soviet land, a dark kingdom." This wasn't entirely accurate, but it existed and played a major role.

At present, Russians lack "such a picture." The West is "also a dark kingdom," and things in Russia are complicated. "In brief, people no longer have in their consciousness this exact dichotomy" and the guidance it offers. And as that has happened, "they have been converted into a silent majority."

Russians now, Dzhemal said, carry around anger with them "but they do not know what channels they should use to express it. Such a situation is especially dangerous because when at last the cock crows," the anger of the silent majority will overwhelm the system. "People who do not understand the situation and cannot influence it will remain silent only until then."

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