The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Blue Bucket Protests Will Fail

By Boris Kagarlitsky

June 19, 2011

According to blogs and the liberal press, the "blue bucket brigades" are one of the most important activist phenomena in Russia's still young and undeveloped civil society today.

The brigades are citizen activists who publicly demonstrate their disapproval of bureaucrats' special driving privileges by wearing blue buckets to represent the flashing blue lights that high-ranking public officials place on the roofs of their cars. These blue lights require all other drivers to move over to another lane to allow the officials to pass. They also allow the privileged bureaucrats to exceed the speed limit, go through red lights and break other traffic laws with impunity. Drivers and pedestrians have long been angered by these abuses, particularly when they result in deadly traffic accidents.

To be sure, ordinary drivers are hardly the best example of good driving habits. They are known for cutting off other drivers, refusing to give way to pedestrians and driving in the wrong lane. The difference is that ordinary drivers usually get punished for such infractions by the police, who either levy fines or extort bribes, whereas the "blue lighters" get off scot-free.

By marching with blue buckets on their heads and posting videos on the Internet of traffic violations committed by cars with flashing blue lights, the activists have attracted media attention to widespread abuses. In recent months, the media have been filled with reports of appalling accidents caused by high-ranking officials and their drivers.

But the number of violations and accidents has not fallen. On the contrary, the more journalists and blue bucket activists cry out in protest, the more brazen it seems that the owners of the blue flashing lights have become.

Public demonstrations against government abuse are effective when they actually lead to some kind of positive change. The blue bucket activists would be successful if public officials were actually punished for their traffic violations. If nothing ever changes, these protests do not mobilize the population.

If there is any group that becomes mobilized, however, it is the privileged bureaucrats. As soon as they sense that their privileges might be taken away, they mobilize all of their power and influence to protect their status. What's more, other government officials join in to protect the blue lighters in a display of "corporate solidarity." They understand that they, too, may need protection one day for their special privileges and immunity from prosecution.

The blue bucket activists have good intentions, but they naively believe that they can force top officials to observe traffic laws without changing the underlying system in which the government is not accountable to the people.

But even if the blue bucket activists were able to achieve their main goal and force Russia's top bureaucrats to observe traffic laws, this would probably exacerbate the problem. A bad government becomes even worse when officials begin observing — and enforcing — all of the rules.

This is particularly true in authoritarian systems, where "law-abiding" officials and police are harsher and more ruthless than corrupt ones. After all, the Gestapo, too, had great respect for the rules of traffic and did not run down pedestrians. But that was of little help to the German Jews.

Boris Kagarlitsky is director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/06/19/blue-bucket-protests-will-fail-a7692