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Russian Culture Suddenly Politicized

By John Freedman

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How things have changed!

A year ago, even a week ago, it would have been hard to find more than a hardcore handful of Russian performers and artists who would dare display a sense of civic commitment.

Just five days after the disputed Russian Duma elections, the situation has turned tables almost 180 degrees.

Alexei Devotchenko, an actor who regularly speaks out through the press, blogs and social media, publicly doubted that anyone would attend the December 5 protest in Moscow near the Chistiye Prudy metro stop. "Will it be just a pitiful group of 100 again?" he asked sarcastically.

In fact, estimates put the crowd at 5,000 to 8,000 people. It not only took the Russian authorities by surprise, it apparently shocked opposition parties, most of whom didn't bother to send important representatives. Most of all it surprised the cultural community, what is

often called in Russia the "creative intelligentsia."

Social media — led by Facebook, since sites like Live Journal and VKontakte were apparently hit by hackers — exploded with signs of awakened social conscience.

On the morning following Monday's protest the young Moscow director Yury Muravitsky wrote, "It sounds bathetic, but today I sensed what the word 'generation' means. Fabulous. Fabulous, that there were so many people there."

Also on Tuesday, as an unsanctioned protest unfolded on Triumfalnaya Square in Moscow, the St. Petersburg director Dmitry Volkostrelov wrote, "Piter! When and where does one take to the squares? I've got an itch. I can't travel to Triumfalnaya in Moscow. We've got enough of our own squares."

Countless performers were wrapped up in Tuesday's events in Moscow. The composer Alexander Manotskov was arrested, as was classical pianist Fyodor Amirov, Teatr.doc actor Ilyas Tamayev, Sergei Vasilyev of Mad Pierrot Cabaret, and others.

Manotskov was seen being beaten up and friends kept a virtual vigil on Facebook throughout the next day. He was released Wednesday and posted the following text: "I'm home. I was not beaten during arrest, but afterwards in a place set up especially for that... I was all bloody from cuts. It looked horrible but was not frightening, as any boxer or fighter will tell you. My other wounds are less pleasant, but do not require hospitalization. I'm now home, working and drinking scotch, which I would have you do, too. Thanks to all those who were worried about me."

Another text went up Wednesday on the Facebook page of St. Petersburg director Vasily Senin. He wrote, "Yesterday my production of 'Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man" nearly had to be cancelled. Vitaly Kulikov, an actor at the Lensovet Theater, was arrested at a protest near Gostinny Dvor. The theater administration got him out of detention and the show went on. But now demands are being made that he sign an admission that he shouted 'anti-government slogans.' I ask everyone who has worked with me in St. Petersburg to support Vitaly; HE MUST NOT SIGN ANYTHING!"

On Thursday Senin posted a note that Kulikov was, indeed, forced to sign the "confession" and that they would seek legal counsel. He bemoaned the fact that the St. Petersburg mass media, not even in theater circles, had responded to the incident.

Moscow director Konstantin Bogomolov posted an essay Wednesday in which he appealed to government officials and mass media to take stock of their actions. "I increasingly think," he wrote, "that the true elite of this country, it's true wealth, is not in you, who keep silent and hide your faces behind the tinted glass of your fine automobiles; not in you, who keep coming at us from the television screen; and not in you, who comfortably occupy offices of high power; but in those boys and girls who take to the streets with open hearts and are no longer able to bear humiliation. Who are not able to bear to watch how their country is raped."

In 22 hours after the initial post, Bogomolov's text was reposted 90 times.

On Thursday the popular director Kirill Serebrennikov published a Facebook appeal branding

the government's actions this week "pathetic, suicidal and criminal." He added that elections are impossible "without a free mass media, without an opposition, and in conditions of authoritarian terror!"

Not all are happy with the flood of exhortations.

Playwright Ivan Vyrypayev posted a warning on his Facebook page from Poland late Wednesday, in which he reminded friends and fans that "only good conquers evil. One must not enter the energy of darkness and aggression (which are one and the same). One must not bog down in this solvent of hatred and virulent struggle."

By early Thursday, however, Vyrypayev admitted that if he were in Moscow he would attend the planned Saturday protest on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

The news that city authorities cancelled the Saturday protest was met with indifference and promises to show up anyway.

Then there was the subtle, but stunning news on Wednesday that Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, had relinquished his mandate as one of the top figures of Putin's United Russia party in that city. According to a report on OpenSpace.ru, Piotrovsky was diplomatic about the reasons for his decision. He made the move at the request of the museum staff, he said, and also because he will be "extremely busy in 2012."

But there is no longer any doubt that support for President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is melting at an extraordinary rate in Russian cultural circles.

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