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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Revolutionary Times

By Julia Phillips

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The past month has seen this country erupt in protest. In the wake of the Dec. 4 Duma elections, tens of thousands gathered in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, and Vladivostok. Websites crackled with reports from the demonstrations. Protestors pledged their attendance to future marches on Facebook, stamped their tweets about the events with Cyrillic hashtags, broadcast meetings live by raising iPads over the crowds.

On this peninsula, where all Internet signals are relayed through one satellite prioritized for military communications, most news is announced not by tweets or iPhone snaps but by state television channels. The other side of the country may have spent last month tallying up Facebook event attendees and shouting on a cold Moscow avenue, but here people referred to a few foreign news sites, then floated questions about the meetings into the stillness of their apartments: "So have you heard about these protests...?"

"A revolution could take place in Moscow," a friend joked, "and we wouldn't hear about it for weeks." He'd just brought up the protests, their signs and slogans, over jam-filled pastries in his kitchen. His television, antennae crooked, perched on the refrigerator.

"A revolution!" I exclaimed. "Do you really think that's what this is?"

"No," he said. "I hope not." The electric kettle hissed between us. "I've lived through revolutionary times, and they bring cold, hunger, and violence. Now I just want calm. I don't ever want to see another revolution."

For a few years in the late 1990s, Kamchatka's regional government was unable to afford fuel. The tankers that brought oil to the peninsula showed up with enough for two days' production of electricity, then enough only for a single day; then the tankers stopped coming. Reserves were depleted. What power could be produced had to be allocated to hospitals, kindergartens, dairies, and bakeries. Electricity was turned on for three hours every other day. Some people spent the winters living in their banyas, while others constructed fireplaces in their apartments. On a post-Soviet peninsula the size of California, hundreds of thousands of residents were left without heat, light, or water.

In 1998, Gazprom established a branch on Kamchatka, and in 2001, Mutnovsky Geothermal Power Plant, the largest geothermal plant in Russia, began operations on the Mutnovsky steam field here. Now lights may flicker off for an evening, not a season. Memory is long, though, and those who mention the Moscow protests often say in the same breath that Kamchatka needs stability more than activism.

Still, outside my friend's apartment building, stickers on construction site barricades condemn the party of crooks and thieves. Past those, the hum of a state television channel is faintly audible, and yellow light shines from thousands of kitchen windows.

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