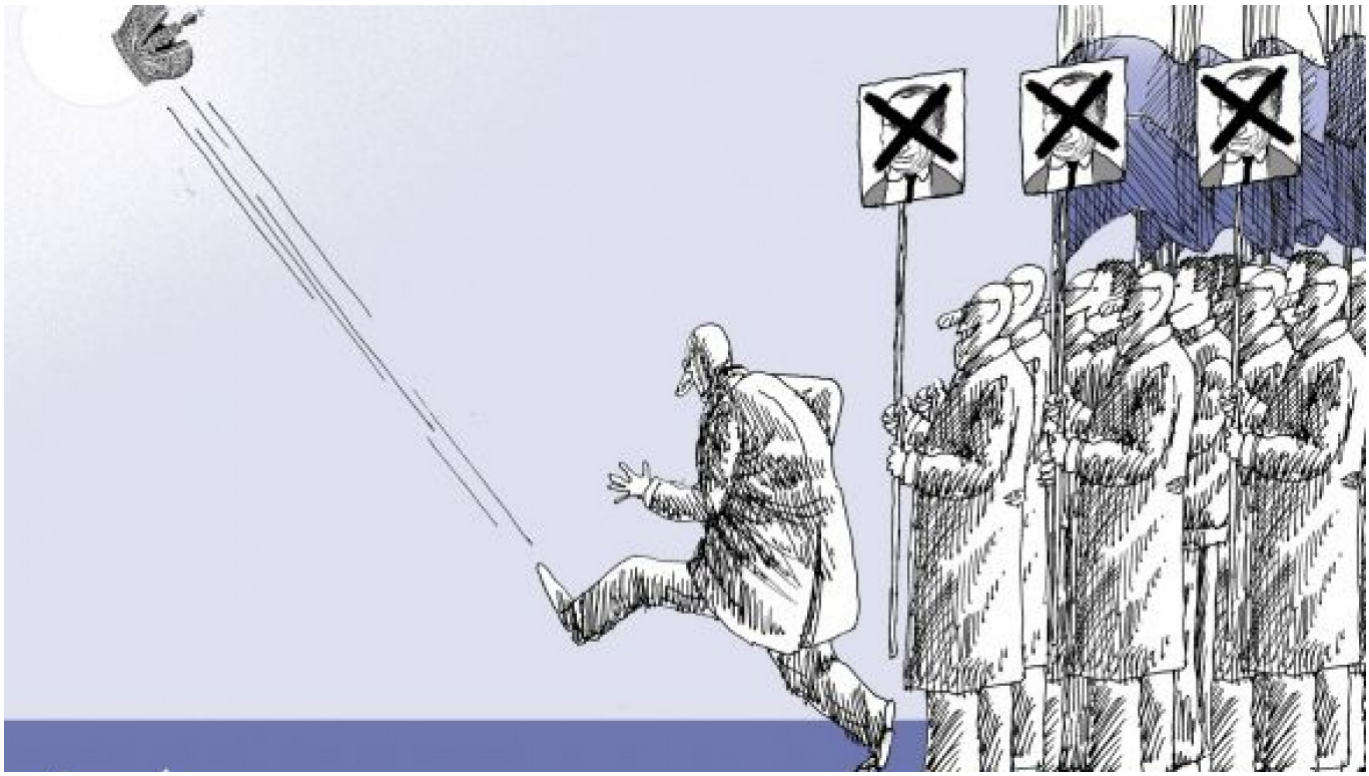
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Decembrists' Manifesto

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

January 16, 2012



One of the most common criticisms of the "Decembrists 2.0" protest movement is that it has no program, strategy or vision. But the opposite is true. Taken together, the five demands put forward by protesters at the Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova rallies comprise a coherent program with a clear strategic goal. If those demands are met by the Kremlin, Russia's political system will undergo a fundamental change and become a democratic state governed by rule of law.

The first demand is that the authorities immediately release all political prisoners and those who were deliberately incarcerated on trumped-up charges. The web site Politzeky.ru lists 137 of Russia's most prominent political prisoners, including former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his former business partner Platon Lebedev. In addition, there are also tens of thousands of innocent businesspeople who were convicted on fabricated charges after their businesses were seized by corrupt government officials. This is a standard method used by officials to cover up their expropriation of private enterprises.

In addition to releasing political prisoners, the first demand voiced by protesters is to dismantle the police state, eliminate politically motivated prosecutions and respect

fundamental human rights. This requires a fundamental reform of the court system and security forces.

The second demand is the annulment of the results of the rigged parliamentary elections and the holding of new elections under open, democratic rules and legislation. Throwing out the results of the Dec. 4 elections would enable this country to form a parliament that has legitimacy, a basic requirement for creating legitimate laws and governance.

The protesters' third demand is the dismissal of Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov and a criminal investigation into all allegations of electoral fraud that have been documented and recorded by citizens and monitors. This is in no way a personal attack against Churov and his colleagues. It is aimed at the thousands of individuals across the country who have been accused on solid grounds of committing electoral fraud — local election commission members, government officials and managers at state organizations. Bringing them to justice will establish the principle that ordinary citizens and officials are accountable before the law and must answer for their crimes. It will also help institute much-needed reforms to improve the transparency and accountability of elections.

The fourth demand calls for the adoption of new legislation concerning political parties by the end of February 2012. During President Dmitry Medvedev's December address to the nation, he proposed legislation that would ease the registration requirements for political parties, including eliminating the need for them to collect millions of signatures. Medevedev also promised to return the direct election of governors and single-mandate districts in State Duma elections. These measures are a good start, but alone they would not accomplish the fundamental changes protesters are demanding.

Even if Medvedev's measures were adopted, fundamental obstacles to the holding of democratic elections at all levels would remain. These include the barring of election monitors and representatives of civil society from polling places, the widespread use of so-called administrative resources, media censorship and the frequent bans on political rallies and demonstrations. Moreover, the ruling regime continues its illegitimate hold on power, while government officials and their relatives remain unaccountable before the law. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin holds monopoly power, the parliament is decorative, and the courts obey the orders of their political bosses. In his December address to the nation, Medvedev did not mention these huge barriers that prevent the country from developing a democracy.

Medvedev's proposed political reforms remain incomplete and superficial. They do nothing to change the basic nature of Putin's authoritarian system, one in which all power is focused in the hands of a single individual.

The "Decembrists 2.0" movement calls for something fundamentally different — namely, deep and comprehensive political reforms based on two principles: the creation of strong constitutional guarantees against autocracy and instituting the rule of law that would make all citizens — above all, elected officials — accountable for their actions.

Finally, the fifth demand is that new and fair parliamentary elections be held in accordance with new, democratic legislation. Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, Liberal Democratic Party head Vladimir Zhironovsky, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov and Yabloko party leader Grigory Yavlinsky and former Finance Minister Alexei

Kudrin have all demanded that the Dec. 4 elections be annulled and new ones be held under new democratic rules and provisions.

The idea of electing an interim president in March for a term of 12 to 18 months is also becoming popular. The interim president would oversee the introduction of democratic legislation, constitutional amendments and the implementation of electoral reforms. Once these are in place, a new, free and fair presidential election would be held for a five-year term.

The more than 100,000 protesters who rallied in the public squares in Moscow and other cities in December have articulated a clear strategy to reform the country. The main components of this strategy include eliminating the police state, moving away from autocracy and toward the rule of law and holding new parliamentary and presidential elections. They reflect the long-term interests of Russian society and offer the best roadmap for the country to develop as a modern, free and democratic state.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio and is a co-founder of the opposition Party of People's Freedom.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/01/16/the-decembrists-manifesto-a11911