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# An Open Letter to Sergey Brin

By Richard Lourie

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Dear Sergey,

As you no doubt noticed, protesters took to the streets by the thousands in your native city of Moscow in December. I say "by the thousands" and that's just the problem. The police and other state officials always tend to lowball the number of demonstrators. Protesters tend to exaggerate their numbers because turnout is the first measure of a demonstration's success. It's been said the police will attack a demonstration of 5,000, stand aside from a demonstration of 50,000 and join one that's reached 500,000.

Though both sides have an interest in distorting the numbers, it's also important that they know what the real numbers are. A government that lies to itself will make erroneous decisions that will only make matters worse. An opposition with an inflated sense of its support might act prematurely to little or even negative effect.

For those deciding between supporting the government or the opposition, the numbers are especially important because they show which way a situation is trending. Of course, it also

helps to have some breakdown of the numbers. If everybody is 17, that's one thing, but if there's plenty of people who are middle-aged that's another. Still, first you have to have the numbers.

So, quite simply, what I am asking is that you and Google use your intellectual power and technology to produce real-time realistic estimates of crowd size. There has to be some accurate method of analyzing overhead photos of crowds within far narrower parameters than those reflecting political agendas.

To some extent, this will be a thankless task. In nearly every case, the numbers Google provides will be to someone's disliking. (A pro-Kremlin youth rally in Moscow or a pro-regime demonstration in Syria might prove uncomfortably large for some.)

The U.S. Embassy in Beijing issues daily reports of the fine particulates in the air that are not included by the Chinese government in its own reports on Beijing's air quality. But it is those fine particles that can do the most danger. Google's crowd estimator could serve an analogous purpose.

Obviously, such estimates would be of value worldwide and not only to gauge political forces. Still, I'd like to keep the focus on Russia. As one of the country's leading intellectuals, writer Boris Akunin, put it: "I think that in 2012 Moscow — and Russia as a whole — will be the most interesting and important place on the planet. Just as a quarter-century ago, during perestroika, the eyes of the world will be upon us. The battle between a newly awakened civil society and an authoritarian regime is a thrilling spectacle to behold."

The United States has a strong vested interest in how Russia handles the turmoil in 2012. Currently, significant amounts of materiel for the war in Afghanistan pass through or over Russian territory. Russia's nuclear stockpile would be less secure if society descends into disorder. Also, since Russia stretches from Europe to China, disturbances there can quickly become global, hardly what the world needs as it emerges from recession. On the other hand, a successful resolution of Russia's problems could result in the free, open, productive society that has eluded the country for so long.

Unlike votes, accurate numbers of demonstrators can't be rigged. At the very least they can prevent both sides making miscalculations. They can also show when it's time to concede defeat.

It would be excellent if the answer to the question, "How big was the demonstration?" was: "You can Google that."

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography.

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