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How Protests and Shopping Changed Russia

By Esther Dyson

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In mid-December, while trying to understand what was happening in Russia, I checked Twitter and found a tweet that somehow signified everything. It was from a young woman, and it said, in Russian: "Gotta sleep! Tomorrow I'm going for a [facial] peeling, then to the meeting and then shopping." All three words — peeling, meeting, and shopping — were in fact the English words, rendered in Cyrillic.

What this reveals is that the Russian protests — called митинги — are no longer just for old people, radical extremists or jobless, unskilled and wild youth. They are for sociable people who have time and money not just for politics, but also for shopping and, yes, even cosmetic procedures.

That is a big change from just a few years ago. My Russian friends — many of them computer programmers, but also some shoppers and business executives — routinely dismissed politics as the province of the naive or the corrupt. Many of the older ones chose careers in science —

and then software — because it was the only kind of desk job you could get where politics mostly did not matter (and where Jews were allowed). These people avoided politics on principle, but also because they were afraid of losing their state jobs, or of disappearing altogether.

The younger ones were not afraid. They were simply not interested in a spectator sport of politics that seemed irrelevant to their lives. Of course, no one could affect the outcome of a football match, either, but at least it was fun to watch — and the rules were clear. In Russian politics, as the old joke goes, the outcome is fixed in advance, but the rules are unpredictable.

So, what changed? Everyone points to Facebook and its Russian analogue, Vkontakte. And they do matter. But the point is not just organizing a protest "meeting." Protests have been organized before — in 1917, for example. The exciting difference is in people's minds, not just in their tools.

I once wrote that "every time a user gets information, it reinforces a little part of the brain that says: 'It's good to know things. It's my right to have information, whether it's about train schedules, movie stars or the activities of the politicians who make decisions that affect my life.'"

In the same way, every time someone posts on Facebook, they feel empowered to speak as well as to read. One of the slogans of the protests is, "We are not cattle." On Facebook, people are not cattle. They can comment and like things, and their votes are counted.

Compare that to the old days, when the state ran everything. It even picked the public's heroes — not just people like cosmonaut Yury Gagarin, the first human in outer space, but wholly invented characters and achievements, like Pavlik Morozov, the child martyr who allegedly denounced his traitorous father and was murdered by his family in 1932, or Alexei Stakhanov, who supposedly fulfilled 14 times more than his production targets. Actors succeeded or failed not on the basis of popularity, but on the state's direction. Imagine a world with only one movie studio deciding which stars to promote.

Now, the kids are not afraid, and they pick their own heroes. Yes, they have seen oil baron and former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky imprisoned on questionable charges and inconvenient opposition journalists beaten or killed. But they have also seen their friends posting on Facebook with impunity and can see their own comments there. They cannot imagine disappearing without a trace, as many of their ancestors did under the old regime, when it was dangerous even to mention those who were gone.

Indeed, they are also not worried about losing their jobs. By the standards of the protesters in the Middle East, for example, they are well off. Russia does not have the same demographic crisis — a large cohort of unemployed youth — that has catalyzed change in the Arab world. On the contrary, its demographic problem is just the opposite: not enough young people. Russia's crisis is far more political than it is economic.

But what does this all mean? How much more will things change, and how persistent will the changes be?

It is fairly clear that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will be re-elected to the presidency

in March. The votes will be counted properly, even though some may argue that the slate of candidates is unduly restricted. What is not clear is what will happen after that.

Today's protesters do not want a traditional revolution. They are mostly educated enough about the past to fear blood in the streets. They want Putin gone, not necessarily punished. They realize that it is the system that produced Putin, who then reinforced the system. They want to reverse that cycle, putting an end to corruption, official impunity and being treated like cattle.

Unfortunately, however, there is no obvious alternative to Putin. In the most benign scenario, Putin himself would evolve. After all, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev managed to change the system that produced him, although you could argue that he did not change it enough.

If Putin and his team were to start changing the system — for example, genuinely fighting corruption and perhaps releasing Khodorkovsky — the response would be positive. But that may be as much of a dream as Stakhanov's legendary feats.

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