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A Propaganda Breakdown

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Propaganda is not as powerful as many think. You might convince Russians that people in Egypt, Italy and Ukraine are paid or otherwise persuaded to join street protests, but you certainly cannot convince them that their own dissatisfaction with the government is the result of a foreign conspiracy. When tens of thousands of Russians brave freezing temperatures to voice their discontent, state propaganda is of little use.

The Russian authorities continue to believe that their image can be shaped by skillful use of the mass media that the government controls. When ratings for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin or United Russia fall, Kremlin PR spin doctors do not blame it on their own outmoded and unpopular policies, but on the superior propaganda of their rivals.

Leaders actually believe their own lies and have fallen hostage to the myths that they themselves have invented. They sincerely believe that nobody is capable of independent, rational actions and that Russian society is only a mindless mob that can be easily manipulated by cheap propaganda.

This is why authorities respond to protests not with political reform, but with more intensified attempts to manipulate public opinion. They drag people to pro-government rallies against their will, failing to understand that by doing so, they only create far more bitter enemies than they already have.

What's more, the Kremlin has exponentially more resources to spend on propaganda campaigns than the opposition and could never be "outgunned" in a information war.

The problem for the authorities is that the entire playing field has shifted. Russian society has changed. Even the leadership has changed. It has lost its ability to understand and control the processes unfolding in the country.

Putin has tried to seize the initiative. During visits to the regions, his campaign organizers played up the loyalty of provincial workers as a counterbalance to the discontent of Moscow's middle class. Liberal commentators immediately cried that the authorities had taken an unexpected left turn on the political spectrum, but their fears were unfounded. The authorities made nothing more than general comments. Corralling people into street demonstrations after a long day at work is no way to build up an electoral base among the working class.

The paradox is that the protest movement is driven by Moscow's prosperous middle class — the very people who have traditionally supported the government's policies. That proves the current order is doomed to fail. If those with the most to gain from it are jumping ship, what happens when the real victims of the Kremlin's policies join the struggle?

The only reason the lower class is not rebelling yet is that ordinary Russians are overburdened with the daily struggle for survival. Stripped of independent trade unions, their outward passivity only masks a silent and smoldering anger. It will be difficult for the working class to organize itself into a political movement — even if economic conditions worsen. It is no easy task to overcome the passivity and fear that sits in most Russians.

But the public awakening among the middle class has been accompanied by a growing awareness of the gap between the interests of the majority and those of the political elite that claim to act on their behalf. The organizers of the Moscow protest rallies are themselves the source of a growing irritation that occasionally bubbles to the surface. They now want to speak for themselves, voice their own demands and choose new leaders.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

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