The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

We Want Reforms, Not Revolution

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

February 13, 2012



The main lesson from the rival anti-Putin and pro-Putin demonstrations held on Feb. 4 is that both civil society and the authorities are walking down a dangerous path of escalation.

After angry protests broke out in response to the rigged State Duma elections on Dec. 4, the authorities chose not to implement reforms to meet some of the protesters' demands. On the contrary, the Anti-Orange protest on Poklonnaya Gora that the authorities threw together at the last moment showed that the Kremlin is as determined as ever to try to discredit and marginalize the grassroots protest movement.

After three large rallies on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, Prospekt Sakharova and Bolshaya Yakimanka, the protesters' demands have become stronger as the authorities continue to stonewall. The first rallies focused on political reforms, falsified elections and the dismissal of Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov. By Dec. 24, however, demonstrators had focused their animosity on Putin.

The actions of the authorities mirror the strategy of the opposition. They have stepped up their ideological rhetoric and are actively attempting to co-opt, or at least redirect, the energy

of public protests. The pro-government rally on Poklonnaya Gora gathered — or, more accurately, dragged out — far fewer participants than the anti-government rally on Yakimanka, but more than enough to create the illusion of strong support for Putin. In fact, the sham worked so well that Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov claimed afterward that Putin would win the presidential election in the first round of voting.

As a preventative measure, the Kremlin decided to renew their persecution of the most active nongovernmental organizations. Golos, the independent elections watchdog, found itself evicted from its offices overnight. Moreover, the Justice Ministry is planning to conduct new reviews of the "illegal activities" of other NGOs.

The authorities are justifying their witch-hunt on the patently false charge that the West is bankrolling the protesters to foment a Color Revolution in Russia. As evidence, they point to the routine meeting that protest leaders held with U.S. Deputy Undersecretary of State William Burns and new U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul on Jan. 17. Exhibiting the kind of paranoia that infected the Soviet Union in its worst years of spy mania, that event has been portrayed on state-controlled television as proof that foreign powers are orchestrating and financing the protests.

Moreover, Putin's series of articles published in leading Russian newspapers dispelled once and for all any illusions some might have had that the authorities were prepared to reach an agreement with protesters. Now we know to expect a further strengthening of Putin's autocracy.

Russia's urban middle class is demanding political representation and systemic political reforms, while the regime refuses to make any concessions. It is highly doubtful that the protesters will give up the fight.

Meanwhile, Putin remains out of touch with reality. In his article published in Kommersant, Putin wrote: "Our society has changed radically since the early 2000s. Many people have become more prosperous, are better educated and are therefore more critical. New demands on the government and the advance of the middle class above the narrow objective of guaranteeing their own prosperity are the results of our efforts. This is what we wanted to achieve."

It is clear that Putin is appealing largely to the poor, blue-collar workers and pensioners. He is trying to curry favor among disadvantaged and economically vulnerable citizens by tacking a few hundred extra rubles onto pensions, military salaries and paychecks to state employees. The more loyal these people are toward Putin, the less likely they will join the educated middle class in public protests.

There is only one peaceful resolution to this standoff. The authorities must hold real and sincere negotiations with the opposition. When authorities and Kremlin-friendly journalists and analysts label the opposition "radical," it is a clear attempt to demonize the protesters and delegitimize their legitimate complaints. The opposition is ready and willing to engage in substantial talks. It advocates reforms, not revolution.

Soon, millions of Russians will be convinced that the country's leader has usurped power through illegitimate means. This is a ticking time bomb that threatens all of us, and it is

important that the Kremlin negotiates with the opposition before it blows up.

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/2012/02/13/we-want-reforms-not-revolution-a12596