The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Opposition Needs to Reach Beyond Moscow

By Boris Kagarlitsky

May 16, 2012



The Moscow protests on May 6 marked a milestone in the country's political development.

Before this event, the government allowed demonstrators to hold marches and rallies, at least in the capitals and several of the largest cities in the regions. The authorities thought that the protests had little impact and could be effectively ignored. For some reason, President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle were quite certain that the presidential election and inauguration would bring a definite end to the political crisis.

That assumption was especially surprising for a country in which elections are perceived as meaningless. Nobody has ever transferred authority through real elections and where voting is nothing more than a ritual needed to give the semblance of legitimacy to those who are essentially already in power. Despite having turned elections into a fiction, officials actually believed that these elections would somehow convince the opposition that they had lost in an honest political struggle and that it was time to give up the fight.

On May 6, the authorities had hoped to drive a final nail into the coffin of what they thought was a demoralized and defeated opposition. But the large turnout for that rally proved that the presidential election had given the movement a second wind. By blocking peaceful demonstrators from reaching Bolotnaya Ploshchad, which they had full authorization from City Hall to enter, the police provoked not only a new round of confrontation but proved that any previous agreements between the opposition leaders and authorities were no longer valid.

Many observers compared the tent camp at Chistiye Prudy with the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. But the U.S. movement was nationwide in scope, and it operated under a clear slogan that everyone understood and many Americans supported. By contrast, the Moscow protests have taken place against a backdrop of largely silent regions. The people in the regions are silent not because they like official policy or are afraid of speaking out. Their silence has more to do with the fact that the protesters in Moscow do not reflect their particular interests and needs.

The mood of the Moscow protesters is gradually changing. In addition to the demand for new free and fair elections, some demonstrators are now calling for free medicine and health care, granting more workers the right to strike without retribution, a price ceiling on utilities fees and an end to sharp cutbacks in education, including the closing of many schools across the county.

Not surprisingly, the demonstrators' banners are changing their focus accordingly, and even those who do not identify themselves as leftists are quick to agree that health care and education must be protected. Nonetheless, opposition leaders have largely excluded social demands from the movement's main platform, even though that those are the very issues capable of uniting large masses of people.

If the democracy movement does not move beyond Moscow to the regions, it will eventually fade away. Freedom is not a toy for a chosen few or a reward that should be bestowed on representatives of the Moscow elite. Freedom is the right of the majority to change official policy so that it reflects the interests of the people.

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