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Demonstration Deja Vu

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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The anti-government rallies in Moscow are becoming something of a tradition, as demonstrators take to the streets about once every month, with the exception of August. At first, the authorities were frightened or at least taken aback enough by the rallies to introduce a few concessions, such as loosening the rules for the registration of new political parties. But now, everyone from government officials to the protesters themselves has gradually grown accustomed to the rallies.

Most of the participants in the march Saturday felt a sense of deja vu. The same people marched along the same route as they had on June 12, lined up in roughly the same formation and shouted the same old slogans.

But there were also significant differences. First, noticeably fewer people took part. Second, the old enthusiasm was missing. People felt a sense of protest fatigue, asking themselves how much longer all this marching can continue if nothing changes as a result?

The energy behind the marches is undoubtedly waning, but it is also clear that the series

of protests over much of the past year has changed society such that it will never return to its former stability.

A type of stalemate has resulted. The confrontation with the authorities will continue, but the opposition has exhausted its political resources. If it repeatedly stages the same type of rallies, it will only lose popularity and influence. Slogans that united disparate groups last winter no longer work. While grassroots protesters are no longer calling for the cancellation of the December State Duma election results, protest leaders don't tire of repeating this unrealistic demand.

Apathy is evident in the provinces, where the call by the opposition now goes unheeded. Notably, St. Petersburg, a city that until recently was a center of the protest movement, produced embarrassingly small numbers Saturday. Protest organizers were able to mobilize large numbers in Moscow only because they were joined by other ideological forces, mainly from the left.

Meanwhile, discontent is growing in most parts of the country. People are less concerned about holding new Duma elections than they are about hikes in utility fees, the crisis in education, the closure of schools and hospitals, and the loss of jobs following Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization. Sensing that this frustration could be tapped for a new wave of protests, opposition leaders at first hesitated but then made a last-minute decision to add social demands to their platform.

The problem is that people in the regions want to see concrete proposals from opposition leaders, not empty slogans at protest rallies or on blogs.

It is telling that the only group at Saturday's rally whose numbers had not decreased since the June march was those seeking to stop the decline in education. This protest group was largely formed through the efforts of initiative groups at universities, and their success is the result of daily work dealing with everything from teachers' salaries to living conditions in the dormitories. It is significant that activists from leftist youth organizations made up the original core membership of these groups.

If similar initiatives and increased activity among independent trade unions were to become more widespread in the regions, it is very possible that the current lull in the protest movement could quickly become a new and far more formidable resurgence.

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