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One Year of Protest Turbulence

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Summing up the year, analysts generally agree that the political crisis that erupted a year ago after the December State Duma elections has largely run its course. Last week, Alexei Mukhin's presented a report aptly titled "Has the Turbulence Ended?" in which he praised the authorities for not resorting to excessive force to put down the protests.

Although the sense of instability that resulted in December 2011 has not completely subsided, there is still a general state of equilibrium in society. The threat of political crisis has given way to a new normalcy. The opposition may still be able to get thousands to turn up for mass demonstrations, but the likelihood that these protests will result in significant change has faded almost completely. The authorities' continued harassment of activists who took part in the May 6 protest is an attempt to both break the opposition and seek revenge for the fear and confusion they caused last December.

In reality, the opposition is much to blame for undermining its own movement. This is an opposition that is eager for power and popularity but uninterested in real change. The only card the opposition held was the call to fight corruption, but now that President Vladimir

Putin has ostensibly initiated his own anti--corruption campaign, they do not even have that. At the same time, however, Putin would have had no motivation to even pretend to battle corruption if not for the influence of the protest movement.

Amid all the talk of Russia's turbulence being overcome, U.S. history professor Robert Brenner believes we are living in times of "global turbulence." To be fair, it is difficult to talk about stability in Russia until the global economic crisis has passed. External economic factors do not depend on the government or the opposition, and they will continue to destabilize the situation.

Against this backdrop, the decline of political opposition in the capital is accompanied by an increase in social conflict in the regions. Those protests are not aimed at overthrowing the regime but at achieving concrete changes or concessions from authorities, employers and local administrations. But precisely because their potential is much greater, it will be far more difficult to crush them. Moreover, the liberal elites lack the means for working with such movements. They are unable to control them the way they control rallies in the capital, and they cannot exert any ideological hegemony over them. The nationalists also have nothing to offer, particularly since social programs are not their strong suit.

But this does not mean that the left automatically comes out the winner. Leftist groups must first overcome a number of bad habits if they want to work with mass social movements. For now, the left is not having much success in this regard. But nature abhors a vacuum. The new social conflicts could boost the political rise of those local elites and bureaucrats who have the courage to identify themselves with the protesters.

In any case, we can speak of an end to turbulence only in the sense that we have passed through a particular phase of the crisis, one that will logically and inevitably be followed by another. If it leads to change, perhaps turbulence is not such a bad thing after all.

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

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