The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

More Protests in 2013

By Nikolai Petrov

January 21, 2013



The first weeks of 2013 have already shown that relations between Russian authorities and society will be no better this year than they were in 2012.

The large-scale "March against Scoundrels" rally in Moscow on Jan. 13 and the smaller but significant rallies in a host of major cities showed that large numbers of demonstrators can be mobilized on short notice to protest the actions of the authorities. The angry protests might be triggered by fraudulent elections, repressive measures against protesters or even something as seemingly far removed from the standard political agenda as the recent law prohibiting U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children.

Among the key things that could trigger protests this year are the criminal charges authorities plan to file against participants in the mass protest rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6, the day before Vladimir Putin's inauguration. In a Levada Center survey conducted in December, 40 percent of respondents said the process could have a negative effect on the authorities. At the same time, 40 percent said they believe dissatisfaction and resentment will grow as a result of unjust court rulings and abuses by the judicial system, police

and government officials. In addition, 12 percent of those questioned predicted that the protest mood would increase and become more radicalized.

Also noteworthy, opinion polls indicate that a significant part of the population sympathizes with protesters. According to a recent survey by the Levada Center, more than one-third of Russians fully or partially support the mass protests.

The environmental protest movement is also growing. Expert Siberia magazine named an environmental activist as its person of the year for 2012. Also in Siberia, the Krasnoyarsk is Opposed movement forced local authorities to halt construction of an iron plant in Yenesei that would have heavily polluted the environment. An increasing number of people who were previously unengaged are now joining the environmental protest movement. In the fall, 181,000 Krasnoyarsk residents — one out of every three adults in the city — signed a petition demanding that President Vladimir Putin halt construction of the plant.

A number of environmental protests were also held in the Moscow region demanding an end to highway construction and the clearing of forests, the most notable being the Khimki forest dispute and the defense of the Tsagovsky forest in Zhukovsky, 25 kilometers from Moscow.

Demonstrations against social and economic conditions, especially the increase in utility rates, are also increasing. Spontaneous rallies were held recently in Volgograd, Kaliningrad, Bryansk, Omsk, Pervouralsk and other cities.

Rising prices on the full range of consumer goods and price hikes on alcohol and tobacco products are also fueling social and economic protests. The new law on education, which entails reductions in many areas, is slated to go into full force this fall, along with similar "reforms" in the the health care system. Both of these initiatives alone could add attract more Russians to the protest movement.

As a measure to prevent unrest, Putin promised to raise salaries for state employees, largely drawing on regional budgets to fund the increase. But Putin is taking a risk in potentially creating a "middle class" of bureaucrats, which he hopes will counterbalance the more independent oposition movement. We will likely see the first problems in Putin's strategy when the ineptitude of governors and the Regional Development Ministry leads to financial mismanagement and chaos.

Nikolai Petrov is a scholar in residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Related articles:

- Kremlin Running Out of Options as Protests Grow
- Thousands March to Protest U.S. Adoption Ban
- Poor State of Housing Services Could Be Next Rallying Point

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/01/21/more-protests-in-2013-a20796