

Russians Are No Longer Scared to Protest

Russians, once cowed by the potential consequences of taking to the streets, are increasingly willing to protest over issues that matter to them.

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Rallies and protests in Russia — over various issues and in different parts of the country — have ceased to be something extraordinary. Not long ago, a handful of people protesting on the central square of a provincial town would have attracted widespread attention and been covered in the national news. But rallies and protests are now occurring with increasing frequency, primarily because Russians no longer care if the authorities refuse to sanction a given gathering, making it and participation in it illegal.

Indeed, protesters are becoming radicalized. They now refuse to buckle under pressure, and

they are willing to take to the streets over issues as nonpolitical as the environment and as local as the construction of a cathedral. Unable to suppress the protests using force, the authorities have met these displays of mass dissent with confusion and attempted to accommodate protesters, sometimes meeting their demands.

Every night last week, several thousand residents of Yekaterinburg converged on a park near the city's drama theater to protest a plan to build the St. Catherine Cathedral on the site of the park, a construction project supported by the local diocese, the regional authorities, and some large businesses, yet opposed by the public. The protests were spontaneous and thus unsanctioned by the authorities; some participants were detained by the police, who were accompanied by members of a martial arts academy endowed by the Russian Copper Company (RCC), one of the construction project's sponsors. These men guarded the fence that had been erected around the park and were not afraid to verbally — or physically — confront protesters.

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The protesters thus risked physical injury, detention, and charges, administrative as well as criminal. Some went so far as to physically rescue other protesters from the police, forcibly dismantle the fence, and pepper-spray RCC personnel — an unprecedented scene.

A month earlier, several thousand people marched down Arkhangelsk's central street and held a rally in the city's central square — in both cases, without the approval of the authorities — over the construction of a waste storage site, to be used to process Moscow's refuse. In February, an authorized rally on the same issue held on the city's outskirts drew thousands, who braved the cold as well as a kilometers-long trek to the location chosen by the authorities. Few buses serviced the area. Previously, several rallies attracted thousands in the Ingush capital of Magas, where locals objected to the redrawing of the republic's border with Chechnya. They did not fear a standoff with security forces.

All this goes to show protesters' newfound willingness to take part in unauthorized gatherings, a fearlessness that was limited to just a handful of activists until recently. This, at a time when taking to the streets in small towns is riskier than ever, with the prospect of detention now accompanied by the danger of losing one's job or being expelled from one's school or university. There are no secrets in Russia's small towns, but protesters no longer care.

The potential consequences of participation once trumped one's outrage at the actions of the authorities. But the need to speak out and make one's discontent known now tends to prevail, in a new, radical form, be it dismantling a fence in Yekaterinburg or puncturing the tires of construction trucks and blocking off roads in the Arkhangelsk region.

To be sure, Shies, where the aforementioned waste storage site is being built, is located a few hundred miles from Arkhangelsk — a greater distance than that between the residents of the Moscow suburb of Yadrovo and the nearby garbage dump making it impossible for them to breathe. Although hazardous waste materials — like the kind that will be stored in Shies — could seep through the swampy soil, get into the river, and flow down to Arkhangelsk,

when and how the consequences will be felt is a rather vague reason for thousands to protest.

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Not long ago, people stayed home in markedly more critical situations. The Kuchino landfill site in the Moscow suburb of Balashikha poisoned the air and emitted a stench smelled in Moscow's southeastern suburbs and the capital itself before being shuttered by President Vladimir Putin. But there were no protests, whereas the residents of Arkhangelsk have regularly taken to the streets over a waste storage site hundreds of kilometers away that has yet to be built.

The same is true of Yekaterinburg. True, the city has few parks but many churches. Yet, the construction project's supporters point out, the park in question was practically deserted and anything but a major attraction. Still, the city's residents were prepared to protect this patch of greenery, even when threatened with violence.

Protesters have latched onto symbolic issues associated with humiliation. Although the Shies waste storage site is far away from Arkhangelsk and its residents, it will process waste from Moscow, an image that protesters find insulting and disrespectful. Protesters blame Moscow for the state of the center's relations with the regions, resent their inability to influence the federal government's decisions, and object to inflation as well as controversial decisions like the raising of retirement ages.

Similarly, in Yekaterinburg, the city's residents have long complained of infill development and the lack of green spaces. The search for land on which to build the cathedral has gone on for about a decade. What has made the latest attempt at its construction so controversial is general discontent. The impoverished Ingush republic has an even more symbolic reason to protest: although no one is living on the land that has been ceded to Chechnya, it is still seen as "our land." Protesters in Ingushetia have also pointed to unemployment and local corruption and expressed concern about rising prices and the unpopular pension reforms.

Frustrated with the government, which has managed to disappoint virtually every age and social group and profession in the country, Russians need only a symbolic reason that unifies and mobilizes them to take to the streets. All of a sudden, the disjointed and disgruntled public finds itself speaking the same language, and slogans like *Pomorye Is Not a Dump* and *We Are for the Park* emerge.

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Yet a symbolic reason to protest is just the last drop in the bucket of general discontent. Had the Moscow mayor decided against constructing the Shies waste storage site, protests in Arkhangelsk would have been set off by some other incident; nor would Yekaterinburg's authorities have avoided unrest had they not erected a fence in the park. Protesters across Russia admit that general discontent has been growing for a while and that they would not have taken to the streets, be it in defense of a park or against a landfill site, in a time of plenty.

For now, protesters have focused on nonpolitical issues, afraid of making overtly political demands. Rally organizers in Arkhangelsk stress the nonpolitical nature of the protests there, but political pronouncements can still be heard — among them, calls for Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to resign. Anti-Putin slogans and chants could also be heard in Yekaterinburg. Protesters everywhere have the same message for the federal government: *You didn't ask us.*

In Yekaterinburg, Arkhangelsk, and Magas, protesters have demanded that their regional governors resign. Yekaterinburg's Yevgeny Kuyvashev is the second carpet-bagger to run the Sverdlovsk region. Igor Orlov, who has been living in the Arkhangelsk region since Soviet times, is now seen as an outsider. His predecessor, the former Yakutsk mayor Ilya Mikhalechuk, was another carpet-bagger. People see regional governors as envoys of the center and charge them with aiding the mayor of Moscow and the Russian Orthodox Church while undermining their actual constituents.

The federal authorities are clearly concerned. Shies's construction was halted after a Kremlin meeting, while Putin has criticized the actions of the Arkhangelsk city and regional authorities. As for Yekaterinburg, the president proposed that the public be polled regarding the construction of the cathedral. The city and regional authorities eagerly obliged, and a state-run poll conducted in mid-May found that nearly three-quarters opposed the cathedral's construction on the site of the park. The governor of the Sverdlovsk region has declared that the project will not go forward.

The federal government has mistaken the symbolic reasons for these protests for the real drivers of unrest in the country and accordingly focused its energies on tackling them, signaling a willingness to talk, be it on cathedrals or landfill sites. The general discontent of Russians remains unacknowledged, with Moscow finding it more convenient to believe that its token concessions will quell the protests. But these will only temporarily relieve tensions; meanwhile, Russians will grow more and more courageous.

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