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Instead of a Riot, I Got a Chillout

Last week's Moscow protest through the eyes of culture critic Artemy Troitsky.

By Artemy Troitsky

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Artemy Troitsky in Moscow **Pjotr Sauer / MT**

My daughter, two of my friends and I arrived at the Yesenin monument on the Tverskoy Boulevard in central Moscow at exactly 2 p.m. There, as promised, was Yelena Rusakova, the head councillor from my local city Gagarinsky district.

The Yabloko political party advised people not to take part in the stroll on Aug. 3, but Yelena turned out to be braver than many of her party colleagues. It was raining lightly. There were around 50 people gathered at one of the places where the protest was to be held, including Dutch and German television, the BBC and The Moscow Times.

There were also around 50 cops around the perimeter and at the exits from the boulevard (I can't distinguish between National Guard, OMON and the police, so I call them all the same).

While I was giving an interview, they quietly and imperceptibly arrested two Gagarinsky municipal deputies, Yury Zuyev and Grigory Tolkachyov, right behind me. The rain stopped.

At about 2:30 the cops formed a short chain and pushed the small crowd and Yelena Rusakova off the boulevard and onto the sidewalk in front of the Chekhov Moscow Art Theater. They were rough, but didn't beat anyone. I didn't see the group of deputies after that. Mysteriously, our little group was not touched. And so we were the *only* ones left along the whole of Tverskoy Boulevard.

I'm not counting people in helmets; they ignored the five of us, and we ignored them. It was really strange: In over 60 years of living in Moscow I've never seen such an empty boulevard.

It reminded me of the frozen pictures in Alain Resnais' "Last Year at Marienbad," or the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Cirico. And I remembered at the same time what it resembled most of all: the heroes Garry Cooper and John Wayne! A lone sheriff with his hand on his holster, walking down the main street of a deserted town in the midday heat. It was unsettling.

There wasn't a soul. We walked like this in complete isolation (the boulevard had been sealed off) through the gardens from Nikitskiye Gates to Pushkin Square, fraternizing from time to time with those walking along on the other side of the steel barriers.

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At the Kliment Timiryazev monument there was the state-sponsored NTV film crew, restless with idleness. They were so lonely behind the cops that they even asked me for an interview, from which the only word that could be broadcast was my annoyed exclamation of "Damn!" — this was when I heard the name of the television channel, of which I had the misfortune to be one of the founders.

At 4 p.m. we reached Pushkin Square again and hopped off the boulevard. There were a lot of people on the square and in the garden — no fewer than 1,000. But there was nothing going on there at all. We warmly bid our farewells and went our separate ways. I got on a bus and went home. On the way I gave comments to various outlets, where I cursed Putin and Sobyanin; people on the bus listened and nobody objected.

Some took pictures, raised the clenched fist in solidarity and showed their middle finger.

Later I read that there had been another round of stomping and state sadism at Trubnaya Square, but I hadn't been there. I confess: Instead of a riot I got to chill out.

Deputy Yelena Rusakova said on the phone that she had been giving assistance to arrested protesters in the Gagarinsky Department of Internal Affairs on Fotieva Ulitsa until midnight; they didn't allow lawyers in for four hours.

What will happen

On Aug. 10 and 17 and for the rest of the month, perhaps people will come out more often to protest for their legal constitutional rights, which the federal and city authorities are

despicably and cynically trampling upon.

Whether these demonstrations are "agreed" or not is already of no importance. Agreeing a protest with those against whom it is aimed, you will agree, is absurd. There will be beatings and there will be arrests, but dozens and hundreds of thousands of people will have a firm sense that they are personally in the right. The will is there, there's no fear — this is the main thing.

If Putin and his flunkies had even the slightest bit of common sense (I'll say nothing of conscience, it's all been said), they would have made an attempt to tackle the current situation in a bittersweet way: they would have released those detained, registered the deputies — then sold them all down the river in the elections, hoping that the people would be tired by then, and things would cool off. But no: there's going to be a stupid crackdown and a distillation of lawlessness.

A good sign is the refusal by the best artists (Bravo, Tequilajazzz, Nogu Svelo!, Alexei Kortnev) to take part in what was probably an extremely generously paid decoy festival on August 3 called "Shashlik Fest."

More relevant were the performances by the real idols of today's youth — Noize MC and Face who took their time to criticize the Kremlin after the protests.

And then there was an astonishingly pathetic list of cultural trash (Bogomolov, Butman, Keosayan, another couple I don't know), who have signed up to the anti-protest festival.

There is still a lot of indifference and cowardice, but the cesspool of collaborators is draining away with every week.

What reassured me

Reasoned and non-violent rebellion creates and unites a civil society. I don't know what the boys in the Kremlin will decide to do with their elections in Moscow, St. Petersburg and the regions, but they will no longer see the servile submissiveness of a people who just lap it all up, like the bald patches on their heads. Free people WILL MAKE Russia free.

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