

New Urban Romanticism: *Political and Sociocultural Aspects of the Newest Russian Protest*

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Abstract: The article examines the major political, social and cultural aspects of Russian protest movements in the late 2011—early 2012. Well-established concepts used within these movements as well as their social self-characterization are analyzed. The article considers the impact of the new media environment on the shape and political limitations of this phenomenon. It argues that the novelty of the protest phenomenon is the appearance of “new urban romance.”

OVER the past months, the main topic of Russian intellectual discussions has been the succession or events in Moscow and several other large Russian cities which took place in the wake of the most recent Duma and Presidential elections. Spirited excitement reached a climax on many occasions and the events have left an important mark on the lives of participants; texts written on this topic will be important for many generations of intellectual historians. I was most interested in this last circumstance; owing to my professional and special interests, the section on “intellectuals” (far less so “politics”) has significantly grown in my Internet bookmarks during this time. However, I had no inclination to write anything on the subject. The situation mirrors the reasons that historians differ in their estimation of the epoch of Peter the Great: some enthusiastically refer to it as a critical moment in Russian history, whilst others discern in it the banal continuation of the tendencies of Aleksey Mikhailovich’s reign. All in all, here I am on the side of the intellectually bored. Although, of course, I am personally happy for the emotional uplift of young students and my forever young friends and companions. Yet, a person of the writing profession has need to record current developments, if not in the form of massive treatises, then at least in the form of little notes for posterity.

Constitution Day

An indication of the crisis of (or loss of) legitimacy by the current regime due to objections to the last Duma and Presidential elections is one of the most actively played out conceptual games of recent times, but at the same time one of the least adequate. And here is why. The notion of legitimacy refers to the structure of power and governance as the aggregate of institutions and to the basic principles of the accept-

ance of this structure's efficiency, but in no way does it refer—as in the case of the legitimacy of Russian power today—to single individuals holding singular positions within this structure. The factual constellation of major slogans and demands which formed the minimal unity of mass protests revealed, contrary to all speculation, *the affirmation of the legitimacy* of the existing political system. The demand for “fair elections” or “Putin go away!” etc., as well as all the activity of election observers, as well as the aggregate of actions related to the resistance to the arrest of activists, as well as the pronouncedly permitted character of protests—all of this rests on the unconditional acceptance of the legitimacy of the existing political-legal system and, moreover, positively insists on it. Transgressions, fraud, manipulation, backstage agreements and so on—all these objections have the character of an *affirmative performative appeal* and are unthinkable and desperately controversial without the acceptance of its legitimacy. On each of these occasions one can only talk of the transgression of the *legality* of actions of certain individuals or their groups. To the extent that, in my view, *Constitution Day should have been rescheduled for some memorable December date*, for these events, up to the present, form the most massive public action precisely in favour of the very Constitution.

It is also clear that the only direct result of all the newest oppositional activity in fact consisted in the intermittent growth in votes given to the liberal candidate Mikhail Prokhorov. This result is predictable inasmuch as the existing political system was established *for the long run* precisely as a condition of the possible establishment of, conventionally speaking, a “liberal-market” system by way of suspending the activity of a range of legal and constitutional mechanisms [Furman 2003; Kurennoy 2007; Kurennoy 2010].

The question of the fully fledged civil legitimacy of the existing system brings us back to the “depths of time”—first to the system that emerged under Boris Yeltsin and then, if one is especially meticulous, further back to the history of the emergence of the Soviet state. The question, however, is too complex for only superficial examination. I will therefore limit myself to the following formulation that is indeed far from new: *the contemporary Russian political and legal system of institutions exists and operates as a result of the permanent suspension of democratic procedures*. The source of legitimacy of this system lies in the future, not in the present, and the future that was advocated by the protesters is in no way different from the content of the prevailing system's mandate of legitimacy. The question of exactly whose company of friends¹ benefits from the cur-

1. It is characteristic that the ideologists of the protest, mobilised for political re-

rent system, redistributing its inevitable bonuses, is undoubtedly thrilling and mesmerizing, yet—within the framework of an affirmative relationship to the system as such—should one not also ask the old and simple question “what is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?”

The Generation of Screens

One of the common clichés of the current events was the division between TV and Internet audiences. The latter understood itself as strictly thinking and independent—in contrast with the passive former, dumb-ed down by propaganda. Notwithstanding the unbearable easiness and pleasantness of such an act of self-cognition, media critics nevertheless suggest they should pay more attention to certain formal sides of the issue first and not to impressive substantive metaphors.

In the context of our problem, it is appropriate to pose the simple question of the essence of the TV medium as a message and its significance for the political fate of modern societies. Politics in the age of television, with few exceptions, ceases to be a complexly mediated structure with party programs, discursive political press, social-political groups such as trade unions, parties, etc. The process of losing this organisational-rational structure by politics is, of course, not homogenous: the historical track of established practice slows down this process in countries with a respective paradigmatic tradition, but Russia cannot be considered to stand among them, for it lacks such a history. In its full development, this process leads to the transformation of politics into a TV show, founded on the direct emotional relationship to the personality of a politician explicitly present on your home screen (“audience democracy” [Anashvili 2009: 33–56; Kurennoy 2005]). But the Russian internet audience is not so different in this sense from the TV one: a purely emotional personification of the protest, expressed as a direct address to Churov or Putin, clearly dominated over a possible discursive-rational complexity. In such a way, it can be concluded that the internet does not limit the efficiency of television-screen mechanisms of deforming the paradigmatic modes of modern politics, hence one can simply acknowledge *the absolute similarity between TV and internet audiences*. The substitution of vivacious TV news for a

flexion, quickly brought forth after all this most mundane formula of *the company of friends* as an explanatory model. See the exemplary: “We used to have an institution of friends. <...> But now an institution of enemies emerged of its own accord” [Revzin 2012]. The formula of thinking contrariwise here, of course, is the criterion of itself and its opposite.

venomous demotivators did not make any noticeable adjustments to this similarity.

The direct emotionality on which TV-audience democracy is based also revealed another aspect within the web community. Web interaction begets its own emotionality and logic of self-assurance, the very same principle of screen reduction of complexity at its core. The intense web protest interaction that reached its culmination by the March elections placed the participants in an atmosphere of expectancy of the inevitable collapse of the regime. Enthusiasm in this regard is concisely expressed by the words of the responsive parodist Sergey Shnurov:

When all people get to know about our Khimki Forest
Welfare and happiness will reach up to the heavens.

The growing frustration surrounding results and expectation gave rise to a wave of varied reactions, including social judgment of all the major centers of Russian electoral polls forced to provide public explanations [Sotsiologiia 2012], as well as an abundance of personal emotional disappointments.²

Theatralisation, Emotionality and New Media

It is easy to agree with Olga Sedakova's academic thesis that protest actions are not a carnival in the Bakhtinian sense [Sedakova 2012]. However, it is also difficult to deny that recent urban actions, to a large extent, resembled a theatrical staging (including such forms as puppet protests or "Lego-rallies" in some cities where there were no mass actions). The individualised theatralisation of the rally participants was one of the most remarkable peculiarities of the protest events because, in departure from practices of self-organisation, traditional demonstration attributes (marching columns, banners, orators), revealed an unusual sociocultural novelty. Theoretically speaking, this peculiarity

2. For example: "I shall be frank. I wanted to see how this "monstrosity" works at a microlevel level," that is at the level of precinct election committees. I wanted to see "stuffings," "carousel voting," "swindlers-chairmen," etc. with my own eyes. I wanted to see all the things that many observers described after the Duma elections. Instead, I saw the procedure of elections in its chemically pure form from the inside. Neither I nor, by all accounts, other observers saw any violations, any "lawlessness" <...> the Fourth of March became the day of giving up illusions for the thousands of observers-neophytes who took upon themselves this mission amid the enthusiasm from the mass protests. We are not Russia, we are merely its part, and moreover, not the most numerous" [Uzlaner 2012].

can be considered to be the realisation of several types of possible factors (that could be combined or redistributed in different ways among various groups of participants), the factual correlation of which cannot, however, be determined without a special investigation. For that reason, let us limit ourselves to the philosophical procedure of relating the structure of possibilities.

First, the individualised theatricalisation can be considered a compensation for the scarcity of Russian urban public spaces that could have become the regular scene for such forms of self-expression. Even in the biggest cities, dandyism is for the most part packaged into the confined spaces of clubs or shopping centers. Rallies, however, turned out to be a spontaneous form of street gathering of a referential audience that could hardly be expected to appear in other urban localities.

Secondly, contemporary culture with its tendency toward individualism and fragmentation does not dispense with the need for collective emotional experience (moreover, it even intensifies it), the expression of which does not find any intelligible forms in Russian contemporary urban space (indeed, some bureaucratised “city day” cannot be regarded as such). It is not Le Bon’s “crowd” in the old-fashioned sense and not Kracauer’s ornament “mass.” A multitude acts here as the resonator and the accelerator of individual emotionality realised, among other things, in the form of theatrical staging. As if Yevgeni Grishkovetz multiplied into a myriad of mini-copies that with his same sincerity put on their mini-performances before a mobile audience of several thousand well-wishing spectators. On the whole, however, the emotional request to partake in protest actions is epistemologically worth considering precisely in the light of the specificity of an experience-driven society (“Erlebnisgesellschaft”), dominated by an autonomous logic that can hardly be captured by political terminology. A long list of emotional notions by which the participants identified their need to participate in these collective events and the results of their participation can be quoted here (sincerity, enthusiasm, overcoming fear, bravery, various forms of “we”-experience, extreme emotions such as clashes, arrests for a few days, and so on). However, all these emotions could have been realised in a variety of other non-political practices. Only one thing distinguishes them from political logic, namely the participants’ centrality on themselves, on their own emotional experiences and not on a purposeful-rational struggle for structural redistribution of power relations or on resolutions of a common political program. Speaking in economic terms, the need for an emotional shock, the satisfaction of which, by and by, has a costly character, was realised here in a mass and budgetary way.

Thirdly, the individuality of self-expression unfurled not only on the street but also in the new media environment, which also poses serious limitations for the possibility of employing the language of classical political theory for the analysis of these events as such. One should not, of course, overestimate the significance of the social networks for the organisation of the new protests.³ However, it is precisely them that could act as the catalyst for the modeling of individual forms of the observed public self-expression. The efficiency of this catalyst is based on the personified structure of the representation of the modern internet user (first of all, on social networks). The role of the new media environment can be schematically presented in the following manner: by virtue of the immediate finding of support for their oscillatory opinion, the web, among other things, creates for an atomised individual an opportunity to effectively withstand the traditional forms of ideology transmitted by authorities through “big media.” The web, in its turn, forms its own highly emotional “public opinion,”⁴ as it has already been noted above. However, the very form of its media packaging (the personification of profile) stimulates an individual form of expression that in the end *materially* comes into conflict with a traditional symbolic apparatus of the consolidation and representation of the political position of the social majority (common slogans and banners, orators’ speeches, political claims, etc.). The widespread use of the means of visual fixation (photo cameras, etc.), directly commuted to the web space of presentation that diffused attention all throughout the rallies, ignoring the tribune, their traditional representative and center of events (in contrast to traditional journalistic optics), should also be taken into account. This aspect of the modern media environment also, although differently,⁵

3. In this statement, I rely on a series of interviews we conducted on 24.12.2011 on Academician Sakharov Avenue with the students of Cultural Studies at NRU-HSE under the auspices of the journal *The Russian Reporter* (taking advantage of this opportunity, I would like to express my gratitude to the editorial board here). In particular, the polling of significant groups of participants (from 5 people onward, not formed according to party affiliations) showed that the method of their organisation has a hybrid character. The factors of family or friendly ties, common work and education played in this case the main role, whereas the social networks played an instrumental role. That is, the internet networks fulfilled a coordinating, not organisational function.
4. In relation to this, in my point of view, one also should not nourish excessive enthusiasm regarding internet networks and underestimate the role of the mass media. Because it is exactly corporate media players that acted as the points of crystallization of web public opinion and directed it.
5. That is, defining the logic of what Herman Lübbe calls “praeceptio” understanding by it “the dependency of the future reception of the past, which will some-

provoked and intensified the personified theatricality of the rallies' participants.

In such a way, it is precisely emotional individualisation, which acquired its material-symbolic fixation in the form of theatricalised attributes (slogans, costumes, etc.) and relied on a specific media structure in terms of both the event's input and output, that furthered the key political peculiarities of the protests—their political disparity.⁶

Homines Novi

Neither the new media environment, nor all the more so the political situation in Russia (that has hardly changed structurally since the 1990s), nor the actions and motives of some local political groups provide sufficient or necessary explanation for the outburst of the newest social activity. Of course, the generational factor always plays its role—after all, the generation that has now embarked on the course of formal political action has not only no memory of the Soviet period but not even of the most part of the history of post-Soviet Russia. But precisely because it always plays a role the generational factor is also always insufficient.

The sociocultural explanation I offer has a partially institutional character. The problem of institutions is one of the main problems of contemporary Russian society that was voiced in very different contexts lately. It is said that there is a lack of them, that they are weak, etc. I understand the institution as a typified form of social cooperation, a steady and reproducible habitus of social interactions. In the post-Soviet period, we have to deal with the large-scale creation of new formal institutions (or establishments) [Kurennoy 2006: 5–26], first and foremost in the field of law. However, not all of them are functional and there is a suspicion that the majority of them do not work at all, whereas those that do work are not new. This peculiarity of our society was repeatedly described in modern literature (in Simon Kordonsky's

day become our present, on the kind of means by which the present is imparted to the future" [Lübbe 1994: 94–113].

6. The explanation used here is rather oriented toward the central situation of "thing" in the manner of constructions *a la* Bruno Latour and not toward the apparatus of the conceptualisation of political events accepted by the classical sociopolitical theory. All in all, I nevertheless risk defining the notion of "emotional individuation" here as the supporting structure of material and media attributes (limiting, in such a way, radical constructivism). Although, of course, this individuation could not have taken place in an articulated way without the presence of the latter.

works in particular). For this reason I am not going to dwell on it. Nevertheless, there is a range of *new* institutions that have by now reached the level of mass (though not universal) functionality. The two institutions that can be named among them are the institution of the formal contract (the efficiency of which is based in particular on the success of the contract of personal liability insurance for car drivers) and the institution of consumer choice (that can also be considered new against the background of the unprofitable Soviet economy). In other words, the majority of our citizens are used to the situation of possible consumer choice at a time when a considerable group of them, although less numerous, have adopted the habit of formal contract compliance. As for the institution of formal contract compliance, it is not, of course, limited to only car drivers: the use of the consumer contract that deals with the acts of purchase and sales of goods and services is also commonplace. One can assume, however, that in relation to the latter the situation is much more variegated (in virtue of the heterogeneity of consumer possibilities and practices), colourful and not easily succumbing to generalisation, in contrast to the institution of the vehicle insurance contract that can be considered the exemplary case of a new post-Soviet institution.

The stabilisation of these two mass institutions means that we are dealing with a real correction in the behaviour of large groups of people, that is very difficult to achieve even by the most radical political measures, all the more so by means of political declarations and the continuous creation of formal institutions.

If we look now from this perspective at the common denominator of the newest public protests, it is easy to notice that, content-wise, their demands amounted to the observance of the indicated institutional norms (the possibility of choice and the formal observance of contracts) not only on the consumer and civil markets but also on the political one. The proof is the demand for “fair elections” and the indignation shown toward the lack of options with regard to the presidential candidate.

This, however, does not mean that only groups of “informed consumers” and “car drivers” took part in the protests, as such an explanation would be naive and not confirmed by the opinion polls of the protestors. But the very protests should also not be understood in simplified terms—as the selectively organised gathering of this exact multitude of people in this exact place at this exact time. These events have a latent institutional background defining the contingency of these visible forms of activity that have a certain isomorphism in relation to the surrounding social environment.

It does not follow from this thesis that this context is the context of all Russian society. Rather, different institutional layers of this context are integrated to different degrees into the visible form of protest activity—some of them more deeply than others. We live in a country that is far from being developed, hence we share the problems of “developing” societies that were explicitly described by Hernando de Soto [de Soto 2004]. Only a small part of the Russian population is within the legal domain of formal contract compliance. In Braudel and de Soto’s terminology, it is under the “glass dome.” Whilst the other part of our society will not empathise with “fairness” to the same degree, as they themselves function in accordance with the norms of formal institutions and live according to the rules of shadow zones. The same reservations should be made (although it is a question of different social proportions) in relation to the developed habits of consumption. In order to elaborate—in the manner of a historical reference—I shall mention that the formal “fairness” is a new occurrence in Russia and remind you of lines sung by Soviet poet Vladimir Vysotsky, revered across the nation:

The troop fulfilled the order golly good
But there was one who did not shoot.

It is clear from these lines that such societies are also possible where fairness is manifested precisely through non-compliance with the formally declared contract. And, as of yet, we are far from overcoming the inertia of one such society, although the newest developments indicate that the “glass dome” of the legal institutional environment has already acquired its contour and hardened. All the newest torrent of journalism where the theme of “two Russias,” “two peoples,” etc. is played upon can be translated into precisely this language of distinction between two types of institutional environments, accompanied by a few ad hoc specifications.

As a side remark on the institutional aspect of this problem, I shall add that the construction of the boundaries of this dome dividing formal and informal institutional environments is actively stimulated by some policies of control and rationalisation practiced by Russian bureaucracy. The difference in access to the information environment by citizens plays the key part in the realisation of these policies, which is, so to say, approved in practice by Norbert Balz’s thesis that the split, becoming all the more definite, is now drawn in the modern world along the line of “online”/“offline” players [Bolz 2011].

The following provides an illustration: the portal of state and municipal services *Gosuslugi.ru* has been in operation in Russia since 2010.

The connection to its services is based on citizens' access⁷ to the Internet. The "online" citizens who use these services are endowed with special privileges compared to "offline" citizens. For example, the collapse of the infrastructure for certification of the technical condition of vehicles, that happened in May 2011 and gave impetus to make the decision at the presidential level to change this whole system, could not have been possibly noticed by the "online" Russian citizens. The "online" citizens obtained the privilege of making preliminary appointments upon filling in the online form and of the subsequent guarantee of strict abidance of the rules of certification according to this appointment—as contrasted to the "offline" citizens who continued living according to the informal rules of a "first-come-first-serve" basis (the practice of making an appointment by phone that existed beforehand was at the same time cancelled). Similar types of discrimination are at work upon application for an international passport and other basic civil documents. It is such control policies of Russian bureaucracy that shed light on the genesis of the self-comprehension of the "hamsters" who participated in the rallies one and one and a half years after the mentioned mechanism of splitting the online and offline worlds of Russian citizens took effect.⁸

A Creative Class?

A remarkable occurrence that accompanied the rise of political activity was the explosive vivacity of discursive work aimed at the production of notions that could identify and self-identify the social substratum of the new activity. "Angry citizens," "educated citizens," "the Facebook generation," "the intelligentsia," "the new intelligentsia" and so on—in short, many different words were tried out. The astonishing peculiarity of this discursive work by metropolitan publicists turned out to be a convulsive mobilisation of conceptual resources formulated in the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods for the thematisation of the problem of the "intelligentsia" that one would think irrevocably fell into oblivion.⁹

7. To be more exact, on the competence of access—taking into account special terminals that should, as envisioned by the developers, present an alternative for those who don't have access to the internet through their own personal computers.

8. The stated remark does not imply a retrograde criticism of this progressive service. But as any other virtuous and rational undertaking, it has unforeseen social and cultural consequences, that should at least be thematised. By the middle of April 2012 the number of registered users of the website exceeded 2 million people.

9. For the analysis of problematic conceptual self-identification within modern Russian intellectual circles [Kurennoy, Nikulin, Rogozin, Turchik 2008]. By

I shall stop here at only one popular social marker borrowed from Richard Florida, the “creative class.” In reality, this concept, as well as some others, was not really new in the Russian public space, it was brought into play as part of the competition between expert groups long before the protests, as an accompaniment to the program of modernisation. The issue in question was about the creation of a possible social backbone to this very modernisation—the Institute of Social Projecting, for example, brought forward the “middle class” and in 2010 the “intellectual class” [Mezhuev, Cherniaev, Kurkin, Pavlov 2010] emerged (by the way, in spite of that very “creative” class). It is not appropriate here to enter into the polemics around Florida’s concept (in some ways very dubious), but despite its theoretical weakness there is a hard core to this work that is presented in the chapter “From Social Capital To Creative Capital” [Florida 2005: 294]. In this chapter, Florida tries to provide a substantial analysis of the social peculiarities of the group he implied by using the concept “creative class,” polemically referring to Robert Putnam’s concept of “social capital” while at the same time significantly relying on Mark Granovetter’s theory of “weak ties. By addressing this central point in Florida’s work it is possible to understand whether it makes sense to call the Russian protesters a “creative class.”

On the basis that Florida’s “creative class” is distinguished by sustained individualism and aspiration to walk away from “strong ties” and be drawn to “weak” ones, the answer to this question is no. Besides, Florida’s creative class is the most mobile constituent of modern societies. *It chooses its place and not merely inhabits it*¹⁰ (which contributed to the concern of city authorities all around the world after Flori-

the way, the chapter “The Nameless” bears a direct relationship to the discursive pursuits at the end of 2011 to the beginning of 2012, which this text also discusses: “the new form of intellectualism up until now has not found either the conceptual ways for its articulation or steady socio-communicative structures that have a public character.” The recent revival of public activity and the emergence of communicative density merely brought this problem of a social marker to the light of publicist discourse.

10. Only those people who are tied to a specific political space care about the long-run political rules of the game (“fair elections”). Whilst it is easier for a representative of the creative class to choose for themselves a well-developed environment, not burdening themselves by an additional identity expressed in political obligations. A small but characteristic remark: among the circle of active participants of the newest events accessible to me, it was but the parents of the newborn who in their majority acted as observers at the presidential elections. That is, a category of people who can hardly be expected to have much free time but, at the same time—thanks to the burden of long-run strategies for the future—who are interested in the compliance with the rules of the game in the present

da explained to them what is what—hence there are all these “creative cities,” branding and the “Perm experiment”). If you prefer an example from art, then the exemplary representative of the “creative class” is the protagonist in the movie *Up In The Air*¹¹ who is practically homeless, spending his life in airplanes and hotels and starting only short-term relationships (“weak ties”). The spirit of the new rallies, however, as far as I can comprehend it from interviews, conversations and the cloud of written texts, is of a completely different kind. It became more and more apparent as the actual emotional heat began to recede and the crystallization of some stable social practices started—to the accompaniment of speculations on the topic of “what to do next?” There was nothing unexpected in these practices, a true club of amateur singing unfolded at *OccupyAbay* (singing with the guitar, mats, sleeping bags, though there were no tents for purely technical reasons), whereas the “assemblies” organised at them praised the age-old utopia “back to antiquity!” The ideologists of the movement started speaking about various beneficial local works—to reach out to the people, to support small initiatives and projects. In other words, what followed after the act “What a great thing that we have all gathered together here!” were various publicists’ vain pursuits of a “common minor deed” that would unify us, that would not allow for the loss of feeling of sincerity, of the friend’s elbow, and of creative favour. It goes without saying that this minor common deed should go against the “big” ones—bureaucratic-rational state ones, in short, absolutely soulless, untruthful and corrupt¹²—and be, on the contrary, sincere, ascetic, altruistic and small.¹³

context more than anybody else. The ideal representative of the “creative class,” in turn, when discomfort reaches their limits, simply buys an airplane ticket.

11. *Up in the Air* (directed by Jason Reitman, 2009) is an adaptation of the novel of the same title by Walter Kirn (2001). The film presents a conservative criticism of the social type represented by the protagonist.
12. Here is a random selection: “Artists and writers should give preference to small publishing houses, independent projects, non-budgetary exhibitions and musical initiatives crowd-sourced on the internet. We shall use the state only as the source for our personal means for survival but our mind and heart will be someplace else. If it means exhibitions organised in private apartments and concerts in open spaces—let it be so” [Degot’ 2012] “Inasmuch as the state is not able to handle this bottomless pit of rusty iron, it is necessary to mobilise private business and common citizens: when you wake up go and fix your own fence”; “Any form of horizontal self-organisation—trade unions, house management companies, the organisations of fishing enthusiasts and societies of lifeguards—all of these are good” [Saprykin 2012]; “one should consume less and do things for other people’s sake” [Murav’ev 2012].
13. For background information: such a contemporary bureaucratic monster as the Ministry of Emergency Situations has grown in actual fact from a small civil

What has the “creative class” got to do with this? Absolutely nothing. For these events have as their backbone an entirely different motive. It is the attraction to the sincerity of “strong ties” resulting from working together on minor deeds, in the process of singing songs with the guitar under a starry sky and other understandable sociocultural practices. Of course, the question arises of how much truth there is in the words of the very ideologists suddenly awakened by the street, feeling this motive and trying to cast it now into manifestoes. What prevented them from doing these minor deeds before? Is it so that somebody put obstacles in their way of enlightening children or hindered their ascetic devotion to science, education and culture? Or stopped them from supporting non-budgetary exhibitions and concerts in open spaces? Come on!—Nothing stood in their way. They pretended and will go on pretending as usual, shrugging off their manifestoes, false in their starry-eyed idealism with appeals and instructions. “The time has come, something enormous is impending us all. A massive, strong tempest is getting ready. It is coming and it is already very near and soon it will blow off our society’s sloth, bias to labour and rotten boredom. I will work and in some twenty five to thirty years everybody will work. Everyone!”—for pity’s sake, for how long is this going to continue...

Yet, that being said—withstanding whatever delusions in self-identification—there is something of a novelty in this movement, something massive has taken place here. But what is it after all?

New Urban Romanticism

The new phenomenon of activity is at odds with itself at two levels. The first one is superficial and political. Many various, sometimes contradictory, forces aspired to privatise it politically, to take on the leadership and to direct it. These forces emerged before this phenomenon and will continue their existence regardless of it. What they have managed to instrumentalise and how profoundly is a question that is not relevant to our immediate topic. How adequate or inadequate was the perception of this phenomenon on the other hand—this question is also of no major importance.

The second level of incongruity is more substantial: “in itself” is not the same as “for itself.” The phenomenon perceives itself as being very liberal, very advanced—hence, among other things, the desire to call

initiative—on the basis of a group of volunteer rescuers who worked after the earthquake in Spitak in 1988.

themselves a “creative class.” But in my opinion, the essence of this phenomenon lies in something totally different; it is a *romantic reaction* to the burden of modernisation, to the world in which heavyweight rationalised corporations and state apparatuses function, to the world regulated by external ties,¹⁴ among which a human being is not the end but the means submerged into manipulation and insincerity. It is precisely in this that the whole problem of estrangement lies, the utopia of overcoming which fed Marx’s energy; the problem that today has reached sizes and limits totally unthinkable to Marx.

The Russian phenomenon of the newest social activity is not isolated. But it belongs not to the range of Orange and Arab revolutions but rather it stands closer to the movement that simultaneously unfurled in core countries of western culture (Occupy Wall Street). It is a protest against the system of the modern world as such. Of course, this system is better in some aspects, in others lame, but these are all details. People do not want to live in a soulless world of external ties where sociality is integrated by the external structures of government (manipulation and propaganda, controlled rallies), where big corporations operate, access to the control over which is limited and scarce by definition (hence their corruption). They crave a leader similar to them, whom they understand and who is agreeable to them, they crave sincere and strong relationships, bonded by kind minor deeds. They want their handicrafts to be noticed and appreciated (even if it is one’s own political banner)—are they, indeed, in any way worse than the choir of Buranovskiye Babushki on Eurovision?¹⁵ They look for freedom, altruism and songs with the guitar under a starry sky, when something slightly cold and hostile surrounds them, which, however, only strengthens the emotion of a common but yet individualised shared experience. The new urban romantics want assemblies and direct Athenian democracy, not

14. The attraction to formal contract compliance described above seems at first sight to contradict this, for it can be regarded as a preference for external ties. However, if one considers this problem seriously then this peculiarity of the protest environment can nevertheless be interpreted as a variety of romantic reaction. To be more precise, as a comfortable way of dealing with the indeterminacy of the complex world, as a refined form of aspiration to one and the same “stability” (the key concept of Putin’s success in “another Russia”), that is constituted within the limits of a more complex environment of the “glass dome.”

15. It is interesting that the Babushki were not aesthetically accepted within the environment we are discussing. Here the hero is, rather, Peter Nalich, whose appearance on the preceding Eurovision was perceived precisely as the victory of this very new urban romanticism over the bureaucracy of competitive selection.

oblique political representations and the sclerotic apparatuses of governance, thanks to their enormity. Such is the romantic reaction that is as old as the civilisation of modernity and is its necessary part and inevitable shadow.

Having mentioned the two types of incongruity, I am nonetheless not inclined to underestimate the significance of those, albeit inadequate, political forms and types of self-identification in which this romantic reaction can be encapsulated. Under certain circumstances, this protest against soulless civilisation could have been cast into a nationalistic or even fascist form, under others—into a socialist revolution. The paradox of all modern revolutions, however, lies precisely in the fact that man simply wanted to give up the gun and move to the village to be with his beloved and engage in minor deeds, but as a result he spent twenty five years washing ore in a camp in the country of victorious revolution.

So, notwithstanding the analysis presented here, everything is yet possible and nothing is excluded.

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