

The Most Recent Anti-Putin Protest: Evidence of a Nascent Russian Civil Society

by Joshua Tucker on February 5, 2012 · [2 comments](#)

in [Comparative Politics](#), [Protest](#)

In my [post on Friday](#), I suggested that the cold would probably push down the number of protesters in yesterday's protest, and the resulting story would be about a protest movement losing steam. Instead – in a sign perhaps of just how important the expectations game has become – the story actually [appears to be the opposite](#): that the size of the movement *despite* the cold shows, as the [NY Times reported](#):

.... that antigovernment demonstrations had not lost momentum and could continue into the spring. If they do, they will pose an unexpected challenge to Mr. Putin, who has never faced sustained public opposition in his 12 years as the country's paramount leader.

Political scientist [Regina Smyth](#) of Indiana University was there yesterday, and she was kind enough to offer us the following observations:

It is hard to describe just how cold was today as Russians passed through metal detectors to march in support of free elections. The organizers, police and press have wildly different estimates of the total attendance. There were not 120,000 participants as was declared from the stage but there were many more than the 36,000 counted by the police. Marchers spilled into Bolotnaya Square from two directions and lined both sides of the island. It is impossible to know how many there were, but it was a lot of people and all of them were reveling in the company. Regardless of the numbers, this march was a show of enormous strength and organization against all odds.

What was more remarkable than the numbers was the energy of the crowd—energy that has grown with each protest event. Over the past two months, Russian protestors have learned call and response and the effectiveness of a good chant. There were drums and whistles. Young entrepreneurs sold commemorative t-shirts. Marchers carried an enormous range of posters that were clever, funny and very pointed and signed up en masse to serve as election observers on March 4 to back up their demands.

Movement leaders also seem to have studied up on mobilization tactics. This march was not about big name politicians and their egos but about the crowd. The heavy hitters—Kudrin, Prokhorov, Nemtsov and Navalny—marched but did not speak. Those who did speak were brief, sharp and peppered their remarks with exhortations and slogans. The official banners trumpeted very clear movement demands. When the rock star Yury Shevchuk sang his anthem, Motherland, the whole crowd sang with him and danced to stay warm.

Any assessment of a mass political action is shaped by where you stand in the crowd. As we moved through this march, the diversity was notable. There were many very young people but there were also families and pensioners. Students mixed with businessmen. There were nationalists, monarchists, communists and democrats of all stripes—many who have significant differences. Together they demonstrated, that in this moment, Russia has an opposition united in a call for significant political change. For Bolotnaya's protestors,

freedom meant freedom for all and free speech means the right for all voices to be heard. The march was evidence of Russia's nascent civil society—a significant change, regardless of head counts.