



The Monkey Cage

Democracy is the art of running the circus from the monkey cage -- H.L. Mencken

More on 2012 Russian Presidential Elections and Post-Election Protests

by [Joshua Tucker](#) on [March 6, 2012](#)

From [Regina Smyth](#), a political scientist at Indiana University who is currently in Moscow and who observed the [post-election protests first hand](#); all views expressed below are those of the author.

“ Preparations for Russian protests have taken on a very predictable pattern. First come the barriers and portable toilets, along with large vehicles (buses, trucks, riot vehicles) lining the sides of the protest sites. These vehicles are full of police—both regular forces and riot police. They sit on the buses for hours; get on and off to smoke. Sometimes, they jump over to MacDonalds for some food. Unauthorized vehicles are cleared from the streets as the area is closed off. The security presence grows with the installation of metal detectors and the reinforcement of the metal cordons with a wall of police. Exits from the metro are closed in order to channel participants to a single entrance into the protest sight. Elaborate sound systems are constructed. By and large, the heavy-duty security forces, the OMON, stay out of sight. Just before the protests begin, the military helicopters appear. This pattern is the same for both pro-regime demonstrations and anti-regime protests.

Overall, the regime's relationship to protest is ambivalent as indicated by the haggling over both the location and size of protests that are permitted. Yet, they continue to allow sanctioned protests while immediately cracking down on all unsanctioned actions, carrying out swift arrests. Participants feel this ambivalence in the police presence. Our pilot surveys of protests show that participants on both sides see the police as aggressive, although predictably anti-regime protesters experience more aggression.

Protest actions grew tense as elections approached. Despite having secured permits for a large number of actions on Sunday evening, many of the pro-Putin demonstrations did not go off. Rather, the permits seemed to reflect a strategy of insurance: allowing for the possibility of rapid and legal response to any non-sanctioned anti-regime action. The cordons and police were present in squares but there were few actual demonstrations. The very large demonstration outside of the Kremlin walls was subdued, and in the cold, damp weather, many participants who

had been offered incentives to participate escaped to their buses.

Like blatant falsification, the show of support in mass demonstrations seems a risky strategy on the part of the regime. As the opposition fighter Aleksei Navalny has argued in his blog, the very need to provide incentives to encourage massive turnout as well as the differences in level of compensation across participants creates some tension within the crowd. These rallies provide interesting insights into the weakness of the regime by involving so many in the pageant of regime support—and it is information shared among colleagues, families and neighbors. Still, in the short term they underscore the regime’s capacity to manufacture turnout, making victory seem inevitable.

March 5th on Pushkin Square “for free elections” was different from previous protests. The police presence was greater. Nightsticks were out. There were countless heavy vehicles in the streets around the square. The crowd was large and very diverse: couples of all ages, fathers and sons, groups of young people and lots of businessmen. They overflowed the square and on line through the metal detectors people around me—newcomers to the protests—talked about how the police were using “technology” to create fear. They were fearless in the face of it. The crowd was determined yet subdued.

At the close of the event, riot police carefully guarded all exits of the square to prevent a march to the Kremlin that had been threatened by some opposition leaders. In response, some protestors marched in the opposite direction and were arrested at Triumfalnaya Square. When Navalny refused to leave the center of the Square the police cordoned the area, pushing the crowd back and trapping a few dozens in the square. It was a stand off that lasted on only an hour or so, until the OMON had enough and arrested three opposition leaders, Ilya Yashin, Sergei Udaltsov and Navalny, and those that stood with them. Riot police, using shields, sealed off the square to prevent further of occupation and blocked the entire area of the Square as heavy police vehicles took the leaders away—each to different detention centers. Navalny tweeted photos from the police vans.

The movement now faces many of the same challenges that the Occupy Movement faced as winter approached—to survive it must redefine its goals and tactics. And like Occupy, the movement demands remain diverse and difficult to reconcile. The central unifying goal, “Russia without Putin,” seems a long way away just one day after the election. The protest leaders claim that their audience is neither the central powers nor average Russians, instead they want to challenge the security forces, testing their resolve in the face of non-violent protest. Toward that end, Navalny has called for a tent city to put pressure on the police but they have been effective in precluding that possibility, arresting young people who have attempted to place tents in prominent public spaces. Moreover, the police though more aggressive have shown considerable restraint, even when protests move out of the bounds of sanctioned action. This restraint on both sides has led most Moscovites to breath a sigh of relief, since revolution has been averted. The

problem for the movement is that most would like to see the opposition put to rest for good.

From [Andrey Makarychev](#), Guest Professor, Free University of Berlin

“ In the morning on March 5, speaking at DGAP think tank in Berlin, Gleb Pavlovskii has assured that, in spite of apparently convincing victory of Vladimir Putin, political crisis in Russia only broadens. It is hard to disagree with his analysis. The electoral campaign, formally successful for the expected winner, has revealed the scale of the current crisis in the country. Here are its most notorious symptoms. Despite mass-scale protests, electoral fraud is still the pivotal part of the system of governance (Pavlovskii told the audience about numerous buses packed with workers who were transported from one poll station to another). Most falsifications are the doing of school teachers – what a moral degradation of society! The rhetoric of the campaign resembled the discourse of the civil war (the dividing line between “us” and “them” only deepened). Nationalists with dubious reputation like Sergei Kurginian and Alexander Dugin were allowed to speak on behalf of the Kremlin. Authorities even didn’t bother about disavowing the endless accusations in corruption. The president of the country not only turned into a lame duck and lost the remnants of his authority, but as a potential prime minister became a dangerous ally for those who have long-term political plans – that’s why the process of government-making will inevitably turn into another crisis for the Kremlin. Finally, Putin himself demonstrated unusual incoherence, too often making controversial and mutually exclusive statements. “He is in conflict with himself”, assumed Pavlovskii.

What stems from this analysis is that, first, the price for this victory was too high – for the “party of power”, as well as for the whole country. “United Russia” kept a relatively low profile during this campaign, which makes its strategic future obscure. In principle, I can imagine who might play the key roles in other parties in the next electoral cycle. On the left flank we shall see people like Sergei Udaltsov; the “angry middle class” will split its sympathies between Alexei Navalniy, Igor Kudrin and Mikhail Prokhorov (or, perhaps, a combination of some of them); and even “Just Russia” has some chances for rebranding, should Sergei Mironov resign in favour of much more attractive Oksana Dmitrieva. But the biggest question is who will play in the Kremlin’s team in a couple of years from now. We have not seen a single new face there for years, and they will unlikely to appear soon.

A second, and much more theoretical lesson to be drawn from the election story, needs a reference to the concept of “the sensible” introduced by the French political philosopher Jacques Ranciere. He predicted that in a post-political and post-ideological society the most dynamic sphere able to generate political impulses is the sphere of emotions, symbols, narratives, storylines, messages, perceptions, etc. In other words, what matters is not how much people earn or what kind of laws they have to observe, but what people feel about themselves and power. Any emerging political community, born out of a protest, is based on sharing something which is to be

felt, seen, noticed, respected (or, vice versa, despised). The sphere of politics thus appears as a theatrical stage, he claimed . Isn't it the right time for Russia experts to start reading Raciere with a bit more of attention?
