



The Monkey Cage

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

Russia's Growing Opposition

by **Joshua Tucker** on [May 7, 2012](#)

Vladimir Putin [was inaugurated for his third term](#) as Russia's president today. As numerous [news organizations have reported](#), Russia's nascent opposition movement also took to the streets to mark the event. We are fortunate to have the following guest post from University of Indiana political scientist Regina Smyth, who is spending the year in Moscow. All views expressed below are those of the author.

“ Yesterday in Moscow the opposition protests culminated in violence that obscured the broader process of civic organization that occurred over the past months. Tens of thousands of citizens turned out for the Million Man March, on the eve of Mr. Putin's inauguration. The march ended at Bolotnaya Square where it combined with a protest meeting. Most marchers never made in to the Square. They packed the bridge and embankment across from the protest and stood on the march route. This division in protest events created confusion about the numbers of participants. Official counts included only those in a small area around Bolotnaya, severely underestimating the size of the crowd that marched.

The opposition, reported to be in disarray, put on a tremendous show of unity. The nationalists marched right in front of a group wearing neon balaclavas and holding a large poster exhorting the crowd to, “Start the Pussy Riot,” a nod to the punk rock poets that are being held on serious charges for staging a protest in the Church of Christ the Savior. The Muscovites cheered loudly for the delegation from St. Petersburg whose large banner read, “Piter is Against Putin.” The libertarians marched with the KPRF and every off color poster, costume and piece of art was applauded along the route. This crowd, filled with families, older people, and groups from around Russia, was not confrontational nor did it seem defeated.

The size of the protest caught the police by surprise. Dispersed along the route but not behind barriers, they looked uncomfortable as they were surrounded and separated by groups of marchers. As the crowd neared the square, a long line of special forces, the OMON, in riot gear rushed to get in front of it and prevent people from crossing the bridge toward the Kremlin. Their leaders exhorted them not to run as they struggled to stay together.

At the end of the event, opposition leaders refused to leave Bolotnaya and sat on the asphalt. While they had done the same thing on March 5 in Pushkin Square, this time thousands of participants joined them in an attempt to occupy the space. A few people pitched tents. In her open letter on Live Journal, Ksenia Sobchak writes that the opposition leaders planned the provocation before the march, and raised fears of the movement being radicalized. Descriptions of violence, accompanied by horrific film, eclipsed all other coverage of the event.

Yet, peaceful protests across the city today defy the conclusion of radicalized action, and the growth in civic action beyond the protests defies the reported sense of resignation among activists. A few thousand peaceful activists wearing white led the OMON in a chase around the squares of the central city and although many were arrested they were very orderly. These actions reflect the growing use of protest to contest a closed system. In the past weeks, Muscovites have taken to the streets to protect historical landmarks, agitate for the release of Pussy Riot activists, protest for the environment, fight building corruption, revise damaging educational policy changes, and support transparency within the police ranks.

Similarly, civic organizations continue to exploit every opportunity to contest the limited political structure. The initiative “Our City” recruited and trained two hundred candidates to run for municipal office. Many of these candidates won. The impressive network of elections observers in a number of large cities linked civic groups to each other and to electoral competition. As a number of protest leaders have noted, both of these models are easily transportable strategies that can transform controlled elections.

Activism has spread beyond the capital. In Astrakhan, mayoral candidate Oleg Shein embarked on a hunger strike that forced the Central Election Commission to admit significant fraud. Ironically, the CEC’s admission stemmed from a review of video from the cameras Mr. Putin installed in polling stations in response to Moscow’s December protests. Upcoming elections in Omsk, where regional activists conducted their own hunger strikes, provoked a group called Citizen Mayor to announce a primary to recruit a single candidate to challenge the governing party.

Today, President Putin’s motorcade went through empty streets where police cleared pedestrians from standing to watch it. The ceremony took place behind closed doors. The “power” looks afraid while civil society continues to gain strength and experience that is redounding through the system. It is time to watch them.

[Photo by Regina Smyth]