

## **Civic Mobilization in Russia: Protest and Daily Life**

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**Has Russia, amidst rising social discontent and pervasive economic crisis, rediscovered collective mobilization? Drawing on a vast study of Russia’s provinces, Carine Clément emphasizes the potential for self-organization evident in mobilization “from below,” which is rapidly expanding in daily life.**

In late 2011, numerous commentators inside and outside of Russia discovered, much to their surprise, that Russian society was capable of mobilization. Some spoke of a “reawakening of Russian civil society” or of the rise of an “anti-Putin” opposition. This mobilization may have attracted more attention because, unlike its precursors, it has been mostly concentrated around Moscow. Perhaps, too, it appeals to the snobbery of the Russian capital’s enlightened intellectuals, who, in the Moscow demonstrations, have at last found a public worthy of their approval. For the experienced observer, however, its novelty lies elsewhere: not in grassroots mobilization, which has undergone considerable development since emerging in 2005, but in the “political” (as some have called it) or “civic” (as I prefer to describe it) character of the current movement, which began after the federal legislative elections of December 4, 2011.

My goal here is not to recount the history of social mobilization prior to December 2011, but to investigate its character and significance, particularly in light of the latest wave of civic mobilization. I will do so for two reasons, both of which relate to what I see as the often erroneous judgments passed on social movements that emerged before the most recent wave. Contrasting the social, materialistic, and even “paternalistic”<sup>1</sup> demands of these movements to the “moral”<sup>2</sup> goals of the recent Moscow demonstrations, some observers have classified the former as “NIMBY”<sup>3</sup> movements, i.e., as egotistical and devoted to the defense of special

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<sup>1</sup> L. Gudkov, “Social'nyj kapital i ideologičeskie orientacii” [Social Capital and Ideological Orientation], in *Pro et Contra*, vol. 16, no. 3, May-June 2012, <http://carnegie.ru/proEtContra/?fa=49069>, p.25 (accessed 01-01-2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> “NIMBY” stands for “not in my backyard,” an expression originally used in the United States to refer to neighborhood groups that oppose any disruptions in their immediate environment.

interests rather than the general interest. Moreover, most commentators, when discussing the most recent demonstrations, speak of the “return of politics”<sup>4</sup> to a society that is profoundly apolitical, and even hostile to politics. I will discuss each of these analyses in turn, basing my assessment primarily on the empirical data on social movements that my colleagues at the Institute for Collective Action and I have gathered since 2005.<sup>5</sup>

## Building Spaces of Solidarity

The social mobilization that has appeared since 2005<sup>6</sup> has been diffuse, local, and rooted in the daily lives of the participants. It has sought to address relatively concrete social problems. But does this mean that its participants are merely engaged in a selfish struggle of the NIMBY variety?

There is no question that some of these movements belong in this category. However, the social movements<sup>7</sup> we have chosen to study are characterized, to the contrary, by their tendency to branch out, grow, and become more open. They have branched out to issues or problems that are different from but connected to those that gave birth to the primary activist group (“*iniciativnaâ gruppâ*” in Russian). They have grown in scale, expanding from a micro-territory or micro-locality (for example, a courtyard shared by several buildings) to other territories (such as other building courtyards, a town square, etc.). They have opened up to other partners, activist groups, trade unions, and political organizations. In other words, our case studies reveal that there exists a process of generalization—a “rise in generality,” to use Laurent Thévenot’s<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example: G. Ūdin. “Lovuška nelegitimnosti – 2. Ot fragmentacii k prezentacii” [The Trap of Non-Legitimacy: From Fragmentation to Presentation], *Russkij Źurnal*, January 16, 2012, <http://russ.ru/pole/Lovushkanelegitimnosti-2> (accessed 01-01-2012); S. Mitrofanov. “Stranicy našej istorii, zima-letu – 2012” [Pages from our History: Winter-Summer 2012], *Russkij Źurnal*, June 18, 2012 (note in particular the following quote: “In Moscow’s streets are gathered thousands of people belonging to Russia’s political vanguard”), <http://russ.ru/Mirovayapovestka/Stranicy-nashej-istorii-zima-letu-2012> (accessed 01-01-2012); K. Remčukov, “V 2011 godu politika vernulas’ v Rossiû” [In 2011, Politics Have Returned to Russia], *Nezavisimââ Gazeta*, December 13, 2011, [http://www.ng.ru/itog/2011-12-30/1\\_red.html](http://www.ng.ru/itog/2011-12-30/1_red.html) (accessed 01-01-2012); V. Gel'man, “Režim, oppoziciâ i vyzovy èlektoral'nomu avtoritarizmu v Rossii” [The Regime, the Opposition, and the Challenge to Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia], *Neprikosvennyj Zapas*, no. 84, April 2012, <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/2578> (accessed 01-01-2012).

<sup>5</sup> This data consists of interviews with participants in collective action and social movements of all kinds—occasional participants, more regular activists, and movement leaders (at least 200 interviews were conducted for different projects in over twenty regions); external or internal observations; accounts of collective action; and written, photographic, and video documents.

<sup>6</sup> It would of course, be mistake to consider that the history of Russian social movements only began in 2005. Since then, however, there has been a rise in mobilization that is unprecedented since the collapse of the Soviet Union (1988-1991). They consist primarily of grassroots mobilizations, involving ordinary, non-politicized men and women with no real prior political experience, who if anything had been hostile to collective action before this recent involvement.

<sup>7</sup> By “social movements,” we mean any group of individuals or organizations that are united in collective action to defend the same cause and to attempt to influence, at the very least, their immediate environment.

<sup>8</sup> L. Thévenot. *L’action au pluriel. Sociologie des régimes d’engagement*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006.

term—as well as the formation of bonds of solidarity that are not restricted to friends, neighbors, and one’s immediate world.

Most of the mobilization that takes place in contemporary Russia is the result of situations and problems rooted in everyday, familiar, and local life. These problems have an emotional impact on those who experience them, leading the protagonists to change how they see, think, and act and to experiment with activist practices. The latter depart from the most widely followed socio-cultural norms in Russian society, which many sociological studies<sup>9</sup> have identified as the idea of “every man for himself,” obedience, mistrust (beyond one’s “own” circle), conformism, and paternalistic expectations from the state. Whatever one thinks of this often cartoonish perspective on contemporary Russian society and culture, it calls attention to the fact that collective movements can only be launched when the everyday, familiar world of the “ordinary” individual is in some way unsettled. The fact that the roots of popular mobilization are to be found “below”—in ordinary, concrete life and the disturbance of daily routines—does not mean that it cannot spread to other realms, address wider interests, invoke universal values, and have recourse to more socially conscious practices. I will quickly discuss two examples that illustrate the possibility of such a “rise in generality” and trace its contours and mechanisms.

### **Winter 2005: A Critical Mass of Micro-Conflicts**

The first example is the protest movement of the winter of 2005. It was directed against a reform (known as the “monetization of in-kind social benefits”) that threatened the social benefits of a number of specific professional categories, but which in practice affected most of the population, particularly retirees but also school children, students, the disabled, Great North workers, victims of political repression, and so on. These protest actions began on a very small scale by raising very concrete issues: following altercations on buses and trolleys, retirees objected to having to pay for their tickets (since Yeltsin, most retirees use public transportation for free, to make up for their tiny pensions). From bus stop to bus stop, indignation spread, as

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<sup>9</sup> Scholarship in French and English as well as Russian has done much to give credence to the view that Russian society is reluctant to engage in collective action. Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin, researchers who belong to the Levada Center, place particular emphasis on the passive and unengaged attitudes and behavior of post-Soviet Russians. See, notably, L. Gudkov, B. Dubin, and N. Zorkaâ, “Postsovetskij čelovek i graždanskoe obšestvo” [Post-Soviet Man and Civil Society], *M.: Moskovskaâ škola političeskikh issledovanij*, 2008; L. Gudkov, “Itogi putinskogo pravleniâ [Balance Sheet of the Putin Government], *Vestnik obšestvennogo mneniâ*, 5, 2007; L. Gudkov and B. Dubin, “Posttotalitarnyj sindrom: ‘upravljaemaja demokratija’ i apatija mass” [The Post-Totalitarian Syndrome: “Directed Democracy” and the Apathy of the Masses], in M. Lipman and A. Rjabova, eds., *Puti rossijskogo postkommunizma*, Moscow, R. Elinina, 2007, pp.8-63. See, too: V. Shlapentokh. *Contemporary Russia as a Feudal Society: A New Perspective on the Post-Soviet Era*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; M. Mendras, ed., *Comment fonctionne la Russie ? Le politique, le bureaucrate et l’oligarque*, Paris: CERI/Autrement, 2003; Gilles Favarel-Garrigues and Kathy Rousselet, *La société russe en quête d’ordre. Avec Vladimir Poutine?* Paris: CERI/Autrement, 2004; Anne Le Huérou and Kathy Rousselet, “La société civile en Russie: de l’utopie à l’engagement civique?,” *Problèmes politiques et sociaux*, 814, January 8, 1999; and M.M. Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

retirees shared their anger, which intensified as they expressed it in familiar public spaces: the post office, waiting in line to receive their pensions, pharmacies, public transit, building stairwells and courtyards, and telephone conversations. The news spread like a wildfire, fanned by feelings of indignation, injustice, and contempt. The interviews attest to these feelings: the in-kind social benefits (including completely or partially free public transit, health care, medicine, telephone service, and local taxes) they had previously received by virtue of belonging to a particular social category (veterans, retired workers, Chernobyl survivors, victims of political repression, invalids, blood donors, etc.) were seen by those concerned as legitimate recognition of their merits and the state's obligations to them. The issue was not simply money or access to public services, but their own dignity. "The state is spitting in our faces": this statement, variations of which were repeated across the country, summarizes the general state of mind.

The movement quickly gained traction: only a few days after the law went into effect, on January 1, 2005, thousands of people, led by the retirees, demonstrated in the street to demand the repeal of the "monetization" law. It began spontaneously with the occupation of public buildings and street blockades, as demonstrators demanded meetings with local government representatives. Often, it sufficed for a town mayor or regional governor, whom the demonstrators requested, to remain invisible for the angry crowd to pour into the street or burst into the town hall or the seat of the regional government. People heard about the demonstrations "through the grapevine": flyers posted in buildings, traffic jams resulting from street blockades, meetings scheduled at the end of each demonstration, and contact lists collected during each event, which volunteers used to make calls on the eve of each demonstration. In this way, the wave of protests grew: during the month of January alone (when demonstrations were occurring on an almost daily basis), the movement mobilized more than 500,000 people in 97 towns and 78 regions across the country. Gradually, local coordinating committees were formed, often in an ad hoc way, when representatives of local governments agreed to receive protestor "delegations," which had to be created. Leaders began to emerge. They were those who spoke most frequently or seemed most determined. The criteria varied, but the challenge remained the same: to be recognized as a leader by the demonstrators themselves. Many leaders who emerged spontaneously at this time still play major roles in their towns' social and political affairs. Some coordinating committees are still in operation, diversifying the scope of their activity (notably by taking on housing issues). Belatedly, opposition parties and national associations (notably those representing the reform's victims, such as the disabled, veterans, Chernobyl "liquidators," etc.) joined the mobilization, with varying effects on the movement at the local level.

The critical factor, however, was the dynamic resulting from the micro-conflict relating to public transit tickets. Beginning with retirees, the movement expanded to include other victims of the reform. They were joined by young radicals, political organizations, associations, and some members of the local intellectual elite, especially journalists. The censorship barrier was thus overcome and information on protest actions circulated widely. Public opinion followed: polls from the time show considerable support for the protestors. Finally, the

movement reached the national level, not only through its impact in the media and public opinion, but in the kinds of action it pursued, its goals, and in its own internal dynamic. National action days were organized to demand that the federal government and Vladimir Putin withdraw the law. The national campaign ultimately achieved a partial repeal of the reform—a rare occurrence in contemporary Russia. The local coordinating organizations expressed a desire for interregional synergies and connections, as well as for meetings and exchange programs. This resulted in the first Russian Social Forum, which in April 2005 brought a thousand regional activists to Moscow. This also led to the creation of one of the first interregional networks of local social movements, the Sojuz Koordinacionnyh Sovetov (Union of Coordinating Councils, or SKS),<sup>10</sup> which survived the winter 2005 demonstrations and continues its activity (notably campaigns related to housing and habitat).

### **Kaliningrad 2010: Reclaiming Power “From Below”**

The vast mobilization that took place in Kaliningrad in late 2009 and early 2010 offers a second case study. It was directed against an increase in road and city taxes, economic asphyxiation, and “political dictatorship.” After organizing the most massive demonstration in recent years in a middle-sized Russian city, which assembled 12,000 people<sup>11</sup> on January 30, 2010, the movement achieved the dismissal of the sitting regional governor, Georgi Boss. Here, too, the movement began at the micro level and grew out of efforts to tackle specific social problems and mobilize different sectors of the population. Since late 2008, car drivers had attempted to challenge the regional government’s new policies, which first revoked custom duty breaks on imported vehicles (the approach favored by the residents of this Russian enclave, surrounded by the European Union), before sharply increasing the transportation taxes that car-owners were expected to pay. The car-owner movement began with gatherings in front of customs barriers, which were facilitated by the kilometers of lines created by the new regulations. Losing patience, small-time car importers (a “small business” that is widespread in Kaliningrad) grew irritated, talked among themselves, and began to express their exasperation. Spokespersons emerged, notably Konstantin Doroshok, one of the key figures of the vast demonstrations of January 2010. One day, he took the initiative of blocking the federal road that passed near the customs posts, and was followed by dozens of his colleagues. Soon, actions of all

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<sup>10</sup> Not to be confused with the Koordinacionnyj Sovet opozicii (the opposition’s coordinating council, or KS), whose 45 members were elected on October 22, 2012, through a mostly online election, to coordinate a citizens’ movement opposed to federal power. Unlike the SKS, which mostly consists of the leading figures of local social movements, which is ignored by the media and attached to social-democratic ideas, the opposition’s KS is dominated by Muscovites, including leaders of the liberal right with an established media presence. Unlike the SKS, which primarily deals with social questions and organizes campaigns on concrete social issues, the opposition’s KS is focused on opposing federal power, particularly Vladimir Putin.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted parenthetically that, on a per capita basis, the number of demonstrators was greater than in Moscow during the great civic mobilization of 2011-2012.

kinds abounded (petitions, the picketing of the customs offices, and assemblies downtown), each attracting more supporters than its predecessor.

The doctors and patients of the so-called “fishermen’s hospital” (previously reserved for employees of the fishing industry), which had been slated to be shut down, also became active in late 2008. The campaign against the hospital’s closing benefited from the support of a group of local political and labor activists who, for a year and a half, organized a picket line each week in front of the local government’s headquarters. Despite initially attracting little support, the campaign to save the fishermen’s hospital (which, besides picket lines, consisted of media interventions, petitions, lobbying, and parliamentary battles) eventually transformed itself into a movement to defend public health in the region (specifically, to increase the health budget and improve health care quality and access, which had deteriorated following an experimental pilot program in health care finance). The campaign had a significant impact on public opinion, recruited an ever increasing number of stakeholders, and ultimately forced the resignation of the health minister, in addition to securing an increase in health spending (the hospital that triggered the campaign, however, could not be saved). This “rise in generality” and the campaign’s widening support and diffusion were made possible by regularly scheduled events, the organizers’ perseverance, the conflict’s dynamic, and the initiative of its leader, the trade union activist and local representative (from a party belonging to the regional opposition), Mikhail Chessalin. While they began by attacking the financial wrongdoings of the fishermen’s hospital’s head doctor, the picket-line protestors gradually scaled the hierarchy, denouncing first the health minister, then the regional governor, before designating the primary culprit: as a sign that appeared on the picket line a year into the campaign declared, “Putin is responsible for Boss.”<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the sign became a prop found at each demonstration. The campaign to defend public health also gave the town’s activists and their apprentices a regular chance to meet. The weekly picket line became an informal meeting place, where information was exchanged, actions planned and coordinated, and connections forged between activists belonging to different initiatives and movements. Doroshok, for example, along with other car-owner activists, were regular participants in the “Friday picket line.”

In late 2008, small shopkeepers, despite the stiff competition, united in the face of a common threat, when the city government announced a plan to revoke the right of kiosk owners to use municipal property. Faced with the closing of their businesses, which in most cases were their families’ primary source of income, the kiosk owners formed an association to fight back, first through lobbying and press releases, then through public protests. In this case, too, over the course of the conflict, the target of their anger rose several notches: first, city hall; then city council, which would ultimately have to approve the new law; next, the regional governor, who authorized what was interpreted as a “raid” (as they described it) on small businesses on behalf of a corrupt big businessman with well placed connections; and, finally, the federal government,

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth recalling that at the time regional governors were named by the Federation President (from early 2005 to September 2012).

embodied by Vladimir Putin. The latter was publicly attacked by a speaker representing the small shopkeepers' movement during a mass demonstration on January 30, 2010, with no prior approval or premeditation. One of the leaders of the small shopkeepers' movement recalls: "X went to the podium and yelled 'down with Putin!'—just like that, with no warning, because that was the atmosphere. In the end, we liked it." Ultimately, as a result of their struggle—as well as their participation in the mass demonstration of January 30—they achieved their goal: the city agreed to 25 year leases on their kiosks.

The region's retirees were involved in their own campaign, directed against a law adopted in June 2009 by the regional parliament, which proposed to end the indexing of social benefits giving access to public services.<sup>13</sup> Particularly in the region's small villages, where access to public transportation is essential for retirees dependent on the regional capital's social infrastructure, protests were organized throughout the summer and signatures were collected for a petition demanding the law's repeal. In this instance, too, the protestors proved successful.

To these various struggles must be added: the mobilization of the employees of the local airline, KD-Avia, who opposed the company's closing and demanded the payment of back salaries (their multiple walkouts resolved the latter problem, but not the former); numerous neighborhood struggles for the preservation of green spaces threatened by building projects opposed by residents; and a campaign (piggybacking on the latter), launched after the revision of the Urban Development Plan, to defend the principle of the "city-as-garden" against "government doing the bidding of real-estate companies."

All these movements emerged after 2008-2010, against a backdrop of growing social discontent and economic crisis, at the same time that the preferential treatment enjoyed by the Kaliningrad enclave was crumbling, the cost of public services (notably building maintenance costs) was eating into monthly family budgets, companies were shutting down, and unemployment was on the rise. With all the campaigns and demonstrations, the various forces involved in the mobilization ultimately created a relatively dense network of assorted social movements, as well as a space of communication and mobilization that allowed particular and localized struggles to break out of their usual limits and to influence people who were not directly affected by the specific problems that had launched the movements in the first place.

These interconnections between movements occurred as a result of several factors, individuals, places, and circumstances: common areas for meeting, assembling, discussing, and coordinating (particularly the weekly picket line to defend public health care); movement leaders seeking support, publicity, and the consolidation of their forces, who quickly began cooperating with one another, participating in one another's demonstrations and experimenting with common, unified actions; openly named offenders (elected officials of United Russia, the

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<sup>13</sup> I am referring to the financial compensation received by retirees following the in-kind "monetization of social benefits," the reform that was partially rescinded following the mass demonstrations of early 2005, but which was nonetheless implemented at different paces and in different ways depending on the region.

governing party; ministers; Governor Boss; and Putin); widespread social discontent among much of the population, which, for once, due to the particular dynamic arising from the proliferation of mobilized fronts and the specific groups mobilized, had access to information about the struggle (which circulated through independent media outlets, the internet, and, most important of all, by word of mouth) and which, moreover, could be sensitized to certain problems, thus challenging the conventional wisdom of “ordinary folks,” that “we can’t do anything about it, so it’s better to be quiet and not attract attention.” For if relatives, friends, colleagues, and trustworthy acquaintances participate in these kinds of protests, then perhaps... Furthermore, the movements’ leading figures were different from the typical civil servant, bureaucrat, or party leader: they were normal, “grassroots” people, who were directly affected by the issues they raised, living their lives and trying to get by, like everyone else. Most of all, they seemed determined and to have real convictions. Though I am presenting this revolution in collective action as if it were a purely mental process, it was, in fact, shaped by emotions, feelings, encounters, scenes that were either witnessed or told, discussions, and experiences.

Rising discontent; inter-movement networking and the experience of united action; cooperation between leaders and their efforts to coordinate and broaden their struggles; the anticipation resulting from increased mobilization; the disruption of the habit of “keeping quiet”; the active and passive support of opposition parties (without nonetheless dominating the demonstrations or infusing them a partisan hue); the support of some journalists and members of the political and economic elite in the conflict with Governor Boss; the growing popularity of the new car-owners’ leader, Konstantin Doroshok: all this resulted in an event that was unexpected and unprecedented in post-Soviet Russia (at least since Perestroika). 12,000 people assembled in a vast square in downtown Kaliningrad. A message was sent across the country. The Kremlin quickly dispatched an emissary to quell the rebellion. Some predicted that the next assembly would reach the tens of thousands. Last but not least, the governor was fired.

Yet beyond the community that arose from the protests, what was it that kept all these people together, in the frigid cold, as they solemnly listened to speaker after speaker at the podium, chanted slogans, and held their fists up high? What were the underlying principles of the new site of solidarity that was created one cold day in January? There was, of course, emotion; the impression of experiencing an historic event; pride in finding oneself amid such an enormous crowd; anger; and the sense that one was reclaiming power “from below,” in an act of open and mass defiance to the “power ladder,” which was condemned to public obloquy. But was there a program, a common platform transcending the totality of particular demands? The answer, in my view, is undeniable: mass opposition to the political monopoly of the governing party, United Russia, was expressing itself through protests directed against the anti-progressive policies of the regional and federal governments, the pauperization of an ever-larger share of the population (compared to the dishonest enrichment of civil servants and big businessmen), and the movement’s assertion of its ability to set the agenda for regional development. The demand for Governor Boss’ resignation, frequently expressed in slogans and speeches, was just one way of



personifying broader discontent with the political system as a whole, which was all the more successful in that most people saw Boss as a foreigner or as “Moscow’s legionary,”<sup>14</sup> who cared little about the region’s development and only served Moscow’s interests.

As for Putin himself, his role strikes me as inessential: slogans demanding his resignation were rare and brandished primarily by the movement’s leaders. “Anti-Putin” sentiment mostly reflected the rejection of the political system he represents (first, the “power ladder,” which refers to the absolute subordination of civil servants and political officials to their superiors, in which the public and voters count for naught). Yet Boss and Putin (who was considered “responsible for Boss”) were not the main concerns of the movement, whose protagonists shared an outlook that might be described as social, political, and moral. Yet their positions are not abstract, but anchored, rather, in concrete social experiences. Thus one could say that the Kaliningrad movement of early 2010 arose from a number of micro social conflicts rooted in daily life, and then grew into broader social, political, and moral concerns. It was a movement founded on bonds transcending the local activist community, but also on micro-bonds forged through shared experiences occurring in familiar, local contexts, and finally on more expansive bonds arising from the struggle itself.

### **Social, Civic, and Political Movements**

In contrast to social movements rooted in the everyday, familiar world addressing social and material issues, the movement for “fair elections”—the dominant slogan during the demonstrations of December 2011 to May 2012—seems to belong to the more abstract world of ideas, universal values, and politics.

A number of prominent Russian sociologists and political scientists have described the mobilization of 2011-2012 as a “return to politics” or as the aspiration for a new kind of politics, in addition to emphasizing the demonstrations’ “moral” and “disinterested” character.<sup>15</sup> But this interpretation is founded on no other empirical basis than the claims of a few protagonists, the fact that the demonstrations occurred in the country’s capital, which is considered more “modern” and “advanced” than the regions, and the relatively higher levels of education and income of Moscow’s “opposition” demonstrators. Against this view, I would like, building on the work of several colleagues,<sup>16</sup> to demonstrate that the “opposition” demonstrations suffered from a political deficit and to advance the hypothesis that social movements that seem more

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<sup>14</sup> Georgi Boss is a Muscovite businessman who spent his entire career in Moscow before being sent to Kaliningrad in September 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See Gudkov, *Social'nyj kapital*; Ūdin, *Lovuška nelegitimnosti*; Mitrofanov, *Stranicy našej istorii*; V. Gel'man, *Režim, opoziciâ*.

<sup>16</sup> F. Daucé, *Russie 2012: La difficile incarnation politique de la société civile, Les dossiers du CERI*, February 2012, <http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/russie-2012-la-difficile-incarnation-politique-de-la-societe-civile> (accessed 01-01-12); S. Erpyleva and M. Kulaev, “Vernulas' li politika na ulicy? [Has Politics Returned to the Streets?] *Polit.ru*, April 20, 2012, <http://polit.ru/article/2012/04/20/politics/> (accessed 01-01-12).

“materialistic” and less inclined to identify with the “opposition” have, in fact, far greater potential.

There are many definitions of “politics,” but two of its central elements include, in my view, the conflicts and social differentiation that politics creates, on the one hand, and, on the other, a vision of society which includes ideas about the proper organization of power relations. This conception of politics, inspired by the thought of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, is not, of course, consistent with the liberal creed, but it is capable of inspiring profound social change. For what empirical studies of particular social movements in Russia clearly show is participants’ dissatisfaction or disappointment with the results of their collective action, even when they managed to secure the confirmation of certain social rights or the dismissal of a particular political official. Indeed, Russian society is so deeply marked by relations of domination that minor social compromises or changes in political personnel have little effect on the political system itself. The only movements that could shake up such a system are those based on the conception of politics defined above.

I distinguish between several types of movements (as ideal types rather than empirical facts): social movements, civic movements, and political movements. By “social” movement, I mean a movement that emphasizes social questions—i. e., issues relating to the needs of human beings in society—and, in the event of a “rise in generality” or a broadening of solidarity, a movement that defends specific goods and distinguishes between a “we” that shares such interests, opinions, and values, and a “they” which does not. By “civic” movement, I refer to a movement seeking to assert citizens’ control over the state as well as the supremacy of law and right, under which all citizens are equal.

The movements I have analyzed in this essay should be classified as social movements, while the mobilization for “fair” elections or the “opposition” are best described as civic movements. As the interviews and observations of the Independent Demonstrations Research Initiative<sup>17</sup> suggest, the participants in the mass protests held in Moscow in 2011 and 2012 demanding “fair” and “untainted” elections emphasized respect for the law and existing formal procedures (notably relating to elections), expressed dismay at the power of “crooks” and “thieves,”<sup>18</sup> and wished for a government that was “honest,” “clean” (white was the movement’s symbolic color), and responsive to the citizenry. Following the presidential elections of March 4 and the use of increasingly repressive measures against demonstrators, discontent became directed at the person of Vladimir Putin. At the podium, the new slogan was: “down-with-the-power-that-evil-Putin-has-usurped.” What prevailed and continues to prevail, despite some

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<sup>17</sup> “Nezavisimaja issledovatel'skaja iniciativa-mitingov” (NII-Mitingov, Moscow, <http://niimitingov.wordpress.com>, accessed 01-01-12) is a not-for-profit group of sociologists and political scientists who are amateur activists—or activists who are amateur sociologists and political scientists—who conduct on-the-grounds research on demonstrations and other forms of collective action arising from the vast mobilization for “fair” elections of December 2011.

<sup>18</sup> The governing party, United Russia, is commonly referred to as “the party of crooks and thieves” (this slogan, which has grown very popular, was launched in 2011 by the blogger Alexei Navalny).

divergences, is a common aspiration for unity and fraternity, in which all express the same courage and dignity by going down to the street and publicly affirming their right to be respected as citizens. Overall, the movement avoids political, social, and ideological division, and presents itself as a movement determined to ensure that “the state” (understood in fairly monolithic terms) recognizes

“citizenship” and “citizens.”

Both types of movements suffer from a political deficit, either because they are not divisive or lack a vision of society. This deficit cannot be measured by considering the activists’ own words: whether they participate in movements that tend to be more “civic” or more “social,” most reject politics as something “dirty,” “corrupt,” “manipulative,” and “deceptive.” It is more useful to consider their practices, spontaneously expressed aspirations, and goals. From this perspective, social movements have a greater political potential than civic movements. Indeed, whereas “civic” movements dissolve social identities and conflicting worldviews in the unifying thrust with which they advance the idea of shared “citizenship” and condemn a state that scorns its citizens, social movements create social divisions (between proponents and opponents of a particular solution to a social issue), explore new ways of acting collectively and shaping daily life, introduce practices of solidarity and self-organization—all of which are incipiently political. Not politics “on high,” but political “from below”: that is, what “we,” here, at our own level can do collectively to improve our daily existence.

Between this incipient form of politics to a political movement in the full sense of the term (i.e., one with the potential to shake up the social relations of power) lies a step that is still far from being taken. But in my view, movements that overemphasize their civic character tend to sap the political potential of such mobilization. This is how I see the current opposition movement, which is positioning itself against a state that it sees as monolithic and alien, and against the person of Vladimir Putin, while neglecting social questions and the people’s capacity for self-organization, as well as the experiences of collective action which are proliferating at a micro level in daily life. This position, which is primarily endorsed by the movement’s leaders, explains in large part why “grassroots” social movements, particularly in the regions, have had very little involvement in an opposition movement in which they do not recognize themselves.

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